



Response

Drinking stories: The importance of gender, narrative and epistemology



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In response to Tutenges and Sandberg's (2013) article 'Intoxicating stories: The characteristics, contexts and implications of drinking stories amongst Danish youth', Radcliffe and Measham (2014) argue that the authors' narrative analysis of young peoples' drinking stories is limited by its failure to engage with the relevance of gender, sexuality and the heteronormative environment in which those stories were enacted and constructed. They question the limits of narrative research in the construction of drinking cultures and the ability to identify whether the drinking freedoms young women employ in a post-feminist environment are 'insecure and contested' in nature.

We agree that gender is central in understanding alcohol consumption and the practices associated with that consumption. We also promote recognition of alcohol-related practices serving as a means through which gender is accomplished, with those practices remaining highly regulated (Atkinson, Kirton, & Sumnall, 2012; Measham, 2002; Skeggs, 1997). Context is all important; as Rúdólfssdóttir and Morgan (2009: 493) have argued, the socio-cultural framework in which drinking takes place makes us 'read differently' the alcohol consumption of men and women, which in turn influences the ways in which the sexes 'do alcohol'. As Tutenges and Sandberg (2014) note, drinking stories are no longer 'a male dominated verbal art', with women's conspicuous participation in night-life spaces becoming a common feature (Griffin, Benry-Howell, Hackley, & Mistral, 2009; Measham & Brain, 2005). In a time when bars and clubs are making 'a business model out of sexism' (Huffington Post, 2014), arguments around the role of alcohol in accomplishing gender are even more pronounced. That said, youth focused, alcohol heavy, 'spaces of attention' (McRobbie, 2008) are also divided on lines of race, ethnicity and class (Hubbard, 2013), and should influence theorising on drinking cultures accordingly. Gender, is not the only variable worthy of analysis.

It may feel that examination of drinking stories which does not incorporate these features, constructs only a partial account. McRobbie (2008) argues that the post-feminist sexual freedoms available to women, and which lay the foundation for 'hedonistic leisure pursuits' (p. 231), still operate within a hegemonic structure in which hyper-sexual femininity is retained. Clearly, a failure to interrogate gender relations in such instances would mean that the power dynamics that underpin women's transgressions would remain invisible. That, however, is not to say that analysis of hyper-sexual femininity, as purely performed in narrative, is not important in its own right. This can tell us plenty about the ways participants interpret and negotiate their social worlds and the narrative techniques used to do so. In addition, gender is not only expressed in the 'doing' of alcohol, but also in the narrative scripts that accompany the performance. Whilst gender may not have been the focus of Tutenges and Sandberg's analysis, this does not mean that all narrative research must (or indeed does) neglect issues of gender. The links between language, power relations, what is said, what is omitted, whose narratives are accepted whilst others are excluded (Riessman, 2008), means that the approach lends itself well to the study of gender relations (Presser, 2005), even if such elements of story construction are not deemed sufficient areas of exploration in their own right.

Gendering the stories of its participants was not what Tutenges and Sandberg's (2013) analysis set out to do, in the same way certain feminist drugs research would not set out to analyse the narrative techniques within the stories of its participants. The point to be made is that academics work from different epistemological vantage points. Whilst this doesn't mean we can't, or shouldn't, step out of our epistemological-comfort-zone, for many, it is 'a skin, not a sweater' (Marsh & Furlong, 2002: 17).¹ Questions consequently

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¹ Thanks goes to Dr. Sam King who recommended the incorporation of the quote.

remain as to whether we should focus on areas of research that fall outside our expertise, or paradigm.

Narrative is important in understanding drinking stories and cultures, as is the construction of narrative and the wider gendered, raced and classed framework in which stories are created and circulate. We should recognise that our disciplines, and the issues they tackle, are advanced by the different epistemological approaches; they enable critique, which ultimately advances knowledge and contributes towards a greater understanding of the 'whole'.

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