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Women, Alcohol and Femininity

A Discourse Analysis of Women Heavy Drinkers' Accounts

ALISON ROLFE

University of Northampton, UK

JIM ORFORD

University of Birmingham, UK

SUE DALTON

Office for National Statistics, Titchfield, UK

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ADDRESS. Correspondence should be directed to:
DR ALISON ROLFE, Division of Psychology, School of Social Sciences, The University of Northampton, Boughton Green Road, Northampton, NN2 7AL, UK [Tel. +44 1604 892102; Fax +44 1604 722067; email: alison.rolfe@northampton.ac.uk]



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Abstract

Qualitative interviews were conducted with 24 women who were heavy drinkers, as part of a larger, longitudinal study of heavy drinking in the West Midlands of England. Critical discourse analysis was used to analyse the interviews, and resulted in the identification of two main discursive constructions: drink as self-medication, and drink as pleasure and leisure. However, women need to resist and negotiate stigmatizing subject positions of the 'woman drinker' in order both to justify their drinking and to protect their moral status as 'good women'.

Keywords

- *alcohol*
- *femininity*
- *stigma*
- *women's drinking*

Introduction

DRINKING is a marker of leisure and pleasure, but has historically been a gendered form of consumption. Women's drinking has been largely a taboo subject, and has been hidden from view within the private sphere of the home (Plant, 1997). From a feminist perspective, the public consumption of alcohol has been an important aspect of men's dominance over the use of public space and places of leisure. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, the British pub was considered a male institution, and women entering pubs were a threat to the sanctity of this institution (Hey, 1986). In consequence, it is argued that women have either been 'unsexed' or 'oversexed' by their entry into this male space—that is, seen as unfeminine, sexually available or sexually endangered (Day, Gough, & McFadden, 2004; Langhamer, 2003). Women's drinking has therefore been characterized historically as unfeminine, immoral, unrespectable and associated with uncontrolled sexual appetites (Plant, 1997).

Recent increases and/or visibility of British women's drinking may suggest that such condemnatory discourses are no longer prevalent. In contemporary Britain significant social changes appear to be occurring in the gendered nature of drinking, with a marked increase in weekly alcohol consumption among young women during the 1990s (Rickards, Fox, Roberts, Fletcher, & Goddard, 2004). Furthermore, in comparison with other European countries, the ratio of women's drinking to men's is smaller, with British men drinking 40 per cent more frequently than women. This is in marked contrast to countries such as Austria, Switzerland, Spain and the Czech Republic, where men drink at least 200 per cent more frequently than women (Makela et al., 2006). Plant and Plant (2006) argue that there is now a greater social acceptability of drinking in Britain, particularly among young women. Lyons, Dalton and Hoy (2006, p. 229), in their analysis of representations of alcohol consumption in magazines, found that women's magazines aligned alcoholic drinks with femininity, but drinking by young women itself with 'masculinity, adventure, professionalism and the public sphere', thereby reinforcing recent shifts in gender relations.

However, the degree to which British women's drinking is a cause for concern remains a matter for debate. The UK Department of Health (2007) reports that average consumption by women has fallen in Britain since 2003, and remains significantly below

that of men's. It can therefore be argued that women are not a high-risk group for alcohol problems, compared to men (Plant, 1997; Plant, Plant, & Mason, 2002). Recent discourse analytic research suggests a mixed picture in which British women drinkers are presented as modern and cool, yet are simultaneously vilified. Some authors, such as Day et al. (2004) have argued that there is currently a moral panic, particularly around women's binge drinking, which continues to be discursively constructed in highly gendered ways. Day et al. (2004, p. 167) claim that women's increasing entry into the public domains of paid work, pleasure and leisure over the past three decades has involved encroachment on traditionally male public space, which is resisted by 'all manner of "backlash" discourse and practice'. Their discourse analysis of British newspaper coverage found that women's drinking is most commonly constructed negatively, and that women were 'largely presented as unfeminine, risking their health, and even emasculating' (2004, p. 171). Skeggs (2005) similarly argues that the contemporary moral subject is formed through the figure of the 'immoral repellent woman'. She remarks that,

women's 'binge' drinking ... has been highlighted as a significant threat, not only to the state of the nation, but also to herself. To smoke, drink, be fat and publicly fight and/or participate in loud hen parties is a national sin. (2005, p. 967)

It can therefore be seen that there is widespread ambivalence about women's drinking, with it being viewed as part of women's increasing rights and equality, but at the same time as potentially harmful, if not dangerous.

From a Foucauldian perspective, these kinds of 'macro-level discourses' (Yardley, 1997) construct and position women who drink. Such discourses also form the resources which are available to women to draw upon, modify or resist in their talk about their own drinking, and that they use in positioning themselves as subjects (Coyle, 2007; Walton, 2007; Willig, 2000, 2001, 2008). However, despite the recent emergence of studies on media discourses of women's drinking, there is much less published literature on women's own accounts of their drinking. Just as there is currently the danger of a moral panic being created around women's binge drinking, there is equally a danger that women's problems with drinking may be minimized or ignored (Bloomfield, Gmel, & Wilsnack, 2006), making it difficult for women to seek treatment for alcohol-related

problems (Rhodes & Johnson, 1994). This may be, at least in part, a reason for the tendency for women's accounts to be under-researched. One notable exception is provided by Waterson (2000), whose qualitative study of women's drinking patterns in the transition to motherhood considers drinking as a 'rational choice' in certain social and cultural circumstances. While Waterson makes a valuable contribution, there is a need for further studies of women who drink heavily, including those of women drinkers in middle and late adulthood. This article therefore focuses on women's own talk about their drinking during interviews for a longitudinal study of heavy drinking. It examines some of the ways in which alcohol consumption is constructed as a gendered and sexualized activity in discourse and how women position themselves in relation to such discourses. These ways of talking about drink and drinking have implications for subjectivity and for alcohol interventions.

Method

Data used in this article form part of a much larger data set, being drawn from the Birmingham Untreated Heavy Drinkers Research Project. This project was commissioned by the UK Department of Health and designed as a longitudinal study of the 'natural history' of heavy drinking. Five hundred participants, both male and female, were recruited in 1997 from the English West Midlands community and were interviewed at two yearly intervals. All participants were drinking heavily (at least 50 UK units¹ of alcohol a week for men and 35 units for women, for more than half the weeks in the previous year). In 1997, they were aged between 25 and 55 years and had not received any alcohol-related treatment during the previous 10 years. Ethical approval for the study was sought and obtained from the University of Birmingham ethics committee.

Interviews used mixed quantitative and qualitative methods, with each interview including a semi-structured qualitative interview. Different qualitative interview topics were used at each wave of interviews, as different issues emerged as particularly significant and in need of further investigation. At the third wave of interviews, in 2001, 18 different qualitative topics were used over the course of the year. One set of qualitative interviews focused particularly on women and drinking, and a sub-sample of 24 women (out of a total of 91 women interviewed during the year) were interviewed on this topic. Between February and

May, female participants were selected for this interview topic using purposive sampling, to ensure a sample representing the range in terms of age and socio-economic status. Interviews were conducted by four members of the research team, all graduate psychologists trained in qualitative interviewing techniques. Interviews started with a general invitation for the participant to talk about her views on women and drinking, and on the role played by drinking in the lives of women. Where women did not do so spontaneously, they were also asked to relate their general views on women and drinking to their own experiences. This was followed by an exploration of the personal meanings of drinking for the women interviewed, and of the pleasures and drawbacks of drinking in the context of the women's lives.

Sample members were aged between 28 and 56 years old at the time of interview (mean = 42). Half were in occupational classes categorized as non-manual (managerial, technical and skilled non-manual) and half in manual occupational groupings.² Fourteen were in heterosexual relationships, two in lesbian relationships and eight were single at the time of interview. Six women had children living with them. Seventeen of the women were typically drinking 'heavily' at the time of interview (defined as at least 35 units in a typical week), with two women drinking over 100 units in a typical week. Mean weekly alcohol consumption among the sample (based on a self-report of a 'typical' week) was 50 units, with a range from three to 168 units. On average, they drank at 'binge drinking' levels (defined as at least seven units in one day) on three days in the previous week.

Interviews were fully transcribed, and analysis was conducted using a critical discourse analytic approach (Parker, 1992; Walton, 2007; Willig, 2000, 2001, 2008). Following Parker (1992, p. 5), discourse was defined as 'a system of statements which construct an object'. In this case, the discourses that women use are seen as constructing a particular account of women's drinking. The analytic process followed the steps outlined by Willig (2001, 2008). This involves identification of discursive constructions of the 'objects' of discourse—in this case, drink and drinking, within the texts. Links were then made to theory and to 'macro-level discourses' of drinking and of gender. Further analytic stages involve examining the action orientation of participants' talk, the subject positions made available by particular discourses and how participants negotiate seemingly contradictory discourses in their talk.

Analysis

Two main constructions of drink were identified in the women's accounts: as a form of self-medication, and as leisure and pleasure. In the first, alcohol is understood as a means of coping with emotional pain, depression or stressful social circumstances. In the second, drinking is constructed as a source of enjoyment, relaxation and reward, and this is associated in the women's talk with women's rights and increasing gender equality. In both these ways of talking, however, women need to justify further their drinking and to move between these different constructions of drink, in order to protect their moral status, and to present themselves as 'good women' as well as women who drink. They do this through a variety of discursive strategies, including appropriation, negotiation and resistance of stigmatizing subject positions, by contrasting their own actions and behaviour with those of other women and by employing a discourse of self-control.

Drink as self-medication

Drink is frequently talked about as having drug-like qualities, and as being used by women as a 'pick-me-up' and mood-altering substance, as a comfort and to help women to cope and to function. This construction also draws on a wider emotional discourse, since the desired state of mood-alteration is a means of coping with feeling and thinking too much, and with depression, anxiety, stress and loss.

Women tend to drink, if they do drink in excess, like I think I do, erm, it's more of a coping mechanism rather than, erm, you know—I may be wrong cos I haven't asked a man this—but a man's more for like, enjoyment. You know when he's out with the lads or out at work, and they have, you know, a few drinks, and it's more of a fun thing. But I think as a woman, if you drink in excess, or more than the norm, I think, I think it's like a crutch, you know, to try not to shut your feelings away. (P427)

In this excerpt, the speaker distinguishes between women drinking as a coping mechanism, and men drinking for 'enjoyment and fun'. This talk of drink as self-medication positions women drinkers as having serious reasons for their drinking, and also as using it to help them function better, rather than using it in a destructive manner. Women stress how they use the 'drug' to help them perform well in caring roles. In other words, it is presented as supporting their role as mothers and carers, rather than undermining it.

You can get a kick from it. It's like a drug, isn't it? A drug enhancement kick.

Yeah, yeah, and how do you think that helps?

Well I think you rely on the drug enough to make you feel a bit happier (*Mm*) and then maybe you can, er, get your, what you've got to get done and then you can sit down and have your dinner, sort your kids out and you can then relax. *Yeah. Yeah.*

But I think with a lot of women today there's a lot of pressure on them.

Mm, yeah, what kind of pressure do you think there is?

Well I think work, if a woman works, family, time because they're always rushing from A to B. (P015).

This way of talking about drinking to help a woman get through the day appears to draw on a medicalized discourse, in which women's problems are individualized and become the focus for drug therapies. A clear example is that of Benzodiazepines, which were constructed through medical discourse as helping housewives to deal with depression during the 1950s to 1970s (Metzi, 2003). This was popularized through the Rolling Stones song, 'Mother's little helper', in which a 'little yellow pill' helps mother on her way, 'gets her through her busy day'. While these lyrics represent an ironic and critical take on the widespread use of barbiturates during the 1960s, they also reflect a popular discourse of women using drugs/alcohol therapeutically. This is therefore a way of talking about women and substance use which has a long history, and which also relies on the binary division of men as strong (and therefore able to cope with day-to-day life) and women as more emotional and in need of 'something to lean on'. In the present study therefore, women draw upon this traditional way of talking about women, emotionality and medication. However, this is often used with a modern twist in which they emphasize that drink helps them to function more effectively and to be fully capable of carrying out their responsibilities as caring *and* working women.

Drink as leisure and pleasure

Drinking is also talked about as pleasure, leisure and reward. At one level, drinking is about simple pleasure and enjoyment of the taste. However, this association of drink with pleasure is also closely articulated with the concept of leisure and 'time out' from work, which has to be earned through hard work. Drinking is therefore understood as a form of reward.

If I have one I feel more relaxed. I feel more holiday mode. I feel work's finished. I've got a nice evening ahead of me. I always view it positively, you know, I like the sound of that cork coming out of the bottle you know so, I think it gives you a sense of well-being. (P064)

I suppose that, in my small way I have achieved my independence, and it's, I suppose it's a status thing. (P572)

I'm just thinking about eating. It is nice to sit around a table with a couple of friends and ... with lots of things on the table to eat and a few glasses of wine to wash it down. (P289)

This notion of drink as associated with pleasure and leisure has parallels with how women talk about food, and closely echoes the construction of chocolate as pleasure, comfort and reward in women's discourses of chocolate 'addiction' (Benford & Gough, 2006). Indeed, drink is sometimes constructed as a form of gastronomic and culinary pleasure in the women's accounts. In the third excerpt, the focus is on food and friendship, and the alcohol appears as almost an afterthought and as only having utility in relation to eating good food.

The construction of drink as leisure is also often closely articulated with a 'gender equality' discourse in the women's talk. The traditional association of drinking with leisure and with male public spaces means that, when talking about drink as pleasure and leisure, women's drinking is, at the same time, associated with freedom, rights and equality. This is contrasted with past generations of women for whom drinking was more strongly stigmatized.

Women just about want to enjoy themselves as much drinking, even getting drunk, as men. I mean I got many a friend who clearly could drink any bloke under the table. (P323)

Just like the feeling of freedom, the feeling of, erm, you know, cause really I'm free to drink what I want without anybody you know raising their eyebrows or anything. (P037)

Of course, now women are standing up for their rights, erm, you now, 'we are equal to you' and they're doing as they want to do now and I think it's bloody great. (P332)

In the first excerpt, women's entitlement to pleasure appears to require justification. The phrase, 'even getting drunk' seems to suggest that this is quite extreme behaviour, outside what would be expected from a woman. At the same time, the

speaker asserts women's equality to men through arguing that women are sometimes *better* than men at drinking to excess. In the second excerpt, the speaker closely associates drinking with a sense of freedom. Similarly, in the final extract, women's drinking is articulated with notions of women's rights and freedom of choice, and is seen as a source of celebration.

This construction of drink as pleasure and leisure may also function to normalize women's drinking. This is achieved by drawing on a liberal rights discourse, thereby asserting that drinking is part of freedom of choice. It is also achieved by presenting heavy drinking as what men have always done, and as commonplace now among women (as in the first excerpt above). In this way, the pathologization of the woman drinker is resisted.

Resisting and negotiating gendered identities

Where drinking is constructed as leisure and pleasure, however, a balancing act must be performed. Since the woman who goes out to drink is entering what has traditionally been a male space, it is a challenge for the speaker not to be positioned as manly, sexually promiscuous or lacking in respectability. Women negotiate this challenge in a number of different ways, including: taking up a 'lad' identity; preserving a feminine identity through adhering to gendered ways of drinking; and direct resistance of these gendered subject positions.

Interestingly, some of the women choose to position themselves as 'lads' or as 'manly', employing a discourse of drinking as masculine:

They drink pints anyway, so I think they're all manly these days aren't they?

Women are?

Yeah.

Ok.

Me personally.

What do mean by that?

Uh, it's obviously the company I'm in, I suppose, really. Uh, yeah, they're all lager louts (laughs).

Oh ok.

We're all lager louts together. (P288)

Here, the speaker makes a clear association between pint-drinking women and being 'manly'. Towards the

end of the excerpt she identifies her social group as 'lager louts', although the laughter suggests that this may be meant humorously or ironically. However, she repeats this in the final line, and positions herself within this group, through changing 'they're all lager louts' to 'we're all lager louts together'. So she positions herself as a 'manly lager lout', but does this by first establishing that this is the behaviour of all the women around her and is supported through a group identity.

At other points, women are protecting their own moral identities through positioning themselves as womanly and respectable, while other women drinkers are positioned as 'manly', 'unfeminine', 'lads' or 'ladettes' if they drink pints of beer, drink in pubs or engage in drunken behaviour.

I never drink pint glasses. (Right) Erm, I never drink out of a pint. I always have half glasses.

Right, so why is that? What's, what's the, sort of ...

Cause I don't think it's the womanly thing to drink, to sit there and drink out of a pint glass. It doesn't bother me if another woman's sat there, (No) drinking out of a pint glass, because my younger sister does. (Yeah) She drinks pints and she'll sit there with a pint glass, (Yeah) but to me it's just not the done thing. (Right) A woman has a half-pint glass [slight laugh] (Yeah) you know?

So, so it's kind of like when you have a drink, you're enjoying a drink but you want to enjoy it as a woman?

Yeah, yeah.

And you want ...

I don't want to look like er, not, not a slob, erm, cause that wouldn't be the word, would it? Erm [short pause] I dunno, I dunno what the word would be that you'd use for it but I just don't think that it looks right (Yeah) for a woman to be sat with a great big pint glass (Yeah) you know? (P332)

Here, the speaker positions herself as 'womanly' through her choice of glass. She struggles to articulate why she finds the image of the woman pint-drinker problematic. She tentatively uses the word 'slob', which has associations of laziness, slovenliness and vulgarity. However, in using it, she appears to be caught between the desire to present a liberal and supportive view of women's drinking practices ('it doesn't bother me if another woman's sat there drinking out of a pint glass'), and condemning this

behaviour. This may be why she uses it tentatively and appears to appeal to the interviewer for agreement or correction (as in 'that wouldn't be the word, would it?'). When such agreement is not forthcoming she then settles for it just not looking 'right'.

At other points, women explicitly resist this positioning of women drinkers as not respectable or manly, and equally resist what is seen as the continuing marginalization of women from public drinking venues.

Men don't like it do they? ... You'd always get looks from men as though 'Oh you know, is she on the game'? (P015)

When you think of ladette, you don't think of pretty, female, (inaudible word), slim, tall, whatever curvaceous whatever. You don't think of, I think of someone in a boiler suit with their paints, and you know no one wants to really be like that. So I think the stigmatization comes from all these stereotypes really. (P323)

In these excerpts, women directly identify what they see as common stigmatized subject positions of women drinkers, and in identifying them, resist them.

Use of these different strategies of appropriation, accommodation and resistance at different points in an interview can sometimes lead to apparent contradictions. For example, the following excerpt is taken from later on in the interview with P288, who had commented that women are 'all manly these days' (see above).

Erm you've also said that women are more manly these days. Could you tell me a bit about why you might think women (are like that)?

More manly? (Yeah). Well they, I wouldn't say more manly. Well, I guess I am saying more manly. I'm contradicting myself here.

Don't worry, don't worry.

There's more house men, erm, men about now, isn't there? There's more women at work now. Erm. (P288)

Despite having stated this earlier, when her comment (that women 'are more manly these days') is repeated back to her by the interviewer, the assertion that women are 'more manly' does not seem to fit comfortably, and the speaker is aware of the contradiction she appears to be making. One interpretation of this is that her earlier remark was made in the spirit of bravado or irony. When presented back to her by the interviewer, it may have taken on stigmatizing

connotations. Again, the speaker then struggles to make sense of this contradiction, but attempts to do so through drawing on a gender equality discourse, in which men are taking up 'female' roles as much as women are entering male space.

Self-control and self-surveillance

In both of the main discursive constructions of drinking outlined in this article, women need to protect their moral identities through demonstrating self-control. Where drinking is constructed as self-medication, the speaker runs the risk of being positioned as an 'addict'. If drink is constructed as pleasure and leisure, there is a risk of association with the folk devil of the rough, binge drinking woman exhibiting 'out of control' public behaviour. Since there are dangers of stigmatized subject positions relating to each of these constructions of drink, women may move between the two discourses in ways that allow them to resist both the identities of addict and 'rough' binge drinker.

Women consuming a range of foods and substances have been found to employ a discourse of addiction (see, for example, Benford & Gough, 2006, on 'chocaholics' and Gillies & Willig, 1997, on women as cigarette 'addicts'). For the woman heavy drinker, however, use of a discourse of addiction would threaten to undermine her moral status, since the alcoholic woman has historically been a figure of pity, condemnation or disgust. Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, there is no explicit recourse to a discourse of addiction in the women's accounts. Alternatively, drinking may be described as a 'habit', which hints at addiction, but without connotations of compulsion or obsession, and which can be controlled if the woman chooses to do so.

Quite a lot of it is just it has become habitually what I do. And I enjoy it, I mean I wouldn't you know, you don't drink something if I'm not going to enjoy the taste of it. Um, so again, if there was, if the only alcohol available was something that I didn't like, I wouldn't drink it. (P376)

In this excerpt, we see the speaker employing the notion of a habit, but immediately following this by commenting that she is not compelled to drink, since she would only do so if she was going to enjoy it. In doing so, she appears to be making a distinction between drink as a habit and as an addiction.

Equally, women need to protect themselves against the image of the publicly drunken, unruly woman. This is achieved primarily through a

process of othering, in which women are able to project the unacceptable face of women's drinking onto other (frequently younger) women, leaving their own identities unspoiled. Drinking is talked about as being perfectly acceptable as long as it is controlled, and controlled drinking by the woman herself is contrasted with the rowdy disorder of other drunken women.

As a woman I don't like you know, I don't really like to go out and get drunk in public cos I don't think that's the, you know, I don't think it looks very nice. Obviously women do do that and I think, you know, it doesn't look very becoming. (P427)

I think some of em go stupid, when they've had too much to drink. Erm and as you say a lot of women when they have been drinking, when they've had too much can get very bitchy you know which er, which I don't agree with. ... And with, with a woman, when they've been drinking there is no reasoning with them. You can't, you can't reason with them, you know. They are right and that's all that matters. (P332)

Most of the women consider themselves to be predominantly home drinkers, and this marks them out from the unbecoming (indecent, immodest) behaviour of the publicly drunken woman. Equally, in the second excerpt above, drunken women are positioned as 'stupid', 'bitchy', irrational and argumentative.

Self-control is considered important in identity protection, and is also an individualized process, which can be seen as forming part of a wider project of self-surveillance.

It's easier for women to drink. I've often thought about this. If I was drinking a bottle a day on the sofa, my husband wouldn't even know. Well, he might know because of my behaviour but, you know, so far as, as far as getting the wine and bringing it home was concerned, I mean, there's no control. You are your own control, aren't you? (P387)

This final comment summarizes one of the key ways in which the women talked about the importance of self-governance around drinking. The point being made here is that, while there used to be patriarchal control of women's drinking, the need for control has now shifted to the individual woman subject. The concept of control is a recurrent thread running through the women's talk, and this resonates with previous research in health psychology, in which a perceived need for self-control has been found to be an important aspect of contemporary 'expert' health discourses (Willig, 2000). That this discourse is

present in the women's accounts may be evidence that a meta-discourse of self-regulation runs through both 'expert' and lay discourses of health. However, there is also a gendered aspect to a discourse of control, since it is seen as particularly morally problematic for women to be 'out of control' rather than a self-governing moral subject (Skeggs, 2005).

Discussion

Two main ways of talking about women's drinking have been identified: drink as self-medication, and drink as pleasure and leisure. Despite the apparent contrasts and contradictions between these two discursive constructions, they reflect the variety of diverse meanings of alcohol for different people, and also replicate a wider cultural ambivalence about women's drinking. In constructing drinking in these ways, women also need to perform a balancing act in order to protect against a stigmatized identity—particularly that of 'manly woman', 'unrespectable or irresponsible' woman, 'addict' or more generally 'woman out of control'. Thus, the women's discourses of drinking support the view that there is now greater social acceptability of drinking (Plant & Plant, 2006). However, they also support the view of Day et al. (2004) that moral discourses around drinking continue to be highly gendered, and that alcohol consumption continues to be a site for the reproduction of traditional discourses around femininity and sexuality.

The ways in which the women talk about drinking can be seen to reflect the complex and changing state of gender relations at the start of the 21st century, with women gaining equality but significant power imbalances remaining in place. Within this rapidly shifting picture, women who appear to be encroaching on male space still have to negotiate power inequalities, and alcohol consumption becomes one site for the re-working of masculinities and femininities. Such inequalities are evidenced in discourse through the 'spoiling' or forfeiting of feminine identities. One of the ways that women negotiate this appears to be by projecting the unacceptable face of heavy drinking onto others—particularly onto young women. Having said this, there is clearly space for women to construct more positive subject positions for themselves as women who drink, and to begin to embrace a range of femininities.

The focus of women's talk is on drinking-related behaviours, and it is apparent that a discourse of

health is virtually absent from their accounts. Recent moral panics over the young binge-drinking woman may take the focus of concern from a health debate onto a social order debate. One side-effect of this is that it enables older, more steadily heavy drinking women to consider themselves much less of a 'problem' than apparently extreme young binge-drinkers. More focus on long-term health consequences may be needed to prevent chronic heavy drinking, and to engage this group of drinkers. Given the prevalence of a discourse of self-control in the women's accounts, and parallels between the ways that women talk about their consumption of food and drink, it may be that there is a place for a 'weight-watchers' style approach to alcohol self-help programmes, which may appeal to women who identify as needing advice and support to control their drinking 'habit', without the need to enter the formal treatment arena.

In terms of accessing alcohol treatment services, the picture also appears mixed. The presence of a psychological or emotional way of talking about drinking could be considered a protective factor, since it considers drinking in its psychological and social context and may provide an explanation that could enable someone drinking at harmful levels to be able to access psychological and other support services in order to consider alternative ways of coping. However, it could equally be used to support a position in which drinking is seen as a very successful way of coping, and the potential for harm to health from very heavy drinking may then be denied.

What this study does clearly show is that many women drinkers continue to feel stigmatized, and this may be an obstacle to many women accessing treatment services, since to access treatment may imply being an 'addict' and being 'out of control'. While this stigmatization of alcohol treatment is also experienced by men, it takes on an additional layer for women, due to the ways in which the heavy drinking woman is positioned in discourse. For women who do enter treatment, these findings may also suggest the importance of including positive as well as negative talk about alcohol consumption, since these form an important part of women's own talk about drinking.

Notes

1. A UK unit of alcohol = 10 ml or 8g of pure alcohol. One unit is equivalent to half a pint of 3.5 per cent beer, or a small (125 ml) glass of wine at 9 per cent.
2. Based on current or most recent occupation.

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Author biographies

ALISON ROLFE is Senior Lecturer in Counselling Psychology at the University of Northampton, UK. She previously worked as a Research Fellow at the University of Birmingham and project manager of the Birmingham Untreated Heavy Drinkers Research Project. She has interests in the areas of alcohol and health, gender and sexuality. She has previously published on alcohol and aggression, processes of drinking change and teenage motherhood.

JIM ORFORD has researched and written about alcohol and other potentially addictive behaviours throughout his career, and now heads the Alcohol,

Drugs, Gambling & Addiction Research Group in the School of Psychology at the University of Birmingham where he is Emeritus Professor of Clinical and Community Psychology. Among his best known works is *Excessive appetites: A psychological view of addictions* (2nd edn, Wiley, 2001).

SUE DALTON who was a former manager of the Birmingham Untreated Heavy Drinkers Research Project is currently working for the Office for National Statistics on the 2011 Census.
