



Response

A feminist, narrative analysis of drinking stories



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My round! To the bar! Past jostling bodies, ‘scuse me!’ I smile, squeezing between clusters of too cool bearded men sipping frothy beer. Low ceilings, dim lights; East London, Saturday-night. Elbows finally on the bar; cash in hand; on tiptoes; polite smiles at bar staff. Then, a hand on my hip.

Whose hand is on my hip? I shift awkwardly and the hand moves. I glance at the mirror behind the bar: tall man to my left. Is it him? Typical... Oh, he’s doing it again. I shift again; pretending to check my phone. My shoulders creep up. Ignore him and maybe he’ll get the message?

“Four rum and ginger, please”, I shout over the din. The barman nods and lines up glasses, clinking in ice.

Tap, tap on my opposite shoulder: the school-yard trick. No, it’s not funny, and no, I don’t want to speak to him. Come one, mate, take the hint... .

I pay and shove the change in my purse. The tall man has grabbed my drink. I grab it back and he takes another, grinning stupidly. Does he want a free drink? Does he think this counts as flirting?

“Can you just leave me the fuck alone?”

I quickly turn and barge across the dance floor back to the table, suddenly wired and oddly sober.

“You ok?”

... I was at the bar and... He had no right to... I... .

“Fine. Just... Just some dick at the bar. Typical, anyway, cheers everyone!”

Fieldnote from 15 February 2014, bar in East London, UK.

This instant ethnographic account (Ferrell, Hayward & Young, 2008) explores territory highlighted in debates between narrative theorists Tutenges and Sandberg, and feminist drug researchers, Measham and Radcliffe and demonstrates the value of *both* narrative and feminist approaches for understanding drinking culture.

This is not a ‘drinking story’. Something happened at the bar, but it failed to become a story at the time, and only becomes one here through ethnographic reflection which make space for instants and moments. While I agree social life is organised by and given meaning by stories, not all of social life is incorporated into personal narratives. Drinking stories, like all discourses, contain absences and silences (Foucault, 1981). Thinking about gender reveals one such absence. The process of *constructing* narratives is therefore important.

Why did I not ‘story’ this incident? Several explanations are possible: the puzzling nature of the tall man’s behaviour, doubtfulness about being believed, and unwillingness to admit to being upset. ‘Just some dick at the bar’ hints at narratives about everyday sexism, yet my utterance both draws attention to this possible narrative, whilst simultaneously absenting it.

Moreover, this incident does not fit with the ‘drinking stories’ genre. It is too ‘serious’, lacking the requisite grotesque and carnivalesque aspects (Tutenges & Sandberg, 2013). Whilst drinking stories can make sense of ‘unpleasant’ events, somehow this incident is the wrong kind of unpleasant (p. 541). It is, depressingly, about social conformity rather than transgression. In this respect, Measham and Radcliffe are right to note the gendered silences however I would argue that these absences are part of the discourse of ‘drinking stories’.

All involved agree that drinking cultures are gender stratified. Nonetheless, my generation of women is expected to drink – we are the target market – and we do. In this respect, Tutenges and Sandberg are right – women *and* men drink, and have drinking stories. My post-feminist, cocktail sipping generation ‘does’ a particular kind of post-feminist, middle-class femininity, both in the drinking and the telling (Weatherall, 2002). Sexism is arguably hard to comprehend within such narratives. I have little investment in narrating victimhood, or incorporating it into my drinking stories.

‘Drinking stories’ is a useful concept for understanding the gendered nature of drinking cultures. Tutenges and Sandberg recount two respondents’ comments, which are clearly a performance of sexually aggressive masculinity:

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'Like you could go: "hey, I grabbed her tits and then she took a swing at me.' That would have been a great story.'" (2013: 541)

Cultural scripts of masculinity, and 'drinking stories' converge and facilitate problematic behaviours whilst cultural scripts of femininity offer women different possibilities. The groped woman has little to gain from either passivity, or retaliation. Neither makes a story, far less a *good* story. This is not to fall into binaries of male/female but rather to state that gender is relational and an inevitable part of drinking cultures.

Measham explores women's drug use as means of enacting particular gendered roles such as the bubbly nightclub 'babe' (2002). Whilst she explores enacting gender, narrative analysis draws attention to the cultural scripts available, and the gendered inequalities at play: intoxicated men are rarely expected to be 'nice', or to treat the invasion of personal space as ordinary. Thus, drinking narratives arguably play a crucial role in sustaining gendered inequalities in drinking cultures. Moreover, drinking stories may

also help explain young women's continued engagement with the night-time economy, in spite of regular annoyances, and rare dangers (Brooks, 2011).

References

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