

**Organisational identity and alcohol use among young employees: A case study of
a professional services firm**

Benjamin Walker and Todd Bridgman

School of Management

Victoria University of Wellington

PO Box 6140

Wellington

New Zealand

Phone 0064 4 4635118

todd.bridgman@vuw.ac.nz

ben.walker00@gmail.com

NOTICE: this is the author's version of a work that was accepted for publication in the International Journal of Drug Policy. Changes resulting from the publishing process, such as peer review, editing, corrections, structural formatting, and other quality control mechanisms may not be reflected in this document. Changes may have been made to this work since it was submitted for publication. A definitive version was subsequently published in International Journal of Drug Policy, v. 24 (6), 2013, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2013.07.005>.

Organisational identity and alcohol use among young employees: A case study of a professional services firm

Abstract

Background: Cultural influences on young people's drinking have been the focus of much research and policy practice. Young people's drinking is influenced by a range of institutions, including the workplace, yet this has received comparatively little attention by researchers and policymakers. This study examines the workplace influences on young people's drinking through the conceptual lens of organisational identification.

Methods: Data was collected through 16 semi-structured interviews with mainly young employees of a professional services firm in New Zealand. The interviews were coded and analysed thematically, generating five themes of alcohol use at work.

Results: Alcohol was used in a number of ways by the respondents in relation to their work, from acting as a means of relieving stress or anxiety induced by work, to providing a means for bonding with work colleagues. Their work also impacted on their alcohol use in more 'positive' ways (e.g. respondents limiting their intake to prevent damage to their career prospects).

Conclusion: The study highlights how processes of organisational identification both encourage and inhibit alcohol use. The consumption of alcohol at work provides young professionals with a medium to engage in a variety of organisational identification processes. An understanding of these processes can assist policymakers in focusing on the workplace, an area largely ignored to date, as a target for their campaigns aimed at reducing the harmful effects of young people's heavy alcohol use.

Keywords: Alcohol, youth drinking, work, organisational identity

Introduction

In recent times, the heavy use of alcohol through ‘binge drinking’ activities has been a central focus for alcohol researchers in the public health arena (Measham & Brain, 2005). In New Zealand, a recent report classified 21% of all New Zealand adult drinkers over 18 years old as binge drinkers (ALAC, 2011). Measham & Brain (2005) caution that binge drinking is an inappropriate conceptual foundation for analyzing drinking behaviour, especially that of young people. This criticism of the binge drinking discourse has found support from other public health researchers, who note that the binge drinking discourse

- a) is inherently ambiguous and as a result becomes redundant as a descriptive concept (Hayward & Hobbs, 2007; Szmigin et al, 2008).
- b) establishes heavy alcohol use as a problem that afflicts only the abnormal or flawed in an otherwise responsible or normal society (Brain, 2000; Wilson, 2005). However, it is often the most ordinary, law-abiding citizens who are engaging in the binge drinking behaviour described by mainstream public health research (Parker & Williams, 2003);
- c) stunts consideration of the deeper phenomena that underpin heavy alcohol use amongst young people. That is, through an exclusive problematic (binge) / non-problematic (non-binge) dichotomy, it fails to highlight a range of sociological and psychological reasons for heavy alcohol use amongst young people (Brain, 2000; Measham, 2004; Parker & Williams, 2003).

Policies aimed at tackling binge drinking which fail to acknowledge and address the range of contextual factors which influence it are unlikely to meet with success.

Understanding these complexities is, therefore, important for policymakers and others

attempting to reduce the harmful effects of heavy alcohol use among young people. There is a need for alcohol research which extends beyond theorising youth drinking as a social problem to examine it within a broader sociological context. Drunkenness amongst many young people is not seen as something to repress, avoid or to be ashamed of (Workman, 2001). Instead, it is encouraged by many youth sub-cultures and is determinedly sought after (Brain & Parker, 1997). Drinking is a highly symbolic act for many young people that plays a vital role in processes of socialisation (Brain, 2000), a “marker of identity and membership” and an expression of collective solidarity (Room & Sato, 2002, p.6). Parker & Williams (2003) found that alcohol and a ‘big night out’ served the functional purpose of maintaining a work hard-play hard image amongst young adults in the UK. Here the drinking act was seen as a stress reliever, but also as a way of maintaining a particular image and identity. In addition to the drinking itself, the spaces in which drinking occurs and the types of drinks that are consumed, are symbolic acts that affirm or deny one’s belongingness to a particular group. Chatterton & Hollands (2002) explore the development of new urban spaces, and the way in which certain types of drinking spaces serve to create and reinforce particular forms of identity, such as a ‘mainstream’ or ‘alternative’ identity.

It is important, therefore, that the dominant discourse of binge drinking does not crowd out alternative analyses of the way young people use alcohol, and how the reasons for its use change over time. It is to this end that our own study is geared. We aim to provide an account of how young people’s work lives shapes their use of alcohol. The following section provides an overview of the work and alcohol literature, which provides the grounding for our study.

Work and Alcohol

The heavy use of alcohol by young people poses significant risks to individuals' health (Measham, 2006). However, while there is extensive public health research on the use of alcohol and its effects, studies that examine the relationship between work, as a social institution, and alcohol use are relatively few in number. In their extensive review of the work-alcohol literature, Trice & Sonnenstuhl (1988) segment work-alcohol studies into four main groups. The two approaches or perspectives most relevant to the current study are the social control perspective and the work culture perspective.

Studies adopting the social control perspective focus on the formal regulatory factors that influence a person's use of alcohol. Trice & Roman (1978) identify two work-based risk factors that promote a greater degree of alcohol use amongst workers; absence of supervision and low visibility of job performance (Ames & Janes, 1987). Individuals will have more opportunities to drink heavily in jobs where there is little or no supervision (Ames & Janes, 1987; Manello & Seaman, 1979); where there is little or no interdependence with other work roles (Roman, 1981); where there is low visibility of job performance (Ames & Janes, 1987); and where work is highly transitive (i.e. where workers travel between locations frequently or obtain new management / supervision often) (Trice & Sonnenstuhl, 1988).

Given such considerations, there have been studies into the role of social control — both formal (i.e. supervisors, management, organisational policies on drinking), and informal (i.e. normative regulation through sub-cultural values and beliefs) in

workers' use of alcohol (Trice & Sonnenstuhl, 1988). Roman & Blum (2002) for example provide a thorough review of those studies that have examined the effectiveness of formal workplace controls or programmes in addressing heavy alcohol use / abuse amongst workers. Tools such as alcohol education programmes, peer intervention and employee intervention programmes are cited as common techniques for reducing alcohol-related harm amongst workers. Relatedly, the Alcohol Advisory Council of New Zealand (ALAC) (n.d.) has recommended that workplaces have a robust alcohol and drug workplace policy that is developed in consultation with all levels of the organisation.

Ames & Janes (1992) have contended that the social control perspective described by Trice & Sonnenstuhl (1988) is a subset of a broader cultural perspective on work-alcohol, which explores how normative controls in the workplace, achieved through shared values, beliefs and practices, can inhibit and / or encourage a person's alcohol use (Trice & Roman, 1978). An influential study by Janes & Ames (1989) of male blue collar factory workers in the US found that those individuals whose social networks were comprised largely of work relationships were the most likely to drink heavily and experience problems with alcohol. Thus, "membership in this subculture...was most important for those men who had no interests or social involvements outside the workplace" (p.245). Bennett & Lehman (1999) found that "group occupational structure may be an important factor in determining whether employee substance use will lead to problems for others" (p. 317). Bennett & Lehman express strong support for a cultural perspective on work-alcohol, suggesting that those organisational reactions to heavy alcohol use which treat the problem as one of individual control risk neglecting the underlying organisational norms which

might encourage drinking. A reaction only to the ‘problematic individual’ means that such norms continue to exist and propagate heavy alcohol use amongst organisational members (Schaef & Fassel, 1988).

In the above studies, drinking and drunkenness can be seen as serving both symbolic and functional roles in organisational sub-cultures. Our research seeks to contribute to this literature. Using the closely related concept of organisational identity (Albert & Whetten, 1985), we explore the relationship between organisational culture and alcohol. Albert & Whetten (1985) proposed that, like individual persons, organisations as groups of individuals can also have their own sense of identity or self. Organisational identity consists of those features that are central, enduring, and distinctive to a particular organisation. According to Hatch & Schultz (2002) “the phenomenon of organizational identity appears whenever members of the organization ask themselves ‘who are we?’, ‘what business are we in?’, or ‘what do we want to be?’”(p. 3).

In terms of the work-alcohol relationship then, the fundamental question that an organisational identity perspective gives rise to, and one that we believe has not been addressed in the work-alcohol literature, is how *processes* of organisational identification (i.e. people and ‘the organisation’ coming to form / re-form a sense of collective identity) are related to alcohol use amongst organisational members. Three aspects of organisational life; culture, identity, and image, are phenomena that the alcohol literature would suggest are particularly salient to understanding the work-alcohol relationship, but which have not been addressed in an integrative manner. From this perspective, drinking is not only seen by individuals / groups as a way of

gaining a sense of self (identity). It can also come to act as a functional, social activity for particular groups (culture) and as a way of impressing upon those outside a particular social group (image).

Professional Services Firms and Alcohol

Within the work-alcohol literature, white collar or professional / managerial workers workplaces have received relatively little attention from researchers compared blue collar workers (e.g. Janes & Ames, 1989; Mazas et al., 2006). It is likely that such a gap has arisen as a result of the numerous sets of survey findings which conclude that these workers are less at risk of being alcohol dependent and having problems with alcohol than blue collar workers (e.g. Hemmingsson et al., 1997; Parker & Harford, 1992).

However, there are a number of features of these particular kinds of workplaces, and specifically, professional services firms that make them particularly useful research sites for theorising about the work-alcohol relationship. Professional services firms “rely to a large extent on interactions between knowledgeable buyers and highly educated service providers who engage in some form of joint problem solving” (Lowendahl, 2005, p. 18). Examples include law firms, consulting firms and marketing firms. Such firms tend to utilise a less visible and less direct form of managerial control to achieve the desired work behaviour from employees (Karreman & Alvesson, 2004). For example, Barker (1993) observed what he described as ‘concertive control’ in self-managing teams. On the surface, freedom from traditional management control in the form of an autonomous team would appear to represent a reduction in control over workers. Barker however suggests that given the smaller

size of the team compared to an entire organisation (and thus the increased visibility of each person's work to one another), control actually intensified, being dispersed amongst all members of the team, rather than located 'within' one individual.

This particular feature of professional services firms could be linked to the conclusions of Seeman & Anderson (1983), who found that feelings of powerlessness were a much more accurate predictor of heavy drinking and problems with drinking than the quality of work (measured via job satisfaction, complexity of work, and intrinsic reward in work). This might suggest that even those undertaking 'knowledge-intensive work' in professional services firms, assuming such work affords the worker a high degree of satisfaction and intrinsic reward, are no more immune to heavy alcohol use than those in non-knowledge-intensive work. Rather, it is the nature of the power relationships at work (i.e. whether one feels empowered or not) that are key to understanding the work-alcohol link. This aspect of power and political activity in professional services firms might be of significance for discussions of the work-alcohol relationship, and is an issue we investigate through our use of an organisational identity-based framework.

Another feature of professional services firms that makes them an interesting research site is that issues of organisational identity are highly prevalent in such workplaces. In particular, workers in these firms often face considerable challenges to forming a stable sense of identity due to the nature of their work. Such challenges include intense internal competition (related to promotion and career development) (Grey, 1994), the constant need to manage image (at both a personal and organisational level) in order to attract new clients and maintain existing business networks

(Alvesson, 1990; Alvesson, 1993), and, importantly, the high degree of ambiguity that is prevalent in all areas of knowledge-intensive work (Alvesson, 2004; Karreman & Alvesson, 2004).

Investigation of the role of alcohol in activities related to the above issues, such as client functions (in the interests of image management) or team drinks (to facilitate team bonding), would prompt an understanding of alcohol use as a part of work life, rather than a by-product that occurs outside of work times and spaces. This is an important consideration and one that can be linked to the observations of authors such as Wilson (2005), who states that “drinking practices are active elements in individual and group identifications, and the sites where drinking takes place, the locales of regular and celebrated drinking, are places where meanings made, shared, disputed and reproduced, where identities take shape, flourish and change” (p. 10).

The above discussion highlights the theoretical value of an investigation of the relationship between alcohol use and work life in professional services firms. In the following section, we provide an overview of our empirical research.

Methods

The research consisted of a case study of ORGA [pseudonym], a large professional services firm based in New Zealand which employs 170 people and is part of a global network. The use of a single case was appropriate, given our desire to develop a novel conceptual lens on the work-alcohol relationship through an in-depth examination of work-alcohol dynamics, rather than to develop broader, generalizable findings about the use of alcohol across a large number of professional services firms.

We hope that the insights from our single case will encourage future research which can test the generalizability of our findings across the professional services sector.

We secured agreement from the chief executive to conduct a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with employees of ORGA. In-depth interviews were appropriate for two reasons, as identified by Coombes et al (2009). First, it enabled us to collect rich contextual data. Through discussion and conversation (in place of measurement and quantification), interviews allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between individuals' use of alcohol and their work lives. Second, interviews are well suited to researching sensitive issues (Coombes et al, 2009). It would be very difficult to gain data about what could be quite a personal activity (that is, alcohol use) from interviewees if they felt as though they were being interrogated or treated in a clinical fashion. The interview method enabled us to create a high-trust and relaxed environment.

The chief executive acted as our key informant who distributed our research information sheet to employees. Contacting the employees directly was not a viable option for recruitment because of legal and ethical concerns. While the use of an open sample (Payne & Payne, 2004) was appropriate, recruiting interviewees in this way can potentially generate a skewed or unrepresentative sample (O'Leary, 2010), so we cannot claim that the findings are representative of all members of ORGA. 16 interviews of between 60 and 90 minutes in length were conducted. 8 of the respondents were 25 years of age or younger (one of whom was an individual responsible for organising ORGAs various functions and client events), 6 were aged 26 to 30, and 2 were aged 30 or older. These two 'over 30s' were members of the

senior management team and were interviewed in an informant / observer capacity (i.e. to obtain their views on the drinking activities of the younger group of employees). The oldest respondent was 55 years old, and the youngest was 21. The gender split was 9 males to 7 females, which was representative of the firm's overall composition.

Our interview schedule had four sections. The first consisted of factual questions about their age, time spent working at ORGA, as well as their roles and responsibilities. As well as gathering needed data, these questions were designed to help the respondent feel at ease (Coombes et al, 2009). The second section focused on the ways in which respondents use (or do not use) alcohol, focusing on frequency, quantities and locations. Section three of the interview schedule explored the relationship between alcohol use at ORGA and organisational identity. We looked for rich descriptions of the role of alcohol use in events and activities. The final section consisted of questions which explored participants' views on the work-alcohol relationship, examining connections between the way they drink (or do not drink) and their role at work.

As the interviews proceeded, we became aware of recurring themes. While more data is better for trustworthiness and authenticity (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), we concluded that further interviews would have been of diminishing value in answering the research question. In analysing the data we undertook a thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). The interviews were first digitally transcribed verbatim. The most recurrent themes in each identification process became clear based on which themes had the

most amount of transcribed speech or data contained within them. A summary of the five key themes we identified is presented in Table 1 below:

Insert Table 1 here

Findings

Before elaborating upon the five themes, it is important to note the distinction that emerged in the interviews between the social drinking act and the physiological effect of alcohol. While both played important roles in different situations, the social drinking act and all of its intricacies were more significant for the interviewees than the physiological or psychoactive properties of the alcohol itself.

Reflecting on work life and the company

The drinking act provided a means for reflecting on the nature of ORGA, its people, its systems and structures, and the work that employees were currently involved in. The group-based or social nature of the drinking act, at least those that were not hosted by ORGA, provided an appropriate forum for airing one's thoughts about pressing issues, providing respondents with a form of psychological release. The informality associated with the spaces in which the drinking act was conducted (often off-work sites such as bars) was conducive to open discussions. Bars for example, provided a degree of privacy to the conversations, even though these are ironically, generally considered to be fairly public spaces (Sturdy, Schwarz & Spicer, 2006).

One respondent spoke of the criticisms of high fees and lack of value directed at him and his team of consultants at ORGA.

Some of the work we do [consulting] is quite sensitive. People don't usually like seeing us, if they see us there, they know that something's happening, and there's something wrong. At other times, people like having us there. Some of the jobs we're doing involve restructuring, people losing their jobs. Some of the work hasn't been that pleasant. So it's good to go out and have a drink and be able to talk about that with people who actually are going through the same sort of thing. Within [New Zealand], or within most businesses, consultants aren't really looked kindly upon. I think, some of the comments are we're second worst to lawyers, or they think we're overpaid and don't really do much. We go in and we talk a whole of crap. So there is that perception out there. (Participant 1, male, 23 years old, junior member of the firm)

These are direct threats to the firm's sense of identity, or at least that of its consulting division, which are discussed and to some extent 'worked out' at a group level through the drinking act. These and other aspects of ORGA's identity could be questioned or challenged by its young employees, with no fear of any of their comments impacting on their career prospects or progression in the firm. There was a degree of implied privacy to any discussions held 'over a drink' amongst colleagues. Along with the social act came a new set of norms or implied rules that participants in the act both seemed to tacitly consent to upon entering the social engagement.

The 'working out' of issues is perhaps one explanation for the large number of social functions that ORGA hosted for its workers. Senior management at ORGA realised the opportunities these kind of situations provided for workers to communally and informally raise the less visible (to senior management) issues or problems at ORGA. At the very least, these issues that would ordinarily be encountered in the 'frontline' of the organisation could be brought to management's attention at ORGA functions, enabling them to address these issues, and be better placed to improve ORGA's image and subsequent performance.

However, given that ORGA-hosted functions were still seen by interviewees as 'work' to some extent, the possibilities for the same openness and honesty (in terms of discussions about ORGA) that interviewees attributed to the non-work hosted drinking acts were still limited. The idea of 'Friday night drinks' and other ORGA hosted functions as 'informal-but-not-too-informal' events was most evident in the way employees talked about intoxication at work functions. Because ORGA functions were still as a 'part of work', workers would often describe a deliberate degree of self-management of the inevitable bi-product of extended drinking acts at these work-hosted functions - the physiological effect of the alcohol. This made any prolonged reflections on the company at ORGA-hosted functions a somewhat risky endeavour, and it was in the attendees' interests career-wise to be careful of how much they drank at work functions. If, as a result of having 'too much to drink', one was to divulge too much information to senior individuals, or to express the information in a less palatable fashion, or to simply 'make an idiot of themselves' by behaving inappropriately, interviewees perceived that their personal and professional image in the eyes of their superiors could be compromised:

I wouldn't say I've ever been drunk around workmates, only on those occasions where it's outside of [ORGA-hosted functions]. That's probably just something for my own career, the smart move is not to get real drunk at a work function. Just because, I guess it's a risk you could do something stupid. I mean I don't think it's particularly frowned upon but... (Participant 7, male, 23 years old, junior member of the firm)

In sum, the drinking act provided a key means through which interviewees were able to evaluate the company and their own work life with their colleagues. In this sense, alcohol use served a functional role as a form of release and psychological resolution and repair. Through the more informal discussions 'over a drink', ORGA members were able to reflect on the nature of the work, the company, and their colleagues and clients. The reflection processes that workers undertook 'over a drink' were clearly identified by ORGA's management as providing a useful means of uncovering valuable information about organisational life from those 'on the frontline'. As a result, ORGA deliberately hosted drinking events, assumedly in an effort to facilitate processes of reflection and gather this valuable information for purposes of improving organisational performance.

Relationship Building

A major theme to emerge from the interviews was the role of alcohol use in 'socialising' and building relationships with work colleagues. The drinking act provided a means by which workers could talk to one another outside the usual parameters of 'work hours', and thus get to know colleagues 'as a person' rather than

as a 'work colleague'. The fact that the drinking act was a shared activity played an important role in this relationship building. By engaging in the activity together, colleagues had, at the very least, some 'common ground' (the drinking act) from which discussions could begin.

End of month drinks usually revolve around drinks. It's a tool to socialise I guess. And it is used a lot. Even with the social club, there'll be drinks and food. I guess the only thing that isn't out of the things I listed is sports teams. But apart from that, it's [alcohol] probably going to be there. But it's not like everyone is going to abuse it and drink free alcohol until it's gone. It's just, everyone enjoys having a few beers after work. Socialising. (Participant 3, male, 24 years old, junior member of the firm)

I think it's the social functions, and just having those it what sort of creates those relationships. Particularly in [division X] we have quite a few just [division X]-specific ones. So you're not just lost in a big sea of people, you're with the people you work with and you get to know them a bit better... You know it relaxes everyone, people have a good time, and I just find when you have a decent night with someone, it brings down any of those barriers. Like when you see them again, you know you're both human, you've both got something in common. (Participant 7, male, 23 years old, junior member of the firm)

Respondents saw ORGA as having high expectations of them. Many admitted they would often work unpaid overtime, including weekends, if a particular project

required it. In return, ORGA rewarded employees accordingly when they produced work of a high standard. Respondents often spoke about ORGA-hosted social functions as a form of celebration, where their efforts and hard work were rewarded by senior management:

I mean even if we have a work drinks celebration or something, for example last week we won a contract that we were extremely stoked about, it was a large client. So [management] put on drinks on a Wednesday afternoon.

(Participant 4, female, 21 years old, junior member of the firm)

I think that's the only one actually, or maybe it's kinda used as a reward here. For the long hours, and the highly stressful work you do. It's a little way they can reward you after a hard week. (Participant 16, female, 28 years old, middle level (non-management) of the firm)

The actual celebrations hosted by ORGA could involve alcohol or be alcohol free, but respondents reported that all of the significant celebratory functions, such as the mid-year and Christmas balls, or team-level celebratory drinks, did involve alcohol use. At these large scale celebrations, employees would sometimes drink relatively heavily, in contrast to the Friday night drinks, where they would deliberately exert a degree of self-control over their alcohol intake:

I think rightly or wrongly, if you're going to have a celebration, if you're going to have a thank you, which is what the function kind of is, "hey guys you've worked really hard, thanks, let's have a party", there's just an assumption that

there will be alcohol involved...But being able to be in that context [Christmas function], you know where people probably loosen up a bit and stuff, I actually think it's [having a drink] a key element of that night. (Participant 9, male, 33 years old, manager at the firm)

I think it's [Friday night drinks] less about people ending the week and wanting to get smashed, and it's more that relationship aspect to it. That collegial environment, rather than wanting to forget your woes of the week. (Participant 13, female, 29 years old, manager at the firm)

Alcohol and drinking occasions were also a common way of inducting 'graduates' into the firm. Alcohol appeared to be used in a very similar way here as it was to build relationships amongst seasoned employees at ORGA. This time however, alcohol was used in the context of integrating entirely new workers into the company. Both the shared drinking act and the physiological effect of the alcohol appeared to play a part in this process of making graduates feel more comfortable with one another and their new environment:

Especially with graduates I think because they come in so sure of how the whole situation's going to be, and how to act and you know, people generally behave when they're in the office. And I don't think it's until you get out of the office and people have had a couple of drinks that you actually start to joke around and have a bit of fun and feel more comfortable. And I'm not saying just in that situation, but the difference between the team with new grads, and the team with new grads once you've had one function together is quite noticeable

in terms of their interaction, and how relaxed they are within the team. I guess after a few drinks, it kind of puts people on the same level. (Participant 13, female, 25 years old, junior member of the firm)

Managerial control

Each of the ‘benefits’ of alcohol use employees described was invariably of benefit for ORGA as a profit-oriented company as well. For example, the idea of alcohol use as an effective means of building stronger relationships with colleagues was of benefit in terms of the quality of work produced for ORGA’s clients. The social events of which alcohol was an important part, was to some extent, a deliberate form of managerial control that served to reinforce certain aspects of ORGA’s organisational identity. Through positive reinforcement using events involving alcohol, ORGA succeeded in prompting workers to ‘work harder’ during ordinary work time. This could be for a number of reasons; because they felt an obligation to their ‘team mates’ (with such team bonds being strengthened through work-hosted drinking events), because they felt an obligation to ORGA for ‘buying the drinks’, because they knew they would be rewarded for their efforts, and so forth. A number of respondents saw the numerous events that ORGA hosted for workers as exactly this kind of managerial tactic – as outlined by one member of the senior management team:

You know people here do get worked hard. There’s an underlying, almost an anonymous HR strategy that, “ah, we will employ a lot of young people, we will work them really really hard, for 3 to 4 years, 5 years. We will work them bloody hard. And, as a consequence of that, if we have to fill them up with a bit of grog, so they think we’re good people, then we’ll do that. You know, the

turnover of young people in a firm like ORGA is considerably high than the turnover of young people in a lot of other industries. You go to university, you start as a graduate when you're 22, 23, work for 3 or 4 years, you do your professional exams, and when your 27, you might be senior associate, you might be verging on becoming a manager, but you've worked really hard over that period of time. People piss off overseas and say 'this is all just too much for me'. But during that period we say 'well we'll give them a good time'/
(Participant 15, male, 55 years old, senior member of the firm)

The deliberate managerial attempt to cultivate in the minds of the workers the idea of the company, or those within ORGA as 'good people', explains management's rationale behind the use of drinking events at ORGA. For the respondents, drinking was an activity that they undertook only with those that they were, or wished to be close to on a personal level. By not only drinking 'with ORGA' (in the form of work colleagues), but having ORGA 'buy the drinks', behaviours that would often be associated with a 'good mate' or friend, ORGA was attempting to personify the organisation.

Networking and image management

Maintaining relationships with existing clients was seen by interviewees as critical to ORGA's performance. It was important to ensure that relationships with clients were maintained and developed in order to ensure repeat business, and to cross-sell other types of services that ORGA offered. The use of alcohol and the 'etiquette' around drinking as a means for starting and maintaining a conversation was a recurring theme. One interviewee described alcohol as 'a prop' in these situations, and

highlighted how she had been trained by the company in the ways she could use alcohol at client functions as a means of talking to different people:

You actually get taught to use, drink in the left hand shake with your right. So there's etiquette around it. If we were to be networking in a room and I just met you, and we were having a conversation, and I noticed your drink was low, and we'd been having a conversation, and there were a couple of other people in the room that I wanted to talk to, I might say, 'oh I see you're out of a drink' or 'do you want a top up can I get you one?', bring it back and say 'here you go it's been really lovely talking with you but I'm just going to take the opportunity to go and talk to others'. We actually were shown, taught or shown, as part of some of the courses we go on how to use that as a way to facilitate our networking. So it's a prop. (Participant 14, female, 28 years old, middle level (non-management) of the firm)

Respondents, then, could successfully use alcohol as an object to ease the process of speaking to unfamiliar individuals. More specifically, the social drinking act was a key way in which ORGA members impressed the firm's identity (or at least the aspects of the firm they wished to communicate) upon clients. ORGA members could discuss some of the firm's most recent successes, or how they could add value to a client's business 'over a drink', with alcohol use making such conversations easier to undertake due to the sense of informality both ORGA members and clients attributed to the drinking act.

In an almost identical manner to how existing clients were treated, ORGA members adopted the same approach to trying to obtain business from potential clients.

ORGA's senior management hosted client and networking functions, training seminars, and sponsored other events in attempts to meet potential clients that they could offer their services to 'over a drink'.

At the same time however, respondents were aware of a need to manage their own drinking activities to protect the image of both the company and their own professional image in the eyes of their superiors. The valued characteristics amongst ORGA members of being a highly reputable company known for producing the best quality work in its field were strongly internalised by the workers, and was a source of pride for them:

I think it's the lack of tolerance about mistakes. Everything has to be completely accurate, micro managing. I think there is a real element of that. There is an expectation that everything we do has to be a hundred percent correct. You know, and it's risk management. We can't make mistakes. (Participant 15, male, 55 years old, senior member of the firm)

To ensure these high organisational expectations were met at an individual level, respondents made a conscious effort to limit their drinking behaviour during the week when their identity as a member of ORGA took priority. They instead engaged in drinking activities in their 'personal' or 'non-work' time on the weekends:

But yeah definitely in terms of my midweek drinking, because I'm often here till like, in your 3rd year, I can be here till 6.30, 7.30, 8.30, so you don't.

Whereas in my first year I would organise quite a lot to meet people during the week. I can't make a lunch date and very rarely make evening plans. Sounds a bit sad. In first year, it's a lot of things, but I guess you don't have so much responsibility...as more responsibility falls on you and as I started doing this project work, one, I just can't come to work hung over, and two, there's limited chance to drink anyway, sometimes. (Participant 13, female, 25 years old, junior member of the firm)

Discussion

In this paper we have argued that alcohol use, particularly the social drinking act, can be framed as a sub-part of the broader process of forming a sense of organisational identity. The social drinking act provided a forum for employees to reflect on ORGA, their current projects, and the individuals that they worked with. Whether in the company of work colleagues or friends unrelated to ORGA, the drinking act served a functional purpose for the interviewees in that it allowed them to explore and make sense of various aspects of ORGA.

The current study adds a degree of nuance to stress-based studies of alcohol use (Frone, 1999). The conversations and social acts that individuals undertook together 'over a drink' were the providers of relaxation and stress relief, not necessarily the physiological effect of alcohol. Previous stress-based studies conceive of the worker as a 'psychoactive consumer' (Brain, 2000) who uses alcohol to chemically alter their mood from stressed to relaxed (Frone, 1999). During our interviews, interviewees

were uncomfortable associating their alcohol use with stress relief, fearing that their behaviour might be labelled as that of an ‘alcoholic’. We suggest that future studies should integrate a higher degree of detail in terms of the alcohol use of individuals, and attempt to separate discussions of the physiological effect of alcohol from those of the social drinking act itself. While more detailed typologies of the stress drivers of ‘alcohol use’ have been developed (e.g. Frone, 1999; Greenberg & Grunberg, 1995), there is a need for greater understanding of the ways in which individuals use alcohol to alleviate work stress or anxiety.

Our study found that alcohol use played a prominent role in re-enforcing the central aspects of ORGA’s identity to its members. Alcohol was used frequently as a part of ORGA-hosted social functions, with both the social drinking act, and for some, the inebriating effect of the alcohol, perceived as enhancers of social interaction and the depth of discussions amongst workers. Through these conversations, workers were able to share work stories, as well as relate to each through conversations about ‘non-work topics’ such as friends, family, hobbies, or weekend activities.

The use of alcohol as a means of bonding at ORGA seems to be a clear example of what Trice & Beyer (1984) call ‘rites of integration’, which ‘encourage and revive common feelings that bind members together and commit them to a social system’ (p. 657). This was particularly evident in the use of alcohol at ORGA-hosted functions. This revival of ‘common feelings’ that were ‘non-work related’ (given that workers already knew commonality as to work would exist) were more effective in creating stronger bonds between workers, probably because people saw others as more similar if they were related in a way that was not pre-established (i.e. was not through work).

Overall, it was evident that alcohol use served to strengthen members' association with ORGA through interaction with its members and thus assisted members in expressing various aspects of ORGA's identity to one another through shared interaction and conversation.

This finding represents one of the most important theoretical implications of this study – the notion of alcohol use as a part of young employees' 'work life'. A similar conclusion can be drawn from the use of alcohol as means of obtaining new business at ORGA. This re-framing of alcohol use differs significantly from most of the work-alcohol literature, which tends to view the drivers of alcohol use as occurring 'during work', and the actual use of alcohol as occurring 'outside of work' (e.g. Trice & Sonnenstuhl (1988) provide some examples). Our study suggests that alcohol use is undertaken in both 'work' and 'non-work' times and spaces, a conclusion that aligns with the 'cultural' perspective on the work-alcohol relationship (Bennett & Lehman, 1999; Cooper et al,1990; Schaeff & Fassel,1988).

This re-framing of alcohol use reminds researchers to attend not just to those aspects of work that cause employees to drink, but also to how some organisations 'require' or prompt individuals to use alcohol in order to be effective in their role. Though ORGA by no means forced employees to drink heavily, in organisations where such 'rites of integration' involving alcohol are more intense and more integral to organisational life (e.g. college fraternities as studied by Workman (2001)), we see a new and relatively unexplored example of the ways in which organisations can have a detrimental impact on the well-being of their members — in this case, a physiological and / or psychological one through the harms of alcohol.

Our study also provides a different angle to the mainstream public health ‘binge drinking’ discourse (Measham & Brain, 2005) of alcohol use, and provides a novel explanation of why individuals engage in heavier drinking during the weekend relative to their drinking during the week. In this case, the respondents’ work and sense of organisational identity played an important part in shaping when and how much alcohol would be consumed. The deliberate ‘compartmentalising’ of their alcohol use into the weekend was driven to a significant extent by work-related considerations, particularly the desire to produce the quality of work expected of ORGA and its members (from both members of ORGA and outsiders). Thus, the compartmentalisation of respondents’ drinking into weekend time was not simply because of a drive to consume alcohol heavily on the weekends, as the ‘binge drinking’ discourse would seem to suggest. Rather, it can be seen as a product of their participation in a particular organisation. This is consistent with the findings of Parker & Williams (2003), who found that young adults often viewed their drinking activities as part of a ‘work hard, play hard’ lifestyle (a term that frequently arose in our interviews), and would engage in heavier drinking sessions on the weekends for the same reasons described by the interviewees here. Our study contributes, therefore, to the literature on alcohol and identity (Brain, 2000; Chatterton & Hollands, 2002; Room & Sato, 2002). In particular, it offers a reframing of ‘binge drinking’ as the outcome of organisational identification processes.

The idea of ORGA’s identity as an inhibitor of employees’ alcohol use also opens up another area of quite positive discussion – that workplaces, and organisational identity more specifically, can be successful in limiting or reducing an individuals’ alcohol

intake. The good news here, particularly for policy makers, is that partnerships with workplaces, given the seemingly important role they play in governing an individuals' alcohol use and behaviour in general, can be useful in implementing measures to reduce alcohol consumption, or promote 'safer' levels of, and types of consumption, depending on the policy approach taken.

One of the most prominent focus areas of current work-alcohol policy discussions relates to ensuring workplaces construct and enforce alcohol and drug policies and procedures that minimise any harm caused by alcohol to employees (ALAC, 2005). Roman & Blum (2002) examined the effectiveness of employee assistance programmes (EAPs). They found that while many of the studies of the efficacy of EAPs suggested such programmes were effective, methodological limitations in the studies that were reviewed precluded definitive conclusions.

The findings of this study highlight the importance of focusing on workplace policies and procedures, such as employee assistance programmes. It is interesting to note that we reviewed 10 years worth of ALAC's self-published magazines (2000 – 2010) and found no mention of a work-alcohol link at any point in over 25 magazines. This would seem to suggest that the work-alcohol link lacks prominence in the New Zealand public health agenda. Beyond this point however, the findings also highlight how a large amount of work-alcohol activity that occurs is beyond the control of formal workplace policies and procedures, such as drinking offsite with work colleagues. The informal nature of much of the work-alcohol activities outlined in the current study serves as an important reminder to policy makers that while formal workplace policies and procedures are important, they should by no means be the sole

focus of policy discussions. There is therefore a need, if the focus is harm reduction, for policy makers to continue to conceptualise and implement innovative harm reduction strategies that are effective in targeting the work-alcohol relationship at a more informal level.

Conclusion

It is important to consider the work lives of young people to understand their alcohol use. More specifically, an understanding of alcohol use as part of organisational identification is a fruitful means of generating new insights into the work-alcohol relationship. Furthermore, it is important to understand people's alcohol use in terms of the social institutions that give the use of alcohol its sense of meaning for users. We acknowledge that our study was limited in scope and small in scale, which prevents us from making generalisations. We encourage, therefore, further research which conceptualises alcohol use as a social activity embedded within a broader system of meaning construction and creation. In addition to investigations of workplaces, we call on research that theorises the use of alcohol in its broader context. By establishing connections between all the different institutions, activities and organisations that continue to make alcohol use (and its respective set of meanings) an integral socio-cultural activity in societies, a more complete understanding of alcohol use can be generated. For policy makers and public health stakeholders, such deeper sociological understandings are in our view, a fundamental requirement for the success of any and all attempts to reduce alcohol-related harm in our communities.

References:

- ALAC. (n.d.). *Alcohol and other drugs in the workplace: Employer guide*.
Wellington, New Zealand.
- ALAC. (2005). *Review of workplace-based alcohol and other drug early intervention*.
Wellington, New Zealand: Alcohol Advisory Council of New Zealand.
- ALAC. (2011). *Alcohol monitor - Adults & youth 2009-10 drinking behaviours report*. Wellington, New Zealand: Research New Zealand.
- Albert, S., & Whetten, D.A. (1985). Organizational identity. In L.L. Cummings & B.M Staw (Eds.), *Research in organizational behaviour* (Vol. 6) (pp. 263-295). Greenwich, CT, United States of America: JAI.
- Alvesson, M. (1990). Organization: From substance to image? *Organization Studies*, *11*(3), pp. 373 – 394.
- Alvesson, M. (1993). Organizations and rhetoric: Knowledge-intensive firms and the struggle with ambiguity. *Journal of Management Studies*, *30*(6), pp. 997 – 1015.
- Alvesson, M. (2004). *Knowledge Work and Knowledge-Intensive Firms*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

- Ames, G.M., & Janes, C. (1987). Heavy and problem drinking in an American blue collar population. *Social Science and Medicine*, 25(8), 949–960.
- Ames, G.M., & Janes, C. (1992). A cultural approach to conceptualizing alcohol and the workplace. *Alcohol Research and Health*, 16(2), 112–119.
- Barker, J.R. (1993). Tightening the iron cage: Concertive control in self-managing teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 38, pp. 408-437.
- Bennett, J.B., & Lehman, W.K. (1999). Employee exposure to coworker substance use and negative consequence: The moderating effects of work group membership. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 40, 307–322.
- Boyatzis, R.E. (1998). *Thematic analysis and code development: Transforming qualitative information*. Thousand Oaks, CA, United States of America: Sage.
- Brain, K. (2000). *Youth, alcohol and the emergence of the post-modern alcohol order*. London, England: Institute of Alcohol Studies.
- Brain, K., & Parker, H. (1997). *Drinking with design: Alcopops, designer drinks and youth culture*. London, England: Portman.
- Chatterton, P., & Hollands, R. (2002). Theorising urban playscapes: Producing, regulating and consuming nightlife city spaces. *Urban Studies*, 39(1), 95–116.

- Coombes, L., Allen, D., Humphrey, D., & Neale, J. (2009). In-depth interviews. In J. Neale (Ed.) *Research Methods for health and social care* (pp. 197-210). Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cooper, M.L., Russell, M., & Frone, M.R. (1990). Work stress and alcohol effects: A test of stress-induced drinking. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 31, 260–276.
- Frone, M. (1999). Work stress and alcohol use. *Alcohol Research and Health*, 23(4), 284–291.
- Greenberg, E.S., & Grunberg, L. (1995). Work alienation and problem alcohol behavior. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 36, 83–102.
- Grey, C. (1994). Career as a project of the self and labour process discipline. *Sociology*, 28(2), pp. 479 – 497.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 105-117). London, England: Sage.
- Hatch, M.J., & Schultz, M. (2002). The dynamics of organizational identity. *Human Relations*, 55(8), 939-1018.

Hayward, K.J., & Hobbs, D. (2007). 'Beyond the binge in booze Britain': Market-led liminalization and the spectacle of binge drinking, *British Journal of Sociology*, 58(3), 437–456.

Hemmingsson, T., Ingvar, L., Romelsjo, A., & Alfredsson, L. (1997). Alcoholism in social classes and occupations in Sweden. *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 26(3), pp. 584 – 591.

Janes, C.R., & Ames, G. (1989). Men, blue-collar work and drinking: Alcohol use in an industrial sub-culture. *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*, 13, 245–274.

Karreman, D., & Alvesson, M. (2004). Cages in tandem: Management control, social identity, and identification in a knowledge-intensive firm. *Organization*, 11(1), pp. 149 – 175.

Lowendahl, B.R. (2005). *Strategic management of professional services firms*. Copenhagen, Denmark: Copenhagen Business School Press.

Manello, T.A., & Seaman, F.J. (1979). *Prevalence, costs and handling of drinking problems on seven railroads*. Washington DC, United States of America: University Research.

Mazas, C.A., Cofta-Woerpel, L., Daza, P., Fouladi, R.T., Vidrine, J.I., Cinciripini, P.M., Gritz, E.R., & Wetter, D.W. (2006). At-risk drinking in employed men and women. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, 31(3), pp. 279 – 287.

- Measham, F. (2004). The decline of ecstasy, the rise of 'binge' drinking and the persistence of pleasure. *Probation Journal: The Journal of Community and Criminal Justice*, 51(4), 309–326.
- Measham, F., & Brain, K. (2005). 'Binge' drinking, British alcohol policy and the new culture of intoxication. *Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal*, 1, 262–283.
- Measham, F. (2006). The new policy mix: Alcohol, harm minimization, and determined drunkenness in contemporary society. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 17, 258-268.
- O'Leary, Z. (2010). *The essential guide to doing your research project* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA, United States of America: Sage.
- Parker, D.A., & Harford, T.C. (1992). The epidemiology of alcohol consumption and dependence across occupations in the United States. *Alcohol Research and Health*, 16(2), pp. 97 – 105.
- Parker, H., & Williams, L. (2003). Intoxicated weekends: Young adults' work hard-play hard lifestyles, public health and public disorder. *Drugs: Education, Prevention and Policy*, 10(4), 345–367.

- Payne, G., & Payne, J. (2004). *Key concepts in social research*. London, England: Sage.
- Room, R & Sato, H. (2002). Drinking and drug use in youth cultures: 1. Building identity and community. *Contemporary Drug Problems*, 29, 5-11.
- Roman, P.M. (1981, Summer). Job characteristics and the identification of deviant drinking. *Journal of Drug Issues*, 357–364.
- Roman, P.M., & Blum, T.C. (2002). The workplace and alcohol problem prevention. *Alcohol Research & Health*, 26(1), 49 – 57.
- Schaefer, A.W., & Fassel, D. (1988). *The addictive organization*. New York, NY, United States of America: Harper & Row.
- Seeman, M., & Anderson, C. (1983). Alienation and alcohol: The role of work, mastery and community in drinking behavior. *American Sociological Review*, 48, pp. 60 - 77.
- Szmigin, I., Griffin, C., Mistral, W., Bengry-Howell, A., Weale, L., & Hackley, C. (2008). Re-framing ‘binge drinking’ as calculated hedonism: Empirical evidence from the UK. *Drug Policy*, 19, 359–366.

- Sturdy, A., Schwarz, M., & Spicer, A. (2006). Guess who's coming to dinner? Structures and uses of liminality in strategic management consultancy. *Human Relations, 59*(7), 929–960.
- Trice, H.M., & Beyer, J.M. (1984). Studying organizational cultures through rites and ceremonials. *Academy of Management Review, 9*(4), 653-669.
- Trice, H.M., & Roman, P. M. (1978). *Spirits and demons at work: Alcohol and other drugs on the job* (2nd ed). New York, NY, United States of America: Cornell University.
- Trice, H.M., & Sonnenstuhl, W.J. (1988). Drinking behavior and risk factors related to the work place: Implications for research and prevention. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 24*(4), 327–346.
- Wilson, T. (2005). *Drinking Cultures*. New York, USA: BERG.
- Workman, T. (2001). Finding the meanings of college drinking: An analysis of fraternity drinking stories. *Health Communication, 13*(4), 427–447.

Table 1: The role of alcohol use in organisational identification processes

Theme	How the drinking act is seen by respondents
Reflecting on work life and the company	As a means of evaluating the company and their work life with colleagues; an opportunity to 'get issues off their chest'
Reinforcing organisational identity	As a means of reinforcing aspects of the organisation's identity to its members.
Managerial control	As a means of ensuring that employees carry out what the organisation expects of them
Relationship building	As an act of developing relationships, for example, by celebrating achievements, inducting new employees
Networking and image management	As a means to project an image externally and for developing relationships with existing and potential clients.

