

“Shoes on your hands”

Perceptions of alcohol among young adolescents in Norway

Norway has a drinking culture characterised by low per capita consumption, heavy drinking on a few occasions, and restrictive alcohol policies. Attitudes towards alcohol have traditionally been ambivalent, but recently they have become more “continental” among adults, and the temperance movement has lost ground. This qualitative study explores perceptions of alcohol among 12-to-13-year-old Norwegians. The main result from focus group and individual interviews with 141 participants is that young adolescents are highly sceptical of drinking. They believe that people drink because they “want to be cool”, because they are miserable, or because of group pressure. The perceived effects of alcohol consumption include getting drunk and addicted, while those who drink alcohol are described as immature and marginalized. Arguably, these results reflect a deep-rooted cultural ambivalence towards alcohol in Norway. The young adolescents’ perceptions of alcohol reflect adult voices, but do not indicate lack of agency. Instead actively imitating adult voices can be seen as a first step into adulthood. When young adolescents grow older however, categorical rejections of alcohol will be associated with childhood, and must be replaced with more personal, nuanced and sophisticated forms to justify abstinence from alcohol.

Keywords: alcohol perceptions, adolescents, children, culture, Norway, qualitative research

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Introduction

Norway has a long history of ambivalence towards alcohol. On the one hand, alcohol policy in Norway is among the strictest in the world (Brand et al., 2007) and the main policy aim has long been to keep consumption as low as possible in an effort to reduce the harms ensuing from alcohol use. A large number of regulations that limit the availability of alcohol form a political thread, accompanied by a cultural thread that mostly supports such strict policies (Rossow & Storvoll, 2014; Nordlund & Østhus, 2013; Nordlund, 2008). On the other hand, alcohol consumption patterns have been characterised by excessive binge drinking (Bye & Rossow, 2010). Alcohol has traditionally not been integrated into everyday life in Norway, but used as an intoxicant on weekends and during celebrations. Although the Norwegian drinking pattern is changing and many have adopted a more “continental” drinking pattern over recent decades a common practice – even for adults – is to drink heavily on a few occasions (Bye & Østhus, 2011).

Adolescents drink for enhancement and enjoyment, while drinking to cope with negative emotional states is often associated with alcohol problems (Comasco et al., 2010; Kuntsche et al., 2005). The onset of drinking, however, differs considerably between cultural contexts. The average age of drinking initiation in contemporary Europe is 12 (Anderson & Baumberg, 2006; Hibell et al., 2009). In Norway, approximately 25% of 13-year-olds have tasted alcohol, but just above 2% have reported being inebriated (Adolfson et al., 2014). The harms associated with alcohol use appear to be well-known among children and adolescents across Europe. In the UK, a study showed that 5-to-12 year old children were aware of the potential damages of alcohol, and considered alcohol an adult product (Valentine et al., 2014). They were attentive to the social harms of “excess consumption in public spaces” and imagined themselves to drink in moderation in the future (Valentine et al., 2014: 114-115). In a Portuguese study, 13-year-olds stated that people sometimes drank because they felt upset and wanted to forget problems, and described the effects of alcohol as damaging (Fraga et al., 2011).

The perceived “risks” of adolescence – sexuality, crime, violence and substance use – are typically described from the perspectives of adults, while the voices of children and adolescents are often ignored (Harden et al., 2000; but see Valentine et al., 2014; Fraga et al.,

2011). The main objective of this study is to explore young adolescents' perceptions of alcohol use. We investigate young adolescents' perceptions of alcohol through two main research questions: What are young adolescents' perceptions of why people drink alcohol? And what is their understanding of the effects of drinking? By exploring their views on alcohol, the aim is to give voice to the young adolescents' own associations, experiences, and opinions.

Early adolescence and childhood sociology

Sociology has been criticized for inadequately addressing childhood (James & Prout, 2015). In a recent Editorial in the journal *Childhood*, the main position in sociology is described as seeing childhood as a preparatory stage for adulthood. The editorial points out that childhood should instead be seen as a social world in its own right, including “the diversities of children’s life-worlds and their interdependencies with social, economic and cultural structures” (*Childhood*, 21(1): 4). Participants in this study were between 12 and 13 years old and thus young adolescents per definition (Stallard et al, 2013). Arguably, childhood sociology still has a lot to offer when attempting to understand this life-phase. Most importantly, most of the perceptions and opinions they held about alcohol were more characteristic of children (see e.g. Valentine et al., 2014) than of adolescents as described in previous research on alcohol (Rolando, 2015).

The Western childhood is a relatively new construct. Ariès (1962) famously argued that childhood was not understood as a separate state until the seventeenth century. Modern childhood reached its privileged state in the nineteenth century, and although it is “a status to which some children have more access than others”, active institutionalization by the state and recent developments in culture have made it more preferred and dominant than ever before (Fass, 2013:2). Only one hundred years ago in the Western world, children were more integrated in the world of adults through work and family life, and there were fewer specialized institutions and practices reserved for children (Fass, 2013). James and Prout (2015) argue that the “immaturity of children is a biological fact of life, but the ways in which this immaturity is understood and made meaningful is a fact of culture” (2015:6). This is often described as the social construction of childhood (James and Prout, 2015).

Children have long been a subject of sociology (Shanahan, 2007), but childhood sociologists have criticized mainstream sociology for neglecting childhood, and reducing children to passive extras in the world of adults (James & Prout, 2015). The new paradigm of the sociology of childhood has been a response to this tendency in mainstream sociology.

Researchers in this tradition highlight several key themes: that childhood should be seen as a social construct, that children have agency and are actively co-producing what we describe as childhood, and that children should be studied in their own right (James & Prout, 2015). This approach has received some criticism, notably for downplaying the *many* voices of children (Punch, 2002) and the ambiguity of these voices (Komulainen, 2007). According to Komulainen (2007), ‘voice’ can be seen as both an individual property and a product of social interaction, and the clear distinction between one’s own authentic voice and the voices of others can be exaggerated.

By studying early adolescence – a phase where childhood is challenged by the new demands for maturity and reflection in adolescence – we hope to address several of these issues, as well as contributing to understanding the subtle process from childhood to adolescence. This transactional period is a time of great discontinuity and a time for the first early construction of life story (Habermas & Bluck, 2000:762). While childhood has been associated with innocence, purity, and the lack of agency, adolescence has increasingly been associated with disorder and delinquency (Fass, 2013). The absence of agency in childhood has been replaced by the agency and power displayed when young delinquents “transgressed the dominant definitions of sentimental childhood as innocent, helpless, and guileless” (Fass, 2013:6). Romesburg (2013) even argued that wariness “has largely overtaken the modern vision of adolescence as precluding order and hope” (2013:230). Among the worries of adolescence are sexuality, crime, and violence, all closely linked to the excessive drinking that characterises Nordic drinking culture (Savic et al., 2016).

While acknowledging that characterizing drinking culture along just a few dominant lines will inevitably neglect a cultures’ divergent nature (Jayne et.al., 2008; Savic et al., 2016), we still believe that some dominant and enduring characteristics may influence the transmission of cultural beliefs and attitudes through generations. For example, at the core of the cultural ambivalence towards alcohol in Norwegian society lies a consistent scepticism towards, and awareness of the potential harms of, alcohol, as illustrated historically by the prohibition in the 1920s and the contemporary state monopoly on liquor, wine, and strong beer (Hauge, 1988). This reflects an ambiguous “alcohol culture” combining low per capita consumption with less restrictive norms regarding intoxication (Nordlund & Østhus, 2013). Young adolescents’ perceptions of alcohol may reflect such stable and consistent “deep cultural structures” (Samovar et al., 2012), that endure through generations (Rolando et al., 2012).

Method

The data used in this article are from a study concerned with general adolescent development and experiences, but with an emphasis on their opinions and perceptions about substance use. The sample consists of seven 8th grade classes in different middle schools from three regions of Norway - two from the Northern, two from the Western, and three from the South-East region of the country. In each region, both an urban and sub-urban school were recruited; in the South-East region, however, we recruited one urban and two suburban schools. This sampling strategy was chosen to ensure identification of possible geography- and demography-based patterns and variations.

The data consist of 29 focus group interviews and 32 individual interviews with a total of 141 participants (70 girls and 71 boys). Assent from the participants and consent from their parents were acquired beforehand with the school assistance. Both focus group and individual interviews lasted between 30 and 75 minutes, but the focus group interviews were generally longer than the individual interviews. All the interviews were conducted during the freshman year (i.e., during the 8th grade) of middle school, when the participants were between 12 and 13 years of age. In all the focus groups the participants were from the same class. The shared class membership is hereby perceived as an advantage, as students can relate each other's comments to a shared daily life, as well as challenge each other during the discussion. However, a possible disadvantage of this approach is that existing power structures might hinder open discussion. To reduce such risks, the smaller interview groups were composed in collaboration with the participants' teacher. The number of participants in each interview group varied from 4 to 6.

All the interviews were conducted by the two authors and five colleagues. In focus group interviews, our main interest is in elucidating "shared and tacit beliefs, and (...) the way these beliefs emerge in interaction with others in a local setting" (Macnaghten & Myers, 2004: 65). In contrast, individual interviews allowed for more elaborate stories about personal issues and experiences. Individual interviews and focus group interviews were both semi-structured but followed different interview guides. In both cases, however, the overall aim was to gain a more complete picture of youth culture and to understand how legal and illegal substances were perceived and integrated into participants' everyday lives. This approach included general questions about how they experience school, what they do outside of school, their interests and aspirations, and how they anticipate near and distant future. Our more specific questions about alcohol and other drugs were mainly about associations (i.e., "What do you think about when you hear the word alcohol?"; "Why do you think people

drink?”, “How would you describe a good party?”; “What types of alcoholic drinks are there and how would you describe them?”; “What happens when people drink?”). In some focus group interviews this set of questions led to lively discussions about personal experiences, things they had seen in movies, local stories about older youths, etc. In other focus group interviews however, the conversation was slower, indicating that alcohol was more peripheral to the participants. The individual interviews included questions about relationships with family and friends, and the role of alcohol at home and in other family and private settings.

The participants in this study are in a life-phase characterised by the transition from childhood to adolescence. Punch (2002) distinguishes between the researchers who perceive children as different from adults (and therefore rely on participant observation when studying children) and those who perceive children as similar to adults (and therefore apply the adult methodology to studying children). Our study may be associated with the limitations of the first understanding of children, most importantly not adequately addressing the power imbalance between adult researchers and child subjects (Punch, 2002: 322). One possible consequence of such an imbalance is that the younger participants may narrate what they believe the adult researcher wants or expects to hear. While acknowledging this limitation of the method, it should be noted the interviewers made efforts to reduce this tendency by gently probing for more affirmative perceptions of alcohol. In addition, it can be noted that the 8th grade students are generally more used to a school context and consequently also more prepared for a focus group setting compared to the younger children referred to in Punch’s review (2002).

Although we have a high number of participants, this is a qualitative study identifying complex, embedded practices of meaning making, and we have analysed our data accordingly. Most importantly, this means that we have sought the answers to our research questions comprehensively, and not only in the participants’ direct responses to individual probes. Specifically, the questions of why people drink and what are the perceived effects of drinking are indirectly answered throughout the interviews, as responses to many different questions and through varied discussions. We used Hyperresearch for data-coding and first identified all alcohol-relevant conversations. Further, we conducted a conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), a process that involves an inductive approach to the data. The two main categories emerged from our coding: firstly, the sum of different reasons participants gave for why people would drink alcohol, and secondly, their understanding of varied effects of alcohol use. These two parts make up the main substance of the analysis below.

Results

The main results are summarized below, including the main perceptions of alcohol and alcohol use among the Norwegian preadolescents, focusing on their understanding of the reasons for, as well the effects of drinking.

Why people drink

The young adolescents from our study reported three main reasons for why people would drink alcohol: peer pressure to “be cool”, sadness and misery, or to have a good time or celebrate. The first offered rationale was primarily associated with young people’s alcohol use, while the two remaining reasons were more likely to be associated with adults, but not exclusively so. Only the last of these drinking reasons - having a good time or celebrations - was associated with something favourable, and even that association came with many reservations.

To be “cool” and peer pressure

Many of our participants expressed the belief that if one drinks, one is trying to be someone else and giving in to peer pressure. This conversation from a focus group interview is reflective of such beliefs:

I: But OK, now we’ve talked about adults that drink, but how about young people?

Why do young people drink?

Frank: Because they want to be cool.

I: They want to be cool.

Hans: They want to feel like being grown up

Gunnar: Mostly to feel like being grown up and to, like, be the coolest person in school.

Frank: They say, like, I drank yesterday. Then they probably think they’re cool.

I: Is it? When do people start to drink like that? How old?

Hans: Mostly at lower secondary school. Because then the pressure is high.

Frank: If one starts who may be popular and others, like, fancy him and think that he’s cool. And if he starts, like, to drink, then he might influence a lot of other people.

Because they want to be in his group.

That young people drink alcohol to be “cool” often appeared as the first association during interviews. In one focus group interview, participants talked about a beach where older adolescents (i.e., 17-19 year-olds) used to party. Sometimes, younger adolescents would show up as well, but everybody agreed that this was problematic, as expressed by Bente: “some people, like, do it just to be cool. Go down there and party with the older crowd, but then it all goes really wrong”. The potential harms of alcohol were continuously at the forefront of discussion, and our participants tended to see drinking as a silly way to get attention.

That young people may drink as an effort to blend in or because it is expected of them was also a common theme. In an individual interview, Alma said that if one says no when drink is offered by people who think they are cool, “...then they maybe feel excluded or something.” The fear of being excluded creates uncertainty, as Anja expressed when talking about the best and worst part of starting middle school:

The best thing is that I've made a lot of new friends and good friends. The worst thing is maybe that some people started drinking and stuff. You're not really sure if you're supposed to do it or not. That's, like, the worst, that you're a bit insecure.

Peer pressure is a much debated theme in literature on adolescent drinking (e.g. McIntosh et al., 2008; Kloep et al., 2001). The fear of exclusion is part of growing up, and peer pressure was important for young adolescents' understanding of reasons for drinking. It is a mechanism that young people are aware of, both through their own experience and as a general concept, and it frames their understanding of why young people drink.

Because they are sad and miserable

The participants offered various versions of drinking as a way to deal with problems such as depression, exclusion, and marginalization. In the same way as with “coolness” and peer pressure, they had a well-developed language when it came to these reasons for drinking. In a focus group interview, participants discussed a recent party some classmates had attended. Brage stated that he was extremely disappointed that they had been drinking, but a conversation with his mother changed his attitude:

But then I heard other things about him (one of the peers who drank), something else, and then I talked to mom about it, and I said “yeah there's something about him”, so mom had a point that one shouldn't get so upset, that one should rather help him.

Families shape children's knowledge of alcohol (Valentine et al., 2014). Brage was first upset and disappointed by his drinking peer, but a conversation with his mother altered his attitude and made him believe that his peer would drink because he had problems. In another group interview, all participants agreed that people would drink because they "feel alone" or were "unhappy". Why adolescents their own age would start to drink was explained by them being "a little weird to begin with". Addiction was also frequently mentioned as a reason for drinking, and Odin mentioned that "maybe (the alcoholic) had a tough childhood".

Many pointed out that one could drink to forget, as exemplified by Anja who in an individual interview stated that "maybe they have a lot on their minds and stuff, and then when they drink, and get drunk, they don't remember". In a focus group interview, Herman told a story about his uncle's heartache:

My uncle used to be good, he almost never went to parties (...) And then his girlfriend moved out and broke up, so now he's at parties all the time. He's never said that he's heartbroken, but my grandmother says he is. So now it seems like he's trying to drink it away, by going to parties with his cousin all the time.

Herman's story about his uncle is similar to a popular narrative, where sad people drown their sorrows in alcohol. In another group interview, Oda pointed out that "...in movies and stuff, there is a whole lot (of drinking)", and along with parents, movies were mentioned as an important source of knowledge about alcohol. Young adolescents understood drinking as a way to deal with various troubles. That is a well-known frame for drinking, with a cultural resonance in Norwegian society.

Enjoyment and celebration, but...

The positive alcohol-associations presented by the participants included the notion that some drank "to have fun" or to "relax", and drinking was often seen as an integral part of celebrations, such as weddings and adult birthday parties. Several also stated that people drink because "they think it tastes good" or "food might taste a little better with wine". However, it was striking how they tended to modify these positive claims. The following extract from a focus group interview is illustrative:

I: But what about adults? Why do they drink?

Brita: I think it is like (...) they think it's good.

Ingrid: They enjoy themselves somehow.

Brita: Have a good time you know.

John: Yes, but when mom and dad drink, they don't drink like, oohh! right away you know, they take their time and enjoy it somehow. There are probably many adults who have experienced being drunk before and then they maybe didn't like it and then later they've tried to be a little more cautious with alcohol and not drink as much.

While all participants agreed that alcohol can be enjoyed for positive reasons, John is quick to point at risky and bad experiences associated with drinking. To think that getting a little intoxicated was a genuine reason for drinking seemed to be alien to many participants. As John explained, being drunk was rather regarded as an experience many adults had learned from and did not want to repeat. It seemed the young adolescents had a continuous tendency to justify and explain drinking.

The frequent modifications of positive associations with alcohol were not a matter of group dynamics in the sense that people were afraid of talking favourably about alcohol in front of peers. In individual interviews too, such reservations were common. One way the participant's made reservations was to underline how responsible or positive drinking involved only small quantities of alcohol. Helge pointed out that his grandfather and stepfather drank, but emphasized that "they have this tiny glass of red wine after food to unwind when we have people over and stuff". Jonas stated that it was not good to drink "but it's no big deal if one has a little bit once in a while". Stating "a small glass" is not enough; it needs to be a "little bit" or "tiny bit", indicating a profound underlying scepticism towards alcohol.

Children's beliefs about alcohol are often more positive when they approach adolescence (Cameron et al., 2003). In this study it was striking how even the rare instances of positive talk were countered with some sort of reservation (see also Rolando et al., 2012: 205). Interviewers often probed for positive associations, but there seemed to be a lack of language for enjoyable uses of alcohol among our participants, or at least a willingness to let such statements stand uncommented.

What are the effects of alcohol

The effects of alcohol were also perceived as generally and overwhelmingly negative. These can be divided into three main categories closely related to the reasons for why young

adolescents thought people drank. They include getting drunk, getting addicted, and having a good time. The pattern was the same as for reasons to drink: while they had elaborated stories about the negative consequences of drinking, they seemed to lack an appropriate language for addressing favourable effects.

Getting drunk: losing control, being stupid

When asked about what they associate with the effects of alcohol, “drunk” was often the first response offered by the students from our sample. In a focus group interview, the first thing that came to their minds was “beer, booze, anything that gets you drunk,” and one added “I think of people that can't keep it under control”. When asked about what they thought when they heard the word ‘alcohol’ in another group interview, the first reply was “what I actually think about is that you get drunk”. The close association with drunkenness may reflect the main features of the Norwegian drinking culture, but it was never regarded as a desirable effect among the participants. Drunkenness was always framed in negative terms. Anton’s statement, made in a group interview, was characteristic:

Drinking a lot is about you getting high, about you getting drunk, about you not being able to control yourself, about you not knowing, about you not being able to decide on your own. About you doing stupid things and being different from how you really are, also about you feeling bad the day after.

Some participants had never seen drunkenness. Still, they had a strong notion that it involved all sorts of losing control and especially losing control over one's body. In one focus group interview, Johannes stated: “Yeah they (drunk people) walk back and forth in criss-cross and zigzag fashion and maybe they fall. I don't know”. They perceived drunkenness to lead to loss of control over bodily actions and sense of self, thus including both a practical and existential dimension. Sometimes consequences were described as relatively innocent, but drunkenness was also related to serious harms. Frida pointed out that “you may hit someone and stuff, and then there would be some kind of big problems because of that”; another talked about the risk of “getting arrested”. Several talked about “people that had to get their stomachs pumped”. At one school, there was a story about a local young man who almost died after falling asleep outside during winter time. In an individual interview, Brage explained how that could happen: “because you can freeze to death, you can't feel the cold when you've had something to drink”, and he also summoned up all the harmful consequences of drunkenness by stating

that drunk people “rape, fight, drive drunk, steal, just about everything that’s stupid”. Being drunk was clearly not a favourable state to be in.

Studies involving adolescents a few years older, with more experiences with drinking than our study participants, show that intoxication is considered fun, liberating, and exciting (Kloep et al., 2001). Much of the talk about drunkenness in this study was in general terms, beyond time and place. Nevertheless, in many interviews and especially in focus group interviews, the participants referred to some key local stories that became important for their perceptions of alcohol. The story about a young man almost freezing to death was one such story. At another school, there had been an infamous party involving some older peers that was frequently referred to. None of the participants in the focus group interview claimed to have been there, but they could still tell stories from the event, indicating that it was a defining event that generated a lot of talk among younger students. Herman described in great detail what had happened to one of the partygoers:

He was picked up by an adult who said: “now you have to put on your shoes”, and he said: “I don't wanna put my shoes on”, and then he says yeah, and he puts them on his hands, and he goes and gets in the car. And he yells “mama” in the car and starts crying and stuff, because he is a real crybaby when he is drunk, he went and kicked people and kicked doors and stuff.

This story affirmed the young adolescents’ perception that drunkenness leads to loss of control and makes people behave in stupid and embarrassing ways. As with stories about alcohol in general (Tutenges & Sandberg, 2013), the most dramatic stories received most attention. The consequence was that the sceptical attitude towards alcohol often told in general terms was fortified by more lively and detailed “real” stories from their social networks. Together they shaped the participants’ views that the main effect of drinking alcohol was getting intoxicated and that drunk people did stupid and dangerous things.

Getting addicted

The young adolescents described addiction and alcoholism as a reason for drinking, but also as one of the main negative consequences of consuming alcohol. In a focus group interview, Cecilie stated that “if you are young and start to drink, like, then you can get addicted”. In an individual interview, Alma was asked what happens if people drink often. The reply was “I

think one gets a bit addicted to it". In another individual interview, Herman was even more certain that this was the outcome of frequent drinking:

I: What happens when a person drinks a lot?

Herman: When someone drinks a whole lot, then he gets addicted, eventually.

I: Well.. Do you think it takes a while for someone to get addicted or not?

Herman: (...) hm... (...) no, it's just to drink it many times, actually.

Participants were often vague when it came to what drinking "a lot of", "many times" and so on actually involved, but it did not take much for them to regard drinking as risky. In a focus group interview, it was pointed out that drinking was not so dangerous if it happened once a weekend or once every month, reflecting the infrequency of the Norwegian drinking pattern. In an individual interview, Benjamin elaborated on the relationship between drinking and alcoholism from another angle.

I: In the beginning you said something about being addicted, what does that mean?

Who is it that gets addicted to alcohol?

Benjamin: No, maybe the ones that had a little taste many times I guess? Those that maybe didn't like it in the beginning, but that try to like it. Then one gets addicted to it.

I: How do you think it feels, being addicted?

Benjamin: Well, it can't be that much fun, being addicted and spending so much money on something that you probably shouldn't be doing.

Benjamin framed addiction as the result of attempts at trying to fit in by drinking alcohol, reflecting the emphasis on group pressure often mentioned as a reason for drinking. This was also mentioned by Jasmina. Probing for more details, we asked what happens if people drank a lot of beer and her answer was that "then you don't quit, like, then you go on drinking in the future too".

Postponing alcohol debut to avoid future alcohol disorders has been a target of many prevention programmes in Norway. Even though the scientific evidence of such a mechanism is disputed (Ystrom et al., 2014), the story seems to have reached the young participants in our study. The fear of addiction as a consequence of drinking alcohol is somehow surprising given that most of the participants' exposure to parental, sibling, and peer drinking

presumably was not characterized by alcoholism. These stories may reflect a folk devil (Cohen, 1972) constructed by both state agencies and parents to make young people delay their alcohol debut.

Having a good time, but...

In a school in an affluent area, some young adolescents talked confidently about their parents having wine clubs, something they perceived as a hobby for old men: “Like, they just stand there with their glasses, and like “this one tastes very old, and in this one there are grapes, red grapes”, all that kind of stuff. They know so much”. In this school, there were some positive associations of alcohol that did not get countered with negative aspects right away. In one focus group interview at another school, Victor also stated that “Well, drinking, then it's partying, that's what I think (...) it's partying and having fun”. This was one of few examples of unequivocally affirmative evaluations of young peoples’ drinking. In general, as with the reasons for why people drink, talk about the positive consequences did not go unnoticed. It was usually followed up by some sort of “but...”, revealing a deep-rooted ambivalence towards drinking. In a group interview, June’s statement illustrates some of this ambivalence:

June: Yeah, they sort of dare to do more. Maybe they do it as a way to get more self-esteem or something like that. That they sort of have two lives, like the one when they have been drinking and another one when they’re sober.

I: That they become different somehow and dare to do more?

June: They don’t really get cheeky, but maybe a bit, and then they get a little scary too. But they get a little more, like, tough and reckless.

June expressed ambiguity as to what happens when young people drink. On the one hand, drinking is fun and may increase self-esteem; on the other hand, such effects are temporary and lead to living two lives. She acknowledged some bright sides, but the darker aspects were not far away. Similarly, in an individual interview, Eskil modified older friends’ positive descriptions of drinking:

Eskil: I hear stories about people that have had too much to drink.

I: Yeah, what do they say?

Eskil: “That was damn cool!”

I: Yeah. Do they talk about it as if it was cool?

Eskil: Yes, they do, they do. Uh.. But there is not a whole lot of people who do it.
There are parties with eighth, ninth, and tenth graders. No... It's just a waste of time.

While there were some positive associations of alcohol among young adolescents, they were reluctant to make these opinions their own. The effects of alcohol were sometimes described as potentially healthy, and it could make a party better, but the participants were sceptical of these effects, and tended to moderate them with critical comments (see also Rolando et al., 2012: 205). To a certain extent, this reflects the ambivalence model proposed by Cameron et al. (2003), stating that in late childhood there is a tendency to balance positive and negative aspects of alcohol both equally and simultaneously. In this study, however, our 12-to-13 year-old participants provided much richer responses about the harmful effects of alcohol than to its potential benefits, and the negative aspects of alcohol use seemed to be more salient and at the forefront of their minds.

Discussion and conclusion

Among the 12-to-13 year olds in this study, drinking alcohol was relatively unanimously linked to attempts at “being cool”, peer pressure, and described as a response to being sad and miserable. The effects of alcohol were described as losing control, being “stupid” and getting addicted. Even when mentioning positive aspects of drinking such as enjoyment, celebration and having a good time, there was a tendency to moderate and counterbalance such statements with declarations reflecting perceived problems of alcohol use. Participants described alcohol as an adult product, in accordance with previous studies of children (Valentina et al, 2014). In that respect, these young adolescents had more in common with children than adolescents, at least the way they are usually described in the alcohol literature (Rolando, 2015). The main difference from the UK study by Valentine et al. (2014) was that we found fewer positive associations with alcohol. Drinking cultures can be conservative (Rolando et al., 2012) and our participants’ unwillingness to endorse alcohol in primarily positive terms probably reflects a long-lasting and deeply ambiguous Norwegian drinking culture.

In the last one hundred years, the Western world has seen an increasing distinction between the world of children and adults, and childhood has been constructed as a relatively separate sphere of life with its own institutions, forms of talk and culture. For most children, being a child means prevailing in a childhood world of play and relative safety. When asked about “adult-stuff” such as alcohol, it seemed as if our participants primarily retold the stories they heard from their parents, teachers and other adults. Imitating voices is a general feature

of meaning-making (Bakhtin, 1981), but in this study it was particularly striking. The active use of adult voices can contribute to an understanding of how children are both “being and becomings” (Uprichard, 2008: 303). Imitating adult voices does not necessarily indicate passivity or lack of agency, but can be understood as an active attempt to enter the world of adults. Without experience with drinking alcohol and in an early stage of adolescence, repeating what they had been told was active agency in efforts to appear as mature.

The scepticism towards alcohol among the young adolescents in this study reflects some particular traits of Norwegian society. Drinking in Norway often means excessive drinking, and parents and teachers have good reasons to warn about the effects of alcohol. The high-risk drinking patterns characterising Norwegian drinking culture means that many adults want their children to postpone drinking as long as possible. Arguably, the result is the reproduction of deep cultural structures (Samovar et al., 2012) and dominant cultural stories reflecting scepticism towards alcohol. The result is an increasing distinction between an adult world of increasingly continental and moderate drinking (Bye & Østhus, 2011) and the world of children where negative perceptions of alcohol dominate. This is probably fortified by low acceptance for drinking in front of children in Norway (Fjær et al., 2016). In contrast to the pattern where adults model drinking to children (Valentine et al., 2014), adolescents’ perceptions of alcohol in Norway may be more based on the stories adults tell them than on observing actual drinking practices.

Parder’s (2016) has described how stories about alcohol change in the transition from childhood to adolescence, most importantly that adolescents start developing stories that are more personal and sophisticated when it becomes more common to use alcohol. The majority of participants in this study will likely have some experience with alcohol in a few years, including being drunk. Young adolescents’ perceptions of alcohol will probably change accordingly, becoming more affirmative towards drinking. Much will change in just a few years, and this phase from unquestioningly accepting – and even imitating – to actively challenging adult views and rules requires further study. It may for example, be interesting to explore how adolescents develop more situational and flexible reasons for alcohol abstinence once drinking becomes more common among their peers (Parder, 2016).

The negative perceptions of alcohol young adolescents have may contribute to postponing alcohol debut and reducing risks associated with drinking in early adolescence. At the same time, these views of alcohol are based on a strong distinction between the world of children and that of adults. At some point, young adolescents may associate alcohol-scepticism with childhood, turning alcohol into an important part of “growing up” and leaving

the word of childhood behind. As children become adolescents, advocating abstinence or moderation through realistic descriptions of the effects of alcohol and motivations for drinking may then be effective. This may guide adolescents as they change their reasons for abstinence from “simplistic” stories completely rejecting alcohol associated with childhood to more “mature” and complex reasons for situational abstinence.

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