
Making sense of drinking: the role of techniques of neutralisation and counter-neutralisation in negotiating alcohol consumption

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Abstract This article contributes to the understanding of how students neutralise potential feelings of guilt and stigmatisation regarding their alcohol consumption. We report findings from two qualitative studies with students at a UK university. The aim of the research was to uncover the range and ways in which neutralisation and counter-neutralisation techniques are used by drinkers and abstainers/near-abstainers in managing their alcohol position. Study 1 consisted of five focus groups with heavy drinkers and Study 2 comprised nine one-to-one interviews with abstainers and near-abstainers. Analysis highlights the importance of alcohol consumption in students' lifestyles, but also the potential identity conflicts experienced by all drinkers, regardless of the amount consumed. Heavy drinkers primarily employ neutralisation techniques as a means to rationalise the negative impacts of their actions, whereas abstainers and near-abstainers mainly use counter-neutralisation techniques as a means to reinforce their commitment to lifestyles which run counter to mainstream student life expectations. However, regardless of the amount of alcohol consumed, all participants employed neutralising and counter-neutralising arguments in some social situations. The article discusses the usefulness of neutralisation theory to account for the adoption of risky health behaviours, such as excessive alcohol consumption, and the potential implications for public health interventions.

Keywords: alcohol consumption, students, neutralisation

Introduction

The central role of alcohol and drunkenness in many young people's social lives is highlighted in recent research (Griffin *et al.* 2009, Smith and Foxcroft 2009). However, recent evidence suggests that some young people face tensions and stigmatisation in their approach to alcohol consumption (Banister and Piacentini 2006, deVisser and Smith 2007). Although studies into people's experiences with health-related behaviours (see Lawton 2003), and the phenomena of stigmatisation, shame and uncertainty have increased significantly in the last three decades (e.g. Nijhof 1995, Davidson 2000), there is a gap in our understanding of the strategies employed to avoid or manage these negative feelings. This article addresses this gap

by examining these strategies in the context of young peoples' drinking behaviour, drawing on, and extending, neutralisation theory (Sykes and Matza 1957). Examining results from two studies, one with students who identify as heavy drinkers and the second with students who identify as abstainers or near-abstainers (Makkai and McAllister 1990), we explore the value of neutralisation-related processes in accounting for risky health behaviours, such as excessive alcohol consumption. Finally, we discuss some potential implications for public health interventions.

Student drinking dilemmas

UK alcohol consumption peaked in the latter part of the twentieth century among the 16–24 age group, but has since started to plateau (Goddard 2008: 64). However, overall statistics mask a polarisation in drinking patterns. Continued high levels of sessional consumption are accompanied by growing numbers of occasional drinkers and abstainers (Measham 2008). Alcohol serves an important function for young people in their search for identity, control and belonging as part of the transition to adulthood (Fossey 1994, Pavis *et al.* 1998, Griffin *et al.* 2009).¹ For many young people, 'going out' and alcohol consumption are central to the development of social experiences and accompanying social identity(ies) (Measham and Brain 2005). The development of social identities around alcohol consumption emerge through the pursuit of social differentiation and distinction (Bourdieu 1986), with tastes – for different commodities but also various health-related choices (Burrows and Nettleton 1995, Cockerham 2007) – operating as a means to make judgements about others. Therefore, heavy alcohol consumption can play a major role in the enactment of the student lifestyle (Banister and Piacentini 2006, Colby *et al.* 2009), with its own language and rituals. The temporary nature of college/university life may provide students with a break from the expectations and norms of the general adult population (Colby *et al.* 2009), thereby permitting excessive alcohol consumption.

However, for both heavy drinkers and abstainers/near-abstainers there is potential for social identity conflict or 'ontological anxiety' (Giddens 1991), a tension between how the individual sees themselves, would like to be seen, and how they are seen by others. For example, DeVisser and Smith's (2007) study finds ambivalence around alcohol is quite common among young men. While their participants recognise compelling reasons not to drink alcohol (including long and short term health effects, and anti-social behaviour), many still choose to drink, for reasons such as social expectations, disinhibition, altered consciousness, and relaxation. Similarly, a study of alcohol consumption in a university context (Banister and Piacentini 2008), has shown that although binge drinking is considered a socially acceptable rite of passage, and therefore viewed as normative within that context, there is still awareness of the detrimental effects of excessive alcohol consumption which leads to tensions and ambivalence for some.

In comparison, for students who abstain or drink only occasionally, *not* consuming alcohol can signify acting against mainstream student norms and can function as an alternative social identity marker (Hogg and Banister 2001). Abstaining can represent some socially desirable identifications (e.g. responsible young person, in control, positive role models), but it can also have negative connotations, potentially entailing the risk of social exclusion and stigmatisation (Piacentini and Banister 2009). Thus tensions can also prevail for those abstaining or drinking very little alcohol.

For both heavy drinking and abstaining/near-abstaining students, there is the potential for negative feelings and tensions to arise through their approach to alcohol consumption. How

they manage these negative feelings can be explored from the perspective of neutralisation theory (Sykes and Matza 1957), which focuses on understanding how people soften or eliminate the impact norm-violating behaviour can otherwise have upon their identity and social relationships. Neutralisation theory is employed in this context to explore the complexity of ways young people manage and rationalise negative feelings emanating from their drinking position.

Techniques of neutralisation

Sykes and Matza (1957) argue that norm-violating individuals learn a set of justifications or rationalisations, which can insulate them from self-blame and the blame of others. These justifications, similar to Mills's (1940) notion of 'vocabularies of motives' and Sutherland's (1947) 'definitions favourable to the violation of law', are learned through social interaction and help individuals protect their social identity in rule and norm-violating contexts. Sykes and Matza (1957) originally identified five techniques (denial of responsibility; denial of injury; denial of victim; condemning the condemners; and appealing to higher loyalties), which may follow an act, or precede it, serving the purpose of neutralising norm-violating behaviour. Since its original formulation, neutralisation theory has been one of the most widely known and frequently cited theories in the sociology of deviance and beyond (Fritzsche 2005, Maruna and Copes 2005). For example, areas utilising neutralisation theory include strain theory, social learning theory and subcultural theory (Maruna and Copes 2005). In addition, several cross-theoretical studies of deviance have shown that the effect of neutralisation persists even after controlling for other variables (e.g. Morris and Higgins 2009). If a link between neutralisation and norm-violating behaviours holds true in several alternative theoretical explanations of deviance (see Winfree and Abadinsky 2009), it follows that the study of neutralisation-related processes adds explanatory potential to any understanding of alcohol consumption. Neutralisation techniques were originally viewed in opposition to the subcultural view of delinquency which assumed commitment to subcultural rather than conventional norms of action (e.g. Winfree and Abadinsky 2009). Instead, Sykes and Matza (1957) suggested that delinquents remain committed to conventional values yet they learn how to rationalise them. A combination of the two is found in later reformulations such as Bandura's thesis of graduate desensitisation (McCarthy and Stewart 1998), and Minor's (1984) 'hardening thesis', which assume a more developmental path to delinquency. For instance, in the context of alcohol consumption, neutralisation techniques could be employed by students as a means to rationalise or neutralise their commitment to conventional norms and values (against excessive drinking). However, if students become fully socialised into extreme drinking groups and subcultures, neutralisations may no longer be necessary, since the subcultural norms of excessive drinking dominate and students are no longer sensitised to mainstream norms around alcohol.

Neutralisation theory has been applied to excessive drinking contexts and other health-related behaviours (e.g. Peretti-Watel *et al.* 2003), but research in this domain remains limited and under-theorised. For instance, the acceptance of neutralisation techniques is typically introduced as an additional predictor in survey-based studies that treat student drinking as an example of (adult) norm-violating behaviour (e.g. Mitchell and Dodder 1983, Durkin *et al.* 2005). Such studies tend to ignore the role of neutralisation in contexts where anxieties arise because of difficulties managing opposing expectations in different social situations. Accordingly, Maruna and Copes (2005) argue the treatment of neutralisations as individual techniques is limited, and a more promising avenue is to treat them as a key dimension of

peoples' broader narratives and accounts. Existing studies on neutralisation and excessive drinking tend to ignore the situation in many western countries, where young people (and students) tend to favour excessive (rather than moderate or no) drinking (e.g. McCreanor *et al.* 2008), yet are not oblivious to the negative consequences of alcohol consumption and wider norms relating to adult behaviour (e.g. responsible, conscientious). Whereas students who drink heavily may employ techniques of neutralisation in order to alleviate such tensions, abstainers and near-abstainers face the challenge of constructing and reinforcing a positive sense of self in settings where drinking alcohol is a marker of the student identity (Banister and Piacentini 2006). In rationalising their commitment to lifestyles that de-legitimise alcohol consumption, these students may employ logical counter-arguments to techniques of neutralisation, or techniques of 'counter-neutralisation'. Copes and Williams (2007) have noted a similar process they label as 'techniques of affirmation', used to describe straightedgers² attempt to counter typical neutralising arguments. However, unlike straightedgers who attempt to construct subcultural identities that are seen as clearly distinct from mainstream youth (Copes and Williams 2007), students face the additional challenge of balancing an abstaining/near-abstaining identification alongside a 'student' identification. Rather than resolving identity conflicts through adopting one main identification (a process labelled as demarcation; Ahuvia 2005), students who abstain or drink very little may seek compromising or synthesising solutions (Ahuvia 2005), that allow them to avoid excessive alcohol consumption yet remain part of the mainstream student culture and experience. The purpose of this research is to uncover the range and ways in which neutralisation and counter-neutralisation techniques are used by drinkers and abstainers/near-abstainers in managing their alcohol position.

Method

Two studies were undertaken in a campus university in the North West of England with undergraduate students between the ages of 19 and 22 (the UK legal drinking age is 18). The studies aimed to examine the strategies employed by students to avoid or manage any negative feelings associated with their alcohol position. Study 1 was with heavy drinkers and Study 2 was with abstainers/near-abstainers. Different methodologies were adopted for the study groups, because of the very different levels of incidence of each type of drinking. Among undergraduate students, there is a culture of heavy drinking; a recent survey of student drinking at the university revealed 82 per cent of students drank alcohol, with 63 per cent citing going to the pub as a favourite activity.³ Heavy drinking is a norm among student populations, and hence lends itself to more participatory research methods. In comparison, there is a much lower incidence of abstention/near-abstention among the student population (estimated at 17.7% of the student population in the study by Heather *et al.* 2011), and hence a different point of access was required.

Study 1 focused on heavy alcohol consumption, comprising of five focus group discussions (each with 5–7 participants, 27 in total). Profiles of the study participants are provided in Table 1. All participants were 19–21 years old. To ensure thorough engagement with and access to the student world, five student researchers were trained to lead the focus group discussions. These students were invited to participate in the research based on their competence on a research module; participation in the research was not a module requirement. The student researchers participated in a training session, and were involved in the design of the focus group guide (in conjunction with the authors). The student researchers received reimbursement for costs associated with collecting and transcribing the data. The student

Table 1 *Study 1 participants*

<i>Focus group</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Demographic characteristics</i>	<i>Drinking position</i>
FG1	Ron	19/Male/British	Heavy
	Sue	19/Female/British	Heavy
	James	19/Male/British	Medium-heavy
	Dave	19/Male/British	Heavy
	Tracey	19/Female/British	Medium
	Lucy	19/Female/British	Medium
FG2	Elvis	19/Male/British	Medium-heavy
	Herman	19/Male/British	Medium-heavy
	Robert	19/Male/British	Medium
	Baldrick	19/Male/British	Heavy
	Lucy	20/Male/British	Medium
FG3	Carrie	19/Female/British	Medium-heavy
	Dave	21/Male/British	Heavy
	Isabelle	20/Female/British	Medium-heavy
	Rachel	20/Female/British	Medium-heavy
	Lucy	19/Female/British	Medium-heavy
FG4	Matthew	19/Male/British	Medium-heavy
	Jack	19/Male/British	Heavy
	Jim	19/Male/British	Heavy
	Rosie	19/Female/British	Medium-heavy
	Mikey	19/Male/British	Medium-heavy
	Merk	20/Male/British	Medium-heavy
	Andy	20/Male/British	Medium-heavy
	Danny	20/Male/British	Heavy
FG5	Joey	19/Male/British	Heavy
	Ross	20/Male/British	Medium-heavy
	Phoebe	19/Female/British	Heavy
	Rachel	20/Female/British	Medium-heavy
	Monica	20/Female/British	Medium-heavy
	Sarah	20/Female/British	Medium-heavy

researchers were British, undergraduate second year students, all identifying as heavy drinkers. The student researchers recruited participants from their pre-existing friendship groups, irrespective of gender and age, whom they also identified as heavy drinkers. Friendship-based focus groups have a distinct advantage over other focus group approaches, since they grant access to 'real' conversations, and are characterised by a more reflective approach whereby the moderator is actively involved in the focus group, sometimes expressing their own opinions and positions (Kitzinger 1994). This approach is always likely to introduce biases, particularly with the selection of participants similar in background to the researchers. This effect can be seen in the sociodemographic profiles of focus group participants (Table 1). However, it did enable access to authentic conversation, and increased the likelihood of developing plausible and authentic accounts (Golden-Biddle and Locke 2007).

Early questions within the focus groups sought to establish levels of consumption. While participants occupied a range of alcohol positions, these questions confirmed that all participants drank in excess of UK government guidelines (2–3 units per day for women; 4–5 units per day for men) and engaged in binge drinking episodes on a weekly basis. The discussions lasted between 60–90 minutes, and were digitally recorded, then transcribed. Using student researchers heightened concerns about confidentiality, particularly given the

potential for participants to be enrolled in the academic researchers' classes. Consent forms were issued and retained by the student researchers, and all participants' names were changed within the transcripts (to names chosen by participants), thus preserving anonymity (to the research team) and confidentiality (in relation to the student researcher).

Study 2 focused on abstainers/near-abstainers. Participants were recruited through advertisements posted around campus and the initial eligibility criterion was 'not drinking alcohol'. However, those coming forward interpreted 'not drinking alcohol' relative to the dominant norms within the student culture, and while some were abstainers, others were very occasional light drinkers, classified here as near-abstainers (in line with Makkai and McAllister's 1990 definition of near-abstention as those drinking less than once per month). Given our interest in people who do not drink heavily (rather than non-drinking *per se*), both abstainers and near-abstainers were included. Preliminary discussions revealed that abstaining/near-abstaining students' key friendships are often with students who drink. As there is a relatively low incidence of abstention/near-abstention in the student population (Heather *et al.* 2011), it was impractical to adopt Study 1's friendship-based focus group approach. Hence, Study 2 data collection was via one-to-one in-depth interviews, by two of the authors.

Nine students participated in Study 2, comprising four males and five females, aged 19–22. We did not specifically seek to incorporate sociocultural differences into this sample, rather to explore how those who did not fit with the typical student identity dealt with their differences regarding alcohol consumption. A profile of the study participants is provided in Table 2. The researchers used a semi-structured interview guide in order to ensure the interviewers covered similar topics. The researchers did not rely on the guide, but rather, let the participants' stories unfold in a natural conversational way. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, and all were digitally recorded and transcribed. All authors undertook the analysis, first separately and independently, followed by a phase of sharing to explore alternative explanations. A theoretical thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) was adopted, consisting of reading and re-reading, noting patterns and themes in a search for 'patterns and recurring organisations' (Wetherall and Potter 1988: 177), accompanied by a process of categorisation, abstraction, comparison and integration (Spiggle 1994).

Results

There are three sections to our results: (1) the neutralisation techniques used by heavy drinkers; (2) the counter-neutralisation techniques used by abstainers/near-abstainers; and (3) the interplay of these techniques by both groups.

Table 2 *Study 2 participants*

<i>Name</i>	<i>Demographic characteristics</i>	<i>Drinking position</i>
Gayle	19/Female/British	Near-abstainer
Fifi	20/Female/Chinese	Near-abstainer
Lena	22/Female/Persian	Abstainer
Alice	21/Female/British	Near-abstainer
Peter	21/Male/British	Near-abstainer
Mike	21/Male/British	Abstainer
Karen	21/Female/British	Near-abstainer
Andy	21/Male/British	Near-abstainer
Bart	20/Male/British	Abstainer

Techniques of neutralisation: heavy drinkers

Our study of heavy drinkers suggests students employ a variety of neutralisation techniques to account for, and normalise, excessive drinking. However, in line with previous research (e.g. Grove *et al.* 1989), not all five neutralisation techniques are equally represented. The most prevalent techniques are denial of injury, appeal to higher loyalties and denial of responsibility. Some additional techniques are identified and these resemble arguments labelled in previous applications of neutralisation theory as ‘scapegoating’ (Peretti-Watel *et al.* 2003) or ‘justification by comparison’ (Thurman 1984), and ‘justification by postponement’ (Cromwell and Thurman 2003). Typical examples of such techniques are:

Denials of injury:	We are young and healthy and our livers work well (Ross/FG5).
Appeals to higher loyalties:	Well I wouldn’t have met my girlfriend now, if I hadn’t been drunk, it gave me confidence to go and talk to her (Robert/FG2).
Denials of responsibility:	Yeah but then drinks are quite cheap, that’s another thing in some places you can get really cheap drinks. It’s sometimes cheaper to drink alcohol than it is to drink diet coke (Monica/FG5).
Justifications by comparison/‘scapegoating’:	Different groups of people, they are different aren’t they? Like people in this house drink reasonable amounts. But other people like the rugby team are just a joke (Baldrick/FG2).
Justifications by postponement:	Third year – it’ll not change that much, maybe a little bit. Still going to go out nights when we’ve not got work to do or whatever. Whereas probably when we graduate and get a job we won’t be able to go out say on a Wednesday night because of work (Robert/FG2).

Denials of injury are based on notions that excessive drinking is a benign activity and no one directly suffers as a result (e.g. Strutton *et al.* 1994). Appeals to higher loyalties relate to the positive consequences of alcohol consumption, which are somewhat prioritised over potentially negative ones, such as gaining extra confidence, overcoming one’s inhibitions and self-gratification. Students denied responsibility on the grounds their drinking behaviour is due to influences somewhat beyond their control (Sykes and Matza 1957). A common view is that binge drinking is considered normal and is a social expectation among fellow students and university networks. In other instances, students neutralise their drinking behaviour by relocating responsibility to retailers and the way alcohol is promoted; or by commenting on their socialisation into alcohol drinking by their family; or other sociocultural influences. Students often justify heavy drinking on the basis their approach is restrained compared with others’, and this resembles the technique that has been labelled ‘justification by comparison’ (Cromwell and Thurman 2003) and ‘scapegoating’ (Peretti-Watel *et al.* 2003). Students compare their behaviour not only with stereotypical groups and social situations but also named or anonymous others who do not control their drinking, are immature or engage in potentially more harmful behaviours such as smoking and taking drugs (Peretti-Watel *et al.*

2003). By drawing a boundary between the 'stereotyped them' and 'us' (Peretti-Watel *et al.* 2003: 27), students effectively deny the negative consequences and risks entailed in their own behaviour. Finally, most participants justify their behaviour on grounds that student binge drinking is 'a rite of passage' and their alcohol consumption will change in the future. According to Thurman (1984) such 'justifications by postponement' may reflect feelings of discomfort and dissonance that individuals suppress by momentarily putting them out of their mind but could be also linked with limited experiences of embodied ill-health within this age group (Lawton 2002).

Techniques of counter-neutralisation: abstainers/near-abstainers

Instead of neutralisations, abstainers/near-abstainers express counter-neutralisations as a way to negotiate their commitment to lifestyles deemed to be against mainstream student norms and identifications. Consistent with Copes and Williams's findings (2007), some of these techniques oppose typical neutralising arguments, while others seemed to complement traditional neutralisations. However, although we identify similar themes, our students employ counter-neutralisation techniques to challenge the negative consequences of not-drinking while remaining part of mainstream student culture, rather than distancing themselves from it.

Acknowledgment of responsibility:

I'm a bit of a control freak as well, so I don't ever want to be the person that's on the floor and everyone's laughing at them (Karen/Interview).

Acknowledgment of injury:

One girl it's happened to twice [spiked drinks], which resulted in hospital and then the other time with her, I've actually had to take her home and put her in her bed and she couldn't remember anything (Karen/Interview).

Reference to priority relationships and values:

In a way I've got a lot more free time and I'm not really too bothered about missing a night out ... as long as it's not something I definitely need to go to. I guess I've sort of got a clearer mind as well (Mike/Interview).

Discounting condemners and resisting negative labelling:

It was more like you could laugh at other people making a fool of themselves and thinking 'why are they really doing that' because you like kind of see like the sober element ... you only see like the negative side of drinking when you're sober... You laugh at them rather than being part of it (Andy/Interview).

Instead of relocating responsibility to external influences, abstainers/near-abstainers perceive themselves to be more mature, self-aware and in control than their fellow students (Copes and Williams 2007), demonstrating acknowledgment of responsibility. Abstainers/near-abstainers take an opposite view regarding the potential negative consequences of alcohol consumption, illustrating the counter-neutralisation technique of acknowledgment of injury. In many instances, they point to actual experiences of close friends and family members (and sometimes, personal past experiences) which suggest the effects of binge drinking are far from

benign. Unlike students who prioritise the benefits of alcohol consumption over potential negative consequences, abstainers/near-abstainers point to their own priority relationships and values, such as saving money, mental and physical well-being, having more time to spend in building meaningful relationships with friends and family, improving academic performance and developing new hobbies. There is also evidence of discounting condemnors and resisting negative labelling, with abstainers/near-abstainers resisting potential negative labelling from fellow students (Copes and Williams 2007). Participants refer to the appalling or embarrassing consequences of binge drinking, and this serves to further de-legitimise those who may disapprove of their alcohol position. In addition, some participants have taken up roles within their social groups (e.g. designated driver, carer) which often, but not always, pre-empt further negative labelling or stereotyping. In line with findings from other social settings (e.g. Bell *et al.* 2010) there is evidence that non-drinkers's sense of felt stigma is often accompanied by enacted stigma:

Probably because they're already drunk, they kind of become aggressive and give me a kind of thing ... just like have a go at me and say 'stop being a right mother' ... just things like that really (Alice/interview).

Identity conflicts: the interplay of neutralisation and counter-neutralisation techniques

Techniques of counter-neutralisation – heavy drinkers: Consistent with previous research (deVisser and Smith 2007), the heavy drinkers in this study are aware of the negative consequences of alcohol consumption and discussions of the downsides of heavy drinking were common. Nonetheless, in most instances, these are spontaneously counter-argued, and the students' commitment to drinking lifestyles is reinforced by employing further neutralisation-type arguments:

Ryan: It's a part of uni, but I think if everyone didn't drink then, yeah, grades overall would go up, slightly (acknowledgment of injury).

Harry: To be honest, if I wasn't drinking I wouldn't do more work instead, I'd find something else to do (denial of injury) (FG2).

Although participants employ counter-neutralisation techniques (particularly acknowledgment of injury), these are countered by neutralisation techniques (such as denial of injury or appealing to higher loyalties). From a cognitive dissonance perspective (Festinger 1957), such dialogues resemble the process of adding consonant beliefs so dissonance is reduced and drinking behaviour continues and represents a compromising solution according to Ahuvia's (2005) typology. In those instances where more severe negative outcomes associated with excessive alcohol consumption are described, the compromising strategies are accompanied by avoidance strategies relating to specific types of drinks, situations and venues or moderated drinking under specific conditions:

Ross: That was the night I drank all that Jack Daniels, the next day I was just like I am never doing that again and I haven't since (acknowledgment of injury).

Joey: Yeah recently I've found that I can't be arsed with hangovers anymore so I've been drinking less. I hate hangovers so much that I'd rather just chill at home and not get wasted (acknowledgment of injury). But every now and then that wears off (FG5).

In the majority of cases, however, students revert to past heavy drinking habits, highlighting the difficulty of internalising dissonant (or counter-neutralising) as opposed to neutralising beliefs:

- Lesley: I've had that situation as well where I have felt bad about it the next day (acknowledgment of injury).
- Lynda:⁴ So what kind of things did you do at that point? What kind of things do you do, to go through it in your head and sort it out?
- Ingrid: You rationalise it ... you think oh I was drunk it shouldn't have happened they shouldn't have taken ... well it was their fault as well because they were drunk too (denial of responsibility). You know, 'let's forget about it'.
- Lynda: Yeah. Did you change your behaviour as a result of that night?
- Lesley: No (laughter). I feel bad about it for a couple of days and then forget about it (FG3).

Nonetheless, in some instances, there is strong indication that not all participants fully internalise neutralisation-type arguments in relation to the negative consequences of drinking:

- Phoebe: I wish I didn't do that [get drunk], I ain't doing that again! (acknowledgment of injury).
- Sarah: Would you say that you have changed anything now? Like from one night out when you think you've gone completely out of control or you know you think 'oh god, I'm not doing that again'.
- Phoebe: I've thought it.
- Sarah: Yeah, It's another thing doing it.
- Phoebe: But ... I still like to go out and get drunk.
- Rachel: I actually did change the way I was after that, I didn't want to get like that ever again; it was just an awful experience, like when I was on holiday I was more cautious (FG5).

As the above extract illustrates, both Phoebe and Sarah had some negative drinking experiences that made them consider potential counter-arguments to neutralising beliefs, yet these were not sufficiently internalised to effectively challenge behaviour. In contrast, Rachel claims her attitudes and behaviour towards drinking did change as a result of reflecting on past negative experiences. Other students also consider the negative consequences of alcohol consumption and, albeit to a limited extent, they employ techniques of counter-neutralisation, the most frequently mentioned was 'acknowledgment of injury'.

Techniques of neutralisation – abstainers/near-abstainers: By employing techniques of counter-neutralisation, some abstainers/near-abstainers clearly demarcate (Ahuvia 2005), or distance themselves from assuming a drinker identity as part of a student lifestyle. Yet, for others the decision is not straightforward. Some abstainers/near-abstainers have previous experiences of heavy drinking which are contrary to their current lifestyle choices. In these occasions, similar to drinkers, they employ a variety of neutralisation techniques to account for past or sporadic drinking episodes:

- I was very much friends with people that drank a lot (appeal to higher loyalties) ...
I drank alone quite a lot as well, so I guess it couldn't just be that

(acknowledgment of responsibility). I guess I actually live in the middle of nowhere basically, so I guess [the motivation was] a sort of semi-boredom (appeal to higher loyalties) ... I know it seems quite childish now (acknowledgment of responsibility) (Mike/Interview).

When describing their past life which featured alcohol consumption, 'appealing to higher loyalties' is mainly drawn on. Most abstainers/near-abstainers are aware of the benefits of alcohol consumption. They are conscious of the importance of alcohol in establishing and maintaining relationships in a university context, and some admit to further benefits such as increased confidence and self-gratification. In turn, acknowledgment of the loss of such benefits often highlights potential internal tensions or ambivalence regarding their attitude towards alcohol consumption:

But you still kind of question it sometimes and think you know, maybe I should have just embraced it [alcohol consumption] as well as everyone else... After three years of being single, you do sort of start to doubt yourself a little bit but at the same time, I realise why I'm not meeting as many people as other people do and it's my choice to do that. So as much as I'll get the odd pang of you know, doubting my abilities to... you know, the romantic stuff and all that business (Bart/Interview).

When I'd drunk before, it didn't really bother me at all, like the alcohol element and that. But now that I don't drink, I do kind of feel self-conscious just going... just like dancing and you know, being around people (Peter/Interview).

Not all participants experience such losses of benefits due to their alcohol position. Yet some of their claims contain a degree of ambivalence and contradiction; for instance, although Karen initially mentions how her near-abstention goes unnoticed, due to her lively personality, her later comment acknowledges peer pressure to drink:

They don't even notice [that I don't drink]; like I forget that I don't drink sometimes. The only reason I remember is when people relay what they've drunk to me the day after ... All my friends know that I don't really drink that much. I get a ... lot of comments like 'oh my God I'd love to see you wasted' or 'I've never seen you wasted' (Karen/Interview).

Abstainers/near-abstainers mainly draw on compromising solutions, whereby the positives associated with abstaining or not drinking excessively outweigh the negatives. Among this group there is a greater sense of careful weighing up of benefits against disadvantages, and hence neutralisations/rationalisations are less relied upon. However, there remains recognition of the loss of benefits associated with alcohol consumption, which reflects the main identity conflict and tension for abstainers/near-abstainers. The data suggest counter-neutralising techniques are not always fully internalised by those in the abstaining/near-abstaining group, which indicates the dominance of the prevailing drinking culture within the student population.

Discussion

These studies revealed a range of neutralisation and counter-neutralisation techniques, among two groups of students – heavy drinkers and abstainers/near-abstainers. Heavy

drinkers employed neutralisations to downplay the health impact of their actions, as part of compromising strategies (Ahuvia 2005), that were often accompanied by partial avoidance strategies (e.g. temporary periods of abstinence). They did not deliberately and rationally weigh up the benefits against the disadvantages of alcohol consumption, behaviour also noted by deVisser and Smith (2007). Participants nonetheless showed a wide range of justifications and neutralisations in the course of interacting with their friends in the focus group context. These neutralisations serve to protect 'the integrity of the social situation' (Alonzo 1985: 153); incorporating both specific situations of excessive drinking and the overall situational nature of students' alcohol consumption. The method used (friendship-based focus groups) allowed an insider view of heavy alcohol consumption among students, highlighting the difficulty of seeking to understand behaviour from an outsiders' perspective, and illustrating how apparently irrational acts can be rational to those in the context. In this case, heavy drinkers balance the social risks of not participating in the practices associated with excessive alcohol consumption against longer term health risks.

In a departure from previous studies, this research also provides insight into techniques of counter-neutralisation used by students who rarely or never drink. Whereas students who drink heavily experience feelings of tension when considering the detrimental effects of alcohol consumption, these abstaining/near-abstaining students experience similar feelings in their attempts to maintain positive student identities which are against prevailing norms of what a 'typical student' life entails. Techniques of counter-neutralisation, or the rejection of neutralisations used by students who drank, are key facets of these abstaining/near-abstaining students' narratives of self and self-conflict resolution. However, techniques of counter-neutralisation are not fully internalised in all contexts. Like the heavy drinkers, these abstainers/near-abstainers often employ neutralisation techniques to account for past or sporadic heavy drinking experiences. In most accounts there is sufficient ambivalence and contradiction to suggest that these students' techniques represent compromising rather than demarcating solutions, which contrasts with Copes and Williams's (2007) 'techniques of affirmation' used by straightedgers.

Taken together, these findings suggest neutralisation theory, and its logical extension – counter-neutralisation – provides a useful framework for understanding patterns of thought and interpretive repertoires that (de)legitimise alcohol consumption in social settings. However, it is also important to note that as a non-etiological theory of norm-breaking behaviour (see Maruna and Copes 2005), neutralisation removes the explanatory problem only one step, leaving unresolved the issue of why some people employ these techniques and others do not (Hindelang 1974). Neutralisation techniques enable release from ethical restraints and thus the ability to 'drift in' and 'out' of unconventional courses of action (Matza 1964), but they do not explain what makes norm-breaking behaviour attractive in the first place (Minor 1981). In our studies, neutralisation techniques were less commonly used by students who seemed totally committed to norms in favour of alcohol consumption and they were rather oblivious to mainstream adult expectations (e.g. responsible, conscientious, etc.). Likewise, counter-neutralisation techniques do not appear as relevant to students that fully demarcate themselves from 'typical student' identifications. Both neutralisations and counter-neutralisations are more prevalent in the accounts of those students who drift in and out of alcohol consumption while attempting to protect their social identity and the integrity of their social situation (cf. Alonzo 1985).

Furthermore, the origins of neutralisation techniques stress their social nature and (de)legitimation within wider sociocultural systems. They are 'extensions of patterns of

thought prevalent in society rather than something created *de novo*' (Sykes and Matza 1957: 669). This is somewhat ironic given such techniques have found a 'second life' (Maruna and Copes 2005) in various cognitive-based interventions and correctional settings (from sex offender treatments to alcoholic anonymous meetings) which treat them as manifestations of individual erroneous thinking. As Maruna and Mann (2006) argue, this may itself be an example of 'cognitive distortion' given that outside institutional settings, excuse-making is widely viewed as normal and socially accepted behaviour. In this sense, neutralisations say more about a culture than an individual (Mills 1940). Drinkers' repertoire of available social, public and cultural narratives is ultimately limited (Griffin *et al.* 2009), but this does not suggest the potential inoculation of people against popular neutralising beliefs is, or should be, possible outside the broader sociocultural context in which they are enacted and become legitimised. As noted earlier, the theory has been more appropriately conceptualised as a significant component of sociological explanations of deviance (e.g. subcultural and social learning theories; Maruna and Copes 2005) rather than individual choice models. In this sense, it complements rather than competes with theorisations which take into account the social policy, environmental and sociocultural influences of health behaviour (Delormier *et al.* 2009).

The findings from this research carry important implications for public health interventions aiming to improve the social norms around alcohol consumption (HM Government 2007). Alcohol interventions should problematise the thinking that alcohol consumption is part of typical student identities and lifestyles (Piacentini and Banister 2006), and should also identify and de-legitimise those neutralisations which help maintain current (excessive) drinking levels. For instance, overemphasis on benefits such as socialisation, excitement and pleasure derived from drinking represent a neutralisation technique which is used pervasively among drinkers and is a prominent theme in alcohol advertising (e.g. Szmigin *et al.* 2008). In addition, based on the current findings, the need for anti-neutralisation-based interventions is pertinent not only due to their potential to act as dissonance-inducing strategies for drinking students but also as a means to reinforce consonance and confidence in those students who have already taken the decision to abstain or drink more sensibly.

A limitation of our methodological approach is that it did not allow extensive analysis of neutralisation usage among different sociodemographic groups. Although the methods used in Study 1 provided a key means to access discussions among friendship groups, the sampling approach resulted in a fairly homogenous sample (white, 19–21) being included in our study. The most recent data around levels of drinking among undergraduate UK students suggest that students of white ethnicity are more likely to consume alcohol at hazardous levels (Heather *et al.* 2011). For Study 2, there was wider ethnic representation, partially reflecting the fact that non-white students are more likely than white students to be abstainers, mainly for religious reasons (Heather *et al.* 2011). However, the still-high proportion of white students in Study 2 may reflect the extent to which abstinence/near-abstinence remains a minority practice among white students, and therefore abstainers/near-abstainers welcome the opportunity to talk about and reflect on their alcohol position. Gender analysis was undertaken, but did not reveal any notable patterns in the data, according with previous research reporting little or no indication of differential usage of neutralisation techniques based on gender (e.g. Bersoff 1999, Hendershott *et al.* 1999).

Despite the exploratory nature of our research, this article identifies the types of neutralisation and counter-neutralisation techniques which are accessible in students' minds, the key role they play in maintaining coherent identities and resolving potential conflicts, and

discusses their relevance for public policy initiatives aiming to promote a culture of sensible drinking (e.g. Hackley *et al.* 2008). Further research would usefully explore neutralisation and counter-neutralisation techniques by various class and ethnic strata, to illuminate sub-group variations, and add complexity to explanations offered by neutralisation theory. This may ultimately assist in identifying the most powerful means for de-legitimising neutralisations and reinforcing counter-neutralisations.

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Notes

- 1 The symbolic significance of alcohol consumption in defining lifestyles and social identities is not restricted to young people and their transition to adulthood. There is ample evidence alcohol consumption can communicate a variety of social identities relating, for instance, to masculinity (Morojele *et al.* 2006) and ethnicity (Ames and Rehbun 1998).
- 2 The StraightEdge is a philosophy of staying clean and sober, meaning refraining from using alcohol, tobacco, and any other recreational drugs; and sometimes extending to other practices, such as following a vegetarian or vegan diet, not using caffeine or prescription drugs, not engaging in promiscuous sex (Copes and Williams 2007).
- 3 <http://www.alcohollearningcentre.org.uk/LocalInitiatives/projects/projectDetail/?cid=6458>
- 4 In the focus group excerpts, Lynda and Sarah are the moderators.

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