

# Embodiment, gender and drinking in mid-life

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# Alcohol consumption research

Has received much research and public health attention

Frequently conceptualised as individual behaviour based on rational choice

Public health approaches based on this are relatively ineffective (Babor et al, 2010)

# New conceptualisations...

Locates people's alcohol consumption within social worlds

calculated hedonism  
determined drunkenness  
controlled loss of control  
enjoyment  
pleasure  
socialising with friends  
identity and gender performances

Focus on young people; what about embodiment?

# Bodies consuming alcohol

Drinking alcohol happens within a body, we negotiate our lives through our body

We both *have* and *are* a (gendered) body – notions of embodiment highly relevant for alcohol research

Physiological responses to alcohol - how these are experienced and interpreted is inevitably social, cultural and gendered

# Key aims

To understand drinking as an embodied social practice

To explore the intersections of physiology, gendered identities, emotions, and external factors in drinking

To gain insight into men's and women's drinking at midlife

# Design and methods

DrAM study aimed to explore drinking in mid-life adults, aged 30-50 years

Based in Glasgow, Scotland

14 friendship group discussions (6 mixed-sex, 3 all male, 5 all-female)

56 participants aged between 30-55ish; 34 women, 22 men

White, diverse socio-economic backgrounds, range of consumption levels

Thematic analysis informed by social constructionism and embodied subjectivity (Cromby, 2004) frameworks



# Overview of findings

Variation in how much, how frequently, what, and where participants consumed alcohol

Made distinctions between earlier drinking practices and those they undertake now that they are “older and wiser” (Emslie et al, 2012)

But still accounts of recent heavy and drunken drinking episodes and pressure to drink

# Key commonalities

Embodied pleasures of drinking

Embodied knowing – when to slow to stop drinking

Factors affecting reduced consumption

Awareness of public health information



# Embodied pleasures of drinking

Michael: wine's a good comforter – you know? If you've had a hard day at work or something. I used to work quite, I won't say stressful but it was relatively stressful at one time, you know? And you used to come in and get a glass of wine just tae, you know?

Grace: Oh yes, yes I've had that.

Michael: the cold hit at the back of the throat and you think, 'oh, that's my best pal'  
[laughter]

(FG5)

# Embodied pleasures of drinking

Drinking marked a transitory time and space that altered people's embodied experience, distinguishing it from everyday experience

Gendered due to everyday social roles (paid and unpaid work, childcare, housework)

For men drinking provided embodied pleasure as a reward for working hard

For women drinking provided embodied enjoyment and relaxation from busy lives involving multiple roles

# Embodied knowing: Staying in the zone

- Bill: I'd love to drink ALL night but not get drunk. Get to that level of- that perfect level you know and stay there (...) In the zone, that's what it is.
- CE: Yeah. So is the zone, is that kind of feeling it a little bit then? Is that-
- Bill: Uh-huh, that's when you've managed to untie your tongue enough and your brain seems to be working faster, and everything you say is really fascinating to other people [laughs] and that happens to me all the time! But it's for about ten minutes or something. [laughter]. And thereafter it's all downhill. But there is that wee point where you think, I'm really enjoying myself. And then there's the point where you get- the next day you're probably thinking, and that's when I should have stopped.
- Eleanor: I know.
- CE: And is that alcohol or is that people, or is it both?
- Bill: I think it's just both. It's the reduction of inhibitions so that you're feeling more confident and cheerful perhaps. It's the social context as well.

# Embodied knowing: Internal gate

Tara: I feel like I've developed an internal kind of gate, which I know I don't want to go through – and I don't really know what it is, I just KNOW there's been quite a lot of nights out where I've just gotten to the point where I'm like, "if I have one more drink, I'm really not going to be happy. It's just gonna push past that point, and I just know that I don't want anymore," and I'll just stop....And it must be, through many years of experience of me (laughs) going past that point – and I think it's hard to verbalise the feeling that it is. I mean, it's not necessarily that I feel sick or I feel dizzy – although, they would be obviously strong signs. It's, there might be a point of being full – of just being full and, I don't know, maybe happy. I don't know, I'm just like, "no, that's it. That's enough." It's definitely subconscious, I think.

(FG11)

# Embodied knowing: Environmental cues

- Erin: Yeah it's the going to the toilet thing, and realising that it's [alcohol] having an effect. Cos I think - it's more like you're either talking or you're just like, busy, and then you're - going to the toilet's the first time you actually get to think how the night's going and then, how many drinks have I had.[group laughter]
- Ruth: I hadn't actually thought about it like that but it probably is.
- Erin: It's the first time you're kind of like - the lights are different and you're like oh!
- Lynn: The music isn't in your ears

(FG12)

# Embodied knowing

The embodied subjective experience of intoxication involves physical sensations in the physical body BUT...

...their interpretation depends on the person's context, environment, space, and place.

Shared levels of intoxication important for pleasure

When to stop depended on age, experience and gender

Women pay more attention to and could describe more bodily signs and sensations than men

# Conclusions

Adults at mid-life positioned themselves as experienced drinkers who knew their own physical bodies, how to achieve a desired level of intoxication, and when to stop drinking

Health promotion attempts are competing with this embodied knowledge

Drinking heavily is positioned in media/government discourses as irresponsible and risky, although these adults described their end-of-day drinking as rational within the context of their busy lives

Alcohol consumption is not a straightforward 'health behaviour'

# Implications for health promotion

Drinking is a collective activity involving shared desirable embodied states

How can we use these notions of embodied pleasure and embodied knowing?

Physical shifts may act as sobering moments to provide a space to (re)assess embodied states and cease drinking

Consider bodies and age, gender and life stage

Engage with drinking as a gendered, embodied pleasure





# Conceptualising health behaviour beyond the individual

Consider broader structural influences involved

Liberalisation of licensing laws and alcohol policies - in tandem with move to individual responsibility for alcohol consumption (Jayne et al., 2010)

Alcohol industry very successful at linking drinking to reward and relaxation for daily coping among men and women at midlife (as well as to special occasions)

