



Response

Sign of the times? Gender, sexuality, and drinking stories



Alexandra Bogren*

Centre for Social Research on Alcohol and Drugs (SoRAD), Stockholm University, Sweden

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 31 March 2014

Accepted 1 April 2014

In a commentary, [Radcliffe and Measham \(2014\)](#) argue that the relations of gender, sexuality, and heteronormativity in [Tutenges and Sandberg \(2013\)](#) article about the drinking stories of Danish youth remain underexplored. [Tutenges and Sandberg \(2014\)](#) reply that they chose to study the stories in a folkloristic perspective, as one of several analytical options available.

I will not argue that Tutenges and Sandberg should have focused on gender and sexuality. There are no simple answers to what constitutes the most legitimate research focus, and choices will depend on the position and values of the researcher. However, in this discussion, it is important to realize that gender and sexuality can be considered as both thematic research fields with their own theories and as social systems of power and privilege that cut across other research fields. If we draw on the second notion, a folkloristic perspective does not necessarily exclude gender and sexuality from the analysis. Furthermore, gender and sexuality seldom emerge as explicitly in empirical materials as they do in the Danish drinking stories.

It seems to me that the drinking stories are about the presentation of self; of adapting to the norms and demands of the situation ([Goffman, 1959](#)). Does this mean that they represent the storytellers' actual opinions about gender? No – there is no simple one-to-one relationship between stories and storytellers' opinions in other situations. But there are different types of tall story and different ways of turning the world upside down, as “all real cultures contain diverse, often conflicting symbols, rituals, stories, and guides to action” ([Swidler, 1986](#): p. 277). Whereas Goffman is renowned for his close analyses of social situations, he also acknowledged that situational interaction is structured by social norms related to wider cultural assumptions ([Goffman, 1959](#)).

At least two common cultural presumptions about women's drinking are relevant to our understanding of the stories. One is

that women naturally do not get drunk, party hard, or do “crazy things”, an idea that sometimes feeds on the belief that women are, by nature, more delicate and well-behaved than men. Historical research (e.g., [Eriksen, 1999](#); [Warner, 1997](#)) questions this view. Moreover, studies show that the ideal appears to have middle-class connotations ([Skeggs, 2005](#); [Warner, 1997](#)).

The second, and related, presumption, says that women today attempt to drink “like men”, but should know better. This view brings to mind the figure of the “ladette” ([Jackson & Tinkler, 2007](#)) that [Radcliffe and Measham \(2014\)](#) mention in their commentary. She has been heavily criticized and stigmatized in the British media, but is not unique to the British context (see, e.g., [Bogren, 2011](#); [Månsson & Bogren, 2014](#)).

It is interesting to note that the Danish women tell stories of drinking to excess. Yet the analysis does not, I think, provide any straightforward arguments for saying that post-feminism is firmly established among them. We could argue that the women, by mere storytelling, challenge the idea of the naturally restrained and controlled woman. But in considering this alternative, we should also take into account that consumption, pleasure, choice, and self-indulgence are integrated into a post-feminist discourse common in the commercial media ([Månsson & Bogren, 2014](#)).

Moreover, we should not forget the young men's stories. The cultural presumptions surrounding men's drinking differ from those of women's drinking; men are more seldom viewed as representatives of their gender. However, the media provide some clues as to the forms of masculinity that are linked with alcohol. For example, when men's drinking becomes a topic of interest in the Swedish press, it is portrayed as leading to violence and sexist attitudes ([Bogren, 2011](#)). To what extent do the Danish young men's stories challenge such a version of problematized masculinity? Which other forms of culturally accepted and problematized masculinity are available in Western societies today?

In short, we can ask of the drinking stories: Why are they transgressive and fun, and in relation to what? Which cultural resources become relevant and which other symbols and stories are thereby

* Tel.: +46 8161469.

E-mail address: alexandra.bogren@sorad.su.se

turned upside down? Additionally, the question remains as to what extent presumably gendered stories are also structured by class and nationality.

Gender is one of the best examples (though certainly not the only) of the sociological wisdom that everyday beliefs constantly enter into the research process. This accentuates the importance of reflexivity in research that touches upon such issues.

References

- Bogren, A. (2011). Gender and alcohol: The Swedish press debate. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 20(2), 155–169.
- Eriksen, S. (1999). Alcohol as a gender symbol. *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 24(1), 45–73.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Doubleday: New York.
- Jackson, C., & Tinkler, P. (2007). Ladettes and modern girls: Troublesome young femininities. *Sociological Review*, 55(2), 251–272.
- Månsson, E., & Bogren, A. (2014). Health, risk and pleasure: The formation of gendered discourses on women's alcohol consumption. *Addiction Research & Theory*, 22(1), 27–36.
- Radcliffe, P., & Measham, F. (2014). Repositioning the cultural: Intoxicating stories in social context. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 25(3), 346–347.
- Skeggs, B. (2005). The making of class and gender through visualizing moral subject formation. *Sociology*, 39(5), 965–982.
- Swidler, A. (1986). Culture in action: Symbols and strategies. *American Sociological Review*, 51(2), 273–286.
- Tutenges, S., & Sandberg, S. (2014). Bad boys telling sexist stories? Response to Radcliffe and Measham, Repositioning the cultural: Intoxicating stories in social context. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 25(3), 348–349.
- Tutenges, S., & Sandberg, S. (2013). Intoxicating stories: The characteristics, contexts and implications of drinking stories among Danish youth. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 24, 538–544.
- Warner, J. (1997). The sanctuary of sobriety: The emergence of temperance as a feminine virtue in Tudor and Stuart England. *Addiction*, 92(1), 97–111.