

Adolescents' sense-making of alcohol-related risks: The role of drinking situations and social settings

Anu Katainen, Anna-Sofia Lehto & Antti Maunu

Abstract

The article explores how young people understand the risks of alcohol use and how these understandings are associated with differing drinking situations and social settings. By taking account of situational factors, the aim is to demonstrate how young people have highly nuanced notions of drinking styles that suit different drinking situations and of associated risks. The data for the research were gathered in 18 group interviews with Finnish ninth graders aged 14–15 years. Short film clips portraying young people in different drinking situations were used as stimulus material for the interviews. Data analysis focussed on the risk factors related to the social situations illustrated in the film clips. The results show that young people's risk assessments are not based on alcohol itself, but the magnitude of risk is estimated in relation to the social setting of the drinking situation. What is relevant for young people is whether the social situation allows them to make choices with which they feel comfortable. At the opposite pole of problem drinking was social drinking for the purpose of having fun together with other people in such a way that one remains in control of the drinking situation. From a prevention point of view, a key implication is that awareness of the risks is closely associated with situational and social factors. However, the awareness of those risks does not necessarily prevent young people from drinking because they may be accepted as part of the drinking experience.

Introduction

Despite the preventive measures and concern related to youth drinking, alcohol is still a rather important part of young people's lives in many countries (Järvinen and Room, 2007). From young people's point of view, drinking can be a self-evident part of partying and socializing, and drinking experiences with peers can be considered a form of symbolic capital which distinguishes popular people from unpopular ones (Demant and Ostergaard, 2007; Järvinen and Gundelach, 2007; Percy et al., 2011). Previous qualitative research on youth drinking cultures has brought out important features about the meaning of adolescent drinking from their own point of view, but less is known

on how young people understand drinking related risks and how these understandings are influenced by differing social settings. The study examines how adolescents make sense and articulate the risky elements of different kinds of drinking situations. Especially the social aspects of the understandings are emphasized: what kinds of social relations and interactions are considered risky and dangerous in various drinking situations?

The research evidence suggests that young people in Finland view their own alcohol use in a rather positive light, despite continuing efforts to get them to cut back on consumption. European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) has shown that Finnish youths report far more positive than negative consequences from their alcohol consumption (Hibell et al., 2009). Some parallel ideas have also been presented in British discussions. For example, Seaman and Ikegwonu (2010) have paid attention to sociable, positively experienced aspects of youth drinking, and De Visser and Smith (2007) have claimed that young British men view drinking as a positive and negative activity simultaneously, a fun but risky business. However, the mainstream of risk studies has not paid too much attention to the drinkers' subjective understandings of the risks of drinking and how they are related to other, possibly more positive aspects of alcohol use.

In a common sense understanding of the term, risk refers to the probability of harmful or unwanted consequences. In the context of youth studies, the concept of risk has had a central role in at least three senses. First, youth as a stage of life that is associated with various risks. For instance, experimenting with drugs and alcohol in early youth can be seen as indicators of a disadvantaged status and are associated with adverse social and health outcomes later in life (e.g. Dawson et al., 2008; Hoel et al., 2004; Hurrelmann and Richter, 2006). On the other hand, risk-taking can be regarded as an integral part of youth. Seen from a psycho-social point of view, risk-taking by young people is a behaviour that belongs to this particular stage of life: it is grounded, on the one hand, in youth cultural tendencies that encourage risk-taking and, on the other hand, in physiological changes occurring during puberty and exposing young people to risky behaviours (France, 2000). Third, young people's life courses have been interpreted in the frameworks of risk society, neo-liberalism and the governance of youth. Elevated concern about young people and risks can be seen as an integral part of the governing of late modern societies (Kelly, 2003). At the same time, young people's position when confronting uncertainties in their lives has also changed: while more and more uncertainties are defined in terms of individualized risks, responsibility for risk management can be delegated to the individual concerned (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007).

A crucial distinction for the purposes of this article is that between objective and subjective risk (Leigh, 1999). Objective risk may refer to epidemiological risk calculations, for instance, that is, population-level calculations of the probabilities of certain adverse events happening. Subjective risk, on the other hand, refers to the assessments people make about the magnitude of the risks they face, and to the role of risk information in various choices. The 1990s debate on risk society has also fostered growing research interest in people's own risk perceptions. The subjective side of risk has been addressed for example in terms of voluntary risk-taking (Lupton and Tulloch, 2002; Parker and Stanworth, 2005) and edgework (Lyng, 1990).

The voluntary risk-taking perspective has also been employed to study substance abuse among young people (Dobson et al., 2006; Plant and Plant, 1992). One central interpretation regarding the attitude of young people to drinking and to risks is that the presence of risks is an important part of binge drinking. In Finland, Vaaranen and Wieloch (2002) have studied risk-taking by young men in connection with intentional reckless driving. Speeding and driving under the influence of alcohol were related to a quest for collective excitement and part of a process of building masculine identity and group solidarity. According to Engineer et al. (2003), getting drunk is associated with testing and transgressing boundaries of everyday life, with personal freedom and a voluntary loss of control. Drunken mishaps become stories that are told to others, which in turn contribute to motivating more drinking (Griffin et al., 2009).

Especially in the United Kingdom, risk-taking associated with drinking cultures has also received interpretations which relate youth drinking to the on-going societal, political and economic changes (e.g. Hayward and Hobbs, 2007; Hollands, 2002; Riley et al., 2010). Fiona Measham (2004) draws a parallel between the 1990s drug wave and the surge in binge drinking among British youths in the 2000. In partying cultures, young people are now drinking with the specific intent of getting seriously drunk and achieving an altered state of mind. While drug use has shown a downward trend since peaking in the 1990s, new alcoholic beverages specifically targeted at young people and at excessive bingeing on these beverages have emerged in their place. According to Measham, both the spread of drug use in club cultures and young people's binge drinking over weekends represent a form of hedonistic consumption that is typical of consumer society. Christine Griffin et al. (2009) have for their part suggested that the growth of binge drinking among British youths and the associated risk-taking can be seen as part of a neo-liberal turn in society, which has put questions of individual responsibility and autonomous self-control at the centre of a renewed image of the ideal citizen. Heavy boozing may thus represent resistance and refusal to assume the role of a rational

and responsible subject. In other words, young people's risk-taking can be taken as a reaction to various uncertainties in their lives: by taking risks young people want to try and find their own place in the world and to escape the sense of meaninglessness (Le Breton, 2004).

When transposed to a Finnish context, the interpretations offered by British scholars about youth binge drinking raise some interesting questions. First of all, heavy drinking among young people is no novel phenomenon, and therefore can hardly be described as a manifestation of neo-liberal ideologies or hedonistic consumption culture. Indeed, one may well ask whether out-of-control drinking among youngsters today differs in meaning from a few decades ago. Second, there is nothing new in young people using binge drinking and everyday transgressions to set themselves apart from the responsible adult world. In the case of Finnish youth, we also need to ask whether they associate risks with drinking in the first place. Can binge drinking among Finnish youths be interpreted as voluntary risk-taking, and does drinking gain its meaning in the frame of risk-taking?

In this article, young people themselves are let to explain how they define the risks of alcohol use. The data consist of group interviews with Finnish ninth graders aged 14–15 years. Reception analytical group interview (RAGI) method was utilized as a data collection technique as it stimulates interviewee's own meaning making in interaction with other participants. The idea of *sense-making of risk* by Wall and Olofsson (2008) is utilized as distinct from *risk perception*, which is more individually oriented and refers to cognitive processes in risk assessment. Sense-making of risk has more to do with the meaning that risk assumes when it is weighed from young people's own point of view, and against the conditions of their own everyday life. In this sense, risk does not refer just to the individual's assessment of the probability of adverse events, but it is also influenced by both social relations and interaction, as well as by more general ideas of the world and the place of young people in it.

Data and methods

The data for this research consist of 18 group interviews with Finnish ninth graders aged 14–15 years. A total of 89 students were interviewed, 49 girls and 40 boys. The interviews were conducted in Helsinki in 2010–2011. The meanings given by young people to alcohol use have been explored in earlier group interview studies as well (e.g. Demant and Järvinen, 2006; Jaatinen, 2000). A common difficulty in these studies is that the presence of one or more adults inevitably influences the way young people talk in the interview situation. It can make them cautious, especially when they are talking about something that in principle is out of bounds for them. On the

other hand, the situation favours those young people who already have experience of alcohol use (Demant and Järvinen, 2006). In order to constrain these problems, we chose to use the RAGI method (Sulkunen and Egerer, 2009), which utilizes film clips and support questions as stimuli for discussion and which therefore helps to minimize interviewer influence on group interaction and allows the interviewees to produce and express their views as freely as possible. Ultimately, the choice of method was motivated by the goal to identify the understandings informing young people's interpretations of drinking situations and associated risks. On the other hand, the RAGI method allows space for intragroup interaction, which is obviously reflected in the discourses produced by the groups. The conversation culture evolving in the interview situation is largely determined by group interaction (Kitzinger, 1994).

The stimulus material for the group interviews consisted of short film clips showing young people in different kinds of drinking situations. The clips provided not only fuel but also give direction for the group discussions. The interviewer's role in the RAGI method is just to lay down the ground rules at the start of the interviews and to show a new film clip when the discussion starts to dry up (Sulkunen and Egerer, 2009). To support the flow of discussion, the participants were given a list of questions that prompted them to consider the role of the individuals appearing in the clips, how realistic the episodes were, and what might have happened before and after those episodes.

1. Please describe what happens in the scene and what kind of persons appear in it.
2. What do you think might have happened before this event?
3. Imagine what might happen immediately after this scene.
4. Please describe how the same person or persons appear 10 years later.
5. In your opinion, can something like this happen in real life?

The interviewees were instructed to answer the questions, but also to discuss the clips freely among themselves. The aim was to create as informal a discussion environment as possible.

The groups taking part in the study were recruited from upper secondary schools from both high income and low income areas in Helsinki. With the exception of two all-girl groups, the interview groups were mixed gender. There were three to six students from the same class in each group. The interviews were conducted during school hours in vacant classrooms or other function rooms and lasted on average 40 minutes, roughly the same as an ordinary class in school. Most discussions were succinct and moved very quickly, but were nevertheless rich in content. One film clip provided enough fuel for discussion for 5–10 minutes. All the interviews were recorded and

transcribed verbatim for analysis. Permission to conduct the research and collect the data was obtained from the relevant education authorities in Helsinki. The head teachers and teachers of the schools taking part in the study helped to recruit the interviewees. Invitations to take part in the study were sent either to the whole class or to randomly selected students. Students who wanted to participate were required to have a signed parental permission. No personal data were collected on the students in connection with the interview. The citations given as examples were selected with a view to ensuring the anonymity both of the schools and the individual interviewees taking part.

There were always the two adult researchers present in the research situation. Even though it was made clear that everything said in the interviews would be treated in the utmost confidence and we tried to make ourselves as inconspicuous as possible while showing the clips, our presence in the interview room was likely to influence the content of discussions. The interview situation was also influenced by the school environment. Some students clearly approached the group interview as if it were a school assignment that they must complete as quickly as possible. On the other hand, the group interview discussions clearly differed from the way that the students talked in class, where the goal usually is to achieve smooth and seamless collaboration. In the interviews, the students used swear words, talked over one another and sometimes were quite scathing in their responses to comments by others. The discussions seemed to flow most smoothly when the students knew each other well and when at least some of them were friends. The interviewees could have dropped out at any time and in practice they had an option to stay quiet during the interview. Some students chose not to take part in the discussion although they were present in the situation.

The film clips shown to the interviewees were selected with a view to gaining a maximally representative sample of young people's drinking situations, both in terms of drinking styles and social relations within the group compositions. The film clips are described in Table 1.

Table 1. Film clips used as stimulus material.

Table 1. Film clips used as stimulus material.

Film	Scene	Social situation
<i>Mean Creek (USA 2005)</i>	Male teenagers are drinking on a boat. One of them offers the little one a can of beer.	Small group
<i>Fucking Åmål (SWE 1998)</i>	In a home party, a young girl disappointed by love affairs drinks from the bottle and throws up.	Large group
<i>My Summer of Love (UK 2004)</i>	A girl is taking a bath while drinking and smoking.	Alone
<i>Fjorton Suger (SWE 2004)</i>	Two girls in a bedroom drink and then sing and dance on the bed.	Two girls
<i>Krampack (SPA 2002)</i>	During dinner a boy is invited by an adult to take a glass of wine.	Family
<i>Eurotrip (USA 2004)</i>	A group of friends are drinking and dancing in a disco.	Small group

One of the difficulties we had in selecting suitable film clips was that typically, scenes of drinking involving young people are portrayed in a negative light. Drinking usually leads to problems, particularly in the case of girls. In many scenes, therefore, there is a built-in sense that something untoward may follow as a result of drinking, or that the drinking has been prompted by some unpleasant occurrence. This impression was supported by the list of prompt questions given to the interviewees, which encouraged them to consider the consequences of drinking. On the other hand, group interviewees are not restricted to building their interpretations based on the clues offered by the film clips or the questions, but they are free to actively challenge them. For instance, some of the students jokingly talked about the possibility of the characters appearing in the clips becoming alcoholics.

The data were coded using Atlas.ti software. Comments in which our young interviewees talked about the adverse consequences of alcohol use were interpreted as risk talk (e.g. Katainen, 2006). The students themselves rarely used the concept of risk, but their notions of risk were reflected in their comments about how safe or unsafe or dangerous they thought the situation was, or about the possibility of accidents happening. Comments such as *'that could all go horribly wrong'*, *'it could even be worse than that'* or *'that's not very sensible'* can be taken to reflect what they thought about the events concerned. In what follows, we use these perspectives to see what kinds of risks our young interviewees associated with alcohol use in different drinking situations, and especially with the social settings related to drinking. Our approach is an analysis of subject positions. The aim is to examine what kinds of agents young people identify in high-risk drinking situations, how they position themselves in these situations and what kinds of relationships they identify between themselves and other agents (Törrönen, 2001).

Findings

Ninth graders in Finland seem to be aware of many of the risks associated with alcohol use. They take some of them more seriously than others. On the other hand, some situations were considered safer and less risky than others. Furthermore, some groups took a very positive stance on drinking, while others tended to focus almost exclusively on the risks. Among the adverse health risks of drinking, the interviewees drew attention to various short-term physical effects – nausea, vomiting, passing out and hangovers – as well as more serious, one-off physical consequences such as sexual abuse, accidents and the resulting possibility of death. All in all, however, our young interviewees took a rather light-hearted view of the health hazards of drinking: they just go with the territory, or are distant, theoretical harms that happen to other people. They made no mention of long-term physical illnesses. This confirms that for the analysed adolescents, the negative consequences of drinking are tightly bound with actual, real-time drinking situations. Thus also their risk understandings are embedded in their understandings of actual drinking situations, meaning that they do not view risks as detached from other elements of drinking situations.

According to our analysis, a crucial factor that affects our interviewees' perception of risks in different drinking situations is the number and role of other persons present in them. This tells us that our interviewees understand the risks mostly as social, in addition to being situational. The analysis is therefore presented by discussing first the risks the interviewees associate with situations in which people are drinking alone or with one other person. We then move on to analyse young people's understandings of situations where people are drinking together with adults. Finally, we consider drinking situations involving a large group of young people.

Drinking alone

Our interviewees were taken aback and appalled by the idea of drinking alone. Earlier studies have similarly shown that young people take a very critical and judgemental attitude towards drinking alone (Jørgensen et al., 2007):

B2: And I'm sure in real life this doesn't happen nearly as often as this kind of partying. I mean this is the kind of stuff you see in the tabloids.

G3: Mm. I'm sure quite a lot of people do drink ... to kind of drown their sorrows.

B2: Yeah but I'm sure not as often when they're happy.

G1: Yeah and I don't think they're like people our age or very young. I'd say these people are ... I'd say 40 or something ... perhaps men in their forties whose wives have left them and then their whole life is ruined because they no longer have a wife who cooks for them and who does their laundry and cleans out the home and changes the linen.

B2: Or if they drink to drown their sorrows, then I don't think many people would choose to do that in a bath ... perhaps they'd choose a safer place.

G1: Mm. And I think there was quite a lot of water in there ... if she passes out she'll probably drown in there.

B6: That might have been the idea.

G1: Yeah ...

B6: That's why she was in the bath.

(Group 1: My Summer of Love)

In this excerpt, our interviewees feel the scene where a girl is smoking and drinking alone in the bath is so serious and so exceptional that it might end up in the tabloid news. The proximity of water elicited the possibility of accidental drowning, but the possibility of intentional drowning was also considered. On the other hand, it was also thought that drinking alone might be explained by loneliness or depression and in this sense be a reaction to one's own negative emotions.

Furthermore, it seems that 'drinking to drown one's sorrows' was primarily associated with adults rather than young people. In order to reach an informed risk assessment, our young people consider the age of the girl appearing in the scene. Had she been of legal age, the situation would have been considered safer and taken perhaps as a portrayal of relaxation, but as it was the setting was considered serious and threatening.

In the world of young people, then, drinking alone is a frightening departure from normal. From this, the inference can be drawn that alcohol has a profoundly social meaning for young people. Drinking has to do with experiencing and doing things together. As yet, alcohol has no functions associated with self-medication. If a young person has no one to drink with, he or she is fundamentally lonely and unhappy. The long-term risk from this is the possibility of alcoholism:

B2: This person can easily become an alcoholic if she starts to drown her sorrows with drink and ...

G1: Yeah. Good because if you never do anything about your sadness then it'll never go away either.

(Group 1: My Summer of Love)

In this connection, however, the most serious risk of drinking is manifested in the absence of other people from the situation, particularly the absence of equal and caring friends. This indicates, first, that drinking together is considered the safest way because it is expected that the group will always look after a friend who is in a more vulnerable state (Jaatinen, 2000). Second, young people may associate drinking alone with lacking self-control. As for cultural norms that govern drinking behaviour, an ability to exercise self-control can be seen as a central feature of appropriate drinking behaviour as distinct from uncontrolled, problematic drinking (Järvinen, 2003; Katainen and Rolando, 2014). In this sense, drinking alone can be seen as risky as it refers to the uncontrolled nature of the drinking situation.

Twosome drinking

Not only drinking alone but also twosome drinking was considered rather strange and boring. Indeed, it was generally considered a preparatory stage for a bigger party. The scene where two girls are drinking together at home was associated with the risk of being caught by parents, but also with the translation of drunken whims into utter recklessness because of the absence of outside controls:

G1: They were having a pretty good time, so you don't know what they might still come up with.

G4: Yes they seemed to be having fun.

G5: Mm.

G2: All sorts of weird stuff.

G1: 'I know, you hang out of the window and I'll hold you from your legs'

[...]

G1: Yes, but if they had gone out, then something might have happened. I mean they were wearing pretty revealing clothes.

G4: Mm. They were.

(Group 8: Fjorton Suger)

B1: I was all the while expecting when they were jumping up and down on that bed that one or the other was going to fall over, bang their head and die. But it didn't happen.

(Group 9: Fjorton Suger)

Another risk associated with twosome drinking was that in the absence of a larger posse, the girls might have been exposed to various dangers when they went out. It was thought that the drinking situation might break down and lead to one or the other of the friends passing out or physically injuring herself. Even the possibility of death was raised. Passing out may itself be interpreted in our young interviewees' talk as a potential risk in twosome drinking. When two friends are drinking all by themselves in a confined space, they do not have the safety net that comes with the presence of a group. Indeed, our young interviewees considered twosome drinking, without the protection afforded by a larger group, to involve largely similar risks as drinking alone.

Drinking in the company of parents

The interviewees made a firm and clear distinction between drinking by adults and drinking by young people. Adults might have a drink alone just to relax and alleviate stress, but this was not considered appropriate for young people. Partying, on the other hand, was considered to belong to a particular stage of life in youth, to be young people's privilege, and would pass with adulthood. Our interviewees' interpretations of drinking with adults over a meal show that even alcohol consumption at home does not necessarily represent a safe drinking situation. In this case, the risks of drinking are associated not so much with the consequences of young people's own drinking, but the threat stems mainly from the situation where parents either pressure a young person into drinking or themselves get too drunk:

B1: And what happens straight after this, it's probably a downward spiral and then someone will say something humiliating to the boy in addition to that he was humiliated for writing the book, and then they'll go home to sleep. I'd guess.

(Group 2: *Krampack*)

G1: Yeah and the father wanted to try to make his son appear older, by offering him a glass of wine.

G4: Yes.

G1: And yeah, you know, do you want to have some, 'of course he wants to'. I mean he doesn't even know if he wants to have some.

G4: Right. He's making all the decisions on his behalf.

(Group 8: *Krampack*)

The scene in which adults and a young boy are having a glass of wine with a meal was mainly interpreted as sensible drinking and a 'normal' drinking situation, but there was some talk about whether the boy in the scene could exercise his own will. Drinking with parents was considered a result of adult pressure, or it was thought the youngster in the scene was just being polite in accepting the offer of a glass of wine. However, the interviewees acknowledged that the scene represented typical features of Southern European drinking cultures. They made a distinction between Nordic and Southern drinking traditions and considered the situation to be appropriate and normal for people from Southern Europe. When set to Finnish context, young person's drinking in the presence of adults was regarded as a consequence of social pressure rather than an expression of the youngster's own will.

One of Jaatinen's (2000) key observations was that young people's drinking cultures in Finland are detached from the world of adults. Based on the interpretations offered of this film clip, one might add that adults have multiple roles in young people's experiences. Adults have a restrictive effect on alcohol consumption because when you're drinking in their company, '*you don't get blind drunk*', and of course adults also represent the risk of being caught. Furthermore, adults may represent pressure to urge young people to drink against their own will. Drinking in the company of adults, therefore, might risk young people's chances to exercise their own will.

The safety and dangers of a large group

Based on the discussions reviewed above it seems clear that for the ninth graders interviewed, drinking in a large group of peers was considered to provide important protection against the risks of drinking. This lends further support to the notion that in the world of young people drinking is a social activity and any deviations from that norm are considered inherently threatening. It is interesting that despite this, our ninth graders associate risks even with drinking in larger groups.

One of the things that youngsters like to do when they go out partying or clubbing is to get to know boys or girls they have not met before (Demant, 2007). However, on the reverse side of this is the risk of exposure to malicious intentions, including sexual abuse by other young people or adults:

G2: [After the scene shown in the clip] they'll probably take a taxi and go home. I'm sure he won't want to drive.

G1: Or then something completely different may happen. I mean that's one big party.

G2: Party. She can get raped.

G4: Yeah and then if ...

G1: There were these blokes who were dancing with her.

(Group 8: *Eurotrip*)

On the one hand, then, strangers at a party are welcome visitors, but on the other hand getting to know them may involve serious risks. Another risk associated with drinking in a large group is the tendency of mass irrationality. Once they have had a few drinks too many, the group may descend into doing things they later have to regret:

B1: And what happened straight after this? Probably at least some of the people who were there will be sick afterwards, some of them will pass out. And then these people who were mucking about on the couch, they'll feel a bit ashamed when they think back about the day before, probably.

B3: And you could see this sort of party ending with the police turning up and saying that's enough.

(Group 2: *Fucking Åmål*)

When they are out having fun with friends, it is important for young people to strike a balance between being part of the group and going over the top. They need to show good self-control so that they can enjoy themselves and drink successfully. In order to extract every ounce of fun they can get from drinking, it is crucial that they retain their capacity to function. In other words, as far as young people in Finland are concerned, 'good drinking' does not involve complete recklessness or a search for extreme risks, but getting the balance right and achieving just the right level of drunkenness – not too much and not too little. Getting legless and comatose is perceived by young people as a risk, an indication that the drinking situation can go all wrong (see also Törrönen and Maunu, 2007a).

Striking the right balance is considered a skill that requires practice. That is why drunken mishaps, according to our young interviewees, belong to the stage of life that is youth. That is why they are not too concerned about occasional drunken misdemeanours; it is just a passing phase. Going over the top might also provide important lessons, if it causes a sense of remorse afterwards.

A third risk that young people associate with drinking in a larger group derives from social pressure (see also Demant and Ostergaard, 2007). This is considered a real threat especially in situations where the drinker lacks in self-esteem, has difficulties fitting in and making friends, or has other internal problems:

G3: To me it seems first of all that these guys, or this girl is drinking because everyone else is drinking. She wants to come across tough and she clearly has issues.

G1: I think she's just trying to get rid of those issues because of alcohol.

G3: You mean with alcohol.

G1: Yes. All the others are clearly drinking because they want to have fun. That girl's drinking alone somewhere.

(Group 13: *Fucking Åmål*)

Young people's perceptions of a large group of friends portray this as a two-faced creature that can provide rewarding social experiences to the people involved, but that can also expose them to serious dangers. Bearing in mind that young people generally feel that the social risks of drinking greatly outweigh its health risks, it seems reasonable to conclude that the single most significant factor in young people's understandings of the positive and adverse consequences of drinking is the social contact with other people, and other young people in particular. This is an interesting observation that provides a sound basis for a more extensive mapping of young people's alcohol related sense-making of risks.

Discussion

Our main finding is that the drinking situations were assessed in terms of whether they support the young individual's agency. Agency in this context can be defined as a sense of control over one's decisions and their outcomes, and as a belief of having a capability to make individual choices which are not governed by outside forces and structures (e.g. Schwartz et al., 2005). Our analysis

suggests that the risks of drinking mainly have to do with whether young people themselves can exercise their own will and make choices in drinking situations with which they can feel comfortable. It is not a matter of the quantity and quality of alcohol consumed, but rather the quantity and quality of sociability in the drinking situation. Drinking alone, in young people's world of experiences, takes on a negative charge because it is thought that the individual concerned is responding to a negative emotion, or drinking is seen as out of control. This is considered extremely dangerous: it may even lead to alcoholism or suicide. Another potential source of risk in drinking alone, and indeed in twosome drinking, according to our interviewees, is the lack of protection provided by the group.

The core threat posed by both reactive and socially unprotected drinking is that the young individual has neither the ability nor the opportunity to control his or her own drinking and to make it a rewarding experience. Rather than an independent subject, the youngster becomes an object to internal impulses and the behaviour-changing influences of alcohol.

The presence of adults can also threaten the agency of young individuals. On the one hand, the presence of adults in drinking situations can be felt to exert pressure on young people to drink, or to pose some other threat if the adults get drunk. Young people also feel there is a risk of abuse in situations where adults and young people drink together. On the other hand, adults and parents in particular come across as judges to young people: if they get caught, they know they will be punished or at least shamed. Likewise, both will limit the courses of action open to young people and put them in a position of subordination in relation to adults.

Drinking together with other young people, in situations where individuals can exercise their own will and retain their agency, is perceived as a positive drinking experience. This tells us that the core motivation of youth drinking is sociable. In young people's understanding, an archetype of positively experienced, non-problematic drinking is social drinking for purposes of having fun, on one's own will and together with others so that the youngster him- or herself remains in control (see also Seaman and Ikegwuonu, 2010). Törrönen and Maunu (2007a) call this state the common will: individuals deliberately orientate themselves towards the group's shared activities and emotional state.

However, the formation of a common will requires that other young people join the social drinking situation with the exact same hopes, competencies and attitudes – and that, of course, does not always happen. Even when young people get together in common drinking situations, they may

become exposed to the will of others and lose their own agency. The risk of abuse, the group's drunken misdemeanours that turn it into an object of alcohol, and the social pressure for individuals to drink more or unpleasantly are all factors threatening the common will that may materialize in the exact same situations as the exercise of the common will. This makes the sociability of drinking an ambivalent theme for our interviewees: in their images, it is a source of nourishment and fun, but at the same time, it may also cause severe threats and dangers (see also De Visser and Smith, 2007).

Conclusion

Previous research on youth drinking cultures has mostly concerned young people in the United Kingdom and Denmark. Less is known about cultural variations of young people's understandings of risk and alcohol-related meaning making. In this article, we have discussed the ways that Finnish young people make sense of the risks of drinking in differing situations and social settings. Just as is the case with adults, the reason, purpose and style of young people's drinking are largely determined by the situation. Therefore young people's drinking cannot be simply understood in terms of partying and binge drinking, or as voluntary risk-taking, but alcohol use has different functions in different contexts (Törrönen and Maunu, 2007b). Binge drinking with the intent of getting drunk is just one characterization of a drinking situation. This means that the drinking situation has a bearing on which factors and events are perceived as risks of alcohol use. These include social relations and interactions among young people which play an important part in how risks are defined and experienced by young people (France, 2000).

In a high-risk drinking situation, the agency of the young individual is called into question and they are unable to make independent decisions either about their own drinking or behaviour. When young people are uncertain about whether they can exercise their own will, the consequences can be serious. Why, then, do young people drink even though they associate drinking with many severe risks?

An important frame for earlier interpretations concerning young people's substance use has been the idea of positive risk-taking. Seen from this point of view, awareness of the presence of risks would encourage young people to drink. This view comes close to the theory of the 'forbidden fruit', in which the motive for young people's drinking is their conscious pursuit of risky and therefore forbidden leisure activities (Törrönen, 1999). Another reason why the element of risk-taking can be seen to form an integral part of young people's drinking situations is that they happen autonomously and typically without parental supervision.

However, based on the analysis, we are inclined to suggest that the function of young people's sense-making of risks is to define safe drinking situations. In a safe drinking situation, young people can influence how that situation unfolds and how much one decides to drink. In other words, our informants placed greater emphasis on risk management than on a discourse encouraging risk-taking. This entails that they do not drink because of the risks, in some spirit of positive risk-taking, but they drink indeed despite of the risks. They are well aware of the various risks drinking may pose to them, but they cope with the risks by aiming to retain their own will and agency in actual drinking situations.

The result of our research concerning the prominence and importance of young people's agency is significant, as young people's drinking is often described in the media and by adults as irrational drunken misdemeanours resulting from peer pressure. Our research has shown that as is the case with adults' alcohol use, young people's drinking situations are governed by precise perceptions and rules. Normative perceptions of situations determine the boundaries for safe and what young people themselves consider sensible drinking.

On the other hand, it is important to make a distinction between young people's awareness of risks (and the way they talk about them in the interview situation) and the actual drinking occasion (see also Jones and Haynes, 2006). What from the outside appears like risk-taking may from a subjective point of view be part of practice (Bloor, 1995). Even when they are drinking heavily, young people are not necessarily aiming to achieve the rush of risk-taking, but the risks are just side products of the drinking event that are not necessarily even contemplated in the situation itself, or that are regarded as an inevitable nuisance that goes with the territory of drinking. In other words, the presence of risks can also be accepted as part of the drinking experience, and therefore awareness of those risks will not have the effect of deterring drinking. This interpretation is also clearly opposed to the claims that young people would not have enough knowledge of the risks of drinking, and thus they drink. Rather, it can even be said that they have too much of risk knowledge rather than too little: just because they know so well that drinking may always include risks, the knowledge does not prevent them from drinking. The wish or the possibility of fun, intense sociability in a good drinking situation is more important in their experience (also Harrison et al., 2011).

As the debate on risk society has made clear, there is growing level of risk awareness today among both experts and lay persons. Young people are expected to show increasing awareness of the risks that lie ahead of them in life (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). This awareness is clearly reflected in our young interviewees' deliberations. How their judgements and understandings of the risks associated

with drinking are formed is a different matter. Adults concerned about young people's drinking often assume that awareness of the risks associated with drinking is based on education, that is, on what adults themselves have told young people. Our research suggests, however, that young people's risk perceptions derive above all from the world that they themselves inhabit. In other words, there is a mismatch between young people's and adults' understandings of the risks of drinking. Adults' warnings are certainly echoed in young people's risk perceptions, but our study shows that these perceptions are firmly grounded in their own definitions of drinking situations and their freedom to exercise their own will.

References

Bloor, M (1995) A user's guide to contrasting theories of HIV-related risk behaviour. In: Gabe, J (ed.) *Medicine, Health and Risk*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 19–30.

Dawson, D, Goldstein, R, Chou, P. (2008) Age at first drink and the first incidence of adult-onset DSM-IV alcohol use disorders. *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research* 32(12): 1–12.

Demant, J (2007) Youthful drinking with a purpose: Intersections of age and sex in teenage identity work. *Nordic Studies on Alcohol and Drugs* 24(2): 149–176.

Demant, J, Järvinen, M (2006) Constructing maturity through alcohol experience – Focus group interviews with teenagers. *Addiction Research & Theory* 14(6): 589–602.

Demant, J, Ostergaard, J (2007) Partying as everyday life: Investigations of teenagers' leisure life. *Journal of Youth Studies* 10(5): 517–537.

De Visser, R, Smith, J (2007) Young men's ambivalence toward alcohol. *Social Science & Medicine* 64(2): 350–362.

Dobson, S, Brudalen, R, Tobiasen, H (2006) Courting risk: The attempt to understand youth cultures. *Young* 14(1): 49–59.

Engineer, R, Phillips, A, Thompson, J. (2003) *Drunk and Disorderly. A Qualitative Study of Binge Drinking Among 18- to 24-Year-Olds*. London: Home Office Research, Development and Statistics Directorate.

France, A (2000) Towards a sociological understanding of youth and their risk-taking. *Journal of Youth Studies* 3(3): 317–331.

Furlong, A, Cartmel, F (2007) *Young People and Social Change: New Perspectives*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Griffin, C, Bengry-Howell, A, Hackley, C. (2009) ‘Every time I do it I absolutely annihilate myself’: Loss of (self-) consciousness and loss of memory in young people’s drinking narratives. *Sociology* 43(3): 457–476.

Harrison, L, Kelly, P, Lindsay, J. (2011) ‘I don’t know anyone that has two drinks a day’: Young people, alcohol and the government of pleasure. *Health, Risk & Society* 13(5): 469–486.

Hayward, K, 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.

Hibell, B, Guttormsson, U, Ahlström, S. (2009) *The 2007 ESPAD Report*. Stockholm: The Swedish Council for Information on Alcohol and Other Drugs.

Hoel, S, Eriksen, BM, Breidablik, H. (2004) Adolescent alcohol use, psychological health, and social integration. *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health* 32(5): 361–367.

Hollands, R (2002) Divisions in the dark: Youth cultures, transitions and segmented consumption spaces in the night-time economy. *Journal of Youth Studies* 5(2): 153–171.

Hurrelmann, K, Richter, M (2006) Risk behaviour in adolescence: The relationship between developmental and health problems. *Journal of Public Health* 14(1): 20–28.

Jaatinen, J (2000) Viattomuuden tarinoita. Nuoret päihdekulttuurinsa kuvaajina [Tales of Innocence. Young People's Descriptions of their Drinking Cultures]. Helsinki: Stakes.

Järvinen, M (2003) Drinking rituals and drinking problems in a wet culture. *Addiction Research & Theory* 11(4): 217–233.

Järvinen, M, Gundelach, P (2007) Teenage drinking, symbolic capital and distinction. *Journal of Youth Studies* 10(1): 55–71.

Järvinen, M, Room, R (2007) *Youth Drinking Cultures. European Experiences*. Wiltshire: Ashgate.

Jones, N, Haynes, R (2006) The association between young people's knowledge of sexually transmitted diseases and their behaviour: A mixed method study. *Health, Risk & Society* 8(3): 293–303.

Jørgensen, M, Hulvej, C, Christensen, T. (2007) Harm minimization among teenage drinkers: Findings from an ethnographic study on teenage alcohol use in a rural Danish community. Research report. *Addiction* 102(4): 554–559.

Katainen, A (2006) Challenging the imperative of health? Smoking and justifications of risk-taking. *Critical Public Health* 17(4): 295–305.

Katainen, A, Rolando, S (2014) Adolescents' understandings of binge drinking in Southern and Northern European contexts – Cultural variations of 'controlled loss of control'. *Journal of Youth Studies*. Epub ahead of print 14 July. DOI: 10.1080/13676261.2014.933200.

Kelly, P (2003) Growing up as risky business? Risks, surveillance and the institutionalized mistrust of youth. *Journal of Youth Studies* 6(2): 165–180.

Kitzinger, J (1994) The methodology of focus groups: The importance of interaction between research participants. *Sociology of Health & Illness* 16(1): 103–121.

Le Breton, D (2004) The anthropology of adolescent risk-taking behaviours. *Body & Society* 10(1): 1–15.

Leigh, B (1999) Peril, chance, adventure: Concepts of risk, alcohol use and risky behavior in young adults. *Addiction* 94(3): 371–383.

Lupton, D, Tulloch, J (2002) 'Life would be pretty dull without risk': Voluntary risk-taking and its pleasures. *Health, Risk & Society* 4(2): 113–124.

Lyng, S (1990) Edgework: A social psychological analysis of voluntary risk-taking. *American Journal of Sociology* 96(4): 851–886.

Measham, F (2004) The decline of ecstasy, the rise of 'binge' drinking and the persistence of pleasure. *Probation Journal* 51(4): 309–326.

Parker, J, Stanworth, H (2005) 'Go for it!' Towards a critical realist approach to voluntary risk-taking. *Health, Risk & Society* 7(4): 319–336.

Percy, A, Wilson, J, McCartanand, C. (2011) *Teenage Drinking Cultures*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Plant, M, Plant, M (1992) *Risk-Takers: Alcohol, Drugs, Sex and Youth*. London: Routledge.

Riley, S, Morey, Y, Griffin, C (2010) The 'pleasure citizen': Analyzing partying as a form of social and political participation. *Young* 18(1): 33–54.

Schwartz, S, Côté, J, Arnett, J (2005) Identity and agency in emerging adulthood. Two developmental routes in the individualization process. *Youth & Society* 37(2): 201–229.

Seaman, P, Ikegwuonu, T (2010) *Drinking to Belong. Understanding Young Adults' Alcohol Use within Social Networks*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Sulkunen, P, Egerer, M (2009) Reception analytical group interview. A short introduction and manual. Research Reports no. 260. Helsinki: Department of Sociology.

Törrönen, J (1999) Juomisen vapaus ja vastuu. Sosiosemiotittinen analyysi alkoholipoliittisesta liberalismista maallikkoajattelussa [The Freedom and Responsibility of Drinking. Social Semiotical Analysis on Liberalism in Alcohol Politics in Mundane Reasoning]. Helsinki: University of Helsinki.

Törrönen, J (2001) The concept of subject position in empirical social research. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 31(3): 313–329.

Törrönen, J, Maunu, A (2007a) Light transgressions and heavy sociability. Alcohol in young adult Finns' narratives on their evenings out. *Addiction Research & Theory* 15(4): 365–381.

Törrönen, J, Maunu, A (2007b) Whilst it's red wine with beef, it's booze with a cruise! Genres and gendered regulation of drinking situations in diaries. *Nordic Studies on Alcohol and Drugs: English Edition* 24(2): 177–199.

Vaaranen, H, Wieloch, N (2002) Car crashes and dead end careers: Leisure pursuits of the Finnish subculture of the kortteliralli street racing. *Young* 10(1): 42–58.

Wall, E, Olofsson, A (2008) Young people making sense of risk. How meanings of risk are materialized within the social context of everyday life. *Young* 16(4): 431–448.

Author biographies

Anu Katainen works as a post-doctoral researcher in the University of Helsinki, Department of Social Research. She leads the research project 'Images of alcohol use among adolescents - Qualitative comparison of cultural and class differences in Finland and Italy', funded by the Academy of Finland and the Finnish Foundation for Alcohol Studies.

Anna-Sofia Lehto has studied the meanings of adolescent alcohol use in the University of Helsinki, at the department of Social Research in the comparative project concerning youth drinking cultures in Finland and Italy. Her professional career is focused on improving and studying adolescents' social well-being.

Antti Maunu has a PhD in sociology. He is specialized in young adults' drinking cultures, especially their social and emotional dimensions. At the moment he works as a specialist at Finnish Association for Substance Abuse Prevention.