Drinking across the lifespan: Findings from the Birmingham Untreated Heavy Drinkers project

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Birmingham Untreated Heavy Drinkers research project

- A ten-year study of the ‘natural history’ of heavy drinking
- 500 participants recruited in 1997 from West Midlands community
- Untreated for alcohol problems in last 10 years
- At least 50 (men) 35 (women) units per week, for at least half weeks in past year
- Aged 25 – 55
- Interviewed every two years, using mixed methods
- Last interviews in 2007, with 259 participants
Data collection methods

• Interviewer administered computerised questions, including:
  – Health (Sf-36)
  – Health and social service usage
  – Leeds Dependence Questionnaire (Raistrick et al. 1994)
  – Readiness to change questionnaire (Rollnick et al. 1992)
  – Risky and intoxicated behaviours
  – Criminal justice service usage
  – Benefits and drawbacks

• Time Line Follow Back exercise (Last week’s alcohol consumption)
• Changes in consumption over last 2 years (changes chart)

• Qualitative focus topic (e.g. abstinence, story of the last decade)
Some key questions

1) Are they still untreated heavy drinkers?

2) What does qualitative analysis suggest about life stage and drinking change?
Are they still untreated heavy drinkers?

- Between 1997-2007, there has been a reduction in mean levels of:
  - Alcohol consumption (volume & frequency)
  - Dependence (LDQ)

- 49 participants (22%) have sought help or advice for their drinking over the last ten years

- Around 1 in 7 have had contact with treatment services at some point over the ten years
Drinking in 2007 (N=259)

- Potentially harmful: 37%
- More than sensible: 32%
- Sensible: 20%
- Abstinent: 11%
Leeds Dependence Questionnaire (LDQ) Score 1997-2007 by gender (n = 259)
Preliminary (tentative) findings

• Considerable diversity within sample in drinking ‘careers’

• Three main clusters appear to be emerging:
  – Very heavy drinkers who stay very heavy
  – Very heavy drinkers who reduce quickly
  – Moderately heavy (and less dependent) drinkers who gradually reduce

• Further analysis needed to confirm these initial results and to identify predictors – work in progress!
Why keep heavy drinking?

A way of life
‘My father was a drinker…we were just brought up with drink’.
‘(It’s) a part of my life. It is not important, it is just part of me’

Stress & Coping
‘I think it’s the only thing that relaxes me.’

Social glue & community
‘You can only go one place on your own and that’s to the pub’
‘Pubs can be a nice warm safe environment where you might have a little bit of conversation; a refuge …it’s like an essential part of English culture.’
‘It’s the glue that makes somebody bother to phone you up.’
Key themes from interviews with ‘reducers’

- **Life events:**
  - Health
  - Relationships (becoming a carer / parent, new relationship, relationship conflict, bereavement)
  - Employment (Losing job, starting new job/course)
  - Moved house

- **Practical reasons**
  - Wanting/need to drive
  - To have more money

- **‘Moving on’:**
  - ‘Growing out’ of it
  - Wanting something different
How do they cut down?

Professional help group

- On average, are heavier drinkers
- More likely to have received a comment from GP about drinking
- More likely to feel ‘out of control’
- Less likely to have support from social networks
- Establishment of a supportive network viewed as a valuable aspect of treatment

‘Self-help’ group

- Collaboration with other heavy drinkers who are reducing drinking
- Importance of reciprocity
- Not wanting ‘help’: ‘it’s down to me’
- Not identifying with ‘treatment’ group / not needing help: ‘I’m not bad enough’
How does drinking change over the adult lifespan?

Change in drinking over time by age group

Significant effect for time (p<0.005), but interaction effect for age group not significant
Life stage and drinking change: qualitative analysis

- Narrative analysis of 28 interviews from final wave of project:
- 14 participants aged 30 at start of study (‘the younger cohort’)
- 14 participants aged 40 at start of study (‘the older cohort’)

The younger cohort: story types

**Setting the scene:**
A heavy drinking / partying lifestyle, or
A low point

**What they face:**
Dwindling social life
Depression / dealing with the past / adversity
Parenthood and career change

**The resolution: being 40**
‘Settling down’, maturity & responsibility
Growth, changed priorities & meanings
Awareness of maturity, health & ageing
The older cohort: main story types

Setting the scene:
A low point
‘Nothing’s happened’ / can’t remember

What they face:
Relationship breakup / problems
Bereavement & depression
Ageing & health problems

The resolution: facing late middle-age
‘Never getting over it’
‘Slowing down’ & ageing
Facing death / desire for a new life
Younger group

‘I was always out, always going out drinking until late, partying hard. And, um, now I’m in a settled relationship I’ve just calmed myself completely down […] because I’m now a mom. That has just changed everything’ (Jackie)

‘You look back and you think what were you doing back then?’ (Alex)

Older group

Since the death of his father, John found that: ‘Life has a little less meaning now’

‘[The pub’s] my life. That’s my family. Cos I haven’t got anything else’ (Dave).

“I’m just feeling old in my head, I can’t shake it” (Angela).
Narrative analysis

Younger age group
• ‘Progressive’ or ‘stable’ narratives
• Main story types:
  – Success stories
  – Stories of overcoming adversity
  – Stories of ‘settling down’

Older age group
• ‘Regressive’ or ‘stable’ narratives
• Main story types:
  – Stories of overcoming adversity
  – Tragedies

Refs: Gergen & Gergen (1988); Lieblich et al. (1998)
Key elements in stories of the last decade

- Drinking
- Mental wellbeing v. legacy of trauma & depression
- Work, money, & career achievement
- Culture & Community v. isolation
- Relationships & family

Life stage
Some key questions

1) Are they still untreated heavy drinkers?

2) What does qualitative analysis suggest about life stage and drinking change?
Emerging trajectories

- **Continuous heavy drinkers**: high dependence, drinking central to identity, relationships, activities & community

- **Fluctuators**: move in & out of heavy drinking depending on life circumstances

- **‘Treatment’ group**: high dependence, feel ‘out of control’, gain social support through treatment

- **Natural recovery group**: less dependent, ‘maturing out’ (at any age), reduce drinking in response to changed life circumstances & responsibilities
Factors in maintenance & change

• **Maintenance**
  – Relationships & community (the pub) as important maintenance factors
  – Alcohol perceived as the central coping mechanism
  – Difficulties in overcoming adversity

• **Change**
  – Participants’ *own understandings* of change is often linked to significant life events. These events are often to do with relationships and/or life stage
  – Health may be salient, but mainly if it forms a significant life event
  – A sense of agency and control
  – Resilience in overcoming adversity
  – Positive relationships
  – Focus, structure and meaning
The long and winding road to the final report…

Thank you for listening