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Corresponding author:

Professor Christine Griffin

Department of Psychology, University of Bath, Bath BA2 7AY, UK

Email: c.griffin@bath.ac.uk

Reply: Int J of Drug Policy

Significant absences: The luxury of “being less critical”

Polly Radcliffe and Fiona Measham make an important point when they argue that Tutenges and Sandberg’s paper (Tutenges and Sandberg, 2013) is “starkly silent regarding the relations of gender, sexuality and the taken for granted heteronormativity that characterise many of the stories analysed” (Radcliffe and Measham, 2014, p.1). The authors’ response endorses the importance of “explor[ing] the sexual, gendered and racialised dimensions of narratives” (Tutenges and Sandberg, 2014, p.x). They dismiss what they term “fashionable theories from gender studies (Butler, 1990) or post-colonial studies (Said, 1978)” in favour of a “less critical” approach (Tutenges and Sandberg, 2014, p.x). The latter involves a focus on drinking stories as part of a well-established narrative tradition.

There are two points I want to make here. First, the peculiar dismissal of work by Judith Butler and Edward Said as “employ[ing] the familiar binary and hierarchically arranged concepts of man vs. woman, heterosexual vs. homosexual, white vs. black, North vs. South” (Tutenges and Sandberg, 2014, p.x) is unfortunate. A key contribution of the work of both Butler and Said is the determined unsettling of these very binaries, whilst examining how such binaries continue to exert such a force in a range of contexts.

Secondly, I want to examine the implications of this option to be “less critical” in more depth. As I have argued elsewhere, the juxtaposition of post-feminism and the culture of intoxication produces a challenging set of dilemmas for young women (Griffin et al., 2013). They are exhorted to be sassy and independent – but not feminist; to be ‘up for it’ and to get drunk alongside young men – but not to ‘drink like men’. They are also called on to look and act as agentically (hetero)sexual within a pornified night-time economy, but to distance themselves from the troubling figure of the ‘drunken slut’.

Tutenges and Sandberg’s paper indicates that (some) young women recounted stories in which they engaged in heavy drinking alongside young men, transgressing the codes of normative ‘respectable’ femininity in various ways, whilst others appeared to disapprove of the drunken behavior of “all those boys” Tutenges and Sandberg, 2013,

p.541). They provide even more evidence of narratives recounted by young men in which women were represented as sexually available, as “whores” and/or to be “grabbed” in nightclubs. Choosing not to examine – or even mention – the gendered and sexual dimensions of these narratives is a significant absence.

So whilst Tutenges and Sandberg are correct to argue that “women get drunk and talk about being drunk *just about* as frequently and extensively as men” (Tutenges and Sandberg, 2014, p.x, added emphasis), there is considerable significance hidden in that little phrase “*just about*”. Tutenges and Sandberg view the frequent reference to “easy women [and] dumb blondes” in their participants’ drinking stories as forms of “grotesque imagery” in “a world turned upside down”, citing Bakhtin (1984) and Turner (1963). This misses an important point, since one of the hallmarks of contemporary culture is the juxtaposition of ‘new’ forms of transgression that appear to offer young women a license to transgress long-established codes of heterosexual patriarchal social relations, just as those codes and the sexual double standards they engender, remain in force (Griffin et al., 2013).

Tutenges and Sandberg’s paper does an excellent job of exploring the transgressive dimensions of young people’s drinking stories and their role in shaping patterns of ‘extreme’ alcohol consumption. But they only present part of the picture, and the absence of any mention of the starkly gendered and sexualized character of these narratives is significant. In failing to mention the continued force of such sexual double standards and the spectre of the drunken slut that is mobilized by young women and young men in different ways and with distinctly gendered connotations, they exercise a particular sort of ‘choice’ to be “less critical”. The point is not that such drinking stories are “discriminatory”, or that they reflect “a general tendency towards discrimination on the part of the storytellers” (Tutenges and Sandberg, 2014, p.x). Discrimination is not the issue here. Stories about “easy women” and “dumb blondes” (and “uber gay men”) do not simply reflect the ridiculing of the “politically correct” (Tutenges and Sandberg, 2014, p.x). They operate to shore up and reinforce social relations of power around gender and sexuality that do damage, especially to young women. The challenge for researchers working in this field is to appreciate *both* the importance of such drinking stories in generating fun, enjoyment and humour in young people’s social lives *and* the other side of the coin. Holding onto these two parts of the picture is difficult – but it is essential.

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Christine Griffin

Department of Psychology, University of Bath, Bath BA2 7AY, UK

Email: c.griffin@bath.ac.uk

Response-IJDP-Intoxicating stories