

Drinking Stories as a narrative genre: The five classic themes

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Abstract

Drinking stories feature widely in Western societies. Many people eagerly share their stories in the aftermath of drinking events. These stories are also common in books, movies, music, and the media. Based on qualitative interviews with 104 young Norwegian heavy episodic drinkers, the article seeks to establish drinking stories as a distinct narrative genre. We argue that this narrative genre of drinking stories comes from an oral storytelling tradition, which uses transgressions to trigger interest, entertain, and challenge commonly held views. These transgressions typically come in the form of playful violations of conventions and common sense, and tend to centre around five classic themes: sex, bodily harm, bodily fluids, lawbreaking, and pranks. While often dismissed as trivial, vulgar, and of little literary value, drinking stories are highly valued by many people, and have significant consequences for how people experience drinking and behave while being drunk.

Keywords

Alcohol, drinking story, genre, narrative analysis, narrative criminology, transgression,

Introduction

Scandinavians have a long tradition of performing, talking, and writing about drinking. As early as the first century A.D., the Roman historian Tacitus (1901-02) reported excessive drinking in the Nordic countries, and the Vikings of the late 8th to late 11th centuries were known for their drunken feasts, drinking games, and stories thereof (Gately, 2009). The later nobility also reveled in heavy drinking, about which they enjoyed talking. In the early 17th century, the wedding of the Danish–Norwegian crown prince was described by a French guest:

‘It lasted for three days and the guests drank non-stop. Those who got drunk slept a couple of hours before they started again. The prince became totally drunk five or six times. One of the most distinguished guests, I won’t use his name, didn’t reach the door before he had to vomit’ (quoted in Troels-Lund, 1940: 510).

In other countries, drinking stories have also prevailed (Holt, 2006), including in ancient Greece, where drinking stories were abundant, not least in the drinking clubs of the social elite (Qviller, 2004). Today, drinking stories, short or long, are widespread, including in the autobiographies of rock stars (Morris and Westover, 2013; Oksanen, 2013a; Oksanen, 2013b), popular music (Hardcastle, Hughes et al. 2015), movies (e.g. The Hangover trilogy), and popular books (Tucker, 2006; Handler, 2013).

Social scientists have long taken an interest in stories about drinking because they contain rich and easily accessible information about the drinking practices and lives of the storytellers. Many young people willingly share their drinking stories with researchers (Tutenges and Rod 2009; Hackley et al., 2013: 934), in part, as we shall see, because the performance of these stories can serve to entertain and lift the mood while demonstrating

storytelling virtuosity. However, researchers typically examine drinking stories, not as a narrative genre in its own right, but merely as a source of information to study broader issues such as youth culture and addiction (but see Workman, 2001; Fjaer, 2012). Consequently, there exist only vague definitions and understandings of the nature of drinking stories, including how they are structured and the themes they cover.

Herein, we explore the drinking stories of young Norwegians, though we believe these stories are illustrative of drinking stories more widely, including the countries with the highest rates of heavy episodic drinking, such as England, Ireland, Russia, Poland, and the Nordic countries (Kuntsche, Rehm and Gmel, 2004). Our aims are twofold. First, we seek to establish that drinking stories should be treated and understood as a narrative genre on par with other, well-recognised narrative genres, such as the tall tale (CS Brown, 1987; De Fina, 2009). Second, we outline the main themes around which drinking stories revolve. We argue that, although drinking stories are generally told in a distinctly humorous tone, they often touch upon serious issues that are of central concern to young and, to a lesser extent, middle-aged, and older adults. We argue, moreover, that drinking stories are constitutive in the sense that they inspire and sustain both joyful and harmful social practices.

Research on Drinking Stories

Traditionally, narrative researchers have prioritised the study of the quality, meaning, and organising principles of written texts (Bauman, 1986), while less attention has been paid to oral storytelling. Drinking stories have traditionally been a predominantly oral storytelling tradition, which may explain why narrative researchers have been relatively hesitant to take these stories seriously and study them in depth. As Bauman put it, oral traditions have been widely seen as ‘simple, formless [and] lacking in artistic quality and complexity’ (Bauman, 1986: 7). We argue, however, that drinking stories can be meaningful, complex and artfully

crafted. They can tell us much about the individuals who share them as well as the society, culture, and social network in which they are embedded. Moreover, they are based on certain performative and thematic principles, which are best understood by conceptualising them as a distinct narrative genre.

Drinking stories typically refer to seemingly chaotic experiences and behaviours; however, the stories themselves tend to be tightly organised around the same type of characters and events which are presented according to certain sequential patterns (Tutenges and Sandberg 2013; Hackley et al., 2013). The key element is the intake of large amounts of alcohol, combined with the transgression of boundaries established by tradition, the law, or other authorities (Hackley et al., 2015). These stories are usually told to make people laugh, and are often circulated widely among friends through face-to-face interactions and increasingly also online through written communication, pictures and video clips (Truong 2018). Studies indicate that sex, drugs and alcohol are among the most common topics of conversation on social media and that these online conversations serve multiple interactional purposes such as displaying intimacy, strengthening friendships and storing good memories (Van Doorn 2010; Cullen 2011). Many value storytellers' talent in performing drinking stories, both offline and online, and those who have this ability may gain a central position in social networks (Pyorala, 1995; Sheehan and Ridge, 2001; Griffin et al., 2009).

Fjaer (2012) argues that sharing drinking stories may be a way to obtain information about, and come to terms with, what happened at a party. In this process, the retrospective negotiation of what happened may help unify a group while transforming negative experiences into positive ones (Collins, 2004: 48–49). Tragic events occurring as a result of heavy drinking, such as car accidents, school dropout, and alcohol dependence, seem to be avoided in some cultural contexts, as they are perceived as unfitted for storytelling

(Workman, 2001: 442–43). In other cultural contexts, drinking stories may bring up tragic events, maybe to make them more bearable (Tutenges and Rod, 2009).

The most obvious work drinking story do are entertaining, recalling happy moments, and forging close relationships between participants (Sheehan and Ridge, 2001; Griffin et al., 2009). However, fun and laughter may have an ambiguous character. Bakhtin's (1984) 'carnival laughter' is collective and inclusive, and can be uplifting and jubilant, as well as dark and mocking. Drawing on Bakhtin, Featherstone (1991: 22) described the carnival as '... transgressions of the official "civilized" culture [in favour of] excitement, uncontrolled emotions and the direct and vulgar grotesque bodily pleasures of fattening food, intoxicating drink and sexual promiscuity'. These themes are typical in drinking stories, and part of an expressive culture that playfully opposes established views of right and wrong. Drinking stories are meant to disturb and are full of anti-structure (Turner, 1997), in which 'the normal order is momentarily, and cathartically, suspended' (Hackley et al., 2013: 943).

Most research on drinking stories has focused on young adults, but these stories may also be important for middle-aged adults (Emslie, Hunt and Lyons, 2012). Drinking stories of adventure and risk are often linked to traditional conceptions of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). In these stories, drinking is heroic—the more danger, the better. However, drinking stories may also emphasise an unruly and unrestrained masculinity. In a study of stag tourism, Thurnell-Read (2011) shows how physical excesses break down ideals of male control or humorously parodies them. When they narrate their experiences, the messiness or leakiness of the male body is valued; and self-destruction and degradation emerge as something to achieve rather than avoid. Folds or fat around a belly may be defiantly exposed, stories about 'sickness and diarrhoea may be acted out like a comedy tableau' (Thurnell-Read, 2011: 984). Drunken stumbling may be taken as comic proof that the

weekend was a success. Such intoxicated disorderliness represents a release from the ordinary normative pressure of masculine ideals.

Drinking stories used to be a male storytelling tradition, but this is no longer the case. Today, in many Western societies, women frequently share drinking stories, for instance on social media where it is common for young women and men alike to put their intoxicated moments on public display (Dobson 2011; Brown and Gregg, 2012). In so doing, they perform who they are and want to be while negotiating established views about gender and youth. A study revealed how harms related to unwanted sexual experiences during drinking sessions were filtered through ‘the good story’—full of fun, bonding, and pleasurable transgressions (Sheehan and Ridge, 2001). The sharing of drinking stories can be a way to explore the bounds of acceptability, as well as socially sanctioned femininity, and develop skills in deciding which transgressive stories can be told, to whom and in what contexts.

Drinking stories enable the narrators to make sense of their intoxicated behaviour, and in this way also to accomplish important identity work. Storytellers may emphasise wildness and rule breaking, smartness and skilfulness, or they may describe how they assumed the role of caretaker or moderator. Ricoeur (1991: 21) dismisses ideas of an identity based on a stable, basic self. He argues that the notion of narrative identity points to a more useful way of thinking, in which personal continuity and unity are actively constructed by means of a plot. Often this plot is developed through interaction, which is typical for many drinking stories. Narrators take turns telling and listening, and together create the storyline. Thus, drinking stories, in the same manner as other types of stories, forge links between what we have experienced with ‘who we are and what we intend to do’ (Presser, 2013: 15). As scripts for behaviour, they influence practices when inebriated.

Narrative Genre

The narratives that circulate in society are innumerable and ever-changing, but tend to coalesce into distinct classes—what we refer to herein as genres. What demarks one genre from another is often subtle and intuitively determined, but it is not arbitrary. It has to do with the content and structure of the material presented, as well as the communicative purpose, style, and emotional tone with which it is performed (CS Brown, 1987: viii; Swales, 1990: 58). Typically, when a narrative is shared, the audience will have an immediate feel for the genre to which it belongs, but without necessarily knowing the name or definition of this particular genre. Conventions constrain how, where, when, and to whom a particular narrative genre may be performed, but these conventions may be creatively bent by performers to create a desired effect and serve specific purposes (Bhatia, 2014: 13).

Similarities in discourse that can be seen as genre are not just expressed in spoken or written words but also by non-verbal means, such as physical movements (e.g. making hand gestures), sound making (e.g. laughing), facial expressions (e.g. looking angry), symbols (e.g. using emojis), and imagery (e.g. posting pictures) (Pink 2015: 74). The study of genres therefore requires that one pays attention to both the verbal and non-verbal ways that stories are being transmitted and received. Bruner (2009) argues that genres organise the structuring of events as well as the telling and understanding of these events. Notions of genre are therefore crucial for how people encipher and decipher their experiences, framing certain experiences as valid and significant, and others as invalid and insignificant (Culler, 2002).

The most basic genres, tragedy and comedy, can be traced back to Aristotle's *Poetics* from 335 BCE (Halliwell and Aristoteles 1998). Frye (1957) describes how tragedy may be ironic and comedy told in a romantic mode, thereby distinguishing the four most prominent genres that work across a variety of narrative styles and in many different historical epochs. Genres may also be divided into more specific sub- or micro-genres. For instance, Smith (2005) identifies an apocalyptic genre, which is necessary to justify the great personal and

societal sacrifices that come with military conflict. Plummer (2002) highlights the genre of sexual recovery tales in an account of the basic structures and themes of stories told by survivors of sexual abuse. Other such micro-genres include the repentance stories that circulate in religious groups and the bad trip stories told among substance users (Sandberg and Tutenges, 2015).

Literary studies define genres as types of discourse ‘characterised by similarities in content and form’ (Freedman and Medway, 1994: 2). For literary theorists, the main task of genres has been to classify regularities in text that span a variety of literary forms in different historical epochs. For sociologists however, genre studies have more often been identifying textual or oral regularities that dominate particular institutions, in specific social contexts or historical periods. Moreover, linguistic studies typically emphasise form while sociologists have been more interested in content. Following the traditional definition of genre in literary studies, we argue that drinking stories’ regularity in *both* form and content justifies describing them as a narrative genre. Furthermore, we argue that understanding the discursive regularities of drinking stories is necessary to understand the role of excessive drinking in contemporary society.

Method

Data in this study are 104 semi-structured interviews with young Norwegians who regularly frequented the night-time economy. Participants were recruited and interviewed by seven research assistants, four men and three women, from different parts of Norway, all of whom were trained sociologists in their mid-20s. Research assistants recruited participants through snowball sampling in social networks in the different areas in Norway where they had grown up. In addition, some participants were recruited in bars and pubs in Oslo and other urban areas. Participants got a fee of NOK 400 (ca. 40 EUR). The sample included 52 men and 52

women, with a mean age of 25 years ($SD = 3.7$ years). All were heavy episodic drinkers, which we understand as recreational drinking with the purpose of getting intoxicated, and were either students or worked full- or part-time. Their educational level was slightly above Norwegian average, and around 60% were still studying or had recently finished their college or university education. Around half the sample lived in small towns or rural parts of eastern Norway, one in five lived in the capital Oslo, and a minority came from western or northern Norway. Most had an ethnic Norwegian background, reflecting the rather homogenous ethnic population in Norway, outside the greater Oslo area.

The research assistants were trained to use a style of interviewing that fostered a conversational tone. Most participants were in the same age group as them and some had previously belonged to the same social networks. The interviews were often conducted in private homes or in public cafes or bars, which facilitated a friendly and relaxed atmosphere. The context of interviews probably helped avoid defensive accounts of drinking and may have triggered interviewees' eagerness to tell drinking stories. Interviews typically lasted 1,5 hour and included topics such as all forms of alcohol use, being intoxicated, descriptions of parties and other drinking occasions, expectations before such occasions, motivations for drinking, episodes of violence and other unpleasant experiences such as vomiting and blackout, as well as a long section related to 'hooking up', casual sex, and one-night stands.

There are important differences between telling stories to the researchers and telling them to friends. The atmosphere was lively in interviews and sometimes participants and researcher knew each other, but they would probably have been more animated in festive situations involving more people, alcohol and a natural exchange of stories. Moreover, drinking stories were exclusively collected during face-to-face interviews. Results therefore reflect verbal drinking stories with an emphasis on spoken words. With the flourishing of online social media, drinking stories are increasingly expressed through written words,

photography and video clips (Truong 2018). Unfortunately, we do not have data to address such drinking stories.

The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and coded by three of the research assistants who also did the interviews. We first held a workshop on key themes in the coding process where the three coders participated in the discussion and preliminary coding. The coding was then done under close supervision of the authors of this article. We followed general qualitative research analysis standards (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Initial coding identified several predefined codes, including a broad category of drinking stories. Each drinking story identified in this initial coding process was analysed in more detail later by the authors of this article to develop a theme-based typology of drinking stories. In the analysis below, we are limited to quoting a small selection of representative drinking stories from interviews. Those selected were not the most extreme, shocking or disturbing; instead, we have quoted those that, while still reporting extraordinary events, are the most broadly representative of drinking stories from this sample of young adults.

The study is part of the larger ‘Binge Norway’-study, running from 2013-2019, and funded by the University of Oslo and the Norwegian Research Council (see Pedersen, Copes and Sandberg 2016; Pedersen, Tutenges and Sandberg 2017; Tutenges, Sandberg and Pedersen 2019). It 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 (e.g. geographic references, names of partners and friends), were removed and replaced with aliases.

Five Characteristic Themes in Drinking Stories

The study participants were accustomed to telling stories about their experiences while intoxicated. During the interviews, many proved themselves to be eloquent storytellers who

performed their stories in an uplifting and captivating manner. Some of the stories had been told many times before and in the process of telling and retelling, the stories' content and form may have changed slightly to please different audiences and make certain key points more striking (Tutenges and Sandberg, 2013: 541-542). The result section highlights how five main themes stood out in these drinking stories.

Sexual adventures

Sex was the most common theme in the young Norwegians' drinking stories. This theme was sometimes only hinted at or featured as a sort of promising potential or backdrop without being fully developed into scenic descriptions of actual sexual activities. Often, however, the sexual activities featured prominently, describing sexual situations ranging from awkward attempts at flirtation to sexual intercourse with one or several partners. Such experiences are well-suited for storytelling, not only because of the general interest in sex, but also because in contemporary society sex is an important avenue for self-exploration and for obtaining social recognition (Collins, 2004). Accordingly, many of the sexually-oriented drinking stories projected an air of bravado and pride.

Martin told a story about waking up after a black-out, realising that he was naked and in a bed with a woman he did not know. He described it as a relief that she was 'pretty' and then summarised the pillow-talk that followed:

'And she asks me what my name is and I ask what her name is, and this and that and oh my God. And then she says, this sounds like a joke, but it's actually totally true, so she asks me what it is I do, so I say that I study, and I actually did. And then she says "oh really which high school?" (laughs). Right there that is the craziest thing I've ever heard, my heart stopped, I mean it really like, stopped. And she can see it, so she gets

almost a bit of a shock herself, just like (in a bitchy tone of voice) “how old are you really?” I don’t fucking dare say I’m 27, like, so I lie, and I say I’m 23. And then I can see that she’s relieved, so then I ask the same thing, how old are you? “No, I’m in 12th grade, so I am actually 18”. At that point it was just putting one’s clothes on, hopping in a taxi, and getting the hell back home.’

The element of surprise in Martin’s story is a common characteristic of storytelling. The break in the storyline amplifies the narrative and, one may note, echoes an identical scene in the cult novel and subsequent movie *Trainspotting* (Welsh, 1994). The blackout in Martin’s story is another common feature of drinking stories (Fjaer, 2012). This temporary amnesia may serve as an excuse for having transgressed moral boundaries and may also trigger the audiences’ imagination, leading to considerations about what might have happened. Martin presented the sexual intercourse as an awkward mistake, but at the same time seemed to take pride in having had sex with a ‘pretty’ partner who was significantly younger than him.

Looks, gender and sex also played an important role in Daniel’s drinking story:

‘In my eyes, in my condition, she was pretty, the girl that approached me. We danced a little dirty, and some rubbing against each other and this and that, and then we started to talk a little nasty and mess around. (...). She got to give me a blow job in the bathroom, in that bar (...) And while she was sucking me, I’m thinking about those buns I’m going to get to feel...so I stick my hand under the blouse... and, but, one can’t take this literally because I actually don’t know, if it did happen, I might have repressed it (laughs), and so I don’t know if it’s even true, but it makes for very fuzzy memories. But when I finally touch that chest, I really believe that I’m touching some stubbles (laughs, almost hysterically).’

Daniel quickly removed his hand, decided not to make ‘a drama’ and let his sex partner finish the act. Even after the episode, he was unsure of his partner’s gender. Hackley et al. (2013: 933) describes how different types of laughter characterise reactions to drinking stories, from ‘parodic grotesquery’, to ‘ribald and satiric laughter’. Some drinking stories resemble the comedy of intrigue, in which individuals have roles beyond the expected, and in which mysterious or exotic characters may be part of the plot. The mix-up in Daniel’s story includes this type of comedy and intrigue emphasised by his concluding laughter, which frames the episode as slightly degrading and wrong, yet still in the realm of what he considers fun.

Nina similarly described a situation where she got a blackout, a theme recurring in several stories, opening up for anxiety and shame related to her amnesia and not having control over and insight into what had happened:

‘I once took this guy home with me. I was pretty drunk. Woke up the next day, he was gone. I couldn’t remember that he had been there. “There’s a condom on the floor, shit, what happened yesterday?”. Couldn’t figure out who it was, where I had met him, if he was tall, thin, fat, thin - no idea! Didn’t go shopping for a few days in case he lived nearby (laughs).’

Laughter tends to be a critical form of communication—arguably, in this case, a type of self-critique that disparages her own sexual conduct (Bergson, 1911). This was more common for women than for men, although Daniels laughter can be interpreted in the same way.

Another variant of the sex theme in the genre of drinking stories is having sex or being nude in unusual places, such as in a public park or in the bathroom while other people are

knocking on the door. Sometimes, scenes from pornographic movies were reiterated in participants' stories (Dines, 2010). These were usually conveyed with a mixture of pride in having had the experience, and a sense of humiliation or shame about the act in which they engaged. For the men, drinking stories about sex most often confirmed their sense of heterosexual masculinity, but could also challenge or question this, as occurred in Daniel's story. Women seemed to boast less when telling drinking stories that centred on sex, instead focusing on awkward, exciting, extraordinary, or pleasurable sexual episodes. For both men and women, sexual drinking stories often contained a mixture of wildness, taboo, and degradation.

Bodily Harm

The theme of bodily harm was central to many of the drinking stories, ranging from minor mishaps to lethal crimes. The more dramatic, the more worthy of storytelling these incidents seemed. A common variant was stories of violence. Sometimes these were shocking, unamusing stories, but more often they were told in a distinctly humorous tone. As with drinking stories in general, men were more eager to tell these stories, but it was also a theme in women's drinking stories. Cecilie for example, told a story about an episode when she tried to stop a conflict between her friends by intervening physically:

'Then the other guys start to laugh, right, and say 'damn he got pushed by a girl', and then I get so damn pissed, right, that I just like turn around and push him, the other one. So, he actually falls backwards and drags with him the other two. (...) So then, my female friend and I stand there and are yelling and kicking and hitting. Philip was there and I was just getting more and more angry. Another male friend of mine was

standing there, and I said ‘here you go, hold my purse’, so he continued to stand there with a Corona and my purse, probably wanting to join in himself (laughs).’

Inverting traditional gender roles is a typical feature in comedy, particularly when females may be portrayed as physically superior to their male partners (Walsh, Fursich and Jelierson, 2008). The climax of Cecilie’s story, was the image of the male friend passively standing with a purse and a Corona beer, two symbols of femininity. Violence combined with the comic element of reversed gender roles were crucial for making these events material for a good drinking story.

Another variant of stories about bodily harm involved accidents. Sometimes these stories were told in a braggart tone. Johnny’s story began with a comic description of his friend Morten, who accidentally made him fall atop beer bottles:

‘So, then I had to go to hospital. I was lying there on my stomach and got my ass stitched. I was so drunk that it wasn’t even fun. I wandered around the hallways with my pants around my ankles, the little shit! Drove home, changed boxers, went out again, back to the nightclub. I was standing there behind the bar. Morten promised that it would be his treat, right, he had such a bad conscience. Obviously not bad enough, because then some guy came and smacked me on the ass. I just screamed! And then I see Morten standing there and laughing like hell in the hallway! (laughs)’

As part of the process of turning events into stories, potentially traumatising events are turned into slapstick humour. However, the story also highlights Johnny’s bravery insofar as he was able to return to the party despite his injury. Telling it can therefor also be interpreted as a way for him to present a daring and courageous self.

Other drinking stories involved a whole series of accidents and complications, forming what may be considered entanglement comedies. In these stories, the protagonist often comes across as tragically and humorously ironic, in part because the audience knows that the plot will be resolved in a comic mode (Gutzwiller, 2000). If storytellers describe their own mishaps, they may receive recognition for exposing themselves and not taking themselves too seriously. The virtuous storyteller in this genre will succeed in being self-ironic, but not overly so, and in striking a balance between self-critique and self-aggrandisement.

Bodily Fluids

Fluids play a key role in drinking stories. Not only in the form of the alcoholic liquids that the storied protagonists pursue, purchase, consume or spill, but also in the form of the protagonists' vomit, urine, faeces, tears, semen, and blood. Bodily fluids were sometimes only mentioned in passing, but at times also took the centre of the stories. The protagonists' bodies were described as leaking, often in rather histrionic and involuntary manners, and in highly inappropriate places such as beds, cars, and on other persons. Margareta's story took place in a Mediterranean resort known for heavy partying, where she became so intoxicated that her friends had to carry her back to the room:

'So, they thought I was dead drunk, so she [her roommate] brought this Swedish guy with her to the room, and started to have sex with him. I opened my eyes and saw that they were having sex and stuff, in the same room. Then I threw up on the mattress. (...) So, I took the mattress and threw it out the window into the pool and stuff (laughs). Madness, like, to that degree!'

Vomit was the most common bodily fluid in drinking stories and, which often caused embarrassment and confusion. Margareta's story included a long chain of transgressive events, of which her vomiting formed a sort of cathartic finale. Her laughter at the end of the story is indicative of the incongruous combination of sex, vomit, and vandalism and may also be interpreted as a form of self-critique (Bergson, 1911). This type of degradation was a central part of many drinking stories and is often responded to with laughter.

Drinking stories is a genre that often pushes the limits of what can be described and laughed about, and present people in a grotesque light (Journey, 2014). The stories thus allow for taboos to be verbalised and narratively scrutinised, and open a discussion of topics about which people normally remain silent. The humorous tone with which drinking stories tend to be told makes it possible for storytellers to present themselves, their opinions, and events in a manner that is simultaneously appreciative and depreciative. They may or may not mean what they say, and what they did may or may not reflect who they truly are.

Breaking the Law

Another main theme in drinking stories is crimes, such as drunk driving, shoplifting, and burglary. Importantly, these crimes were rarely aimed at the acquisition of material gain, but were often committed by accident or seemingly for amusement. Similarly, sharing stories about law-breaking may offered vicarious thrills by collectively contemplating how protagonists successfully or unsuccessfully handled the thrill of confronting and navigating danger and, perhaps, getting away with it. Thomas shared how his group started their night on the town with theft:

‘We used to stand in the front and cover the camera and all of that, while people in the back were putting bags of potato chips and all kinds of shit inside their jackets. I had a

friend, he made off with a case of soda from the gas station right next to where I lived, and ran, and then he managed to trip on a curb, fell over the case of soda, while he was holding it, and his face (claps) right on the asphalt, scraped his whole face.'

Thomas' story was told to entertain and was both introduced by, and followed up with, laughter. It had a hedonistic dimension, in which people were indiscriminately grabbing items and rules were collectively broken. Drinking stories often describe 'moral holidays', in which there are temporary breakdowns in normal social mores, and in which a group 'may be galvanised into a collective consciousness in opposition to ordinary restraints' (Collins, 2008: 243). The first part of Thomas' story shows how his group experiences such a moral holiday. However, the story actually concluded with regret. Things went too far, pointing to the possibly ambiguous and multilayered character of the drinking story.

Illustratively, after a long, entertaining, and exciting account of escaping the police, Arne concluded his story about drunk driving with a lesson:

'It was a wake-up call because they crashed. I remember I woke up and checked texts the following day, and it said there was a car that had crashed and one person had a crushed skull, and was about to like, die, and there were others that were injured. So, the driver lost his license and was arrested and stuff actually. After that, I have been damn reluctant to ride with someone again while drunk.'

Drinking stories are a genre meant to entertain and be fun, but that does not exclude their ability to convey complex messages. Things may often go wrong, even seriously wrong, as in Arne's story. He had likely told his story many times previously and, arguably, the telling and retelling of these events may have helped him externalise the tragic experience, to share it

with others, and in doing so make it more bearable (Tutenges and Rod, 2009: 363). The story contained a clear moral message. However, because it was initially framed as a drinking story it became more difficult to dismiss it as moralistic. Following the general resonance of open or ambiguous stories (Polletta, 2006), drinking stories are a genre that can convey complex messages, including both laughter and tears, remorse and rejoicing.

Pranks and games

The final theme we identified includes various pranks and games that occur while drinking. Examples include shaving hair from, or drawing on the face of, a friend who has passed out. Parties-gone-wild was another typical story, which sometimes bordered the theme of law breaking, depending on the degree of damage and the relationships between those who inflicted the damage and the owners of the house. Helen described such a party:

‘Yeah, there were people who had smeared nugatti [chocolate spread] all over the kitchen and the bathroom was flooded, it was completely crazy. People had taken my bottle of fish sauce from the fridge and were shooting fish sauce all over the place and it stank like fish for months.’

The tendency was that the more absurd, original, or unexpected the acts, the better the drinking story. One participant told, with great enjoyment, about taking a cow into a living room and dressing it up with a party hat and a blanket. Another described releasing an eagle from a zoo in Budapest. Sometimes these games or pranks explored sexual taboos, such as when a group of young men played a so-called trust game in which they made a circle and put their scrotum on the spoon to the person beside them. Some of these pranks and games seemed to be performed with the clear aim of having a good story to tell later.

Sexual taboos were not the only taboos described in participants' drinking stories. Some also explored themes such as race and ethnicity. Morten described an episode in which he was in a line waiting to buy a kebab after a long night of drinking:

'So, then there's a guy coming over to me, definitely a nigger, or black or whatever they call them nowadays. And he just says, "Hey, are you hungry or what?" I was just like: "Yeah, I am pretty hungry". He just starts to plough his way through the line. People were just like, "Hey, what do you think you're doing?" He was just like, "What? Is it because I'm black?" and "Nono, nono, it's alright, it's alright". Made his way to the front, bought two kebabs and came back and was like, "Here, you get this one" and I was just like, "... Thank you! Fuck yeah!"'

Drinking stories can be a space in which to play with stereotypes and to use words and expressions that are otherwise disallowed. The term 'nigger' ('neger' in Norwegian) in this story, is highly provocative. However, the punchline is that the black protagonist turns out to be the 'hero', which facilitates the story's acceptability (Scarpetta and Spagnolli, 2009). The joking atmosphere makes the story less offensive, and shows how the drinking story genre provides opportunities to use derogatory terms as subtle critique of political correctness (Barreto and Ellemers, 2005).

Drinking stories are complex, and in Morten's story, the plot centred on how the black man took advantage of his subordinate position and turned it into an advantage, by playing actively on stereotypes and peoples' fears of being seen as racist. The story is not easily categorised and in this demonstrates that many drinking stories are highly ambiguous (Polletta, 2006). The way drinking stories can contain several different voices, makes them

well suited for exploring taboos. Based on comedy, the genre of drinking stories easily lends itself to exploring stereotypes, be it racial, sexual or associated with bodily fluids.

Discussion

Drinking stories are a narrative genre that uses incongruity and transgressions to trigger interest, entertain and challenge commonly held views. The transgressions typically take the form of playful violations of conventions and common sense, and tend to centre around five themes: sexual interaction, physical harm, bodily fluids, law breaking, and a wide variety of pranks. Drinking stories includes rupture or disruption, and the more significant the break with what is expected, or the more absurd the drinking episode, the more likely that it will be told as a drinking story. A good drinking story is characterised by an element of surprise, matter out of place, and often involves wildness, excess, transgressions, and sometimes an element of degradation in the Bakhtinian (1984) sense of the term. The absurd, bizarre, or carnivalesque element is thus crucial for the drinking story genre.

Drinking stories are told to be entertaining and typically invite smiles and laughter. They are generally told in a distinctly humorous tone, even when they refer to potentially traumatising events. Part of the drinking story's *raison d'être* is to recast past failures as lessons learned and to transform tragic experiences into comic memories. Drinking stories typically play on tragicomic themes and explore the forbidden. Some resemble a comedy of intrigue, others are heroic portraying the protagonist in a positive light, and yet others come with a strong moral point. Drinking stories are highly gendered, and while many describe traditional hegemonic and heroic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005), some have a self-ironic and humorous style that can challenge or question traditional gender roles. Women also tell drinking stories, but our interviews suggest that these are less extreme and braggart than those told by men. Drinking stories do not one-sidedly celebrate the antinomian

or Dionysian, but also show that some degree of law and order is necessary to survive as individuals and as a society. They thus both deny and affirm the status quo.

Drinking stories have roots in storytelling sessions between two or more individuals and are essentially dialogic (Frank, 2012). During such sessions, the drinking stories help to lift the mood of a group and to transport the group from the day-to-day world of sobriety and reason to the nocturnal world of drunkenness and lack of reason. The stories themselves may thus have intoxicating properties because, when performed well and to the right audience, they can change moods and ultimately alter minds. This dialogic nature of drinking stories makes them difficult to categorise. They are open in form and creative by nature. With each telling, these stories blend, blur, and draw on numerous other communicative genres.

Drinking stories vary depending on the context in which they are told, and they range from completely harmless to potentially lethal. However, the themes are often the same along this continuum and across storytelling contexts. We believe that the most classic themes we have described pertain not only to orally performed drinking stories, but are also evident in drinking stories that are shared online, written or represented in film and photography.

Identifying the themes of drinking stories may appear to some as arbitrary or irrelevant, but we assert that it is decisive to understanding the narrative genre of drinking stories. That is, drinking stories are recognisable as a genre, not only because they have a specific form and are performed in a certain way but also because they revolve around particular themes. Our argument that these stories should be treated as a genre highlights that theme and form are not random or arbitrary. Drinking stories follow particular rules, and covers distinct themes. Using the concept of genre makes it easier to understand the role of drinking stories in contemporary society. Arguably, today's drinking stories may have replaced the folktales of previous times (see also Sandberg and Tutenges 2015), and the importance of the theme of law-breaking can be a window to study the reasons for crime in

the general population. Most importantly, to describe drinking stories as genres opens up for using a whole array of literary theory and studies to understand them, thus challenging and expanding upon the more sociological approach to stories of excessive drinking.

Conclusion

As other stories, drinking stories serve as inspirational scripts that guide action (Presser and Sandberg 2015). The themes of drinking stories are thus important because intoxicated individuals actively re-enact them. Genres are conservative and transformations of literature typically involve genre revolutions (RH Brown, 1987). Similarly, the stability of society depends on the regularity in the way people talk about it, and social changes, great or small, are closely linked to changes in conventional talk (Smith, 2005). As Frank (2012: 10) points out, stories are often based on real events, but also employ lives and make certain scenarios plausible and compelling. To understand drunken behaviours it is therefore necessary to understand the stories that inspire these practices. Had the themes of drinking stories been different, people would have behaved differently while drunk. This could potentially have reshaped societies with a long tradition for excessive drinking.

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