‘I just drink for that tipsy stage’: Young adults and embodied management of alcohol use.

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Abstract

Many young adults aim for a state of tipsiness where control is not abandoned when they drink alcohol, however this level of intoxication is very difficult to get right. Interviews conducted with 60 drinkers aged 18-24 in Melbourne, Australia indicate that few counted standard drinks and most spoke of attending to bodily signs that they had had enough and should not drink more. This strategy was ineffective for a small proportion of interviewees who never felt too drunk. To understand young adults’ efforts to manage intoxication, we use Mol and Law’s notion of ‘excorporation’. The partial nature of intoxicated self-control led young adults to arrange to be in settings where external restraints to drinking would operate. Alcohol policy should acknowledge the mosaic and embodied nature of self-control for young adults in the night time economy and focus on the development of settings where drinking and associated harms are minimized.

Key Words
Alcohol consumption, excorporation, intoxication, young people, deliberate drunkenness, embodiment.

Introduction

Alcohol is the most deeply enmeshed psycho-active drug in contemporary western societies, but this embeddedness presents problems as well as pleasure. In Australia, alcohol is implicated in many social concerns including ill health and violence (Babor et al, 2010). The rise of the night time economy (NTE) has meant that city centers have become enlivened at night with young people drinking in pubs and clubs. This has contributed to economic revival, but has also brought with it problems such as drunkenness and the concomitant violence and nuisance (Fitzgerald & Jordan, 2009). At the same time as opening up the market for alcohol, the neo-liberal state has turned to self-regulating individuals to make rational and clear decisions about how and when to drink and stop drinking (Measham & Brain, 2005; Griffin et al, 2009a). However, this model accounts for only part of how people manage drinking.

The paper considers how 60 young adults, aged 18-24 from Melbourne talk about their experiences of drinking alcohol; the sensations of drunkenness they hope to achieve and the strategies they use to moderate intoxication. There is an instability at the heart of intoxication that many young adults understand and, at times, willingly indulge in. Getting drunk inevitably involves a diminution of self-control, a becoming other to one’s self. Rather than seeking an abandonment of selfhood, many young adults in the study aimed for a
sensory state which they described as between being tipsy and drunk, while acknowledging that this point is unstable and that they frequently find themselves more drunk than they wanted. Much alcohol literature recognizes that young people weigh the pleasures of drunkenness against the risks it entails when making decisions about how much to consume (see, for example, Szmigin et al 2008). Drawing on Mol and Law (2004) we suggest that intoxication is experienced, performed and managed simultaneously and inextricably by the rational thinking self and the body, and hence that both pleasure and risk management are embodied social practices. For example, intoxication is generally sensed through internal affective states rather than counting standard drinks. Aware of the limitations of the cognitive and embodied self to control alcohol use, some young adults ‘excorporate’ (Mol and Law, 2004) this responsibility by planning to drink in settings where external constraints operate.

Mol and Law’s notion of ‘complexity’ (2002) is useful in understanding the experience of drinking and the limitation of neo-liberal technologies for alcohol control. They argue that in a world where knowledge serves to reduce problems of the social to simplifications and straightforward schemas: ‘Complexity exists if things relate but don’t add up’ (Mol & Law, 2002, p. 1). As a neo-liberal means to encourage individual self-management, knowledge practices such as public health messages attempt to simplify the experience of drinking alcohol by delineating levels of risk that constitute unhealthy drinking, with the expectation that people will make rational decisions to drink within prescribed limits. The marketing messages of the NTE, on the other hand, identify young people’s sociability and hedonism as deeply embedded in excessive drinking (Griffin et al, 2009a), situating alcohol use as ‘time out’ from everyday life. Neo-liberal knowledge practices fail to take into account the pleasures of alcohol use and how decisions about drinking are made by embodied people rather than simply by rational actors. We conclude that policy should acknowledge the mosaic nature of self-control for participants in the NTE. Policy makers should focus on the development of settings where harm is minimized rather than calling for more robust individual self-control. This is particularly essential for the small proportion of adults who find it very hard to detect or respond to their escalating levels of intoxication.

**Determined drunkenness and ambivalence**

Along with many other western and developed nations, Australia has been moving towards a neo-liberal economic response to many issues which previously were considered from a collectivist, social welfare perspective (Fitzgerald & Jordan, 2009). Where alcohol was previously considered a dangerous, albeit widely-used, substance which required extensive social control through both state and normative systems, it is now generally treated as a ‘normal’ consumer item and its availability is subjected to limited restrictions including mandatory licensing for retailers. The international alcohol industry has taken advantage of this liberalisation of the alcohol market to produce what Brain (2000) has called the ‘post-modern alcohol order’. In Melbourne, as in other cities, many limits to alcohol availability
were lifted in the 1980s putting in place the conditions for what has been called the night time economy (Hobbs et al, 2003; Zajdow, 2011).

Brain (2000) refers to the ‘postmodern social order’ as the movement from the industrial, modern order characterised by stringent social controls on drinking alcohol, to the post-industrial consumer-led social order, characterised by an active alcohol industry and hedonistic consumption. In the postmodern alcohol order, problems with alcohol, including issues of intoxication and long-term health problems were rebadged as problems of individual deficit and self-regulation. Discourses of risk and self-management have been taken up in what has been termed the ‘arts of government’ (Rose and Miller, 1992). Thus the neo-liberal economic regime relies on, and reproduces, individualist discourses of self-management. Writers have identified the technologies of the self that are inherent in the ideas of moderation and good citizenship, but it is recognised that particular groups are deficient in their capacity to enact these technologies of the self. Young adults, poor people and pregnant women are considered as particularly deficient in these respects (Griffin et al, 2009b; Harrison et al, 2011; Keane, 2009; O’Malley & Valverde, 2006).

According to MacAndrew and Edgerton’s seminal text, ‘{w}hether we drink heavily, moderately, or are totally abstinent, we all possess a host of common-sense understandings concerning the effects of alcohol on man (sic)’ (2003/1969, p. 1). MacAndrew and Edgerton argued that anthropological studies had shown that cultural notions regarding the effects of alcohol impacted on how individuals experienced intoxication. They also argued that alcohol was used in many societies in a ‘time-out’ fashion. That is, in some societies intoxication was used as an excuse for acting in ways that were considered deviant in other circumstances. Individuals would use the ‘disinhibiting’ effects of alcohol in controlled ways to exhibit this behaviour. The types of behaviour included in this ‘time-out’ period, however, were culturally specific and bounded by expectations first considered when sober. Thus while there is no doubt that alcohol effects the body in many ways, drunken comportment meant that ‘drunken changes for the worse’ were driven by social expectations. They write:

Rather than viewing drunken comportment as a function of toxically disinhibited brains operating in impulse-driven bodies, we have recommended that what is fundamentally at issue are the learned relations that exist among men (sic) living together in a society. More specifically, we have contended that the way people comport themselves when they are drunk is determined not by alcohol’s toxic assault upon the seat of moral judgment, conscience or the like, but by what their society makes of and imparts to them concerning the state of drunkenness (MacAndrew & Edgerton, 2003/1969, p. 165).

Griffin et al (2009b) show how ‘time-out’ narratives operate in young people’s stories of loss of consciousness and memory during drinking episodes, although what may be embedded in their social worlds as acceptable to be called ‘time-out’ may not be so in the wider community. Although there is no general agreement on how drunken comportment operates in different societies and cultures, as Room (2001, p. 190) notes, ‘while the link
between drinking and bad behaviour may be culturally constructed, this does not make it any less lethal in its consequences’.

Technologies for moderating alcohol consumption

While biomedicine as a dominant conceptual framework may have been in retreat in 1969 when MacAndrew & Edgerton (2003/1969) first published their text, biomedical and genetic explanations for all drug and alcohol effects have since made a strong comeback. Within the individual body, the effect of alcohol has been described in physiological terms, while behaviour has been explained as a result of the neurochemical effects of ethyl alcohol (Harfield, 2009). In addition, since the 1970s, there has been a concerted effort by public health authorities and governments to quantify the risk for health and wellbeing of drinking of alcohol at particular levels. Particular activities, such as drink driving, and groups, such as young adults and pregnant women, have been targeted for health messages related to alcohol. Thus the cultural argument as presented by MacAndrew & Edgerton (2003/1969) has been drowned out by the health messages presented by biomedicine and public health. One of the ‘technologies of government’ has been the development of recommendations regarding the number of standard drinks that can be consumed to minimise risk. In Australia, the National Health and Medical Research Council released their moderate drinking guidelines in 2001, but rescinded the original and produced newer, lower-threshold guidelines in 2009 (NHMRC, 2009). However, cultural and sociological explanations for behaviour when drunk have not completely disappeared. Many studies of young adults’ drinking show that a cultural logic of drinking (if not drunkenness) is apparent. Grace, Moore & Northcote (2009) argue that young adults’ drinking exists within a diversity of drinking cultures, and that while drinking is central to young adults’ sociability, drunkenness is not always part of this.

O’Malley and Valverde (2006) argue that the discourse of moderation is part of the technologies of government that regulate how people understand drinking. Education is used to impress the citizen with an ethic of moderation which excludes drunken pleasure as one of the rationales for drinking. However, Harrison et al. (2011) claim that young adults’ drinking cultures do not accord with the larger culture’s view of drinking as a manageable, technology of the self.

Our interviews, conducted a decade on with young adults in Melbourne, did not present quite the same picture. What we argue in this paper is that the loss of control that most young adults seek is in itself limited – most people want a partial state of diminished, but not eradicated, self-responsibility, and that they plan for this as part of arranging a night out. This is partially achieved by attending to bodily states and the ‘excorporation’ (discussed below) of control, rather than a rational calculation of the number of drinks needed to get to the state they wished for, but not drunker than they desired. The young adults studied here had a much more nuanced idea of what their ideal state was, and how they were going to get there. Thus, although we agree that getting very drunk is a deliberate choice for some, and that drinking is often constrained to particular times and settings,
most young people express a real desire to retain some degree of control when they consume alcohol.

In support of this contention, MacLean, Ferris and Livingston (2013) found that only about 30% of 16-24 year olds in the general areas where the interviews were conducted agreed with the statement that ‘Getting drunk is an innocent way of having fun’. No doubt people feel differently about drunkenness when they are actually drinking than they do at the point where they are asked an apparently morally loaded question such as this. Nonetheless this finding raises questions about the extent of social acceptability of ‘determined drunkenness’ in the Australian context.

**Intoxication and excorporation**

In an article developed from two studies of young adults in the night time economy in Melbourne conducted some years before the interviews we report on here, Lindsay (2009) found that the ‘staging’ of drinking to maximise pleasure was an important aspect of alcohol consumption on a big night out. She wrote that:

> Young people deliberately stage intoxication to enhance pleasure and minimize pain from their consumption...Young people stage intoxication through timetabling when and with whom it will occur, by choreographing night out, and by managing the risks and consequences of drinking (2009, p. 376).

Building on this idea, we show here how people attend to their own bodily states to reach a wanted state of intoxication. When interviewees were asked questions about how they hoped to feel when they drank on a night out, many more of them described states of moderate intoxication that included levels of self-control than those who described states of determined drunkenness. They were aware of the dangers inherent in intoxication and worked to minimise them, even if, on occasion, they failed, and at times revelled in this failure.

The effects of alcohol are felt in the body and performed by through the body, and thus managing drunkenness requires constant self-monitoring of internal affective states. Mol and Law’s (2004) theorisation of how people with diabetes work to stabilise their blood sugar levels, a skill that they found some people were better at than others, offers useful insights here. Mol and Law describe how alongside using blood sugar measurement devices, people attend to their internal affective states to identify whether their blood sugar levels are within the required range: ‘in the day-to-day handling (or avoiding) of hypoglycaemia, self-awareness is at least as important as measuring’ (2004, p.47). Whether they are monitoring drunkenness or blood sugar levels, people enact this as an embodied state in culturally sanctioned ways (by ‘doing drunkenness’ or responding to hyperglycaemia in ways that are recommended by their medics). At the same time these conditions frame the body’s capacity to respond, for example through the incapacitating effects of severe hypoglycaemia or the reduced capacity for self-regulation that is understood to accompany
heavy alcohol consumption (MacAndrew and Edgerton, 2003/1969). In Mol and Law’s argument, people manage diabetes both by ‘intro-sensing’ hypoglycaemia and by ‘excorporating’ the responsibility to detect and manage it. ‘Excorporating’ in this context entails planning for lapses in self-awareness of hypoglycaemia by establishing external mechanisms to identify and act when the person becomes hypoglycaemic. This occurs, for example, through asking others to intervene if they start to behave oddly.

As we will argue, people recognise and respond to their own drunkenness by attending to feelings and sensations, rather than solely through making cognitive risk assessments. The notion of excorporation enables us to articulate how people arrange for external mechanisms to intervene when this process fails.

**Method**

The study involved interviewing 60 young adults aged 18-24 from two areas of Melbourne (one outer-suburban and one inner urban). We were interested in speaking with only those people who had had one or more alcoholic drinks within the previous six months were interviewed. Participants were recruited via local tertiary education institutions, social welfare agencies and through word of mouth. Equal numbers of women and men were recruited. The majority of participants (44) were studying on either a full- or part-time basis, with a similar proportion employed full- or part-time. Six were neither studying nor working. They came from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Nineteen spoke a language other than English at home. Participants were offered the choice of completing interviews on their own (35), or with one (16) or two friends (9).

The interviews were semi-structured and the interviewees were encouraged to describe their expectations for a night out and the way they used alcohol. The interviewers asked participants to talk about the contexts in which they drank alcohol and to describe a recent big night out involving drinking. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded using the NVivo software package which enabled the researchers to rearrange the data into different nodes according to broad categories identified.

Because of the length of the interviews, and the refining of the codes through rereading, many different accounts were identified. Bryman (2008) notes that this is common in analysing interview data using qualitative software packages. By reviewing codes and transcripts, new theoretical understandings emerge in what Charmaz (2000) refers to as a ‘constructivist’ grounded theory approach. Those accounts that we were most interested in for this paper revolved around the respondents’ desired levels of intoxication and how they hoped to feel when they drank alcohol, how they got to those levels and what did they did to stay at that level. We were also interested in the descriptions the respondents gave to those times that they overshot their desired level of intoxication.
Ethics approval for the research was granted by the University of Melbourne and Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committees. Pseudonyms are used to protect the confidentiality of participants.

The chosen level: life between tipsy and drunk.

As noted, there was some evidence of determined drunkenness in these groups of young adults studied here, but what was also apparent among the majority was a desire for the perfect state of tipsiness, one that fell short of acute drunkenness. This is different to what Measham and Brain (2005) describe. While there is a calculated hedonism, there is also an acknowledgement of the bleeding of one intoxicated state into another, of the liminality and then a possible falling from grace on becoming extremely drunk. So rather than the central purpose being to get drunk, the ideal state is one in which conviviality, friendship and ease of sociality can exist. It also becomes a blending of the individual body sensation with the social body to inhabit a state where contradictions may be accommodated and possibilities explored. What the interviews also give us is a rendering of what Mol and Law (2002) refer to as ‘multiplicity’, that is the coexistence of different, sometimes contradictory stories in a single moment.

The interviewees were asked to describe their perfect state and why they drank:

- Just enjoy [being] with friends, think about all the good things and say all sorts of things, make plans that never happen (Parvani).
- And it would just be – maybe a bit more relaxed and thinking …I’m already clumsy as it is but I’m a bit clumsier, but in kind of a slight nice way. Maybe a bit more relaxed, a bit freer at the same time, which I guess is contradictory in its own way (Scarlett).
- I’m one of the kind of person that don’t actually like to get really drunk, just because I like to have conversations with people. It sort of gets away from the stress. Especially if say you have Friday night and you’re having a few drinks with some friends … it’s my relaxing time, now. I don’t have to worry about uni, I don’t have to worry about working, I’m just gonna have a laugh with my friends, tell silly stories and have a few drinks (Elke).

Other respondents also spoke of allowing the stresses of work or study to melt away by drinking with friends at the end of the day or working week.

There were also those young adults who drank to become someone else. ‘Time out’ as described by MacAndrew and Edgerton (2003/1969) operated for them as a way to gain a sense of freedom from constraints to their usual selfhood:

- I don’t know just, it’s just fun like it’s, it’s different when you’re sober. Like when you’re sober you don’t like dance as much, … you’re not as loud obviously ’cause you’re sober …But it’s just more fun [drinking]. You just, you’re like a different person in a way (Marco).
- You can do whatever you wanna do without restrictions, you feel less restricted in your mind …or easy, easy to break out of the kind of well-behaved manner we kind of put ourselves in real life. How we behave in a certain way, what we think is right, and what is not right. But with the effects of
alcohol we are very free to do anything we wanna do and forget about, very important, forget about the consequences afterwards (Farook).

Farook also described how ‘time out’ operated for someone in his situation when he talked about his desired state being one where one could act with reduced regard to how other people might respond:

Thinking about other people’s feelings. I suppose we [tend to] think about how they feel about, and maybe hiding something from people because we don’t wanna tell it. We don’t wanna say it out loud because we would hurt their feelings or not. Or just, you know, they will not take it well. So with the alcohol you just feel it [is] okay...you don’t really care about what they will feel. You just don’t feel restricted (Farook).

The joy of the of the desired state was often felt in the body as a physical sensation related, in particular, to the dance floor, where laughter and movement were part of the enaction of intoxication:

Like just happy and laughing and feeling confident to dance is the main one ... I hate dancing sober. Like that’s one of the main reasons why I also drink is like when I feel confidence to dance on the dance floor ‘cause it’s what I love doing. Like I’m on top of the world (Michelle).

I don’t like dancing. I can’t interact properly if I don’t have a drink first ...I’m more social when I have a bit of a drink. Even if it’s not like a big, big drink. It’s just a one shot or even just a one beer or one little drink that they bring to the table like that. I’m alright on that too ... I don’t even have to pass that. If that’s all I get like that’s all I get, I don’t care. ...Like I do get drunk a bit fast, tipsy so I can feel it. So either way I’m still gonna feel it, so I’ll be happy. I don’t really need that big drink you know what I mean? (Susana).

Yeah sort of just relaxed I guess, relaxed feeling yeah. But so I don’t really have many thoughts you know (Dragan).

The problem for those who wanted to be someone other than themselves was the distinctly unstable nature of tipsiness and the possibility of losing control over how their drunken selves might behave. As Lindsay (2009) argues, drinking is a means of enacting control. Control is central to how these young adults understood the difference between the ideal state and the danger zone. As Elke notes, the line between the perfect state of tipsiness and the fall into drunkenness is fine indeed.

I always go out telling myself ‘I don’t wanna drink too much’ and at some point I catch myself, especially if you go out to a party where you have a lot of people around you, a lot of friends
And then that I reach the stage and I’m like ‘I didn’t actually wanna be that drunk’. Sometimes I’m going out for one beer and that one beer can lead to another five beers So I guess it’s more the negative feeling than a positive sometimes...I guess it’s nice to socialise and drinking has a lot to do with it and it’s a nice thing (Elke).

Some of the young adults were very clear about the need to control their level of drinking because falling out of control was too dangerous or unwanted. The difference between being tipsy and being drunk was important for many, representing a binary of retaining partial control as against losing it completely.
I don’t like it [being drunk], especially. There’s no self control. When I’m tipsy there is self control, I’m just, I’m just more open to things more, more friendly, more hyper I would say yep but I’m still conscious of my actions. So you don’t get violent, you don’t get upset with things. You don’t regret your actions. So yeah I keep it that way and don’t go overboard… I don’t drink to get drunk, I just drink for that tipsy stage (Arif).

Zara describes how fine the line is between the ideal state and the loss of control which, while on some levels is unpleasant, is also exciting:

> And you’ll just keep going and ‘I’m not there yet’. People often say, you know, ‘You’re drunk’ you know, this or that, [and you are] going ‘I haven’t even hit the point yet’. And then someone will say ‘Shot’ you know. And then before you know it, ‘bang!’, It’s just completely and you’re like ‘Oh my God’, like you’re completely out of it, [you’re] out of control like literally out of control of your body.

Zara and her friend Carley describe many such situations and the ways they try to avoid them, often without success. It could be argued that they do this deliberately, but the feeling is that there is a constant search for the perfect state, and the fall into the state of not being in control is often not altogether a wanted outcome.

> If you drank quickly and then perhaps sometimes we’d have, we have a bottle of wine. And then we’ll go out and get shots, which often sends you over the limit. And then, yeah, I think it’s if you then start going to shots it makes it worse. ‘Cause I always find it’s hard to, I often have blackouts when I know I’ve been drinking shots clubs when, and when I haven’t I remember more (Carolyn).

With alcohol if I’m feeling it, like I know when I’m tipsy when I shake my head and I start seeing everything flying everywhere, that’s when I know I’m tipsy. Once I’m past that stage I wanna little bit more, because that’s just tipsy. And after that little bit of tipsy I’m still happy …that’s the buzz I wanna be in, when I’m tipsy. But because I know it’s only tipsy and it’s gonna wear off really fast. I have that little extra more and that little extra more like I said, like that one shot more will get me going. …Because after that’s just gonna make me feel like you know I’m too drunk now I’m tired now. I wanna be in that hyper nice, happy mood. I don’t wanna be asleep (Susana).

Susanna, Carolyn and others express a dilemma in relation to control. While they want control, they realise that the body easily loses it with alcohol. Even the self awareness of their affective states that people mobilise to prevent drinking too much sometimes fails them when one more drink is suddenly too much As with the respondents in Lindsay’s (2009) study, these young women were learning that their ‘staging’ of drinking was full of dangers and contradictions which might place them in complex and difficult situations.

**Negotiating the troublesome space between control and no control.**

Some respondents did exemplify the self-monitoring, good citizen when answering questions about how they paced their alcohol consumption by referring to lessons learned

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1 The issue of shots would occasionally come up in the interviews. Measham and Brain (2005) argued that, in England drinking shots was a new way of drinking devised by the venues in the NTE to entice young people into intoxication. Consuming shots has also become entrenched in some Australian young people’s enactment of drinking cultures (Lindsay, 2005).
through public health education. They drank water between glasses of alcohol, did not mix drinks such as wine and spirits, counted standard drinks, refused to drink shots when offered or even made themselves leave the venue early. However, this seemed like a minority and even where people did enact these measures they didn’t always work, or still required sensitivity to the unpredictable effect of alcohol on their bodies:

I never count how many drinks I have. I never think ‘Okay I’ve had sixteen standard drinks that’s my limit’, because there’s other things that affect it as well. I can sort of feel that ‘Okay if I have another... like if I drink a shot I’m not gonna feel good afterwards, I’m gonna be drunk, a little bit drunk and then I’m gonna be throwing up’, or something like that. And so I think after a few years of drinking I’ve learnt when that point is. It’s still hard to define exactly (Ryan).

In an environment where people are required individualistically to monitor their drinking research participants were acutely aware of the potential for failure in enacting these techniques. What became clear was that even with attention to such measures, after a number of drinks, many participants abandoned this intention.

Yeah I guess, I guess I could say a rule is like don’t drink more than say eight standard drinks because then that just heightens the chance that I might get in a fight with someone or say something stupid or go home with someone that I wouldn’t have wanted to go home with... Yeah, well I guess, when I’ve drunk too much, I’ve got myself into like dangerous situations maybe where something bad could have happened, sometimes like maybe had sex with someone that I didn’t wanna have sex with, got in a fight with a friend or boyfriend or something (Katie).

Once I get to a certain point I probably lose track, I guess if I just have a bottle of wine ‘cause I know it’s seven or eight standard drinks so I’ll know roughly how much I’ve had but if I do go out and drink I’ll maybe have a couple of gin and tonics or a few shots or a couple of beers I think I’m more likely to sort of start to lose count after that point. Just probably past that eight standard drinks sort of point (Clara).

After a bottle of wine and going out then I won’t remember how many standard drinks I’ve had before (Fleur).

Rather than counting standard drinks, many of the respondents claimed to work hard at maintaining control through actively attending to bodily signs of intoxication:

I get head spins and then like I feel like I’m gonna throw up. But I don’t throw up then, I just stop [drinking] (Kara).

Yeah, now I’m better at it, I mean before, I could just drink you know until the night’s over or until the club closes or whatever. I just, you know, keep drinking or until the money’s spent. Whereas now I can sort of just see if I’m starting to feel a bit more tired. And then I’m like: ‘Nah there’s no point, I’m not really enjoying [drinking] anymore’. So that’s it (Dragan).

Sometimes the taste, the taste kind of gets to me. The taste starts tasting a bit funny for me. So yeah, I go ‘Oh shit I’ve drunk too much now’ (Paul).

I just feel if my body become hot and I feel something uncomfortable then I stop. So sometimes I can drink more, sometimes I drink less (Leila).
In the introduction to this paper we referred to Mol and Law’s (2004) writing about how people with diabetes cultivate self-awareness or ‘intro-sensing’ to detect blood sugar irregularities. Like blood sugar management, attaining a desired state of intoxication requires sensitivity to and awareness of fluctuating internal states. The young drinkers are describing a comparable situation in that they are trying to regulate the active body in a happy or tipsy state. This is something that is done by attending to subtle changes in how they feel, rather than through measuring and counting standard drinks. When that state passes they need to act, by drinking more, to keep it there - but there is always the possibility of falling into out-of-control drunkenness.

In view of their frequent lapses in self-management of alcohol consumption participants ‘excorporated’ (Mol and Law, 2004) responsibility for limiting intoxication by modifying the resources that would be at hand when they were intoxicated or by arranging to go out in social contexts where harm would be less likely. Studies by Szmigin et al (2008) and Lindsay (2009) also illustrate such strategies. One of the most effective forms of limitation seemed to be financial. Ryan would leave his banking card at home, while a couple of others would limit the amount of money they took away with them, leaving themselves just enough to take a taxi home if necessary.

I’ll go okay I’m only gonna spend thirty dollars at this place and that’s, that’s my maximum. I don’t pull any more out. I just leave my bank card at home and I’ve got you know like, like a way to get home. I’ve already planned it all (Riley).

I won’t take any money out of my savings for the night. Like I’ll transfer that two hundred bucks [to an account I can access] and leave it there, and that’s all the money (Cooper).

Hayden lived a long way from the city and regretted that couldn’t leave his credit card behind as he needed to keep money for a cab home. He wished, however, that venues did not have automatic teller machines, to help him limit his spending on alcohol as Riley and Cooper were able to.

Others discussed agreements with friends as a means of externalising responsibility for their drinking. Young women might also have explicit rules about keeping safe. For example, there were rules about going to the toilet with friends or making sure that drinks were not left unattended to avoid drink spiking. There might also be very clear and rational rules about specified meeting places. Amy noted that:

We make a meeting place if we ever actually do get lost. We make sure phones are fully charged and strapped onto us so we don’t lose them...In the most secured spot we can find. Yeah well we’re not stupid. We’re from Sunbury [laughter] and we know how – and plus we used to hang out in Footscray and stuff so we know how to be safe.²

² Sunbury is an outer north western suburb of Melbourne and Footscray is an inner urban suburb with reputation as a place where illicit drugs are sold and used.
Young men did not seem to have the same need to make such agreements beforehand. A few did, however, minimise the possibility of encountering harm when they were drunk by avoiding going out with friends who in the past had got them involved in fights. The unpredictability of drinking occasions meant, however, that plans to avoid conflict didn’t always work.

Oh we’ve had that heaps of times but it never works. We’re like alright we’ll go out tonight, no trouble at all. And then someone says something wrong to their girlfriend, someone says something to them and it just starts you know... Those rules are always breached... Nah, I just say to myself ‘Alright I’m not gonna do this, I’m not gonna do that’. But just within a, within a second it changes (Yusef).

Historically, women were the moderators of men’s drinking. Many societies from Australia to Scandinavia relied on this moderation that put women as mothers, wives and girlfriends in the role of controllers of men’s drinking (Zajdow, 2002; Holmila 1988). Some young men in the study relied on their girlfriends to monitor their drinking, but this seems like the exception.

Mol and Law (2004) write that people with diabetes have different capacities to sense that their blood sugar has become too low. For a small proportion of our research participants there seemed to be no point in trying to control the amount of alcohol they consumed either because they simply never reached a point where they sensed that they had drunk too much, or if they did their solution to feeling bad was drinking more. Among our interviewees these participants were often, but not always, men.

I start drinking you know cos it’s good, it feels good, you know. It feels right, everyone’s drinking having a good time. Then when I feel like I’m pissed. probably after like about 12 cans, 13 cans, I get like anxiety. I just start to feel pissed so I drink more. And I feel better (Andy).

The thing is like I might be drunk at 11, 12th [drink], I might get drunk on the 12th one but the thing is I can still keep going ...With alcohol for some reason you just keep drinking and drinking and drinking. And you don’t realise until you’re conked out (Yusef).

I never really count. And how I stop would be yeah if I start to feel sick or if I start to feel tired. So more often than not [I stop drinking] because the venue closes (Honey).

What became clear was that most people identify drunkenness though monitoring how they feel. They also seek ways to manage their intoxication that do not involve individual self-control only – they are effectively trying to construct settings where they will drink less, limiting their supply to money or placing responsibility onto others and agreeing with friends about behaviour, or relying as Honey does, on venues closing to stop drinking. A small proportion of people are sceptical that their drinking can be managed to any extent through self-control.
Discussion

Public policies related to alcohol are forced to confront many interests and outcomes at the same time. Economic interests in the NTE are powerful contributors to government policies that liberalise alcohol availability, both through approving escalating numbers of liquor licenses and allowing late-opening hours for licensed venues. At the same time, governments at all levels are expected by the communities they serve to respond to deeply concerning problems produced by the NTE such as violence and general nuisance. The answer reached has often been efforts to encourage young people and adults to control their own behaviour, rather than to change the wider economic or cultural contexts where alcohol is marketed and sold. Young adults adjust their alcohol use practices to the complexities of the situation. This paper argues that many young adults don’t actually want to become intoxicated to the point where they have no control; rather they seek a state between tipsy and drunk where they may enjoy a certain loosening of the constraints of selfhood, without altogether abandoning their rational and responsible capacities.

A key technology for self-management of alcohol consumption is counting the number of standard drinks consumed. Australian guidelines recommend that not more than four standard drinks be consumed within a single session (NHMRC, 2009). This is a standard that, as others have observed, is rarely adhered to by young adults (Harrison et al. 2011). Moreover, almost no one in our study managed to keep track of how many drinks they had consumed after the first few. The kind of monitoring entailed in counting standard drinks is antithetical to the sense of ‘time out’ that is integral to drinking in western cultures. Instead participants tried to monitor the feelings of drunkenness within their bodies to reach a desired state, some doing so with greater facility than others.

Given that this strategy is only partially reliable, young drinkers make plans to reduce drinking during the night out and reduce risks to their safety. What is interesting here is that young adults are seeking ways to manage their intoxication that do not involve only individual self-control – they are effectively trying to construct settings where they will drink less, or excorporate management of drunkenness through advance planning – limiting their supply to money, agreeing with friends about behaviour.

Recent survey research from Finland (Huhtanen & Raitasalo, 2012) found that that people who drank heavily were much more likely to use external controls such as closing times of venues and running out of cash to stem their drinking; while moderate drinkers used an internal locus of control in drinking situations. The authors also noted that as people get older, they moderate their drinking more effectively. This is consistent with our finding that while some young adults internally moderate their own drinking, others found this impossible. Thus these authors argue that enhancing external controls such as price and availability would be of greater benefit to society as a whole since those most impacted would be the heavier drinkers.
This study extends the work done by Lindsay (2009), Measham (2006), Griffin et al (2009a & b) and others in a growing literature to understand what young adults seek from intoxication and how they monitor and manage levels of drunkenness. It parses the experience into the desired levels of tipsiness and intoxication and the realities of the controls that can be realistically imposed from within when one drink too many has been consumed.

Mol and Law (2002, p. 1) ask the question ‘how might complexities be handled in knowledge practices, nonreductively, but without the same time generating ever more complexities until we submerge in chaos?’ This dilemma is illustrated when subject/object is the body which is incorporating alcohol but often excorporating control; where injunctions against drunkenness contribute to the transgressive pleasures of intoxication (Brown & Gregg, 2012). Many of the young adults here desired the conviviality that alcohol helped to produce and were aware of the pitfalls that one drink too many could produce. Bodily experiences could be enjoyable or not, but like other metabolic processes maintaining a desired level of intoxication could not always be controlled. Only a small proportion of research participants evinced the intended loss of consciousness or loss of memory that some young people in Great Britain consider an integral part of their social experience (cf. Griffin et al., 2009b). It may be that this difference reflects an international shift in young adults’ drinking practices since this fieldwork was undertaken, or alternatively it might be indicative of differences in drinking styles between Britain and Australia.

This paper shows some of the complexity young adults grapple with in enacting alcohol use. It suggests that public health messages which aim to educate about strategies for moderating drinking are likely to be activated by some, but not all young adults, and even then often in partial and inconsistent ways. This might mean that we need various responses directed at different types of drinkers; some of whom are able to respond to their bodies’ warnings about intoxication and others whose bodies never send these messages. It might also mean that educational messages could reinforce people’s efforts to monitor how they intoxicated they feel by sharing stories of how others know they’ve had enough, rather than simply exhorting them to count their standard drink consumption. The time period during which alcohol is absorbed into the body is affected by factors such as food intake, but peak effects generally occur within half an hour (Ekman et al, 1963). Strategies that encourage drinkers to wait until a drink is absorbed before assessing whether their intoxication will be more pleasurable if they have another may be more effective than exhortations to count standard drinks. Supporting people’s efforts to excorporate control is also important. This might entail, for example, removing automatic teller machines from inside licensed venues so people cannot so easily spend more money on alcohol than they originally intended. It should definitely entail enforcement of responsible service of alcohol provisions and measures to reduce alcohol availability more generally. As Brain (2000) points out, in the post-modern order, young adults become caught between bounded and
unbounded hedonistic drinking. While those quoted here work, for the most part, to limit their drinking, the seductions of the NTE make this difficult to achieve.

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