

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

**“If you only have money for two drinks you might as well have nothing at all”:
Young People Talk About Drinking and Drug Use**

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science

In

Psychology

At Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand

Simone M. Barclay

2010

ABSTRACT

Psychoactive consumption is on the rise. In particular young people's heavy sessional or 'binge' drinking has been highlighted in the media because of the burden it places upon public health resources and the risks it poses to health and social order. Youth intoxication has therefore become a prominent issue for policy makers, health promoters and researchers. Previous research suggests excessive drinking amongst young people can be understood in terms of the contemporary commodification of leisure which contributes to a culture of intoxication and facilitates the pursuit of calculated hedonism.

The current study investigated the discourses surrounding the intoxication practices of 18 – 24 year olds. Twenty-one male and female participants took part in four friendship group discussions in Auckland, New Zealand. Their talk was subsequently analysed to gain access to young people's views on drinking and other drug use in the context of socialising. The data was subjected to a Foucauldian discourse analysis and three discourses were identified in the texts: self-regulation, psychosocial development and pleasure. Together, these constituted a web of meaning which constructed drinking and drug use as a constrained, socially appropriate and culturally embedded practice motivated by enjoyment and social enhancement. Participants deliberately pursued states of intoxication, maintaining specific boundaries of appropriateness, means, frequency and degree of inebriation while simultaneously taking measures to mitigate perceived risks. Widespread conceptions of young adults' heavy sessional consumption as reckless or out of control did not correspond to the young people's perceptions of themselves as responsible, risk averse, social drinkers. Participants consistently resisted the positioning afforded them by the public discourse of censure surrounding youth intoxication and in doing so located their behaviour as age-appropriate and shaped by wider societal norms. Occasional excesses were constructed as a necessary and beneficial constituent of the maturation process.

Results highlight the degree to which the voices of relevant consumer groups have been marginalised in the policy development process and the credibility gap between young people's experiences and the health promotion messages directed at them. Findings problematise the notion that education about the risks of drinking and drug use will cause young people to moderate their behaviour out of a desire to avoid them. It is suggested that current focus on youth excess unduly attributes blame at the expense of recognising the more pervasive changes required to modify population-wide detrimental drinking cultures.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge with gratitude the 21 young men and women who participated in this research, sharing their views and experiences with me candidly and thoughtfully. I would also like to thank my supervisor, Dr Antonia Lyons, who always managed to provide wisdom, guidance and encouragement in the right measure at the right time. Thank you to Stuart, whose practical and emotional support sustained me. Finally, a special dedication to my mother Jillian, who modeled the characteristics of fortitude and perseverance and who showed me that impossible is nothing.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Contextualising Alcohol Use and Abuse	1
Binge Drinking – A Contentious Concept.....	3
Youth and Young Adult Drinking.....	6
Intoxication as a Social and Developmental Function of Youth.....	9
The Role of Culture and Context.....	13
Chapter 2: Theorising Drinking and Drug Use	18
Normalisation – Barometer of Social Change.....	18
Determined Drunkenness and the Commodification of Pleasure.....	23
Calculated Hedonism in a Culture of Intoxication.....	29
Research Rationale and Objectives.....	35
Chapter 3: Methodology	37
Social Constructionism and Discourses.....	37
Data Collection.....	39
Sampling and Recruitment.....	39
Focus Group Rationale.....	40
Friendship Groups.....	41
Focus Group Sketches.....	42
Format of the Focus Groups.....	44
Ethical Considerations.....	44
Transcription.....	46
Data Analysis.....	46
Searching for Themes.....	46
Discourse Analysis.....	48
Reflexivity.....	50

Chapter 4: Results	53
Self-Regulation Discourse.....	53
The Rational and Competent Inebriation Planner.....	54
Psychosocial Development Discourse.....	66
The Developmentally Normal User.....	66
The Culturally Appropriate Drinker.....	72
Pleasure Discourse.....	78
The Fun, Sociable Consumer.....	80
Summary.....	89
Chapter 5: Discussion	91
Overview.....	91
Implications.....	94
Limitations.....	99
Reflections on the Research Process.....	101
Future Directions.....	103
Conclusion.....	103
References	105
Appendices	114
Appendix A: Information Sheet.....	114
Appendix B: Discussion Prompts.....	116
Appendix C: Informed Consent Form.....	118
Appendix D: Transcription Notation.....	119
Appendix E: Thematic Codes.....	120
Table 1: Focus Group Composition	42