

The importance of authenticity for student non-drinkers: An interpretative phenomenological analysis

Conroy, D. and de Visser, R.O.

Journal of Health Psychology. DOI: 10.1177/1359105313514285

Our paper illustrates the importance of authenticity to student non-drinkers. Semi-structured interviews focussing on the lived experiences of five non-drinking students were subjected to interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). We present four inter-related themes: ‘Retaining authenticity by not drinking’; ‘Tainting the self by drinking alcohol’; ‘Feeling trapped by superimposition and self-exposition’ and ‘Doing what you want with your life’. Self-authenticity informed the decision not to drink, became relevant within conversations about non-drinking, and underscored issues of choice and agency raised by alcohol consumption. Entrenched assumptions about alcohol’s self-realising utility are challenged in our discussion and future research recommendations are suggested.

Keywords: alcohol; authenticity; health behaviour; interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA); university students

Promoting healthier alcohol consumption among young people in England is an on-going challenge and the central position of alcohol within university culture is of particular concern (Gill, 2002; Smith and Foxcroft, 2009).

Heavy drinking among students appears to be associated with unfavourable views of non-drinkers (e.g., Conroy and de Visser, 2013; Regan and Morrison, 2013; Zimmermann and Sieverding, 2010). Recently, this association has been explained as an unwillingness to be associated with a non-normative social group (Regan and Morrison, 2013). Studies relating to perceptions of non-drinking help identity factors associated with higher consumption levels, yet research concerning the experience of non-drinkers might inform understanding of how safer episodes of drinking behaviour (e.g., non-drinking during some social occasions) might be presented more favourably within health promotion initiatives. Consistent with this objective, qualitative research has demonstrated varied coping strategies and means of negotiating peer intolerance adopted by non-drinkers in social situations (Herring et al., 2013; Nairn et al., 2006; Piacentini and Banister, 2009). Notably, other evidence suggests that some non-drinkers experience particular pride in their minority status (Seaman and Ikegwuonu, 2010).

Given alcohol's potentially transformative subjective effects (e.g., altered sense of self or others), one might expect that an individual's experience of 'their true selves' might either underlie initial decisions not to drink or have relevance within conversations about non-drinking. Authenticity has been discussed in diverse forms holding close associations with psychotherapy (e.g., Erikson, 1968; Rogers, 1951) and hermeneutic phenomenology (Heidegger, 1927/1962). Its depiction as central to positive human interactions and well-being common within these accounts has inspired sustained empirical interest in authenticity.

Applied research has explored both the consistency of individual's dispositional authenticity across different social roles (e.g., Sheldon et al., 1997) and the extent to which behaviour within relationships reflects true thoughts or feelings (Theran, 2011). Evidence has pointed to an association between higher authenticity levels and increased subjective well-being and life satisfaction (English and John, 2012; Goldman and Kernis, 2002) and to negative health-related implications of 'false-self behavior' (e.g., Peterson and Seligman, 2004). These findings have substantiated ongoing health promotion interest in links between authenticity and both physical and psychological well-being.

Research linking authenticity to alcohol consumption is extremely rare. One study, based on Swedish adolescents, has demonstrated difficulties reconciling valued aspects of self (e.g., authenticity or 'being a strong person') with external agents (e.g., alcohol) which could be used to feel or behave in certain ways, illustrating the dilemmas encountered during a life-stage characterized by transitions in self-identity, peer relations and leisure activities (Bogren, 2006).

Student drinking occurs during a time of new-found freedom characterised by 'bounded hedonistic consumption' (Brain, 2000), psychological turbulence (Wei et al., 2005) and peer pressure to drink socially (e.g., Borsari and Carey, 2001). Issues relating to an individual's authentic self seem likely to become foregrounded during university years, with new opportunities to realise authentic identities. Given alcohol's distinctive subjective influence on how authentic self (and authenticity in the behaviour of others) is experienced in an age group for whom its behaviour-changing effects will generally remain relatively novel, the absence of research linking alcohol and authenticity is arguably surprising. A fine-grain understanding of why individuals choose not to drink, and how issues of self and authenticity might correspond with this decision and the experience of 'living' a non-drinking identity, is therefore of both theoretical and applied interest.

Study focus and aims

Studies exploring the experiences of student non-drinkers have adopted diverse criteria for ‘non-drinkers’ including: infrequent drinkers (Nairn et al, 2006) and authors who steer their enquiry toward ‘anti-consumers’, or, individuals understood to operate outside of student normative conventions (Piacentini and Banister, 2009). Studies focussing exclusively on non-drinkers have excluded individuals abstaining for religious reasons, either to explore less obvious reasons for not drinking alcohol (Herring et al., 2013) or for unspecified reasons (Seaman and Ikegwonu, 2010). While all approaches have their merits, we suggest a distinction between individuals who have culturally *unsanctioned* reasons for non-drinking (e.g., do not drink primarily because they dislike its effects on themselves or others) and culturally *sanctioned* reasons for non-drinking (e.g., due to religion, physical illness or prior dependence). This more conservative sampling focus on unsanctioned non-drinkers is, we suggest, of particular relevance to health promotion initiatives designed to reduce student consumption levels given applicability to the broader student population. For example, the sanctioned non-drinker may respond to the question “Why don't you drink?” by providing an irrefutable reason (e.g., “I have an autoimmune liver condition”) whereas, by contrast, unsanctioned non-drinkers may need to convince others of the validity of his/her decision not to drink. We do not intend to falsely simplify complex issues of social approval, cultural acceptance and personal choice involved in the decision not to drink. Instead, we aim to produce empirical data most directly relevant to support students to manage the decision not to drink when socialising at university (as part of a broader effort to drink alcohol more moderately) more successfully. This pragmatic conceptual distinction represents an original extension to the emerging non-drinking literature.

This study contains interview data from five individuals who have chosen not to drink alcohol and addressed two broad research questions: (1) why have individuals chosen not to drink alcohol?; (2) what kind of social experiences do unsanctioned non-drinkers have in university settings?

Method

Sampling approach

Participants were drawn from a sample of 60 non-drinking students identified from a prior survey study, 47 of whom were willing to participate in an interview study. Of these, 12 did not drink for primarily culturally unsanctioned reasons, 5 of whom were willing to be interviewed (see Table 1). Our sample included both lifelong non-drinkers and former drinkers (defined as having not drunk for ≥ 6 months). Rather than aiming to be exhaustively

representative of non-drinkers or culturally unsanctioned non-drinkers, we intended to privilege individual accounts of non-drinker's experiences.

<insert Table 1>

Procedure and interview

Ethical approval was acquired from the host institution. Our semi-structured interview schedule began with general items (e.g., 'how do you like to spend your leisure time?') leading to more specific questions (e.g., 'tell me about your experiences as a non-drinker'). Interviews took place either on student university campuses or in participant's homes.

Analytic approach

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was the chosen analytic method. IPA provides an idiographic framework well-suited to understanding the lived experiences of individuals who share a common life phenomenon, while explicating the analyst's interpretative efforts (Smith et al., 2009). Recent IPA studies of young people have identified complex links between drinking behaviour and issues of self and identity among young people (Shinebourne and Smith, 2009; de Visser and Smith, 2006, de Visser and Smith, 2007). Small sample sizes are typical of IPA studies and highly congruent with its methodological emphasis: the in-depth investigation of lived experience. IPA is characterised by two broad phases: an empathic phenomenological analysis of individual experience from an "insider" perspective is followed by an interpretative analysis from an "outsider" perspective. An iterative approach to analysis involved: initial transcript notation, thematic coding, and specification of superordinate themes. Themes were critically assessed for validity in relation to the original transcripts, ensuring that the breadth of transcript divergence and convergence had been captured.

We present four recurrent themes: 'Retaining authenticity by not drinking'; 'Tainting the self by drinking alcohol'; 'Feeling trapped by superimposition and self-exposition' and 'Doing what you want with your life'.

Results

Four major themes are described and illustrated with quotes.

1. Retaining authentic self by not drinking alcohol

All participants explained their non-drinking as partly stemming from their wish to experience themselves and life in authentic terms. Dawn, together with her non-drinking twin sister experienced authenticity as the possibility of fully marshalling cognitive capacities:

We kept sane and fully in control of our thoughts and heads and stuff while other people didn't. I don't really want to lose the ability to think clearly and remember things. Whereas people who drink and wake-up not remembering things and, I don't think I could handle that, or I don't want to handle that. -Dawn

Emphasising the implications of short-term cognitive effects of drinking, Dawn indicated that not drinking allowed her to retain control over her mental functions (“control of our... heads”); most dramatically in language referring, albeit figuratively, to the preservation of mental health (“we kept sane”). Having never consumed alcohol, Dawn anticipated the negative influence of alcohol over an authentic experience of life that she valued too highly to relinquish. Paul’s interview provided a similar illustration:

I don't get it for me, my kind of theory is I don't want to be anyone but me, and do anything that I wouldn't do, if that makes sense? [...] life is too short to not remember it the next morning, or to be living it the best you can, feeling it as best you can. I want to experience life as it is. -Paul

For Paul, drinking alcohol would have undermined his experience of self (‘I don’t want to be anyone but me’) and of life more generally (‘as it is’). However, he continues:

When I am out a little bit of me depends on other people getting drunk because, as their barriers go down my barriers can go do as well. So I can be me most when everyone else is drunk, because as they get drunk I can act drunker without being drunk. –Paul

Paradoxically, Paul acknowledges needing the company of drunken others to enjoy liberation from social barriers. The serial appearance of these statements seems to amplify the tension involved in accommodating alcohol’s self-depriving and self-realising properties. For Paul, fully realising an authentic experience of himself was partly conditional not just on others’ presence but on the presence of others who were drinking alcohol. Intriguingly, this suggested how alcohol’s subjective influence could be vicariously experienced as a kind of ‘contact high’ without actually being consumed.

2. Tainting the self by drinking alcohol

In addition to preserving authenticity, participants experienced threats to well-being through historical or imagined experiences of alcohol’s potential for misrepresenting either the self or other people. Michelle, a former drinker, expressed this in her interview:

I realised that I don't like the way I am when I am drunk. There've been occasions where I've done things that I've regretted or maybe said something to a friend that I

wouldn't dream of saying otherwise. I just kind of buried my head in the sand about the fact that I didn't like who I was when I was drunk. The less and less I drank the more I realised that I didn't like who I was when I was drunk, so the less I drank still.
-Michelle

When drunk, Michelle had experienced 'selves' which she did not feel represented her ('wouldn't dream of saying otherwise') and that clashed with enduring self-interest ('done things that I've regretted'). Interplay between her experiences of 'drunken' and 'sober' self gradually led to a state of reassessment where she drank progressively less as the distinction between drunk and sober experiences of herself grew. Features of her struggle seemed to be built into the language of her account, with the repeated 'who I was when I was drunk' tangled up with her actions ('the less I drank') to regain the person whom she recognises as herself (her authentic self).

Katie, another former drinker, had developed a similar view in relation to alcohol's person-changing effects on others, as well as herself:

People are different, on alcohol you're not the same person, you're just different, you're tainting yourself, changing who you are with a bit of alcohol. – Katie

Katie seemed to experience contempt, both of her peers' willingness to cede possession of their authentic identities, and of the cheap medium ('a bit of alcohol') through which this was accomplished. Her alcohol consuming peers could not be readily equated with the individuals she knew when they were sober and as a consequence could not be recognised, respected or trusted.

For Paul, a lifelong non-drinker, the 'tainted self' of Katie's account seemed to represent a feared imagined state and consisted part of the reason why he didn't drink alcohol:

The reason I don't drink might be because I am afraid of what I might say or do, if I drink, saying things that might be permanent. Words that can't be healed. -Paul

Paul fears uncharacteristic behaviour under alcohol's influence expressed as physical and verbal acts holding severe consequences. This seemed to speak to experienced or anticipated risks involved in drinking alcohol among our participants. Despite alcohol's advantages in removing social inhibitions, its influence was experienced as (or perceived to be) untrustworthy, given its association with enduring, hurtful behavioural consequences, which serve ultimately to undermine personal well-being.

3. Feeling trapped by superimposition and self-exposition

Participants indicated how non-drinking was an important way in which authenticity might be preserved. In an ironic twist, latent threats to authenticity were often experienced as

embedded within conversations about non-drinking. For some participants, these conversations were perceived to involve the superimposition of aspects of self or identity linked to their non-drinking derived from stereotypes or prejudicial assumptions:

They don't understand the concept of why I don't. They are trying to fix me, or help me, I think they think I haven't tried it so I don't know if I like it or not. At that point they don't understand [why] I don't drink, it's not the reason I don't drink. –Dawn

These impressions held by peers were hardly flattering: Dawn was perceived as grossly naïve regarding alcohol's social benefits ('I haven't tried it so I don't know') and to be someone enacting a lifestyle decision that undermines personal happiness (e.g., someone needing to be 'helped' or 'fixed'). All participants experienced similar misconstruals of self through peer interactions where non-drinking was discussed. Andy explained the intricate pressures experienced within conversations about his non-drinking using the example of a non-drinking friend:

[My friend] didn't drink for very personal reasons and found it very uncomfortable whenever they got asked why they didn't drink, they were like, 'well I don't really know you enough to open up to you but if I say that I can't tell you then it's almost a statement in itself'. Then this person will think 'what are they hiding because there's all this bad stuff that's happened to them', so it's almost worse not to tell them because you think that their imagination could come up with so much more. So it's quite a difficult question to be faced with because you want to justify why you're not drinking but you also don't want to make the situation uncomfortable. –Andy

Andy depicted a scenario with different layers of discomfort and intrusion into personal space in which the conversational onus is firmly on the non-drinker to explicate their reasons for not drinking. Andy's friend juggles (at least) four tasks simultaneously to produce an account which is: (i) sufficiently coherent not to invite further interrogation, (ii) suitably light-hearted to ameliorate an already uncomfortable situation, (iii) robust enough to resist pressure to reveal private aspects of self and (iv) something approaching a self-justifying yet authentic and honest account of himself. Conversations about non-drinking, therefore, saw participants trapped between a rock and a hard place: they experienced the need to protect their authentic identities from unwanted exposure but, simultaneously, from the imbalanced peer impressions of 'who they were' that could emerge during these situations.

4. Doing what you want to do with your life

Another aspect of ‘being the person that you are’ in relation to non-drinking related to participants’ experiences of personal choice and agency; in terms of how these issues were understood relative to both alcohol consumption and non-drinking. For some, including Katie, normative assumptions around alcohol’s disinhibiting effects were questioned:

I mean, people say Dutch courage [...] but confidence in the first place, you know, change who you are, not try to do it with alcohol. [...] If I embarrass myself, I am going to remember it. I worked with special needs, they have this disco and I used to take my service users with me. When stuff like the Casper Slide and the Macarena came on, I used to get up and do it. One of the other staff used to say, ‘I’d only be doing that if I was drinking’ –Katie

For Katie, feelings of subjective inhibition when sober (e.g., feeling socially unconfident) in the context of alcohol’s success as a social lubricant (‘Dutch courage’) were unfulfilling as a means of achieving aspirations. Having confidence in the first place, or seeking to embed self-confident feelings via personal growth, held greater appeal to Katie than alcohol’s simple but impermanent blueprint for addressing social awkwardness or achieving social goals. Her colleague’s response (‘I’d only be doing that if I was drinking’) educes equivalent phrases referring to present “I haven’t had enough to drink to do that yet” or retrospective “if I did that I must have been drunk” drinking behaviour, which demarcate the ‘forbidden when sober’ from the ‘approved when drunk’. Risking ridicule (made more visceral given that she will ‘remember it’) without having the option to retrospectively appeal to drunken states, Katie appeared to challenge alcohol’s normative status for permitting atypical behaviour as her non-drinking became the catalyst for, rather than the inhibitor of, novel action. Reflecting on what drinking enables for his peers, Paul’s account resonated with Katie’s:

Alcohol allows people to do what they think they should do or be, but they feel they can't because they've got so many barriers in place. People can't act in a certain way in public so they do it through alcohol because that's the only way they feel they can be, can do what they want to do. But if there wasn't so much of a kind of alcohol is a gateway into whatever you want to be, then a lot more would get done instead of having to wait 'til you're drunk before asking out a boy or girl. –Paul

Paul experienced alcohol’s established role as an ‘ice breaker’ or social catalyst with some frustration and indignation, finding that this status impeded completion of important life goals (e.g., meeting potential partners) in states of sobriety. At least two obstacles are implied

in Paul's account: alcohol becomes 'the only way' of achieving these life goals, while drinking conventions could be understood to dictate the time-frame through which more exploratory behaviour becomes socially acceptable ('having to wait 'til you're drunk'). Like Katie, Paul problematised alcohol's perceived role in new or unfamiliar social contexts, lamenting its dominance as an easy route or 'gateway' to life's pleasures which seemed to carry important costs. Without a clearly sign-posted behavioural state (drunkenness), certain behaviours may be perceived as socially legitimate, and attempts to behave in these ways when sober risked being perceived as socially disjointed. From Paul's perspective, alcohol increases the perceived feasibility of self-interested behaviour (e.g., meeting sexual partners) yet simultaneously undermined the possibility of doing such things when sober.

Andy also highlighted issues of agency which might be put at stake in a lifestyle that involves regular drinking, in this case in a narrative concerning the developmental trajectory of his relationship with alcohol from adolescence to adulthood:

When I got older it felt that more, actually stepping towards being a man was more saying um, "I'll do what I want". There is actual security in saying, "This is what I want to do with my life". Like everyone can do what they want, but I want to do this. That was almost a replacement for um, drinking. –Andy

In the context of being a non-drinker, alcohol's equation of adulthood and masculinity were gradually eroded through Andy's awareness that 'choosing what you want to do with your life' represented a more authentic symbol of adult and manly identity. Despite the potential risks involved in non-drinking – e.g., abandoning traditional routes through which adult and masculine aspects of self might be perceived to be obtained – non-drinking has, ironically, become an important statement of both. Issues of personal agency existed in the very terminology of non-drinking for Michelle:

You know, if someone offers me a drink, I think, "Do I want a drink? Don't I want a drink?", and I, 99.9% of the time I don't want a drink. [...] I don't like the idea of being labelled as anything. I am me, I do what, I do certain things, I don't do other things. But I don't want to be labelled by what I do and don't do. –Michelle

For Michelle, her non-drinking continued in a state of persistent flux: it was continuously re-assessed and re-chosen within social situations based on what she wants to do with her life. Located at the heart of this extract, Michelle stresses the importance of authenticity – 'I am me' – challenging the restrictive definitional and regulatory practices which 'non-drinking' as a social category was felt to impose.

Discussion

Student non-drinkers described several ways in which authenticity was relevant to their experience of non-drinking: as an underlay of their decision to not drink, as a valued aspect of self-experience which became salient within peer conversations about non-drinking and, in the longer-term, as an experiential aspect in which issues of self-agency became relevant.

Authenticity was a common feature of participants' reasons for non-drinking. For some, retaining authenticity was akin to retaining a phenomenologically 'pure' perceptual experience of life, which potential alcohol consumption was experienced (or was anticipated) to undermine. For others, retaining an authentic experience of themselves meant commandeering higher cognitive facilities. However, the decision not to drink was also evidently a way of asserting an understanding of self or identity which individuals' felt most accurately represented them. While these data chime with non-drinking motivations described elsewhere (e.g., 'general misgivings about alcohol', Piacentini and Banister, 2009; 'negative past experiences', Herring et al., 2013) they demonstrate a more explicitly self- or identity-related rationale for excluding alcohol as a lifestyle option permitted to the self than has been previously described. The flipside of this involved construing alcohol consumption as 'tainting the self'. It has been suggested how non-drinkers' might orient themselves toward an 'object' construal of alcohol consumption, focussing on its character-changing influences which might come to be experienced as disturbing or false (see Nairn et al., 2006, p. 298).

Possessing, demonstrating, or prioritising authenticity within social relationships has been examined in past research (e.g., Sheldon et al., 1997; Theran, 2011; English and John, 2012). However, the mere presence of authenticity as a dispositional commodity did not seem to determine non-drinkers' experiences of peer interactions in our data. Instead, authenticity appeared to characterise the experiential dynamic in which non-drinkers found themselves socially or acquired particular relevance to non-drinkers' experiences, especially those involving conversations about non-drinking, during social interactions. Participants expressed frustration feeling like passive victims of peer assumptions regarding their decision not to drink (e.g., 'ex-alcoholic'); a scenario that partly stemmed from participants' reluctance to provide a (potentially very personal) full and genuine account of why they don't drink alcohol during interactions with people other than close friends. Alternatively, it is possible that distinct, unidimensional accounts of non-drinking simply aren't always accessible to individuals who choose not to drink, an explanation that is somewhat supported by the shifting nature of accounts of non-drinking during the trajectory of most individual's interviews.

Given alcohol consumption's normative status within university settings, disparities in social power between drinkers and non-drinkers felt by non-drinkers seem unsurprising, and accord with relational-cultural theory's emphases on the importance of mutually empowered interactive dynamics within adolescent peer relationships (Comstock et al., 2008). Through experiences of this imbalance, authenticity might acquire a particular source of self-resilience and social fortitude for non-drinking individuals. This would help explain demonstrated links between relationship authenticity and subjective well-being (e.g., Theran, 2011; Wenzel et al., 2012), yet suggests that authenticity might need to acquire particular value before its protective effects are realised.

For some, the importance of authenticity was also understood in terms of how behaviours related to certain social goals (e.g., initiating romantic encounters; deepening friendship ties) acquire degrees of normative acceptability depending on whether they are conducted under alcohol's influence. This finding holds important implications for all individuals whether drinkers or not. If cherished goals feel only realisable where alcohol is involved then it seems likely that the idolization of alcohol as an emollient of social interaction might be lamented among young people, at least on one level. For other participants, retaining a sense of the authentic self was involved in the restrictiveness of overly-prescriptive categorical summaries of alcohol-related behavior including the term 'non-drinker'. These findings accord with discussion elsewhere of the limitations involved in reference to clearly defined alcohol-related behavioural classes such as 'heavy drinkers' or 'non-drinkers' (Dufour, 1999; Piacentini and Banister, 2009). For example, Piacentini and Banister's (2009) participants understood the term 'non-drinker' to refer to diverse behaviours ranging from complete abstinence to occasional weekly drinking. This is an interesting feature of how being a non-drinker might provoke self-scrutiny over possibilities or requirements for how the self is defined within interactions. Evidence suggested that being understood as 'someone who never drinks' might be equally constraining to being understood as 'someone who always drinks' within social situations. Among our participants, being able to choose and re-choose alcohol-related decisions provided a basis for rebutting social pigeon-holing and helped to realise an authentic experience of self and stronger feelings of self-agency.

Study limitations are acknowledged. First, despite our idiographic methodological approach, we recommend caution regarding sample generalizability given our small sample size. Despite this, we note that there were important general features among participants regarding the importance of the authentic self to their social experience as non-drinkers. Furthermore, the decision to focus on culturally unsanctioned non-drinkers seemed justifiable

given the complex dynamic involved in participants' conversations about non-drinking in which the presence of relatively straight-forward accounts of non-drinking (e.g., "I'm on antibiotics") would have simplified social encounters. Second, self-selection issues are acknowledged. More self-assured non-drinkers might have made themselves available for interviews, contributing to a biased impression of how non-drinking is experienced and managed in student contexts. This acknowledged, we note that none of our participants appeared to communicate atypically straight-forward or traumatic psychosocial experiences of non-drinking, each supplying an idiosyncratic and complex account.

Several extensions of our study are possible. First, we urge further qualitative research relating to non-drinking students, including culturally sanctioned non-drinkers to develop understanding of relations between non-drinking, subjectivity and identity. Second, a larger sample would permit comparison of sex differences in non-drinking experiences, which would seem likely to be important in light of study findings and prior research (Conroy and de Visser, 2013). Third, comparing non-drinkers from varied cultural or geographic backgrounds (e.g., rural/urban) might elucidate variation in how non-drinking is dealt with, contributing to broader efforts to move discussion of cultural differences in drinking behavior beyond traditional 'wet' and 'dry' distinctions (Bloomfield et al., 2000).

These findings conveyed complex but important implications for reinvigorating approaches to promoting healthier student drinking. Current health promotion initiatives focus on encouraging young people to drink 'moderately', according to government recommended levels, despite evidence that this information can prompt misinterpretation (e.g., Furtwängler and de Visser, 2012). Successfully 'calibrating' a moderate drinker mind-set seems likely to be a more challenging task than can be acknowledged. Our data hints at how non-drinking might be communicated to students as more feasible and favourable adopted social behaviour than they might otherwise imagine, holding relevance to all university students exposed to opportunities and pressure to drink socially. Issues relating to authenticity, choice and agency acquired visibility to our participants following the decision not to drink alcohol, rather than being of unique relevance to non-drinkers as an isolated social category. It seems possible that these more nuanced downsides to alcohol consumption – e.g., over-dependence on its effects as a social catalyst; producing an 'unreal' or inauthentic experience of the self or other people – might be capitalized on in health promotional strategies aimed at university students.

Conclusions

The importance of an authentic experience of self was described by our study participants; evident in their reasons for non-drinking, the experiences of talking about non-drinking with

others and the awareness of how issues of agency and authenticity were tied-up in drinking alcohol, despite its ubiquity within university culture and broader society. Contrary to cultural notions of alcohol as a liberating/disinhibiting substance, our participants could experience alcohol as something that undermined the possibilities of experiencing and enacting the self authentically. While our findings relate to a small group of non-drinking individuals, we hope to have contributed towards some critical re-examination of how alcohol is used and understood within a key life-phase, particularly given the dilemmas posed by drinking for how self-authenticity is simultaneously fulfilled and comprised.

References

- Bloomfield K, Stockwell T, Gmel G, et al. (2003). International Comparisons of Alcohol Consumption. Retrieved 24 August, 2013, from <http://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/arh27-1/95-109.htm>
- Bogren A (2006) The competent drinker, the authentic person and the strong person: lines of reasoning in Swedish young people's discussions about alcohol. *Journal of Youth Studies* 9: 515-538.
- Borsari B and Carey KB (2001) Peer influences on college drinking: A review of the research. *Journal of Substance Abuse* 13: 391-424.
- Brain HP, Parker T and Carnwath K (2000) Drinking with design: Young drinkers as psychoactive consumers. *Drugs: Education, Prevention, and Policy* 7: 5-20.
- Comstock DL, Hammer TR, Strentzsch J, et al. (2008) Relational-cultural theory: A framework for bridging relational, multicultural, and social justice competencies. *Journal of Counseling and Development* 86: 279-287.
- Conroy D and de Visser RO (2013) 'Man up!': Discursive constructions of non-drinkers among UK undergraduates. *Journal of Health Psychology* 18: 1432-1444.
- Cross SE, Gore JS and Morris ML (2003) The relational-interdependent self-construal, self-concept consistency, and well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 85: 933-944.
- Dufour MC (1999) What is moderate drinking? Defining "drinks" and drinking levels. *Alcohol, Research and Health* 23: 5-14.
- English T and John OP (2013) Understanding the social effects of emotion regulation: the mediating role of authenticity for individual differences in suppression. *Emotion* 13: 314-329.

- Erikson EH (1968) *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. New York: VW Norton.
- Furtwaengler NA and de Visser RO (2013) Lack of international consensus in low-risk drinking guidelines. *Drug and Alcohol Review* 32: 11-18.
- Gill JS (2002) Reported levels of alcohol consumption and binge drinking within the UK undergraduate student population over the last 25 years. *Alcohol & Alcoholism* 37: 109–120.
- Goldman BM and Kernis MH (2002) The role of authenticity in healthy psychological functioning and subjective well-being. *Annals of the American Psychotherapy Association* 5: 18-20.
- Heidegger M (1962) *Being and Time*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Herring R, Bayley M and Hurcombe R (2013) “But no one told me it’s okay to not drink”: a qualitative study of young people who drink little or no alcohol. *Journal of Substance Use*.
- Nairn K, Higgins J, Thompson B, et al. (2006) ‘It's Just Like the Teenage Stereotype, You Go Out and Drink and Stuff’: Hearing from Young People who Don't Drink. *Journal of Youth Studies* 9: 287-304.
- Peterson C and Seligman ME (2004) *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Piacentini MG and Banister EN (2009) Managing anti-consumption in an excessive drinking culture. *Journal of Business Research* 62: 279-288.
- Regan D and Morrison TG (2013) Adolescents' negative attitudes toward non-drinkers: A novel predictor of risky drinking. *Journal of Health Psychology* 18: 1465-1477.
- Rogers CR (1951) *Client-centered Therapy: Its Current Practice, Implications and Theory*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Seaman P and Ikegwonu T (2010) *Drinking to Belong: Understanding Young Adults' Alcohol Use Within Social Networks*. Available at: <http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/alcohol-young-adults-full.pdf>.
- Sheldon KM, Ryan RM, Rawsthorne LJ, et al. (1997) Trait self and true self: Cross-role variation in the big-five personality traits and its relations with psychological authenticity and subjective well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 73: 1380-1393.
- Shinebourne P and Smith JA (2009) Alcohol and the self: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of the experience of addiction and its impact on the sense of self and identity. *Addiction Research and Theory* 17: 152-167.

- Smith L and Foxcroft SA (2009) *Drinking in the UK: an Exploration of Trends*. Available at: <http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/drinking-in-the-uk>
- Smith JA, Flowers P and Larkin M (2009) *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research*. London: Sage Publications.
- Theran SA (2011) Authenticity in relationships and depressive symptoms: A gender analysis. *Personality and Individual Differences* 51: 423-428.
- de Visser RO and Smith JA (2006) Mister in-between: a case study of masculine identity and health-related behaviour. *Journal of Health Psychology* 11: 685-695.
- de Visser RO and Smith JA (2007) Young men's ambivalence toward alcohol. *Social Science and Medicine* 64: 350-362.
- Wei M, Russell DW and Zakalik RA (2005) Adult attachment, social self-efficacy, self-disclosure, loneliness, and subsequent depression for freshman college students: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Counselling Psychology* 52: 602-614.
- Wenzel AJ and Lucas-Thompson RG (2012) Authenticity in College-Aged Males and Females, How Close Others are Perceived, and Mental Health Outcomes. *Sex Roles* 67: 334-350.
- Zimmermann F and Sieverding M (2010) Young adults' social drinking as explained by an augmented theory of planned behaviour: the roles of prototypes, willingness, and gender. *British Journal of Health Psychology* 15: 561-581.