Alcoholism, Alcohol Abuse and Heavy Drinking: Irish College Males’ Perspectives on Alcohol-related Problems

Yichen Jiang

November 2009

University of Limerick
Department of Sociology

Available at http://www.ul.ie/sociology/socheolas/vol2/1
ISSN 2009-3144

The Department of Sociology, University of Limerick, welcomes applications for post-graduate study

- MA in Sociology (Youth, Community and Social Regeneration): http://www.ul.ie/sociology/ycsr.html
- MA in Gender Culture and Society: http://www.ul.ie/sociology/gcs.html
- PhD by research: http://www.ul.ie/sociology/researchdegrees.html

http://www.ul.ie/sociology
Alcoholism, Alcohol Abuse and Heavy Drinking: Irish College Males’ Perspectives on Alcohol-related Problems

Yichen Jiang

History, Politics, Sociology and Social Studies

This article analyses the perspectives that undergraduate students have on alcohol-related issues. Key differences and distinctions between relevant terms are introduced, namely alcoholism, alcohol abuse and heavy drinking, in an attempt to explore issues around alcohol use and abuse as perceived by Irish young adults. The research reports on a small scale qualitative study focused on interviewing three third-year college males at the University of Limerick. The interviews investigated their drinking behaviours and their experiences which revolve around alcohol consumption. Intimately tied to these facts are key socio-cultural and ideological aspects of alcohol use among young people. The results show that the young men’s popular opinions related to alcohol lead them to believe that they are not in danger from heavy drinking in their daily lives. There is significant, documented, evidence in college males’ lifestyles of a lack of restraint in alcohol consumption. This research explores their drinking behaviours and concludes with a need for enhanced awareness of, and further education on alcohol and its related problems, aiming to create a supportive environment that helps young people make healthy choices.

Alcohol is a potentially addictive drug and if misused a substance that gives pleasure can lead to insidious but finally incapacitating illness. The reasons for alcohol being misused lie but only in the individual but in his society: if the environment is permissive toward excessive drinking, then excessive drinking will go unchecked (Edwards cited in Plant 1979, p. 11)

Introduction

There is a very well-established drinking culture in Ireland: one in four drinks too much, and alcohol consumption has soared since the mid-1990s (Wren
2003, p.12). Indeed, alcohol consumption (per head of population) in Ireland shows an increase of 48% over the twenty-year period 1986-2006, ranking third in per adult alcohol consumption when compared with other EU countries (Hope 2007, pp.3-5). There is clear evidence that “young Irish men (18-29 age group) reported the highest consumption of alcohol and had more binge drinkers than any other group in the population” (Department of Health and Children 2004, p.9). It leads to increased concern about the abuse of alcohol by young people and, particularly, their “tendency in some cases to drink overtly and excessively on the announcement of examination results has caused widespread disquiet” (Conniffe and McCoy 1993; Cooney 2002, p.108). This point is important, for, as Aitken (2001, p.13) notes, young people “are like canaries in a coal mine” – their poor behaviour signifies a disturbing trend in society as a whole. Compared with their European counterparts, young Irish adults are generally characterised by high levels of alcohol intoxication that causes a disturbing increase in medical and social issues surrounding excessive or problem alcohol consumption across Ireland (Cassidy 2003). The paper provides a small-scale qualitative insight into a specific, high risk sector of the Irish population. It focuses on drinking among a group of young adults, namely male college students, and attempts to identify and reconcile their drinking behaviour and consumption patterns with their perspectives on alcohol-related terms and problems.

The subject will be approached in the following ways: the first is to provide definitions of three basic concepts of problematic alcohol use – alcoholism, alcohol abuse and heavy drinking, trying to draw a distinction between them in this research. An analysis of these terms and the corresponding social contexts of the difference may help us to identify the complexity of alcohol issues in the society of young Irish people. The second is to compare and contrast
undergraduate students’ popular views with regard to alcohol in their lives. To achieve this, the following questions are raised and examined in the paper:

1. What are college males’ ideas about alcohol in their daily lives?

2. What are their understanding of the differences between alcoholism, alcohol abuse and heavy drinking in relation to the use of alcohol by these three young men who took part in the study?

3. Are young adults familiar with the policy and actions which have been developed by the University of Limerick, and how do they interpret it (University of Limerick 2002)?

4. How undergraduate students’ perspectives on alcohol-related terms reflect a socio-cultural and ideological spread of normal or safe alcohol use among young Irish people?

The four questions are considered to present a framework for the understanding of alcohol-related problems and whether these perceived ideas affect young adults’ drinking behaviour and consumption patterns.

**Theoretical Framework**

**I. Review of selected prior studies**

According to Aitken (2001), young people’s local contexts play a large part in creating academic concerns for their health and well-being. Numerous studies during the last few decades have examined alcohol use and drinking behaviour among young adults (O’Connor 1980; Phipps 2003; Hope 2003; Gmel and Rehm 2003). They have employed diverse data and methodologies for exploring reasons, influences and controls on alcohol related issues. O’Connor (1980) focuses on the age group of 18-21 year olds by a quantitative survey. She notes that there are obvious differences between the drinking patterns of young Irish people and their attitudes towards drinking, such as the distinction between how much young men actually drink and how much drinking they
think is bad (Ibid). From O’Connor’s (1980, p.37) point of view, differences often centre around “(1) extent and prevalence of drinking; (2) introduction to the use of alcohol; (3) customs and patterns of drinking; (4) social rules of drinking; (5) social meaning and function of alcohol”. Another researcher, Phipps (2003), uses both quantitative and qualitative methods to look at the Irish drinking environment. He applies drinking patterns of different age groups to binge drinking problems and their negative effects, indicating that binge drinkers in Ireland are most prevalent in the youngest age group (18-29) and that these numbers decrease sharply with age (Ibid).

Hope (2003), on the other hand, uses data from the Strategic Task Force on Alcohol and the Intoxicating Liquor Act 2003 as part of her project materials. She finds that drinking among Irish young people to a large extent “reflects the attitudes and practices of the wider adult society” (Ibid, p.48). Hence, social norms generally regard alcohol as helping people to have fun, to make friends as well as becoming more sociable and more popular than those that don’t drink. This, it is argued, needs to be changed in order to decrease the risk of the early onset of alcohol use and abuse (Dring and Hope 2001).

Similarly, Gmel and Rehm (2003) measure the social harm of alcohol consumption such as belligerence, social/family problems and unintentional injuries (e.g. motor vehicle injuries, falls etc.) through a survey research on social consequences of alcohol-related problems. Having quantified the impact of acute and chronic consequences, they emphasise the significance of alcohol policy which incorporates social consequences into policy decisions in a population-based approach (Ibid). If the first two authors have paid more attention to young people and their drinking patterns, then Hope (2003) and Gmel and Rehm (2003) have attempted to explain what leads to stereotypical beliefs around alcohol and sociability that causes many social problems in Irish
society. All of these studies attach great importance to a background analysis for my research paper.

II. Currently accepted definitions of alcoholism, alcohol abuse and heavy drinking

Since alcohol is an addictive and mood-altering substance, the more people that drink, the greater the risk of harm becomes (Bryant-Jefferies 2006). Once researchers move from considering patterns of alcohol use to the growing concern about alcohol-related problems, certain basic definitions between such terms as alcoholism, alcohol abuse, heavy drinking become crucial (Robinson 1976). These will be explored in the following paragraphs in order to avoid any ambiguity in the meaning of three terms.

(1) Alcoholism

The earliest and preferred term ‘alcoholism’ was introduced in 1852 “by Swedish physician Magnus Huss to refer to a special chronic condition of inebriates” (Cassidy 2003, p.33). During the early twentieth century, the term was redefined to cope with the problems of a widespread perceived demand for alcohol. In other words, scholars have linked the popularity of ‘alcoholism’ to its related social consequences. Therefore the medical definition of the word ‘alcoholism’ has been referred to its practical meaning. What is common to most definitions of alcoholism is that most interpretations contain three key elements: firstly, physical dependence or ‘addiction’; secondly, physical damage; and thirdly, social problems (Plant 1979, p.10). Hence, Jellinek argues that “alcoholism” is best regarded as “any use of alcoholic beverages that causes any damage to the individual or society or both” (Madden 1979, p.49). This definition will be utilised for reference in this study.
(2) Alcohol abuse
If ‘alcoholism’ is generally referred to as a disease, then ‘alcohol abuse’ is a label which signifies one of the most serious drinking patterns. It is often used in relation incidences of crime and public health issues. In fact, alcohol abuse, as a term, helps to analyse the relationship between problem drinking and alcoholism. From Madden’s (1979, p.46) viewpoint, ‘alcohol abuse’ is “a widely used term, not necessarily implying dependence that denotes the excessive consumption of alcohol on one or more occasions”. Sometimes the phrase can be replaced by ‘alcohol misuse’, and both of them indicate those excessive drinkers (also called ‘alcoholics’). Here, this study is only concerned with alcohol abuse among college students. One author in particular (Segal 1986) has argued, the rise in alcohol consumption among young people is a consequence of their aspiration to self and social identification. Thus to many undergraduate students, alcohol abuse can be seen as “a reaction to growing alienation, anxiety, boredom, narcissism, and the loss of a sense of belonging” (Ibid, p.159).

(3) Heavy drinking
‘Heavy drinking’ is depicted as a long-standing drinking problem that closely related to alcohol consumption. For men, it is typically defined as consuming an average of more than two pints of normal-strength beer per day (Bryant-Jefferies 2006). Alasuutari (1992) believes that the problem of heavy drinking can be managed and handled but not be cured, especially among college students. To most students, a heavy drinking episode includes binge drinking in which a binge for a male would be above four pints of beer in a day (Bryant-Jefferies 2006). Moreover, it is also defined as an unrestrained drinking bout lasting for at least a couple of days during which time the heavily intoxicated drinkers drop out by not studying, ignoring responsibilities, and engaging in some harmful behaviours such as fighting and using drugs (Hanson 2007b).
Heavy drinking has done considerable harm to young people and public health so that college alcohol policies are needed to intervene in individuals’ alcohol intake (Madden 1979). In essence, reviewing existing literature and analysing alcohol-related definitions here, provide theoretical framework for discussion of the results of the research project, some of which replicate the findings discussed in this section.

**Methodology**

*Participants*

In order to find Irish college males’ perspectives on alcohol, an interview-based, gender-specific qualitative method was used to take a purposive sampling from three third-year male students who are under 23 years of age at the University of Limerick (Bryman 2008). It aimed to avoid mature students (>23) that could be undergraduates because this study is only concerned with the perspectives and poor behaviour that young people have of alcohol. Thus it was deemed necessary to control for mature students who might think or behave in a sensible way. In addition, gender would be controlled for young Irish men have reported the highest consumption of alcohol and have involved themselves in more binge drinking, hence the study targeted only male students in order to gain an in-depth look at problematic male drinking cultures. Due to the limits of time and resources in the study, the author only interviewed three third-year male students whose perspectives represent the thought of the undergraduate male population in the university because they fell into the age group mentioned before. Small-scale studies are in contrast to quantitative researches that encompass a lot people because an in-depth interview of subjects, in this case young Irish people, are more intensive. Although small-scale studies cannot claim to be truly representative of the Irish young population as a whole, the patterns emerged from this study somewhat highlight the way to larger patterns and current social trends in Irish society (Walkerdine *et al.* 2001, p.12). In
addition to this, a small scale research facilitates the interaction between different studies, building a bigger and wider picture for further work in sociological analysis.

Data-collection and interview setting
A structured interview was used to identify the nature of the data, attempting to view events and the social world through the eyes of the three participants (Bryman 2008, p.385). It was felt that this might be the best way to look at Irish college males’ drinking behaviour, to examine how they engage in ordinary drinking activity, and to explore to what extent they can/do distinguish alcoholism, alcohol abuse and heavy drinking from the ordinariness of the everyday activity (Alasuutari 1992; Robinson 1976). An MP3 Voice Recorder Pen was used as in the interview, for the purpose of recording and later transcribing the conversation. The author has obtained interesting and important ideas as well as vivid tales of the drinking experiences of three participants through this face-to-face interaction.

The research interview setting is also important in the process of qualitative research because it is closely attached to two of the evaluative criteria in qualitative studies, i.e. reliability and validity for small samples (Gray 2003). An appropriate setting can make participants feel more relaxed and thus more likely to engage with and to offer substantial information on research questions. It facilitates first-hand accounts of what interviewees feel about alcohol in the ordinary everyday activity, how they explain their drink-related behaviour, and their views of alcohol policy. In particular, one group-study room on the second floor of the UL library building was chosen as a perfect setting for the interview. There are two main reasons for this: firstly, the group-study room is one of the best places to study on campus, and this familiar and relaxed atmosphere makes participants feel comfortable during the whole interview.
procedure. Secondly, the study room is a quiet place for collaborating together on the small-scale interview-based study. It makes participants feel free to express their opinions during the interview because they are not surrounded and disturbed by their friends and other young people.

Procedure and Analysis techniques

According to Gray (2003, p.75), ethical considerations should be seriously taken into account by scholars when they “are proposing research that involves “going out” or “into the field” in order to construct some form of data for our analysis”. In this study I have assured informants that I will do my utmost to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, such as using pseudonyms in transcripts and beyond; storing transcripts, participants’ names and contact details separately (Bryman 2008). Hence informants’ names are concealed through use of the pseudonyms ‘Tony’, ‘John’ and ‘Andy’. Three students were informed that their participation in this 20-minute interview were voluntary. The interview consisted of seven questions, and participants were free to refuse to answer any of the questions (Ibid, p.123). The research questions have been modified from the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT) of a World Health Organisation (WHO) collaborative project (Cooney 2002, p.166-8). They are:

1. How often do you have a drink, containing alcohol?
2. How often do you have three or more pints of alcohol on one occasion?
3. How do you define appropriate drinking practices?
4. What is the normative drinking behaviour during social gatherings where alcohol is present?
5. How do you define alcoholism, alcohol abuse, and heavy drinking?
6. Can you provide one reason that makes you engage in alcohol?
7. How do you feel about the current alcohol policy?
Since the study is based on Irish college males’ perspectives of alcohol-related concepts and problems, the interview questions sought to gather descriptive data that would enable the researcher to study them in great depth and then to “grasp the meaning that actors attach to their actions” (Taylor, cited in Bryman 2008, p.385). While three participants are very small and may not be representative of all young Irish men, the fixed ideas and the patterns of drinking behaviour that students have of alcohol and its related problems in the study are certainly suggestive of what is happening in Ireland today (Walkerdine et al. 2001, p.12).

**Results and Discussion**

Berg (2001, p.276) believes that research findings “quite literally refer to what the data say, whereas results offer interpretations of the meaning of the data. In short, results offer an analysis of the data”. Thus I combine my results section with my discussion in order to analyse participants’ distinctive accounts of alcohol-related issues. Having compared and contrasted the interview data, both similarities and differences are evident for analysis. The similarities are mainly derived from descriptions of participants’ drinking habits, particularly the way of seeing drinking as a part of ordinary life, and their shared reasons for regular alcohol use. When asked about the amount of alcohol they usually drink, the young men used similar terms to describe it. All three used words indicating that they drink habitually and in large quantities. In relation to their current drinking activities, terms such as ‘enjoy’ and ‘get drunk’ are highlighted in the descriptions of their drinking behaviour. For instance, John enjoyed more than four pints of beer on several occasions throughout the past month. He explained that:

“I usually drink 2 or 3 nights a week, in the parties … you know, for social. For me, drinking is the party. College parties need to have alcohol to be fun, so why not drink during party time? I’m on my own, and no parents to say ‘you shouldn’t drink’. It’s time to start living life which includes drinking and smoking and doing other fun stuff”.

45
“Yes some people pretend to get drunk because they wanna get away of things. But most of them have a good time from drinking”.

When asked about how he perceives drinking as part of his everyday activity, John said:

“Well, a couple of pints per day. I will say, the feeling is that to be a man you have to drink a lot, you know, a competition between males. It’s normal to drink in everyday life, drinking face to face against each other. I don’t think it matters. There’s a well-known culture of alcohol in Ireland”.

Other participants, Tony and Andy, had similar ideas about their drinking patterns and the views of alcohol use in the fabric of everyday life. For example, Tony felt ‘kind of different after a few beers, and it’s kind of hard to describe what that “different” is like’. Andy lifted his arms, clenched his fists slightly, and said ‘it’s just like … you know … being a man, and able to handle any rough stuffs’. These comments indicate that Irish college males’ leisure time could be argued to revolve around drinking activities. A high level of recorded drinking practices is found both in the gendered population and in individual level around the college life (Hope 2003). According to three participants, alcohol use is considered to be a major part of social life in colleges because it is the key to having fun and meeting people and it also, to some extent, emphasises so-called masculinity or ‘manliness’ from the viewpoint of Irish college men.

According to the three informants’ views, their main reasons for engaging in alcohol consumption are to ‘have some fun’, ‘make friends’ and sometimes for ‘releasing tension’ as well as to ‘forget about responsibilities’. Diverse drinking patterns to relieve stress, anxiety, and to release them from any sense of obligation were explained in detail. All three interviewees participated in a lot of drinking games which might correspond to reasons such as Andy’s ‘good to
be sociable’, Tony’s ‘the key to be a fun person’, and John’s ‘having fun with friends’. Their drink-related behaviour, in a sense, shares a central meaning of experiencing good fellowship and getting away from uncomfortable feelings such as nervous tension or social anxiety (Rouse and Eving 1978). As Andy said:

“College life is so boring, you know, I need to enjoy some good time. When I was in high school they always said that ‘hey, you cannot not drink, it’s a bad thing’. Now I’m free. And I think the majority of the time is kind of because some of the mission behind is going out, and kind of to get drunk have the time. All my friends drank a lot, I don’t think it’s a problem”.

“So much drinking goes on, you know, Friday night, Saturday night, and every night for those that look forward to enjoying themselves”.

“Anyway, drinking makes me feel relaxed and be happy. I mean, yeah, life is about having a good time. Who knows what tomorrow will be like? Enjoy yourself, now”.

Clearly, male college students do, to a certain extent, overindulge in alcohol and this is a major concern in all Western countries. In Ireland, for example, in 2000, the authorities of all Third Level Institutes became so concerned at the overuse of alcohol and alcohol-related harm that they came together and created the framework of a College Alcohol Policy (Cooney 2002). It includes practical measures (e.g. education on responsible consumption, the banning of on-campus advertising of alcohol etc.) and promotion of alternative social and recreational opportunities for college students (Ibid, pp.111-2). These measures aim to respond to the issue of excessive alcohol consumption by young people through promoting a greater awareness of the public health perspective on alcohol (Ward 2003, p.123). However, the problem here is that students like Andy do not think they have a problem with their drinking. They believe they drink to be sociable that contributes to friendship and self-confidence. From Robinson’s (1976) point of view, alcohol is widely regarded as an ordinary
Alcoholism, Alcohol Abuse and Heavy Drinking:  
Irish College Males’ Perspectives on Alcohol-related Problems

everyday activity which could be judged by the fact that the consumption of alcohol has always been involved in university males’ leisure and social activities. The question here is, can we change the negative attitudes of young men to alcohol? How can a College Alcohol Policy be implemented in any one Irish University? This article will discuss these matters in the last section.

On the other hand, differences are also significant in the data concentrating on interviewees’ drinking frequencies, their weekly alcohol consumption, their interpretations of alcoholism, alcohol abuse and heavy drinking, and their understandings of the alcohol policy of the University of Limerick (2002). Tony drinks often, which is 4 days per week. His alcohol expenditure is approximately €100 per week. When asked him how he can afford this level of expenditure, he said “…that’s fine. I have a part-time job, I can afford it”. John spends nearly €50 on alcohol, and Andy’s spending is about €30-40. However, about the frequency of drinking alcohol and levels of consumption may differ from week to week. It mainly depends on different purposes and locations, which contribute greatly to their social lives such as being sociable at a party or in the pubs.

Three participants use distinctive words to define alcoholism, alcohol abuse and heavy drinking respectively. Tony and John defined alcoholism as “constantly drinking” and “problem drinking”, and Andy defined it as “a disease”. Nevertheless, none of them were able to explain the term in more detail. Alcohol abuse, according to John, was viewed as ‘getting drunk as often as possible’. Andy believed it was “an addiction to alcohol”. Similarly, John connected it with “drug misuse, can’t get away from it”. Talking about heavy drinking, three interviewees said “it’s the same as binge drinking”. It is clear from the interview that many Irish college men have paid little attention to alcohol and its related problems, despite their being among the most corrosive
and devastating features of modern society (Cooney 2002). Further, young men are, in most cases, not able to clearly distinguish between the three alcohol-related concepts despite them differing greatly in their origin, impact and prevalence.

To finish the interview I asked participants whether they heard about the alcohol policy of the University of Limerick (2002), and also how they felt about it. John was not familiar with it at all, but he said

“It might be a policy [that] banned drinking on campus. Actually, I don’t think it has the right [to] control people over the age of 21 drinking out of campus”.

Tony, on the other hand, said:

“Well, I guess I know it a little bit, for example, you cannot drink here even if you are more than 21. And I think it’s something about [that] you can leave and drink off campus”.

Similarly, Andy answered:

“I think I’m pretty familiar with it. Isn’t it just you can’t drink, or no drinking on campus? Well, I agree most of it, I mean, it’s a good policy … of course you cannot drink on campus, but out of campus would be fine”.

In general, three participants are able to access the key point of the college alcohol policy in which the university is a main place of learning as well as work. Therefore a safe working environment should be provided for all students, academic and administrative staff on campus. Additionally, personal responsibility needs to be promoted in order to reduce high risk of drinking and the incidence of alcohol-related problems among all college students and staff.
Conclusions

This study uses a qualitative method to measure alcohol use among Irish male university students and their popular opinions related to alcohol issues. It has been suggested from the results that young adults tend to perceive alcohol use as part of desirable lifestyle of having a good time and being “one of the gang” (Hanson 2007a). They generally believe that their drinking behaviour and consumption patterns are normal and not in danger. As regards their interpretation of three alcohol-related terms, very few distinctions have been made in the interview. The fixed ideas in relation to alcohol itself and a relative lack of understanding about alcohol concepts cause college students to feel safe from the real dangers of alcoholism, alcohol abuse and heavy drinking. Therefore the study indicates that undergraduate students need a different kind of education on sensible consumption of alcohol.

In addition, the results show that three interviewees are not familiar with the university alcohol policy, especially those “acute alcohol-related problems, such as accidents, violence, injuries and deaths”, that might occur among them when they engage in heavy drinking on any one occasion (University of Limerick 2002). This fact highlights the need for an alcohol policy that advertises more at the university to raise awareness among all students and to create a favourable environment so as to help them make healthy choices. Of course there are limitations to the study. For instance, it could be conducted on a larger scale. Using more time and interviewing more students would allow for greater representation of the larger population across Irish society. In general, Ireland is a country in which alcohol is deeply connected to sociability so the wider society does affect young people’s drinking attitudes and behaviour. There is also a need to promote and raise social awareness among individuals about the issue of alcohol for society as a whole.
References


Hanson, D.J. (2007a) Alcohol Abuse [online], available: http://www2.potsdam.edu/hansondj/alcoholabuse.html [accessed 18 May 2009].

Hanson, D.J. (2007b) Binge Drinking [online], available: http://www2.potsdam.edu/hansondj/BingeDrinking.html [accessed 18 May 2009].


