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Heavy consumption and drink driving – A qualitative analysis of edgework among younger drink drivers

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[The paper is work-in-progress.]

Abstract

This paper is part of an ongoing mixed methods project about untreated heavy alcohol consumption amongst adult Danes. It is based upon 21 in-depth qualitative interviews with convicted drink drivers. All interviewees were contacted while attending mandatory courses in “Alcohol and Traffic safety” needed for recovering the driver’s license. The interviews were conducted either in relation to the course, in private or in our office. A semi-structured interview guide was used for all interviews. The 21 interviewees consist of 5 female and 16 male, ranging from 20 to 69 years. The paper focuses on the interviewee’s risk behaviour, especially in relation to driving. The interviewees are first divided into 1) a group of young “edgeworkers” with pronounced general risk behaviour, 2) a group of middle-aged “post-edgeworkers”, most with criminal records, and 3) a group of middle-aged and older heavy consumers with a more comprehensive approach towards drinking. In this paper focus is on the younger edgeworkers and post-edgeworkers, to which alcohol seems to play lesser role and is often mixed with other drugs as part of a wider scope of seeking excitement from risky behaviour.

Heavy drinking in Denmark

According to statistics from the National Institute of Public Health (*Statens Institut for Folkesundhed*), who in 2000 and 2005 conducted third and fourth wave in an ongoing national “Health and sickness” survey (21.000+ IPs), app. 420.000 persons between 25-64 years have an alcohol consumption level that exceeds recommendations from the National Board of Health for maximal number of standard drinks on a weekly basis (i.e. 14/21 drinks pr. week for women/men). (Ekholm et al. 2006, Kjølner et al. 2007) The 2005 survey shows that 17.1 percent of the male and 11.0 percent of the female population between 25-64 years have an average weekly consumption level, which exceeds the national recommendations. In numbers these percentages indicate that 257.000 adult men and 163.000 adult women drink too much (i.e. more than 14/21 standard drinks per week). Furthermore these percentages are likely to be lower than in real life, and it wouldn’t be completely senseless to expect at least one out of every four or five men (and fewer women) within the adult part of the population to

live a life that is at least in part structured by untreated heavy drinking.

Drink driving

How many of these heavy consumers who engage in drink driving on a regular basis, we do not know for sure. We do know that around 15.000 persons are charged for drink driving each year with the exact number rather dependent on the actual effort by the Police. We also know that the number of people getting killed or heavily injured by a drink driver has – with a couple exceptions – showed some invariability over the last ten years with around 120 dead and 6-700 badly injured each year. This indicates that drink driving is a more or less stable incidence in society, that it is not fully exposed, and that its consequences are severe and almost impossible to excuse.

There are no exact measures of the possibility of getting caught in a Police control when drink driving, which is probably due to a general lack of knowledge about the scale of drink driving. Bernhoft et al. 2007 show that app. 0.3 percent of all drivers between 24-64 years and of both sexes are convicted for drink driving. These numbers are accurate as they are based on national Crime Statistics, but they do not say much about neither the actual occurrence of drink driving nor the risk of getting caught. In September 2009 the Danish Police carried out a week-long nationwide campaign against drink driving in which 13.173 random drivers were controlled. This led to charges for drink driving against 104 persons (0.8 percent of all drivers who were controlled).¹ This indicates that the actual occurrence of drink driving is likely to be more than twice as high as the number of convictions. And during the same week as the campaign another 185 persons were stopped during ordinary daily patrolling throughout the country. These 185 persons were stopped on suspicion of some kind of illicit act, which did not necessarily regard alcohol.

To sum up, drink driving appears to be a widespread part of society, naturally entangled to heavy drinking, that is easy to condemn but difficult to restrict and with a relatively small risk of getting caught. On this ground we decided to interview a number of convicted drink drivers, attending a so-called course in “Alcohol and Traffic Safety”.

¹ Cf. Danish Police’s News archive on the Internet at <http://www.politi.dk/>

A/T-courses

According to Bernhoft et al. 2007 the average drink driver is a young or middle-aged single male with no or little education. And though this may be true, it doesn't reveal anything about the drink driver's conceptions of drinking – or for the matter about their risk awareness, drinking strategies and eventual loss of control.

Since 2002 all Danish drivers who have their licence suspended² or are banned from driving³ because of drink driving, have had to pass a course on alcohol and traffic safety (A/T-course) before being able to regain their licence⁴. In 2005 the system was extended to include drivers with conditional suspensions⁵. In practice this means that today all persons who are arrested for driving with a blood alcohol level above 0.05 percent, which is the actual “national limit” for drink driving in Denmark, need to pass an A/T-course if they wish to be able to legally drive a car.

Participants for A/T-courses have to register themselves for the course as well as pay a fee of 2.000 Danish Crowns⁶. The course consists of one weekly session during four weeks. Each session lasts 2-3 hours and participants are obliged to attend all sessions in order to fulfil the course. (Carstensen & Larsen, 2009).

Courses are organized locally by the five Danish Regions (former: counties). They are often located at a local health school after ordinary classes have ended. The course curriculum is outlined by the National Commissioner and legally authorized by a

² Unconditional suspension of the driver's licence is generally caused by driving with a blood alcohol level above 0.12 percent. The length of the suspension period and the type of eventual consecutive sentences (e.g. imprisonment, community service) depend on the specific blood alcohol level and upon the actual driving situation.

³ A driving ban is imposed on younger drivers with a blood alcohol level between 0.05 and 0.12 percent. They will have to deposit their licence at the local police and though their licence is not actually suspended they are only allowed to drive again upon completion of an A/T-course and a supplementary driving test. Drivers who commit a new incident of illicit driving within 3 years from the time of their ban are subjected to one of various consecutive sentences (among these an unconditional suspension of the driver's license).

⁴ For a thorough introduction to present legal conditions regarding drink driving, see Waage 2007.

⁵ Conditional suspension of the driver's licence is given to drivers with a blood alcohol level between 0.05 and 0.12 percent. These drivers are allowed to drive within the period of suspension (usually 3 years), but the sentence will be made unconditional if they get caught for illicit driving during the period of suspension. See Note 2 regarding stricter rules for young drivers.

⁶ 2.000 Danish Crowns = app. 275 Euro. This is not the only expense related to regaining the driver's licence. There is always also a rather heavy fine to pay as well as payment for eventual driving lessons and a new driving test. The total expenses related to regaining the driver's licence will almost always exceed 10.000 Danish Crowns (app. 1.375 Euro) – sometimes by far.

2001 amendment to the Road Traffic Act.⁷ According to this outline the A/T-courses' aim is to "influence the participants to refrain from driving a motorized vehicle while under the influence of alcohol." (National Commissioner, 2002) Generally speaking the courses are practically based on enlightening the participants with a variety of preventive information about drinking and driving. (Ibid.) The courses are set in an informal and open-minded atmosphere. Fruits and drinks are served, and participants tend to mingle with each other and/or with the teacher in the breaks. About three fourths of the interviewees spoke highly of the course, whereas the last fourth considered the course as something to "just be gotten over with".

Courses have a maximum of 20 participants. No one is obliged to inform about any personal matters apart from name, sex and age, and nobody has been referred to the course by authorities such as e.g. the Prison Service. Local job centres/employment services may include an A/T-course in the personal "plan of action" for getting unemployed individuals back to work. We haven't encountered this amongst our interviewees and according to the teachers we spoke to, it isn't a very common initiative anyway. One interviewee had had the course paid for by his workplace in an attempt to get him straightened up and back to work. He himself took comfort in this as a sign of trust from his employer who thus appeared to believe in him. All other interviewees were taking the A/T-course out of their own interest and paid the course themselves.

We were not given the possibility of controlling anything regarding the interviewees' histories or social background prior to the interview and thus had to approach each interviewee without any real foreknowledge about their reason(s) for being at the course – or having decided to take part in an interview. Contact was established at first by having the teachers hand out a short folder about our project and requesting course participants to contact us for an interview. Later (in relation to conducting the first interviews and onwards), we were allowed to visit the courses and, thus, make arrangements ourselves with interested course participants. All persons who agreed to an interview were given a gift voucher to the value of 300 Danish crowns.⁸

All 21 interviews were carried out over a period of approximately two months using a semi-structured interview guide. The interview setting was very informal. The inter-

⁷ Law no. 498 of June 7th. 2001.

⁸ Equivalent to app. 50 Euros.

viewees were more or less just asked to lead the way and tell what they wanted to tell, and the interview guide was rarely present at the table until after about 45 minutes of conversation – and then we would usually have covered almost all of our 15 topics anyway. Most interviews took about 75-90 minutes, and typically we would round up the interview by asking the interviewee about the meaning of “freedom”.

Theorizing the edge

Within a theoretical framework based in Sociology, the act of drinking can be said to be both an individual action (e.g. buying the alcohol, filling the glass, downing the bottle etc.) and an actual part of social life with e.g. its symbolic interpretations, social intimacy and power. Sociologically pictured then, heavy consumption is an example of a connection between individual action and social life. It is thus a connection, which on the one hand inquires individual action and social setting and which on the other hand potentially has both individual and social implications. When people drink, whether on their own or with other people, they do it on behalf of their own more or less acknowledged decision to do so *and* out of a complex relationship with society as such. Questions such as “Why do individuals drink too much?”, “How do individuals drink too much?”, “What are the individual consequences of heavy consumption?”, “To what extent does heavy consumption relate to society as such?” are all legitimate research questions within this sociological framework.

In our case we have been working with a delimited group, i.e. a group of potential rather than acknowledged heavy consumers who have at least once been driving after drinking. Many interviewees were at first reluctant to admit that they drink drive or had been drink driving on a regular basis. About half would begin by stating that the time they were caught by the Police was a one and only episode of drink driving, but after a while all 21 persons did eventually admit to drink driving at least a couple of times, and most (19 out of 21) that they had been drink driving a lot – some even daily over many years. The reluctance to admit one’s own actions is an interesting problematic in its own right, and quit common, we believe when it comes to misuse of drugs; not so much because it indicates the significance of an over-individual conscience or morality of society, but rather because it shows that the interviewees may in fact have reasoned about their dealings (in our case with drugs and alcohol) *and* concluded eventually that they are best left unnoticed. The awkwardness of the inter-

view situation, located in very close proximity to the A/T-course, with an unknown interviewer and a tape recorder, can also have been a cause to some nervousness over the safety of speaking out about illicit driving.

Drink driving is without a doubt dangerous business. It not only risks the lives of others, but also of the driver and her possible companions as well. The problem of risking the lives of others can of course not be underestimated, but it is basically a moral issue, and none of our interviewees did argue against this. But it is the risk to oneself that makes drink driving an “interesting” kind of action. Because, why risk your own life through an action that is basically self-inflicted?

“Edgework” is an analytical concept that is used to cover high-risk activities that are deliberately brought in to being by a knowing subject. Generally put, an edgework activity is supposed to supply the acting subject with a certain feeling of *being* that has also been made more or less redundant – or at least been shut down by the repetitive cycle of ordinary modern life. According to Lyng edgeworkers are “seduced” by the “character of the experience itself” rather than by a measurement of rational choice. (Lyng 2005) They simply “do it because »it’s fun!«” (ibid.), but also because “it calls forth their ego in a dramatic way”. (Lyng 1990) According to Lyng, edgework is also related to “social structures and processes” and can be understood as “[..] a radical form of escape from the institutional routines of contemporary life [...] or an especially pure expression of the central institutional and cultural imperatives of the emerging social order.” (Lyng 2005) Through edgework activities social actors are capable of turning risk taking into an “integral part of the very fabric of social life” rather than just letting “the social and technological imperatives of industrialism” get away with imposing “contemporary dangers [...] on social actors by structural forces beyond their control”. (Ibid.) This doesn’t mean that edgework is not dangerous; it is still a way of seeking life through a potential close-encounter with death. High-altitude parachuting, BASE jumping, high-speed motorcycle riding are all classic examples of edgework, which are closely relating to life-threatening danger, but following Lyng’s et al. definitions and elaborations we would argue that also various types of criminal activity, fighting, and certain ways of binge drinking, heavy consumption and drug use can be looked upon as edgework. Reith (in Lyng 2005) accordingly pictures the voluntary intoxication through drugs to be “the most dramatic and demanding instance of edgework.” And this should according to Reith even be seen in relation to a trend, which

tends to “normalize drug use in everyday life[,]” (ibid.) and in fact leading to a major spread out of edgework activities within society as such.

Most of our younger interviewees (20-35 years) have on a more or less regular basis been mixing alcohol with either soft or hard drugs, or both, also when driving a car. And there appear to be amongst the interviewees a common accept of drinking and of mixing drinking with drugs so as to “stimulate those capacities usually crushed ... by the cold facts and dry criticisms of the sober hour.” (Reich quoting William James in Lyng 2005) For those who grew up on the country “the sober hour” could be long and boring. And with nothing better to do than meet up with the eventual group of other kids, which always including older ones, the eventual occurrence of alcohol, drugs and some petty thievery hardly come as a surprise. These youngsters tend to party in the weekends and cruise around in cars with a bag of beers on weekdays after work. Martin, one interviewee in his late twenties, describes life in his hometown of app. 5.000 inhabitants like this: “There is nothing at all. It is a paltry little town where nothing ever takes place at all.” We only spoke with one person, who had grown up in the capital and his story was a little different from the other’s, as he had spend his teenage years as the only “white” boy in a group of youngsters with immigrant roots. According to him, this was before the kind of gang culture, which we encounter today in Copenhagen, had emerged. But like his kinsmen in the country, this city kids would rather hang out at night with his friends and do drugs, sometimes fight with neighbouring groups, and often drink drive than he would be bound to a life full of restraints and restrictions.

Inherent to edgework activities is a fundamental grasp for freedom that is not available within contemporary society as such and accordingly edgework ought also to be understood as a play with or hunt for this freedom; the freedom to live, the freedom to decide, the ultimate freedom to act and thus determine the outcome of one’s own actions and desires. This aspect was brought up during a pilot interview and independent of Lyng’s et al. theories of edgework. And on this behalf we decided to add a question about the meaning of freedom to our interview guide.

The meaning of freedom

The question about the meaning of “freedom” derived from our pilot interview with a 32-year old relative to a heavy consumer. A few months prior to the interview, the

IP's father had died from an alcohol poisoning that developed into a coma. His father had been drinking heavily for a couple of decades but had never been in treatment, and had been taking care of his job up until his retirement only less than half a year before his decease. When asked about why his father had taken up drinking, the IP answered:

I think he was trying to escape. To get away from a dissatisfaction with his own life. [...] Maybe even more concerning his life in the family than his working life. [...] My sister attaches a lot of importance to a situation a while ago about a promotion-offer that he turned down. His job position was as a kind of inspector, which meant that he used his car to visit different work sites and inspect the work of his colleagues. So he was alone most of the time. He had been in the company for 30-35 years, so one day he was naturally offered a promotion. I don't remember to what – foreman or something, but he refused. I remember it from back then. It's about 15-18 years ago now, but he valued his freedom and just driving around on his own.

According to the IP his father chose to hold on to his freedom rather than to accept a promotion, even though this meant a stagnation of his natural working life progress, and likewise he chose to drink and acquire a similar freedom by escaping a tedious family life rather than engaging in the development of a meaningful life after closing time. The freedom to be on your own is here related to the escape from a dull (family) life, and the connection between freedom and escape goes through heavy consumption.

The question about the meaning of freedom, which was asked to most interviewees as “a philosophical extra question” at the end of the interview, brought in very different reflections. In the following we will go through a few of these, because they give an impression both of some of the interviewees profiles that we shall discuss later on and of the variety in the empirical material for this paper.

Jesper, a young man in his early twenties from the country, stated “freedom” quite clearly to be “to do what you want to do out of your own inclination.” Jesper had lost his licence at the age of 19 after driving a car full of friends from a party at the local sports club. He had a relatively high blood alcohol level of 0.21. At the time of the offence he was partially engaged in group of youngsters, who hung out on a local gas

station, drank beers and partied a lot. The loss of the licence taught him a serious lesson; he left the group, slowed down the drinking and bought his own house with his girlfriend.

Bob, another young man – also in his early twenties, emigrated from Myanmar with both his parents when he was a baby; and now at the final year in high school⁹ and very active in martial arts, where he is among the country's best in his weight group, answers:

[..] My dad often says that I have a lot of freedom. Somehow that is true of course, but when I am at home I often feel that I am not free. So what is freedom? To me it is to be able to do what I want to do. Most people would probably say that, but I mean: to simply be able to plan my time after what I want to do and not having to consider the rights and wrongs of other people – though of course other people's impressions have an influence on you. If everybody thinks that what you do is wrong then you probably will not do it. But, to do things by yourself and drink when you feel like drinking.

Bob was stopped by a civilian police car because of hazardous driving on the way to a party. He was 20-years old and had a blood alcohol level of 0.07. At the time of driving he didn't consider himself drunk or incapable of driving, but when asked to develop further upon this he immediately concluded that drinking always distorted his way of perception. Bob admits to several attempts of drink driving prior to his conviction, always with friends and usually on the way to a party, and never in a state of heavy intoxication. As Jesper he separates his acquaintances in two more or less completely different groups of people; the one being a former group with more "dodgy" characters associated with drugs and petty crimes, and the other being his present group of friends from school, sports, work etc. Like Jesper he does not identify himself with the former group of more suspicious characters.

Bob and Jesper are both very young, and though they have been convicted for drink driving, they do not have a wide resemblance to heavy consumers as such. Both con-

⁹ The Danish school system based on 1+9 compulsory years in public or private school (equivalent to first and secondary school). After that students aimed for higher education must take an upper secondary school leaving examination in high school by finishing one of several 3-year programs.

sume more than recommended and mostly in weekends and always with friends. But their ways of drinking seem somehow to be more corresponding to their age group and to culture surrounding it than an indication of future alcoholism. Especially Bob appears to be reflective upon the possible dangers related to heavy consumption and struggling (at least mentally) with trying to cut down especially on the binge drinking in weekends. That he almost always ends up drinking more than planned anyway, and usually regrets it afterwards (partly because it disrupts up his training) indicates that he, like many of his age, is in a state of limbo in which he needs to settle more on his own ways of doing things instead of constantly following the tight of the crowd or the expectations of his parents. The desire to actually be able to do things his own way is obvious in his definition of “freedom”.

Kenneth, a man in his mid-thirties, who had taken up heavy drinking when he was 25 years old, but stopped completely ten months prior to the interview, answers:

Freedom is to be comfortable. After all, if you are comfortable then you are also free. If you are imprisoned and comfortable with being in prison you are also free somehow. I guess it is to be comfortable. I could have given you a silly cliché like »Freedom is when nobody decides what you can do«. But that is shit. That wouldn't be freedom, as all people probably like someone else to decide for them. It's nice to have someone to sit next to in your sofa at night. So that wouldn't be freedom to me. Freedom is simply to be comfortable and have the freedom to be your self. That's my philosophical answer.

Kenneth grew up in a middle-class family in a small provincial town with both parents living together and with a heavy consuming/alcoholic father. He describes his father as “malicious” when drunk; not in a physical way but rather enacting a kind of “psychic terror”. Kenneth has been imprisoned two times: once five years prior to the interview because of repetitive drink driving (20 days unconditional imprisonment plus 30 hours of community service) and once 1.5 years prior to the interview because of violence (3 month unconditional imprisonment). His former wife and mother to his two children was mentally ill and committed suicide app. five years prior to the interview. This was about the same time as he lost his license. He has custody over both children now, but has had to struggle with local authorities because of his alcoholism. Kenneth lost his driving license shortly before his wife's suicide. He explains about

the incident that he was furious because they had had a fight and he had left the house in their car. His wife then called the local police and told them that he was drinking driving. He was stopped with a blood alcohol level of 0.18, which is relatively high. Shortly afterwards he was recognized in his car by the same officer who had stopped him the first time, this time with a blood alcohol level of 0.09 and he was sentenced to 20 days unconditional imprisonment in an open prison. His second sentence was due to an act of violence against his present girlfriend's former boyfriend that had been harassing the two over some time. The situation ended when Kenneth approached the ex-boyfriend in his home and beat him up. According to himself he was drunk at the time of the fight, and though he had to go to prison for quite a while, he did not regret his act. Considering the particular episodes, which came up during the interview, it isn't surprising that he connects "freedom" to simply being comfortable. He has had a life full of tumult and app. ten years with heavy consumption; he has witnessed his wife commit suicide, had to struggle with authorities over custody of his children, been to prison, and has had to conceal his alcohol – and drug abuse for quite some time in order to keep it going.

Thomas, another man in his early thirties, answers:

It is [freedom] with responsibilities. If you are responsible for someone at home you cannot let them down. You cannot disappoint them. If you have promised to be home by five o'clock, then you cannot come home drunk at seven. Things may crop up but then you have to call home and ask if it's ok that you are delayed. And if you receive a "go-ahead" it is still freedom with responsibilities. Then it is accepted. I am not saying that you need permission for everything you want to do, but if you have chosen to live together with one, or two, or three other persons, depending on how many kids you may have, things need to be in harmony for everything to function. If you have taken the car and the kid needs a pick-up from sports it is of no use to come dawdling home so you cannot pick at the right time. Mutual respect. You have to show each other that you can be trusted. I would turn very angry if my girlfriend told me that I couldn't have a beer with my colleagues at closing time or that we couldn't have a beer in our garage when they drop by our house. That would make me angry. I would feel that I was being suppressed. I want to be able to have a beer or two

with my friends, but I am not getting drunk with them. [...] I have the freedom to have a good time and socialize without it getting out of control. I know that boundary well.

Thomas resembles Kenneth on some interesting points. His parenthood and identity as a father is an important parameter when it comes to avoiding heavy consumption and he claims that he reduced his everyday alcohol consumption app. six years prior to the interview when he learned that he was going to have a child. This did not stop him from drinking though, and later in the interview he (again) claims that he reduced his level of consumption remarkably when he moved together with a new girlfriend. He has also had a very strained relationship with his former girlfriend, who is his child's mother, and who amongst other things has been accusing him of assaults: "The only thing she hasn't accused me of yet must be paedophilia", he states. Like Kenneth he lost his license in his mid-twenties after a night out with a couple of friends and with blood alcohol level of 0.14 percent. This did not stop him from driving, though, and one year later – four days before his driving ban was over – he was stopped again; this time with a blood alcohol level of 0.22. The decision to end his heavy consumption about three years prior to the interview was taken primarily by himself, when he was moving in with his new girlfriend in a different part of the country. Now he primarily drinks with friends or family, and if he drinks alone he limits it to one single beer. And like Kenneth he has always been very focused on staying sober when he has been together with his child. This strong focus on behaving himself in front of his child may together with a frequent and overall focus on understanding drinking as a social act, i.e. mainly in accordance with the social surroundings and circumstances, be the background for his definition of freedom as merged to responsibility.

Edgework amongst younger drink drivers

The act of seeking danger voluntarily is present in almost all of the younger interviewees. This is also true when it comes to heavy drinking if each incident of drinking is looked upon as a separate act. It is not however clear to what extent the aspect of voluntarism is maintained in episodes of prolonged heavy consumption, e.g. over several years, or if it instead is lost somehow when the drinking and drug use gets out of control.

[Chapter needs to be finished]

[Conclusion needs to be added]

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