



Response

As if gender mattered: Reconsidering the implications of ‘intoxicating stories’



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‘Intoxicating Stories’ (Tutenges & Sandberg, 2013) is a timely and provocative article that draws attention to the ways in which young people’s drinking practices are motivated, in part, by the desire to accumulate drinking stories as a form of social or cultural capital. In considering how drinking stories shape drinking practices, Tutenges and Sandberg are poised to make an important contribution to existing literature on substance use. Unfortunately this potential is only partially realised on account of the authors’ inattention to the dynamics of power and inequality which shape young people’s participation in contemporary drinking cultures. Here I want to add to the concerns already raised by Radcliffe and Measham (2014) regarding the gendered power relations that drinking stories reflect and reproduce, and also offer some comments on Tutenges and Sandberg’s response to their critique.

Tutenges and Sandberg’s analysis of the ways in which drinking stories do not simply narrate past events but orientate present and future social action is certainly compelling and well-supported by their data. Why then are the authors not more concerned by the preponderance of stories in which male participants describe subjecting women to various forms of sexual humiliation and harassment? Illustrating the ways in which young people “purposely engage in activities with narrative potential” (2013, p. 541), Tutenges and Sandberg present an extract from an interview in which a male participant recounts publicly groping a woman in the hopes that she would physically retaliate and thus provide him with ‘a great story’. While this kind of narrative would seem to demand a consideration of the ways in which alcohol use is implicated in sexual harassment – which forms part of a broader continuum of sexual violence (Kelly, 1988; Gavey, 2005) and constitutes a considerable public health issue (WHO, 2012; Witkowska & Menckel,

2005) – the authors forego any such critical analysis. This seems a particularly unfortunate oversight in light of the well-recognised if under-theorised relation between alcohol use and sexual exploitation in youth cultures (Guardian, 2014; NUS, 2010, 2013), which Tutenges and Sandberg could usefully supplement by considering how the narrative potential of sexual harassment may motivate men to engage in such practices while drinking. Although the authors recognise the intensely social character of drinking stories, they fail to reflect on the precisely homosocial quality of such storytelling activities. Because of this, Tutenges and Sandberg are unable to consider how discursive constructions of masculinity and practices of male homosociality relate to material realities of gender inequality and sexual violence (Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe, & Thomson, 1998; Flood, 2008).

In their response to Radcliffe and Measham, Tutenges and Sandberg seem to abandon the empirical analysis developed in their earlier article and instead appeal to readers of *International Journal of Drug Policy* to recognise drinking stories as a form of ‘oral literature’. Where the authors initially stated that their main objective was “to explore the ongoing interaction between, on the one hand, drinking behaviour and, on the other hand, drinking stories” (2013, p. 539), in their subsequent response piece Tutenges and Sandberg instead propose to examine drinking stories “with an eye for the artfulness of their telling, their playful mockery of established truths” (2014, p. 1). This concern with the literary merits of drinking stories represents a significant departure from their earlier article, which makes no reference to ‘artfulness’ or ‘playful mockery’, does not distinguish between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ drinking stories, and does not cite any of the folkloristics referred to in the response article (though evidently this is a theme the authors are pursuing elsewhere (Sandberg & Tutenges, 2014)). In exalting drinking stories as “graphic expositions of the imperfectability of human nature” (2014, p. 2), the authors effectively excuse themselves from having to attend to the social and political implications of such narratives and evade any substantive engagement with the concerns raised by Radcliffe and Measham. Indeed, Tutenges and Sandberg’s response

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evidences a certain ambivalence if not antagonism towards feminist scholarship, exemplified in the mocking tone of the title as well as their dismissal of 'fashionable' theories from feminist and post-colonial scholarship as an alternative (but implicitly less valuable) approach to the study of drinking stories. Through such rhetorical strategies the authors present their work as engaging a more sophisticated form of analysis which appreciates the irony and creativity of drinking stories – including those which centre on the sexual degradation and exploitation of women. Social policy and public health researchers may ask: what is to be gained from such an approach? And what kind of scholarship can afford to ignore gendered power dynamics when presented with such narratives?

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