'Being a non-drinking student: An interpretative phenomenological analysis.'

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Recent research suggests that safer student alcohol consumption might be assisted by understanding how social occasions are managed by non-drinkers. In-depth, semi-structured interviews with five 19-22 year old non-drinking English undergraduates were subjected to interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). We present five inter-linked themes: 'living with challenges to non-drinking'; 'seeing what goes on in drinking environments'; 'dealing with conversations about non-drinking ('making excuses vs. coming out')'; 'knowing which friends care about you'; and 'the importance of withholding "legroom" for peer pressure'. Participants felt under persistent peer scrutiny (as a form of peer pressure) and could feel alienated in drinking environments. Talking about non-drinking was characterised by whether to 'come out' (as a non-drinker) or 'fake it' (e.g., 'I'm on antibiotics'). Loyal friendships were reported as particularly important in this context. The decision not to drink was experienced as providing a successful buffer to peer pressure for former drinkers. Our findings unsettle traditional health promotion campaigns which advocate moderate drinking among students without always suggesting how it might be most successfully accomplished, and offer tentative guidance on how non-drinking during specific social occasions might be managed more successfully. Findings are discussed in relation to extant literature and future research directions are suggested.

Key words: alcohol, interpretative phenomenological analysis, non-drinkers, peer pressure, student, university

Promoting healthier alcohol consumption among young people and student populations in England is an on-going challenge (Plant & Plant, 2006) and, relative to other European countries, heavy drinking patterns in these demographics are pronounced (e.g., Fuhr & Gmel, 2011; Plant & Miller, 2001). The central position of alcohol in university cultures is of particular concern (Gill, 2002; Griffin, Szmigin, Hackley, Mistral & Bengry-Howell, 2009; Smith & Foxcroft, 2009). To address this, identifying predictors of harmful drinking behaviour among students and understanding how attitudes towards more moderate approaches to drinking might be encouraged has received substantial attention in psychological research (e.g., Atwell, Abraham, & Duka, 2012; Barry & Goodson, 2010;

Clark, Tran, Weiss, Caselli, Nikcevic & Spada, 2012; Green, Polen, Janoff, Castleton & Perrin, 2007). Many studies highlight the significant influence of social norms, peer pressure and peer conformity on drinking behaviour among young people and students (e.g., Brown, Clasen, & Eicher, 1986; Nash, McQueen, & Bray, 2005; Santor, Messervey, & Kusumakar, 2000). However, fewer studies have examined the experiences of those who do not drink alcohol in social contexts where heavy drinking may be normative (Nairn, Higgins, Thompson, Anderson, & Fu, 2006; Piacentini & Banister, 2009; Piacentini, Chatzidakis, & Banister, 2012). Greater understanding of non-drinkers' experiences in university social contexts might be suggestive of new ways to challenge normative pressure to drink alcohol among students.

In 2009, approximately 20% of young people (16-24 year olds) in England were non-drinkers (National Health Service Information Centre for Health & Social Care, 2012), with evidence that this number increased during the 2000s (Measham, 2008). Promoting non-drinking as a health goal would be an unrealistic or even undesirable health promotion objective (Pederson, Heitmann, Schnohr, & Grønbaek, 2008), yet learning how to empower student drinkers to manage the dynamic and challenges of not drinking during some social situations would be desirable. Addressing situational non-drinking in this way is arguably an important and over-looked feature of strategies designed to successfully promote moderate drinking.

There is only a small body of literature on non-drinking. Drawing on interviews with nine non-drinkers, Piacentini and Banister (2009) reported significant tensions in the successful social management of 'anti-consumption' and discussed the usefulness of different coping strategies such as challenging stereotypes of non-drinkers. These authors also described 'counter-neutralisation techniques' used by non-drinkers to protect themselves from peer intolerance of counter-normative student lifestyles: for example, by acknowledging dangers of heavy drinking or by derogating drunken behaviour (Piacentini et al., 2012). Nairn et al. (2006) identified diverse subject positions young non-drinkers in New Zealand adopted to explain their counter-normative position. These included: (i) positions regarded as socially legitimate in terms of their lifestyle (e.g., sporty; healthy) or cultural basis (e.g., religious); (ii) alternative leisure activities such as daytime café meetings; (iii) constructing alcohol consumption as infantilising or character-changing; and contrastingly, (iv) 'passing' as a drinker in social contexts through actions such as pretending to be holding an alcoholic drink.

Recently, the social experiences of non-drinkers have been described in UK research reports, providing evidence relating to young people's decision-making around alcohol use

(Seaman & Ikegwuonu, 2010) and the processes of becoming and being a non-drinker (Herring, Bayley, & Hurcombe, 2013). These studies revealed that peer tolerance of non-drinking was maximised where individuals strategically deployed 'legitimate' reasons, whether dispositional (e.g., 'don't like the taste') or circumstantial (e.g., 'on medication', 'designated driver') in nature. Both studies also emphasised the importance of dealing with the difficulties of non-drinking at a life stage where everyone seems to be drinking and in social environments where alcohol consumption is particularly prominent (e.g., parties, clubs). Evidence specific to non-drinkers has indicated diverse potential strategies for non-drinkers to use in social settings, including: rejecting stereotypical labels (e.g., 'boring'); adopting alternative identities; ensuring that drinkers do not feel judged; alleviating situational tension using humour; boundary-setting for being out; and being assertive or resolute in how non-drinking is spoken about (Herring et al., 2013). Notably, Seaman and Ikegwuonu (2010) found that non-drinkers expressed pride in their minority status.

Sampling approach and focus

Studies exploring the experiences of young adult non-drinkers provide varied operational definitions of the behaviour. For example, infrequent drinkers are included alongside non-drinkers by some authors (Nairn et al., 2006), while others integrate light and non-drinkers within the category 'anti-consumers' – orientating their enquiry towards individuals understood to operate outside of student norms more generally (Piacentini & 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 & Ikegwuonu, 2010). While all approaches have their merits, we suggest that a more conservative sampling approach is of particular appeal from a health promotion viewpoint. Specifically, we propose an original distinction between individuals who do not drink for reasons that are culturally *unsanctioned* - i.e., those who choose not to drink primarily because they dislike its effects on themselves or others – and those who abstain for reasons that are culturally *sanctioned* - i.e., those who choose not to drink primarily for culturally-recognisable reasons such as religion, physical illness or prior dependence. While similar distinctions between individuals with different kinds of reasons for non-drinking have informed previous sampling approaches (e.g., Herring et al., 2013), we provide an explicit, conceptually informed distinction based on an underlying health promotion rationale and, as such, offer an original extension to this emerging literature.

    We suggest that investigating the experiences of culturally unsanctioned non-drinkers is more valuable to health promotion initiatives designed to reduce student consumption levels

given that they can be more meaningfully applied to the broader student population than those which examine the experiences of non-drinkers en masse. For example, the culturally 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'). In contrast, the culturally unsanctioned non-drinker may have to do more work to convince others of the validity of his/her decision not to drink. This distinction is not intended to provide a reified taxonomical account of non-drinking motivations and in so doing to falsely simplify complex issues of social approval, cultural acceptance and personal choice involved in the decision not to drink alcohol. Instead, our distinction is intended to provide a pragmatic focus on non-drinkers whose experiences may be of most relevance to the broader student population.

Originally with this literature, we provide a subtle but important explicit emphasis on non-drinkers whose behaviour is the least readily defensible (in normative terms), yet arguably carries the broadest applicability from a health promotion perspective. Indeed, investigating culturally unsanctioned non-drinkers holds relevance to *any* university student motivated to drink alcohol more moderately yet who would be required to defend the decision not to drink during a social occasion in the absence of a culturally sanctioned reason for such action. This study presents data collected from interviews with five individuals who have chosen not to drink alcohol and was structured around two broad research questions: (1) why have individuals chosen not to drink alcohol?; (2) what kind of social experiences do culturally unsanctioned non-drinkers have in university settings?

Method

Sampling

All participants were recruited from a survey study of 609 drinkers and non-drinkers. Of 60 non-drinking respondents, 12 did not drink for culturally unsanctioned reasons (e.g., disliking alcohol's effects on others) rather than culturally sanctioned reasons (i.e., religious; physiological). Of these individuals, 5 were willing to be interviewed (Table 1). Both lifelong non-drinkers and former drinkers (abstinence of ≥6 months) were interviewed. The sample was not designed to be representative of either non-drinking students or culturally unsanctioned non-drinkers, but rather to focus on the varied and intricate experiences of these particular individuals who had chosen to not drink alcohol.

<insert Table 1>

Procedure and interview

Ethical approval was acquired from the host institution. An interview schedule started with general items (e.g., 'how do you like to spend your leisure time?') before turning to non-drinking items that were both broad (e.g., 'tell me about your experiences as a non-drinker') and more specific (e.g., 'describe how you have historically dealt with drink offers'). Semi-structured interviews took place on university campuses or at interviewee's homes after obtaining written informed consent. Where possible, throughout interviews, terms such as 'non-drinker' or 'non-drinking' were avoided in an effort to minimize the presence of rigid labels indicative of social categories or lifestyle choices. No fixed interview structure was followed, enabling participants to discuss those experiences which held most personal relevance in an order of their own choosing. Post-interview, participants were asked if there was anything concerning their non-drinking not covered during the interview that they would like to discuss. Recordings of interviews were transcribed verbatim. In this manuscript [...] indicates the deletion of material not pertinent to analysis.

Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA: Smith & Osborn, 2003) was used as a guiding framework. IPA entails a fine-grain account of individual lived experience. It was well-suited to the current research enquiry given its focus on a homogenous group of individuals who share a common life phenomenon. Small sample sizes are typical of IPA studies and highly congruent with its methodological emphasis: the in-depth investigation of a shared aspect of lived experience. Recent IPA studies of drinking behaviour among young people (e.g., Shinebourne & Smith, 2009; de Visser & Smith, 2006, de Visser & Smith, 2007a; de Visser & Smith, 2007b) have demonstrated the inherent value of recognizing complex links between drinking behaviour and issues of self and identity among young people. Similarly, we sought to explore the phenomenology of the decision not to drink alcohol as something that might be expected to hold implications for self and identity given its counter-normative association. Analysis involved two broad phases. In the first phenomenological phase, features of each individual's experience, alongside both their and the interviewer's meaning-making interpretative activities, were carefully detailed. This process was repeated across transcripts, and was followed by the second phase of interpretation in which convergences and divergences within and between individual accounts were recorded. The second author assessed the credibility of data interpretation, the final thematic structure and the suitability of transcript excerpts appearing within themes, consistent with suggested quality guidelines (Willig, 2008).

Results

Analysis identified 5 inter-linked themes relating to the environmental challenges and peer pressure in the experience of being a non-drinking student. The data demonstrate how a combination of adaptability of self-presentation, support from friends, and the assured nature of the decision to abstain itself were identified by participants as conducive components of a more positive social experience of non-drinking during their time at university. Participants' experiences are presented via 5 inter-related but distinctive superordinate themes: 'Living with challenges to non-drinking', 'Seeing what goes on in drinking environments', 'Dealing with conversations about non-drinking (making excuses vs. coming out)', 'Knowing which friends care about you' and 'The importance of minimising "legroom" for peer pressure'. These themes are explained and illustrated below.

1. Living with challenges to non-drinking

All participants described an array of challenges to their non-drinking within peer conversations, though not always via explicit pressure to drink alcohol. These challenges were experienced as subtle but pervasive and diverse in nature, as illustrated in Katie's recounting of responses to the discovery that she is a non-drinker:

> [You] get the multitude of um different, you know, you either get it forced on you, you get the silence, you get the questions, when you say you don't drink. – Katie

Responses to Katie's lifestyle decision were palpably experienced as a bothersome and intrusive calling to account for *why* she had chosen not to drink. Whether her peer response was decisive ('forced on you') or passive ('the silence'), Katie described a comprehensive and inevitable pattern of dialogue in her daily life in which this part of herself was called into question.

For Paul, a lifelong non-drinker, peer responses had focused on remedying his behaviour:

> There is a tendency for [women] to sit down and get to the root of it, subtly trying to get you to drink without you knowing, through other means. The kind of, the "have you tried this", the spiking the drink kind of… "what if we get drunk together." …I've heard a fair few of them. "What if you only drink half of what I drink", those kind of things […] and it's just, "no." – Paul

In such encounters, Paul seemed to experience others' responses to his non-drinking as non-accepting, manifest in the perception of their efforts: to address the root cause of counter-normative behaviour; to undermine his decision by appealing to a shared or communal peer

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experience ('get drunk together') or agreed drinking ratios; or to sabotage his choice ('spiking'). This range of reactions involved in peer pressure suggests how Paul's non-drinking instigates a powerful response from others: so provocative is the discovery of someone who does not do as others do, and so unequivocal is the belief that non-drinking justifiably requires problematizing rather than acceptance. Though forms of explicit pressure were present in both Katie's ('forced') and Paul's ('spiking') accounts, participants' tended to experience peer pressure in the form of more gentle resistance to, or suspicion of, non-drinking.

   2. Seeing what goes on in drinking environments

Although challenges from peers made life more difficult for non-drinkers, there was also the sense from participants' accounts that sharing spaces with people who drink could be disquieting, as Dawn experienced:

> I suppose when you're sober and looking at that kind of thing, and you see people throwing up and being silly, you tend to feel more uncomfortable. - Dawn

   The contrast between Dawn's mind-set ('when you're sober) and her peers' behaviour ('being silly') set her apart from her drinking peers, having deprived her of a meaningful and comfortable social role. Andy, another lifelong non-drinker, described a similar dynamic:

> Two people who were very, very drunk were making a big scene and [...] everyone was kind of being entertained by it and um. They were making fools of themselves and I was sitting there, only sober person in the place. I didn't want to stop it because I felt like, that's just killing a party and upsetting everyone. So, um, I had to leave. [...] I just felt it was kind of, ethically wrong for me to just sit there and watch this go on. Everyone else was drunk so they were kind of excused from the fact that they weren't really seeing what was going on. - Andy

Unaffected by alcohol's influence (social appraisals were uninhibited) and lacking alcohol's influence on the normative interpretation of the situation (social appraisals were unchanged), Andy experienced this scene as alarming rather than fun. A tension existed between Andy's and his peers' experience: to interject in some way would have been, effectively, 'killing the party', or, acting discordantly with the party's rules. A consistent desire for all participants was the need to experience regular, vibrant social lives in which the decision not to drink alcohol was tolerated among peers because it was irrelevant. However, these ambitions could be undermined both *externally* via scrutiny (as a form of peer pressure) and *internally* via

non-drinkers' sense of misfit between them and the social dynamic of heavy drinking occasions.

3. Dealing with conversations about non-drinking (making excuses vs. coming out)

All participants described the importance of providing false or misleading accounts of their reasons for not drinking alcohol so as to provide a culturally sanctioned explanation for their lifestyle decision. Andy's account indicated the social occasions where such avoidant strategies might be employed:

> At my friend's 17th birthday I was meeting quite a lot of new people who were doing a drinking game. I didn't feel comfortable with being the party pooper and saying 'I can't do this I am going to watch instead.' I was getting on with them really well and didn't want to kind of ruin that […] I said, 'I can't drink because I am taking antibiotics' […] that felt like um, a more socially acceptable reason to not drink than because I didn't want to drink. – Andy

Drawing on his experiences, Andy recognised the distinction between not drinking alcohol for socially acceptable reasons (e.g., 'on antibiotics') and socially unacceptable reasons (e.g., dislike its social effects). As someone 'on antibiotics', Andy had a legitimate response, explaining away his behaviour in terms that were easy to understand and hard for others to challenge. This saved an otherwise enjoyable social situation from being 'ruined' by unpacking the complex and idiosyncratic account of his non-drinking presented during the course of his interview.

Similarly to Andy, Paul recognised the importance of deceiving others about being a non-drinker:

> I am very skilled at hiding the fact that I don't drink, I know sleight of hand, or if other people are playing a drinking game I'll, whenever it gets to my turn I'll leave the table or just having a half full glass of Coke, that everyone assumes is Coke and Jack Daniels. - Paul

Wanting to be understood to be doing as the group do, Paul considered it important to evade situations which would require explicit drinking behaviour ('I'll leave the table'), or managed to pass as a drinker by being seen in possession of a beverage that could be mistaken for alcohol. While confident in the success of these strategies ('very skilled'), Paul's experiences within drink-related scenarios entail risk in which constant monitoring of changing situational

dynamics and potential negative evaluation are required to survive peer scrutiny or, worse, social revelation. However, Paul later divulged that deceptive strategies would not be required among closer friends:

> When first getting to know people it's important to look like you've got a drink. But once you've got to know people and they accept it, the best strategy is just to say "No thanks". […] not be, "no way, why would you offer me that, it's ridiculous" just a kind of, "I'm alright thanks." So it's accepted as part of who I am. It's not a secret, it's just not something that you broadcast when people who are around you are heavy drinkers. - Paul

Among friends, rather than confront the basis of drink offers, Paul found that making light of his non-drinking and polite refusal offered him effective protection against a potentially difficult social situation. Paul's experiences dovetail with Andy's concerns about concealing his non-drinking status among new acquaintances, yet suggest that a shift in strategy were found to become necessary and desirable among people who knew him better. Both male participants indicated that some degree of flexibility was required to address genuine, anticipated or imagined evaluations of their non-drinking. An alternative 'coming out' approach among both friends and peers was favoured among female participants. This was evident in Katie's response:

> I'll say [to friends] "I'll go out but I won't drink", and then they're sort of like, "go on, you know, why not?" Because I am a bit more firm in it and I am like, "no, seriously I am not drinking. I am completely adamant, there's no way you can sway me, I will not drink." – Katie

In contrast to Paul and Andy, Katie, a former drinker, announces her intent to friends from the outset of a social occasion ('I won't drink') explicating her resolution ('adamant') and the futile nature of potential pressure ('no way you can sway me'). Katie gained confidence from the personal meanings hinging around personal choice to plainly defend her lifestyle preferences when faced by social pressure to drink alcohol.

This direct approach was also favoured by Dawn, a lifelong non-drinker, within peer interactions:

> I say, "no, I don't drink, I never have drunk, I don't see the reason in drinking, I am not going to drink now." They say, "just smell it, you'll like it." It's like, "it doesn't matter if

I like it or not, I don't want to drink." I repeat that for a bit and they tend to give up and go away. - Dawn

Dawn preferred to comprehensively refute peer pressure to drink alcohol, choosing to express her behavioural mind-set ('I don't'), its history ('I haven't') and her stance ('I don't see the reason in drinking'). This process required repetition (so strong is the expectation to drink among peers), yet appeared to work - 'they tend to give up'.

While some participants' experiences had led to a conviction that some degree of tactical flexibility was required when socially deploying non-drinking narratives, other participants' experienced advantages of towing an unfaltering narrative line. Neither faking it nor coming out provided a wholly satisfactory cross-situational framework for participants: faking it carrying the risk of being discovered, and coming out the risk of being demarcated as a social outsider.

4. Knowing which friends care about you

Three participants described the importance, in the broader context of peer scrutiny and intolerance, of keeping supportive friendship networks, including people who understood and respected their decision to not drink alcohol. Katie communicated this clearly:

> People don't understand why you don't drink. At my age it's expected. If you don't you're a black sheep, kind of thing. I couldn't care less. I really don't care about what people think about me. […] At the end of the day, I have my group of friends so, you know, I really couldn't care about what other people think. -Katie

In her 'black sheep' metaphor, Katie alludes to her experience of non-drinking as a visible and potent signifier of someone whose behaviour is diametrically opposite from that of her same-age peers. Awareness of friends for whom distinctions based on drinking behaviour are unimportant seemed to have provided Katie with an effective bolster against peer prejudice. Michelle had also experienced the importance of delineating between those capable, and incapable, of holding a more permissive understanding of non-drinking:

> My closest friends respect my choice because they care, other people probably don't, they try and coax you to have a drink […] if they cared they wouldn't do it would they? If they cared enough. I've got my close friends and the people who matter around me. So social gatherings with groups of students on my course […] isn't really that important. - Michelle

The issue of sufficiency ('cared enough') seemed to characterise Michelle's experience of no longer drinking alcohol. Once she had abandoned alcohol, Michelle found herself compelled to sort those perceived as caring, from non-caring others. Both Katie and Michelle's accounts hinted at how much more straight-forward life might be were they to drink (e.g., 'black sheep') yet for better or worse sharpened categories of 'close friends' from the broader peer group. For Katie, it was important to dissociate herself from personal investment in the responses of others ('couldn't care less') while for Michelle, a sufficient level of investment on the part of others in her personal well-being ('cared enough') became the criterion through which being a 'close friend' could be established.

Paul also found that the meaningful boundaries of genuine friendship were contingent on respect for his decision not to drink alcohol:

> There have been a few times when people have tried to spike my drink, they think, "Ah he won't know." […] When they try to spike my drink I do actually, the next morning, have a serious word about if they do it again that will be the end of the friendship on the spot. – Paul

Though willingness to endure peer challenges to his non-drinking appeared elsewhere in Paul's interview, his need for dependable, loyal friendship represented the threshold at which such challenges could no longer be tolerated. For Katie, Michelle and Paul, closer university friendships partly involved accepting their decision not to drink alcohol (even where the basis for that choice was unknown or unclear). As Paul explained, inadequate acceptance levels might necessitate the breaking of social ties. Non-drinking, therefore appeared to lead not just to social challenges and exclusion, but suggested the potential need for renegotiating social support structures and friendship groups. Participants tended to describe this aspect of non-drinking in positive, empowered terms, creating a dynamic where supportive friendships were strengthened and less supportive friendships were discontinued.

5. The importance of minimising "legroom" for peer pressure

In addition to environmental pressures, Katie drew attention to the kind of pressure faced by someone who aims to drink moderately when out socially:

> If you're adamant enough that you're not going to drink […] people will understand that a bit more. Whereas, if you say, "oh I might have one." They're like, "Waa-aay, a bit of legroom there, I might be able to sway 'em', you know, get 'em to have one", like the

weak link in the chain. Whereas if someone's completely, "no, I am not doing it", then you won't bother 'cos they've obviously made up their mind. -Katie

Katie experienced evident benefits of denying the possibility of 'legroom' relating to unwanted drinking behaviours pressed by her peers. Dual interpretative meanings are present in Katie's 'weak link in the chain' image: in its metaphorical meaning, as 'the odd one out' within a social occasion; and in its symbolic timbre, which evoked 'chain-mail', or body armour, unfit for purpose that renders the wearer vulnerable. Fully unpacking these symbols reveals how Katie experienced that her *previous* moderate drinker mind-set left her susceptible to social pressure in a way that her *current* non-drinker mind-set did not.

These data unsettle current health promotion initiatives which assume that lower levels of alcohol consumption among young people are most effectively instilled by 'calibrating' awareness of recommended consumption levels, chiming with commentary elsewhere (de Visser & Birch, 2012; Moss, Dyer, & Albery, 2009). Katie experienced that going out with the intention to drink moderately was fine in theory, but offered little defence when negotiating interactions with peers in which preferred consumption levels could come under fire.

Both former drinkers identified the potential pitfalls of attempting to drink moderately during social occasions where others were drinking more heavily. Having experienced life as both former and non-drinkers, these individuals offered clear experiential insights into two distinct mental dynamics: of 'moderate drinkers' and 'non-drinkers'. Michelle said:

> I started to avoid drinking situations and going out with certain groups of people because I felt uncomfortable in those situations. A lot of the time I would give in to peer pressure and end up having a few drinks when I'd gone out with every intention not to. When I've quit smoking […] you know, just by sitting around other people smoking, or having people smoking, or people offering you a cigarette, it all puts pressure on you. - Michelle

Initially, Michelle cut down her alcohol consumption, yet, as a moderate drinker, was still socially present as someone who *may drink alcohol.* Referring by analogy to smoking, Michelle described diverse environmental pressures contended by the moderate mind-set: proximity to drinkers, observing drinking behaviour and experiencing drink offers. To not risk succumbing ('having a few drinks'), she drank nothing in drinking contexts or avoided them entirely.

As non-drinkers, participants felt under persistent scrutiny and pressure to drink alcohol among peers. Participants were aware of a disjuncture in peers' perceptions of behaviour during social occasions involving heavy drinking, leading to feelings of alienation in these environments. Their accounts showed how talking about non-drinking could be experienced as a delicate enterprise characterised by decisions around whether or not to 'come out' (as a non-drinker) or 'fake it' (e.g., 'I'm on antibiotics'). The importance of loyal friendships in these circumstances was described as paramount by most participants. Among former drinkers and lifelong non-drinkers, the decision not to drink was felt to buffer more successfully against peer pressure than the intention to drink moderately during social occasions.

Discussion

The findings presented above help to develop a currently small literature on the experiences of student non-drinkers in two novel ways: first, by restricting attention to non-drinkers whose experiences arguably have most bearing on promoting lower levels of student alcohol consumption ('culturally unsanctioned' non-drinkers); second, by providing an explicitly phenomenological account to provide a clearer sense of situational non-drinking in experiential terms.

Most participants limited their time spent in drinking environments given the sharp juxtaposition between mental states when sober and when under alcohol's psychoactive affects. Aside from the tedious experience of heavy drinking occasions when sober, participants also described a particular moral quandary about attendance at these occasions. For non-drinkers, retaining what has been described elsewhere as 'walk-away power' (Herring et al., 2013) when in heavy-drinking environments was an important strategy for coping with situations which were unable to socially accommodate them as non-drinking students.

For many participants, there were dilemmas around how and when to deceive others about their non-drinking. Misleading people via an excuse (e.g., 'I'm on antibiotics') was an undesirable but prudent route for evading social pressure or judgements – especially with new acquaintances. For example, being seen in possession of an alcoholic drink was one way in which participants achieved this, as demonstrated elsewhere in the importance of 'passing' as an alcohol consumer (e.g., Nairn et al., 2006). This partly seemed to involve being seen to have a culturally 'legitimate' reason for non-drinking, evident in some situations in their

tendency to present fictitious obligations underlying apparent non-drinking (e.g., 'on antibiotics'). Our findings here match similar excuses reported elsewhere (Seaman & Ikegwuonu, 2010). In lieu of religious/cultural reasons for non-drinking, culturally unsanctioned non-drinking students must manage the strenuous task of rebuffing social challenges without having a simple or compelling explanation for their non-drinking. Consistent with Nairn et al. (2006), these 'faking' strategies did not appear to indicate submission to dominant drinking norms, and were found predominantly within interactions (with less well-known peers) in which challenging drinking norms might prove counter-productive and 'coming clean' might be impractical. However, on this point we also note recent experimental evidence suggesting that 'don't', rather than 'can't' refusal framings are more psychologically empowering in motivating goal-directed behaviour (Patrick & Hagtvedt, 2011). Encouragingly, this provides some basis for suggesting that non-drinkers may be in a stronger position than they imagine when being 'completely adamant' about not drinking alcohol (as Katie was), rather than relying principally on the subterfuge provided by excuses. It should also be noted that several participants (e.g., Paul) emphasised that, in addition to deploying plausible excuses, lightness-of-touch was also integral to successfully (i.e., inconspicuously) declining offers of alcoholic drinks to avoid drawing attention to non-drinking behaviour.

The importance of tolerance of lifestyle choices (i.e., their non-drinking) within closer friendships was experienced as an integral aspect of social well-being for most participants. These findings broadly correspond with studies of student friendships which consistently demonstrate positive links between social relationships and well-being (e.g., Buote et al., 2007; Demir & Davidson, 2013) and has highlighted close links between perceptions of genuine support, friendship quality and psychosocial well-being (Demir & Davidson, 2013). It seems likely, then, that these friendship experiences are broadly applicable to students when addressing questions of fidelity, trust and proximity as part of the initiation and development of friendships during their time at university. This said, the socially demanding aspects of being a non-drinker illustrated here and elsewhere (Piacentini & Banister, 2009; Seaman & Ikegwuonu, 2010) suggest that the availability and dependability of such friendships might be particularly important or pertinent to individuals who must consistently defend the counter-normative position which they occupy through not drinking alcohol. In this way, the status of 'not drinking' seemed to provide a benchmark for our participants enabling (or forcing) them to assess the viability of particular social networks or individual friendships.

This process of appraisal was seemed to be particularly evident among participants who had experienced peer attempts to 'spike' their drinks with alcohol (e.g., Paul's interview). Studies of drink-spiking have tended to focus on their general incidence (McPherson & Smith, 2006; Moore & Burgess, 2011) and use in relation to sexual assault (Sheard, 2011). Studies have not, to our knowledge, examined drink-spiking within university social networks and friendships. Understanding how drink-spiking behaviour linked to disregard of lifestyle choices around alcohol consumption and the implications this would hold for friendship boundaries would be useful to address in future research. We take the view that research concerning the experiences of non-drinkers may help to problematize alcohol consumption's entrenched normative status as a 'typical' or 'inevitable' part of student identities and socialising, as stated elsewhere (e.g., Piacentini & Banister, 2006; Piacentini et al., 2012). The study's former drinkers (Katie and Michelle) described important advantages of presenting themselves as non-drinkers, in terms of not presenting 'legroom' for peer intolerance and pressure during social occasions. The effectiveness of presenting 'a non-drinking mind-set' among individuals who periodically do not drink during social occasions would be useful to explore in future research. In considering these issues, we suggest that studies of non-, light/occasional and moderate drinking may help provoke some shift in the strategic emphases of alcohol-related public health promotions in England. Ongoing emphasis in recent health messages has been placed on promoting better understanding of how 'safer drinking' can be equated with alcohol consumption units (e.g., HM Government, 2012; Public Health England, 2013). It is suggested that health promotion initiatives that do not contain overt guidance on how perceptions of drinking behaviour and peer pressure might be strategically managed are likely to have limited impact in reducing alcohol consumption among students.

Study strengths and limitations

Our study has provided an explicitly phenomenological account of how non-drinking is experienced based on a subset of non-drinkers from whom, we argue, the most meaningful and applicable range of experiences can be learnt from and transposed to broader health promotion settings. This complements and extends the existing literature on experiences of non-drinkers. Investigating diverse sub-sets of homogenously-defined drinker 'types' is, we suggest, an important aspect of future research, given the varied emphases and research settings that are required to fully understand the circumstances in which drinking and non-drinking behaviour are best and least well tolerated. In our study, we have drawn attention to

supportive factors that might better empower students choosing to moderate their alcohol consumption by not drinking during the course of occasions, during certain weeks or months, during particular academic periods or for the duration of their university life.

Study limitations and future research recommendations are considered in parallel. First, a larger sample of culturally unsanctioned non-drinkers should have usefully provided former and never-drinkers of both sexes. Given recent qualitative evidence that male non-drinkers may be more socially stigmatized and viewed in more pejorative terms by student peers (Conroy & de Visser, 2013), a larger dataset would usefully permit investigation of sex differences in managing non-drinking. Second, focussing on 'culturally unsanctioned' rather than 'culturally sanctioned' non-drinkers occurred at the expense of investigating the social experiences of non-drinkers who become suddenly unable to drink alcohol (e.g., post-liver infection). While we maintain that focussing on culturally unsanctioned non-drinkers may have the most direct bearing on the alcohol-related behaviour of university students more broadly, understanding the differing boundaries of acceptability of different types of non-drinking presents a potentially fruitful future research objective. Third, attrition of some non-drinkers identified from the survey study suggests potential sample biases; specifically, interview meetings with two male former drinkers could not be finalised, though this in itself holds the possibility that conversations about non-drinking might be particularly burdensome or difficult for male students. Fourth, a naturalistic data-set containing non-drinkers' social interactions (e.g., in student bars) could provide an important complement to the phenomenological focus of the current study. Particularly, such evidence would explicate the rhetorical devices and subcultural resources drawn on by individuals when managing the subject positions involved in non-drinking as a socially constructed category. Finally, though we believe our findings have transferable relevance to alcohol-related decision-making and student drinking patterns more broadly (e.g., indicating possible aids and barriers to resisting peer pressure to drink during a social occasion), we acknowledge that findings cannot be generalized beyond these specific non-drinking individuals. Appropriate to IPA's distinctive strengths as an analytic method, our findings are suggestive of ways in which health promotion approaches to student alcohol consumption might evolve and are not intended to be conclusive in any sense. We suggest that these insights into lived experiences of non-drinkers facilitate critical re-thinking around alcohol's subjective effects, communal influence and social utility. Our data chime with previous evidence of ambivalence towards alcohol consumption among young people (de Visser & Smith, 2007b); findings which lack

prominence in a literature geared towards understanding alcohol's effects in more material terms of physical or psychopathological harm.

Conclusions

The present study enabled non-drinkers to communicate experiences in language of their own choosing which provided rich psychological insights into how pressure is experienced and strategically managed among individuals well-rehearsed in the social dynamics of this task. Given its norm-violating character, it is unsurprising that interviewees did not communicate clear 'magic bullet' strategies for successfully managing non-drinking within social settings. Instead, interviews alluded to how being a non-drinker may hold implications for how social networks, friendships and drinking environments are perceived and how conversations about non-drinking may be most effectively handled. We do not intend to suggest that transposing the experiences of non-drinking individuals to student drinking behaviour more broadly is a trivial challenge, but it seems that further investigation of *how* the decision to not drink alcohol during social occasions might be presented as more feasible for young people provides at least part of the support package required to successfully promote lower levels of alcohol consumption in this demographic.

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Table 1. Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Non-drinking duration (months)	Reasons for non-drinking
Andy	20	Lifelong	Lacking knowledge about alcohol; self-confidence; not wanting to lose self; wanting to do what's right for himself; extended family alcohol problems; not wanting to lose control; healthy lifestyle; financial savings; uncertain about reasons
Katie	21	14	Witnessing negative effects on others (i.e., aggressive drunken behaviour and chronic health impact in barmaid and carer jobs); financial savings; alcohol not necessary for having a good time;
Paul	19	Lifelong	Wanting to be himself; not wanting to lose control; family norms regarding alcohol; disliking taste; uncertain about reasons
Dawn	22	Lifelong	Linked to broader principles for living life; see no reason to drink; seeing negative effects on others (e.g., hangovers); healthy lifestyle.
Michelle	21	6	Dislike self when drunk; partner a heavy drinker; lost confidence as a drinker; addictive personality; wanting university work focus; disliking taste; lost interest in drinking; uncertain about reasons