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The pleasures of drunken one-night stands: Assemblage theory and narrative environments

Willy Pedersen, Department of Sociology and Human Geography, University of Oslo

Sébastien Tutenges, Department of Criminology and Sociology of Law, University of Oslo

Sveinung Sandberg, Department of Criminology and Sociology of Law, University of Oslo

Corresponding author:

Willy Pedersen, Ph.D. Department of Sociology and Human Geography, University of Oslo.

Box 1096, 0317, Blindern, Oslo, Norway.

Phone: ++ 47 90268644. E-mail: willy.pedersen@sosgeo.uio.no

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ABSTRACT

Assemblage theory downplays the ontological differentiation of individuals and contexts and focuses instead on how encounters produce agency. In this study, we use an assemblage theory framework to investigate the link between alcohol use and one-night stands. Data are qualitative interviews with participants in the night-time economy (N = 102, 50% female, with a mean age of 25 years). We show that: (i) alcohol-fuelled sexual *explorations* are key elements of a night out, and include flirting, sensual dimensions, imagination, as well as sex acts. (ii) What may be called sexualized *territories*, such as institutionalized rural feasts, the backseat of cars and holidays abroad play a key role. (iii) Contrary to the findings of previous research, one-night stands were often linked to *pleasure*, sometimes because they entailed breaking norms. Stories of drunken one-night stands were often framed as “crazy” or “wild” and told in a humorous tone. We conclude that the unique assemblages of alcohol, emotions, specific sex acts, time and place contribute to the pleasures of a one-night stand. Moreover, these experiences must be seen as produced by—and interpreted within—a narrative environment that appreciates and expects “sex stories” as part of a night out.

Introduction

Recognition is growing that the uses, experiences and wider implications of alcohol are constituted and conditioned by affective assemblages, consisting of myriad human as well as non-human agents (Duff 2014, MacLean and Moore 2014, Duff 2016). These affective assemblages may be understood as multi-sensory, more than merely human cues, which prompt certain performances and experiences while precluding others (Schüll 2012). From this perspective, an instance of alcohol use always involves a multitude of interdependent factors and should not be understood in reductionist, (mono-)causal terms. As Duff (2016: 16) points out, an advantage of such “assemblage thinking” is that it enables us to see beyond “the subject of this [alcohol and drug] use as the primary ground of the articulation of drug problems” (p 16). This thinking has inspired a range of setting-sensitive studies, including studies of how specific settings, such as festival sites, concert halls and nightclubs, may be transformed to reduce the risks of using alcohol and other substances (Rhodes 2009, Wilton and Moreno 2012, Cooper and Tempalski 2014).

Recent decades have seen dramatic changes in alcohol assemblages across the Western world, linked to what is commonly referred to as the night-time economy (NTE), i.e., the leisure and retail provisions of cities at night (Graham and Homel 2008, Shaw 2010). The concentration of drinking venues has increased in many inner-city areas (Chatterton and Hollands 2003), leading to a proliferation of “drinkertainment” and the presence of socially diverse but predominantly young consumers (Jayne, Holloway et al. 2006). With these changes has come a rise in the level of inner-city alcohol use, alcohol-related accidents and violence (Hobbs, Hadfield et al. 2003). Therefore, to understand contemporary alcohol use, geographers have tried to combine research on embodiment and affect on the one hand with a focus on space and place on the other (Jayne, Valentine et al. 2010). Similar theoretical frameworks have been applied to investigate sexual behaviour (Braidotti 2013, Fox and

Allred 2013, Allred and Fox 2015). Fox and Allred (2013) suggest that the “sexual assemblage”, rather than individuals’ sexual behaviour, should be the focus of research in social sciences. The notion of sexual assemblages refers to the fundamental *relationality* of bodies, things and social formations, where each element becomes meaningful only in “the fluctuating assemblages that coalesce to produce both events and the apparent reality of the relations that they comprise” (Allred and Fox 2015: 908). It is within such assemblages that sexual desire and behaviour are produced.

One-night stands and sexual experiences in nightlife environments are often associated with problems (McIlhaney and Bush 2008, Freitas 2013). In this study of young Norwegian binge drinkers, we have observed a variety of sex-related problems, including sexual assaults and victimization, which took place during or immediately after drinking events (Tutenges, Pedersen et al. 2017). In this paper, however, we shift our focus to the *pleasures* of drunken sex during one-night stands. Drawing on affect and assemblage theory, we show how drunken sex is a valued part of contemporary nightlife; it provides an avenue for sexual explorations within specific “sexualized territories” where playful deviance is legitimated (Redmon 2003, Fjaer and Pedersen 2015). Drunken one-night stands often imply time out and lack of control, and are often recounted as “crazy” and “wild” in a humorous tone. This is crucial to understand why they are often experienced as intensely pleasurable.

Alcohol assemblages, casual sex and pleasure

Within a framework of assemblage theory, desire should not be understood as an essence or a quality of the body. Rather, it is brought into being in a specific socio-spatial context, which results in capacities such as to feel sexual attraction and act sexually. Young people’s sexual practices are closely associated with nightlife environments and the use of alcohol. Indeed, nightlife settings have been described as “affectively charged” (Duff 2008) “intensity machines” (Tutenges 2012: 132), which fire up desires and facilitate sexual

encounters (Heinskou 2002). Light, smoke, laser shows and décor serve to create sensuous parallel worlds, while the music and its beat encourage “the movement of rhythmically gyrating bodies caught up in the kinaesthetics of passion” (Tan 2013: 725). Here, multiple bodies come close; this bodily proximity *per se* can have intoxicating effects because it allows for affective flows to speed up and for mutual awareness to increase (Collins 2004: 34, Fjaer and Tutenges 2016). Drawing on assemblage theory, Bøhling (2015) observes how the dance floor is a key arena for the enjoyment of music, dancing and, as the night progresses, for “blatant sexual encounters and scoring” (p 138). Alcohol and other drugs contribute to this sexualized intersubjectivity by amplifying “the subject’s capacities to resonate” with other people, dissolving the distance between self and other (Tutenges 2015) and lubricating “bodies to affect and be affected sexually” (Tan 2013: 724).

Alcohol assemblages are always conflictual, mobilizing a diversity of forces that function at a semi- or subconscious level (Thrift 2008: 38) as “a set of flows moving through the bodies of human and other beings”. Alcohol assemblages may be harnessed and manipulated for commercial purposes, such as the promotion and sale of alcohol or the promotion and sale of other legal and illegal commodities (Tan 2013). However, humans are never merely passive recipients of the affective flows that surround and run through them; rather, they always actively contribute to the flows through their own performances (Duff 2008: 388, Fjaer, Pedersen et al. 2015, Tutenges 2015).

Over the past couple of decades, casual sex within a so-called “hook-up culture” has been described as prevalent among young people and as possibly damaging for individuals as well as society (McIlhaney and Bush 2008, Freitas 2013). Casual sex is a varied and complex practice, and is usually defined as any consensual sexual activity that occurs between two people (e.g., strangers, recent acquaintances or friends) outside of a committed or long-term relationship (Paul, McManus et al. 2000). A distinction has been made between one-night

stands—usually implying one-off sexual intercourse with a person—and hook-ups, including a broader variety of possible acts and longer-term casual sexual arrangements, such as “friends with benefits”, “fuck buddies” or regularly having sex with an ex-partner (Campbell 2008, Bisson and Levine 2009, Lewis, Atkins et al. 2013). Early terms included “permissiveness without affection” and “premarital sex”, whereas the current concept “non-romantic sex” captures sex that occurs outside the context of a hegemonic romantic narrative (Farvid and Braun 2017).

The main pull of casual sex is assumed to be the desire for uncommitted sexual activity (Garcia, Reiber et al. 2012). However, recent research has linked casual sex to the concept of emerging adulthood, suggesting that, with increasing proportions of people in higher education, employment flexibility and geographic mobility, casual sex may fill “relationship gaps”, or people being too busy for committed relationships because work or studies, and a sense of being too young to be “tied down” (Garcia, Reiber et al. 2012, Lyons, Manning et al. 2013, Lyons, Manning et al. 2014). Previous studies have overwhelmingly focused on the negative aspects of one-night stands, such as lack of sexual pleasure, feelings of regret, poor relationship quality and reputational concerns (Campbell 2008, McCarthy and Grodsky 2011, Lyons, Manning et al. 2014). However, a few studies have presented more complex findings, where casual sex has been associated with psychological and affective pleasures, such as “ego boosts”, the opportunity to be “naughty”, and to experience “thrills”, i.e., novel and exciting transgressions (Farvid and Braun 2017).

Assemblage theory has successfully highlighted the socio-spatial context of alcohol and drug use, and emphasized the multitude of interdependent factors that influence substance use. Continuing the expansion of the assemblage theory horizon, we believe that pleasurable sexual experiences while drunk cannot be understood without considering how they are produced and played out in a narrative environment that is highly appreciative of drinking

stories. Alongside material and spatial factors, these stories are part of the “constellation” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) that produces particular drinking practices. Gubrium and Holstein (2009) emphasize that storytelling and interpretative work must be seen as reflexively intertwined with narrative environments or the settings where storytelling takes place. The sex episodes in this study were told in qualitative interviews, but reflect the narrative repertoire of the NTE and were often framed as drinking stories (Workman 2001, Tutenges and Rod 2009). This narrative genre emphasizes what is out of the ordinary or unexpected and often interprets it in a humorous manner. The narrative environment of a night-time party context influences interpretations of events and can also shape and motivate particular experiences (Tutenges and Sandberg 2013).

In this paper, we focus on the pleasures of drunken one-night stands, by which we mean acts of alcohol use combined with sexual interaction. We do so not to deny that drunken sex can be unpleasant as well as dangerous (Cowley 2014), but because the majority of Norwegian binge drinkers that we interviewed spoke in predominantly positive terms of their experiences of being drunk while having sex. Our main aim is to explore the connection between alcohol use and “sexualized territories”. In particular, we wish to understand the interplay between human and non-human agencies in shaping the performance and experience of one-night stands. We link the presentation of sexual exploration, territories and pleasures to how these episodes are situated in a particular alcohol assemblage and discuss how they are related to a narrative repertoire of “crazy” and “fun” drinking stories.

Methods

The data were obtained from 104 semi-structured interviews with young Norwegian heavy drinkers who partied hard and often participated in the NTE (Pedersen, Copes et al. 2016). The participants were recruited by seven research assistants from different parts of Norway (four men and three women who were all trained sociologists in their mid-20s). They

recruited participants from throughout the country and from diverse social networks. The sample included 52 men and 52 women, with a mean age of 25 years ($SD = 3.7$). All participants were occasional binge drinkers, meaning that they participated in heavy drinking and partying. They were either students or worked full or part time. Their educational level was slightly above average for their age group. One out of five lived in Oslo. Around half the sample lived in small towns or in rural parts of eastern Norway, and a minority came from western or northern Norway.

Research assistants were trained by two of the authors to use a style of interviewing that fostered a conversational tone. Many participants were the same age and belonged to the same social networks as the interviewers, and interviews were often conducted in private homes or in public cafes, which further facilitated a friendly and relaxed tone in the interviews. This interview context probably helped avoid defensive accounts of drinking, but may have triggered “drinking stories” that downplay the negative effects of alcohol. Interviewers still had to cover an extensive interview guide, in which problematic aspects of alcohol were important. Most interviews lasted around 90 minutes and included topics such as all forms of alcohol and drug use, the experience of being intoxicated, flirting, “hooking up”, casual sex and one-night stands.

The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and coded using HyperRESEARCH. We followed general standards of qualitative research analysis (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, Silverman 2009). Initial coding involved identifying several predefined codes, including instances of one-night stands, which was the main code used in this study. Codes included long sections of text from interviews so that the broader interview and social context of one-night stands was included. All these sections were analyzed in more detail to uncover links between such experiences and alcohol and drug use. Alcohol was the dominant drug used during one-night stands in this data; therefore, it is the focus of this study.

The study was approved by the Norwegian Social Science Data Service (NSD) on behalf of the Norwegian Data Protection Authority. Participants gave their active informed consent. Identifying information (names, the names of areas or towns they were living, names of partners and friends), were removed and replaced with aliases.

Results

All one-night stands in this study started in contexts where alcohol was used; e.g., at private parties, rural feasts, pubs and bars, or on holidays abroad. Sexual explorations and alcohol were closely connected. The analysis below is divided into sexualized explorations, territories, pleasures and sexual regrets, but, following the logic of assemblage theory, these dimensions are closely intertwined in the actual episodes recounted.

Sexual explorations

Casual sex and one-night stands were highly valued by the vast majority of our participants. Many described how watching beautiful people, relating, desiring and flirtatious performances were key motivators for a night out on the town because these practices were perceived as pleasurable *per se* and/or because they could lead to sexual intercourse, new experiences and good memories. Hedda described one-night stands as ranging among the most appealing aspects of being young and single:

As long as you're careful, a one-night stand can be really fun. One has to explore to the fullest; that's a part of sexuality. You've got to, like, check it out to move forward, learn new things and yeah, discover a lot about yourself and your sexuality. I learn something new every time.

Both male and female participants described one-night stands as a vital source not merely of fleeting "fun", but also of sensual exploration of their bodies, their sexuality and

their relationship with others. The pursuit of one-night stands seemed to be an expression of the “libido sentiendi” (Maffesoli 2002: 19); i.e., the widespread tendency, especially among young people, to explore with all of their senses the world into which they have been thrown (Maffesoli 1985). Accordingly, the participants’ accounts of one-night stands often included detailed descriptions of the settings, events and overall mood that led up to and framed the sexual interaction. Nozick (1989: 61) argues that “sex is not simply a matter of frictional force”; rather, it is a physical and psychological performance embedded in a specific socio-spatial setting composed of both human and non-human agents (Alldred and Fox 2015). This observation was reflected in Norwegian binge drinkers’ description of drunken one-night stands.

Hanna had been partying hard since her teens. Her crowd used to hang out in a large mansion belonging to the parents of one of her friends, and she described the place as follows: “In absolutely all the rooms in that large house, somebody has had sex: in both bathrooms, in the kitchen, in the small box-room at the attic I bloody well saw two people. Everyone helped themselves to anything they wanted, they were wasted.” She remembered one of her own experiences:

It was extremely fun. There were a lot of people and so I had sex in the sauna. Down the hall, there was a fitness room. Hanne Boel was playing on the CD player. We went in and had sex for many hours. He also used my back door, but I didn’t realize it until the day after—fucking embarrassing (laughter). Woke up the day after wrapped up in a sheet, and I realized there had been activity everywhere, so I was just like “ok”. Totally crazy that I don’t remember anything (laughter).

Note Hanna’s concrete descriptions of the architecture of the house, the sauna where it happened, the background music, and her mentioning of how they—without her being aware

of it—had anal sex. Of course, it may be that Hanna’s account includes these details about the socio-spatial setting because this allows her indirectly to describe the more delicate and taboo subject of the actual sexual intercourse. Her mention of the sauna invokes associations of heat, sweat and naked bodies, while the reference to a well-known husky-voiced Scandinavian pop/soul singer hints at moans, groans and lust. “People and spaces are always woven together” (Dilkes-Frayne 2016: 29), and Hanna’s emphasis on the setting is due, at least in part, to the situational significance of this setting. The sexual intercourse was, in this sense, a superhuman performance cued by the socio-spatial context of its enactment.

Like so many other of the research participants, Hanna recounted her one-night stands in a characteristically humorous tone, which framed her experience as “fun” and “crazy”; i.e., memorable (Tutenges and Sandberg 2013). This type of humour was also central to Didrik’s sex story. He worked in a bar where the male staff routinely invited female customers down to the toilets in the basement to have sex. He described a recent experience at work when a female customer had been hanging out in the bar flirting with him all evening:

I was extremely drunk, but I still took her down to the ladies’ room. It’s large, with benches and stuff. We started, but then another [male] bartender came down, with another girl, while we were screwing. So we were standing up against the sink, my ass bare, her legs around my thighs, and he said, “let me show you a trick”. He moved the bench and arranged stuff, so we could have sex in various positions. It all happened while I was inside her! We finished our business and both laughed a bit (laughter).

Here again we can see how the sexual performance cues and is cued by a vast array of rather incongruous agents, including the alcohol consumed, the “drunken atmosphere” of the bar (Bøhling 2015: 136), the dirty feel of the underground toilets, the sink, the intruding bartender and woman, the bench—not to mention all the imaginary agents that often play a

part when people have sex, such as erotic fantasizing, storytelling, rumination and role-playing (Denmark, Rabinowitz et al. 2005: 272). Didrik's position as an employee, his access to the basement and the woman's seductive skills opened up this specific sexual assemblage. The other bartender's assistance with rearranging the bench and giving advice in this delicate situation probably added to the fun and story value of the experience. It made the whole performance less ordinary and more transgressive, provoking laughter from Didrik and his partner after they had "finished their business" (Bergson 1911).

While both men and women were generally affirmative of drunken one-night stands, women seemed to balance this liberal attitude with efforts to avoiding being seen as "slutty" (Fjaer, Pedersen et al. 2015). Emthe—with some condescension—described a group of female acquaintances who often went to bars and clubs with the intention of dancing and hooking up. She emphasized that her own approach was somewhat different:

Emthe: We're also quite slutty, but in a somewhat more hidden manner (laughing).

Most of us intend to end up in bed with someone. However, we don't do it in the typical manner one may see out on the town, dancing extremely tight together, kind of. We have the same aims, just different ways of achieving it.

Interviewer: The aim is to get laid?

Emthe: Yes. But I manage to legitimize it if I'm not so direct about what I want.

Usually I have to go through an after-party before I end up in bed. But I never kind of stand there and rub my genitals against others on the dance floor.

Emthe enjoyed the game of checking out potential partners, i.e., watching, connecting, and flirting with them. The gaze is important in these activities because it allows for the aesthetic enjoyment of whoever is around, whether they like it or not. Watching and being

watched emphasizes the qualities of surfaces (Bech 1998) and may give way to fantasies about seeing and touching what is hidden and engaging in a “reckless consumption of the Other and being consumed by the Other” (Heinskou 2015: 888). Emthe explained that she enjoyed challenges when picking up boys, “It’s not cool at all when it’s so damn obvious and like, served on a silver plate. It’s much better if one has worked for it in a way. You get a lot more credit ending up in bed with someone when you’ve worked for it throughout the evening, I think”. Thus, a one-night stand was often the successful result of a game—a “girl hunt” or “boy hunt” (Grazian 2008), and something you “had to work for”. In a similar manner, Preben described it as “a game, kind of sport, like being a hunter and bringing down the prey”. In general, the male participants were more direct, insistent and aggressive in their pursuit of sex, but both men and women placed high value on casual sex and one-night stands (Tan 2013).

Sexualized territories

The stories of one-night stands generally contained many details on the social, material, technical, and emotional aspects of the sexual performance. Often, the broader geographical and cultural contexts were also described, presumably because these contexts played a significant role in enabling and shaping the sexual experience. Rita told us about the hardcore party culture in the small town in eastern Norway where she grew up. She described a typical house party in the home of one of her friends when the parents were away:

I was messing around with this guy, and my friend was with a friend of his. And then my friend started to mess around with the guy I was messing around with, so we switched, and then they fucked. Then I fucked him [the first boy] and then I threw up and sprained my ankle. I fell down the stairs. Then my stepfather came and picked me up naked (laughs). But I don’t remember any of it. I believed I had my clothes on, but

apparently I did not (laughs). It was funny (laughs).

Rita emphasized that these events took place in her past and in the countryside, where private parties often went pleasurably and sometimes dangerously out of hand. In this story, the countryside is portrayed as a hedonistic environment that enabled her and her peers to indulge in sexual experimentation. Rita's story also illustrates the central role played by parents in the construction and deconstruction of young people's alcohol assemblages. When parents are absent, emotional energies can run high and there is a generalized sense of freedom from restraints. This freedom is associated with intense pleasures, but also chaotic loss of control. When parents arrive on the scene, it will often disrupt the affective flows and thwart this sense of freedom. In many stories, parents either play the role of spoiling the mood and preventing sexual activity, or they play the role of restoring order and limiting harm, as Rita's stepfather did. However, Rita infused her story with laughter, which may indicate that she is (mildly) critical of her own drunken comportment (Bergson 1911).

Casual sex is often associated with urban lifestyles (de Casanova 2016). However, Rita grew up in a small town; those who had grown up in even more rural areas often described institutionalized feasts, where many drank moonshine and one-night stands in the forests could be part of local traditions. People of different generations could take part in these feasts; for those in their mid-teens, they could function as a traditional rite of passage into adulthood (Sande 2002). Heidi was in her mid-20s and was 15 years old when she first participated in the local feast in the rural area she grew up:

It was disco music, we acted crazy, right. I danced with a guy, we were pretty close, and then he just like, "yeah, wanna go for a walk?" I said, "yeah yeah yeah" (laughs). So we went into the forest (laughs). If you slept with someone [at these feasts], then you were cool. But... in retrospect, I could've done without it, let's put it that way. At that time, it

was really exciting. Then it was all about like... getting some. Right.

Heidi's story illustrates once again that drunken sex is more than merely a genital affair (Collins 2004: 235-36). In retrospect, she did not consider the actual intercourse as pleasurable, but she seemed to find it exciting and enjoyed the ensuing story of having had casual sex in a forest with a young man she had met at a rural feast. Her "crazy" behaviour at the feast and in the forest gave her a good story that she could share with her friends, and which earned her respect within her friendship group. Heidi mildly regretted many of her early sexual experiences, but she continued to have one-night stands: "Each time I go out I think that I'm going just to have fun. Then stuff happens... I mean, what happens, happens. Yeah, I take it as it comes, as simple as that."

In rural Norway, cars play an important role in socialization. Getting a driver's license and your own car is a marker of autonomy and a new social status (Urry 2006). Ingeborg, now a student in Oslo, described how her first intercourse was a one-night stand and took place in the backseat of a car in the rural area she grew up:

Yeah, I was 15 years old; it was at a village party! (laughing and clapping). Yeah, yeah, that's right! Oh, oh my god! So I met a guy that had a damn cool car (laughing). We drove in his car and drank in the backseat. Then we had sex in the backseat. Splendid! Romantic! [with an ironic eye gesture].

Ingeborg's story reminds of many a movie with scenes of backseat sex. There are many practical reasons for having car sex, of course. Cars can function as autonomous zones that can be placed in secluded places (Sheller 2004), and this can help young people become intimate, away from the surveillance of parents and other forbidding authorities. However, a case can be made that an additional attraction of car sex is that it is a highly mythologized form of behaviour, and cars are charged with potent sexual meanings. The car is a material

object, as well as a fantasized object with its own agency. Those who engage in car sex may mimic, mock or take inspiration from the sexual performances of well-known American movies (e.g., “Gone in 60 Seconds”). Ingeborg ended her account with the ironic remarks, “Splendid! Romantic!”, which is typical for many stories about one-night stands. One-night stands were not necessarily regarded as great sexual experiences, but they provided good storytelling material and could be used for identity-building purposes (Tutenges and Sandberg 2013). Certain contexts were typical for the sexual assemblages: e.g., house parties when the parents were away, encounters in urban nightlife, or rural feasts. What characterizes these situations was that these assemblages implied that the combination of alcohol and a party setting would loosen norms. The most extreme version of such a party context was at holiday resorts. Several participants described how holiday resorts with a reputation for heavy partying were especially suited to casual sexual encounters (Tutenges 2012). Frida described how she and her group of friends used to go to Sunny Beach, Bulgaria. Here the total “package” was based upon hard partying and sex:

We used to hang out in the pool bar at our hotel. The staff arranged parties. This Swede named Johnny was working there. He had a weird tattoo over his penis and went around in broad daylight in tight swim trunks, and he sprayed champagne all over us.

All her friends had casual sexual experiences during their two-week stay, often framed as “wild sex”. The common theme in all these stories was alcohol assemblages that produced a variety of one-night stands. The constellation (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) of alcohol and certain places and territories allowed time-out from ordinary norms. Most participants used terms such as “wild” and “crazy” when recounting these episodes, implying that explicit sexual pleasures may not have been the most important outcome of the experiences. Instead, the appeal seemed to be the transgression of mainstream norms in contexts often framed as

dangerous.

Sexualized pleasures—and regrets

Previous studies have emphasized how casual sex often is bad sex (Campbell 2008, McCarthy and Grodsky 2011). In our data as well, several emphasized that the sex itself had little to celebrate. However, many also had positive descriptions of one-night stands. Gunnar described what could be achieved in a one-night stand:

It's not the sex itself; I mean technically speaking (laughing). No, it is about meeting a new person, that chase and the affirmation. If you get to bring someone home, it's about being close to another person. It's also a good feeling physically the day after, the physical aspect of it.

The pleasure of sex can extend well beyond the sexual intercourse itself. It is something that is often anticipated with great joy, and it may be followed by positive physical sensations and the psychological benefits of having come close to another human being. Moreover, many participants—male and to a slightly lesser extent female—emphasized that casual sex could lead to positive feedback from peers in the form of recognition and respect. That is to say, consensual casual sex was generally not associated with feelings of regret and shame.

Espen was a male university student from a small rural town who described a “fantastic sex experience” on a visit to Oslo when he was 18 years old. An older cousin took him to a party. They all drank heavily. He met a girl in her mid-20s, an age group that was “far beyond” what he would usually associate with in his hometown. She took him home to her place: “We were talking intensely, sat on her balcony, till 7 a.m., then we had sex. I left around 9 in the morning. It was kind of *epic cool* [emphasized]”.

Note his formulation, “epic cool”. He continued, saying that “the idea, the conception of sex, when you're out on the town, is extremely strong”. This intense sexual experience had

become a frame of reference for him that infused his nightlife experiences with longing and symbolic meaning and inspired him to pursue casual sex with other women. In other words, Espen's sexual career and the alcohol assemblages that he would become part of were toned and shaped by his "epic" experience as an 18-year-old man. Heidi described "good" one-night stands:

There have been times when it was really nice. I mean not just...just like "a quickie" and then you're, like, done. I mean that in a way you can take the time afterwards, wake up together, chat and eat breakfast and stuff like that, that's like... yeah.

Heidi's rejection of "a quickie" can be seen as an attempt to negotiate gendered sexual double standards for women and balance liberal with more traditional sexual expectations (Fjaer, Pedersen et al. 2015). She emphasized that not only the sexual encounter, but also the interaction afterwards made the one-night stand about more than sex. However, for both men and women, the pleasures of one-night stands could be related to closeness and tenderness, and the advantage that this was not necessarily linked to the obligations and demands of a stable relationship (Garcia, Reiber et al. 2012).

While the sex in itself was not always at the centre of experiences and stories about one-night stands, these could sometimes open a space for hidden and more complex sexual desires. Emilie, a 26-year-old woman working as a teacher, had just broken off a long-term relationship. She went to a bar with some friends, drank heavily, and then noticed a guy who was "rather shy". They looked at each other; he went up to her and asked her directly, "Are you going home with me?" At first, she was hesitant, and then one of her friends said: "Come on, what do you have to lose? Are you going to sulk over your ex forever?" So she grabbed the guy and just said, "never mind, I'll come along". She described the following experience:

We had the best sex in the world. He was kind of shy among other people, but not at all

behind closed doors! It was the details of his sex style, I guess. He was very controlling, without being a sado-fool. I felt very petite and feminine while I was thrown around.

For Emilie, the appeal of the experience was that his “sex style” was unusual for her. She had few previous experiences with sadomasochistic sex, and was sexually aroused by the way he took control in the sex act, possibly also reflecting the increased accessibility of cultural representations of these types of sex (Tsaros 2013).

Hedda also described a one-night stand that released other previously hidden sexual desires. The episode took place in New York, more or less in public, with a man she had met the same day:

It was in this bar, with a pool. We got in the water with only our underwear on. One thing led to another. I was sitting on top of him on a kind of sofa in the pool. Then these flashes, pictures taken everywhere! I just thought, “Damn, imagine if we’re in some of those pictures?” That feeling of having done something so crazy in New York! Yeah, it was incredibly fun. And I wouldn’t have experienced it if I hadn’t drunk alcohol. The day after I was just like, “I want more! I want more!” It was so exciting!

For Hedda, the intense pleasure was a result of the semi-exhibitionistic dimension of the meeting. She was turned on by the fantasy that someone could see them, and possibly even posting pictures of them on Instagram or Snapchat, which could obviously come with a reputational cost (Salter 2016). She was well aware that she would never have done this while sober, and that it was the specific assemblage of alcohol, a nice guy, New York, the pool and the audience that enabled the meeting and gave it unique qualities. One reason why a one-night stand could give pleasure was that norms could be broken and borders could be crossed.

Alcohol was almost always part of the setting when our participants had one-night stands. However, the substance was described as having a variety of seemingly mutually

exclusive effects. Alcohol could often make flirting smoother; it reduced inhibitions and opened up pleasures. Many dared to perform acts they would not have done when sober. Several described how they had experimented with “orgies”, “threesomes” and had done “wild things” that they had enjoyed. However, alcohol could also lead to lack of intimacy, reduced sexual performance or impotence in men (Schlichthorst, Sanci et al. 2016). Many had done “stupid things” or ended up in bed with someone with whom they later realized they did not really want to have sex. Hedda described the ambiguity of these experiences in a characteristic manner:

Hedda: Most of the time [I had sex] was while drinking. I remember at a hotel room, we hadn't had much to drink, just, like, a glass of wine. And he said, “Shit, I haven't had sober sex in, like, six years” or something like that.

Interviewer: Seriously?

Hedda: Mm, I think it's true for a lot of people who are not in a relationship. Or they get lucky. Got lucky one night and just had some sex! No, [meaning: that does not often happen]. People have sex while drunk. Sometimes it goes well and other times it's shit.

Interviewer: Shit because it's bad sex or because...?

Hedda: Because it's bad sex or because one doesn't remember anything or that... yeah, pretty much anything. Or that one loses inhibitions, not using a condom for example, because there's no point [in using condoms] when one is drunk.

As described by Hedda, alcohol was taken for granted in Norwegian binge drinkers' one-night stands, but most were aware that the substance could leave them open to almost any type of experience—good or poor.

Alcohol was taken for granted in one-night-stands among young people in Norway. Moreover, alcohol assemblages often had a sexual undertone, where expectations of sexualized pleasures or excitement were part of the set-up. They were an opportunity for sexual exploration and pleasures in highly sexualized territories. The result was sometimes problematic and included sexual abuse and unpleasant sexual experiences (Tutenges, Pedersen et al. 2017). Hedda highlighted the sometimes ambiguous role of drunken one-night stands. While the overall portrayal of these episodes was favourable, there was also an acceptance of the fact that it could—and sometimes did—go wrong.

Discussion and conclusion

The NTE and party context is closely associated with sexual exploration and pleasures. In fact, it was rare among participants in this study to have experienced one-night stands without alcohol (in particular) or other drugs. Particular sexualized territories were crucial to set the scene for these drunken sexual experiences. Combined, they formed the constellation (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) that produced drunken one-night stands. These were often the result of complex assemblages of alcohol, specific situations creating opportunities for flirting and erotic explorations, usually situated in specific contexts and places, e.g., house parties for adolescents while parents were away, toilets in bars and pubs, the backseats of cars, rural feasts or holidays abroad. Alcohol was used to produce a specific mood, to loosen norms, and binge drinkers in this study had a sophisticated conceptualization of links to perceived effects resting in the constellation of the substance, emotions, time and space.

A recent shift in social theory has broadened the investigational scope to include some of the non-human agents affecting the consumption of alcohol, drugs and sex in nightlife environments (Demant 2013, Dilkes-Frayne 2016, Duff 2016). Assemblage and affective theories (Jayne, Valentine et al. 2010, Duff 2012, Duff 2014) are valuable to support arguments that objects, spaces and places are not “passive backdrops” to drunken one-night

stands, rather socio-spatial settings that should be included in investigations of the experiences and practices of alcohol use and sex. In this paper, we have highlighted and tried to understand alcohol-related sexual pleasures. Traditionally, the possible pleasures of alcohol have received little attention in social sciences (O'Malley and Valverde 2004), but researchers seem to have accepted that the pursuit of pleasure is one of the most obvious explanations of alcohol use (Bancroft 2012, Pennay 2015). Moreover, as argued by Coveney and Bunton (2003), a model where pleasure is regarded as located in a tablet or a glass of wine is obviously deficient. Pleasure is never an epiphenomenal outcome of an act alone, whether using alcohol, making love or reading a novel.

The strengths of assemblage theory in alcohol and drug studies include openness to the role of non-human and social environments, and an attempt at capturing the multitude of interdependent factors that shape both experiences of intoxication and experiences while being intoxicated. Our contribution to this thriving framework is to note how not only the socio-spatial context, but also the narrative environment and repertoire shape and motivate experiences while drunk. We believe that it is particularly difficult to understand drunken one-night stands without seeing how these experiences are potential stories to recount, deeply embedded, and partly produced by a narrative repertoire of pre-existing “crazy” or “fun” drinking stories. The narrative dimensions can even explain how unpleasant or potentially traumatizing sexual experiences can be reinterpreted as “wild” to support a particular social identity favoured in a context of partying and nightlife. Therefore, combined with socio-spatial context, objects and materiality, narrative environment is a fundamental part of the alcohol assemblage of nightlife, intoxication and sexual experiences.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article

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