

'Locker room talk': male bonding and sexual degradation in drinking stories

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Abstract

This paper explores alcohol-related sexual storytelling. In a qualitative study of more than 100 participants in the night-time economy in Norway, many told animated and cheerful stories laced with erotic excitement. However, a minority of men also told sex stories characterised by aggressive, belittling and degrading language. We propose that this minority of men may employ such locker room talk to: (i) achieve male bonding and intimacy, (ii) explore ambiguous and confusing sexual experiences and/or (iii) excuse sexual events characterised by overt aggression. We draw on theories of masculinity and homosociality and a narrative framework and show that for some men, sexual relationships with women are strongly influenced by their relations with other men. We discuss how these stories reflect degrading attitudes towards women and how they produce and legitimise sexual violence.

Keywords: male bonding; transgression; sexual violence,

Introduction

In a now infamous video, President Donald Trump bragged to a male journalist about groping women. When the video became public, the president excused it as ‘locker-room banter’ (*Washington Post*, September 30, 2016). Other, less famous, men excuse derogatory stories as being ‘just talk’. Holland et al. (2004) do not share this view and argue that young men’s derogatory sexual language in jokes and humour is a fundamental dimension of homosocial culture and stands ‘central to the way that young men learn about masculinity’ (78). More than being ‘just talk’ or ‘fun’, these stories may teach boys how to be men and they work as scripts for male sexual behaviour.

We have conducted a large-scale qualitative study of young people’s alcohol use. Previous publications from this study revealed rich alcohol-related storytelling about erotic pleasures and lust by both genders (Author 2017, 2019). However, a minority of men in our sample told stories about women that were highly degrading. They objectified women and described episodes that had an aggressive or abusive dimension. Here, we explore the relationship between degrading sex talk, masculinity, homosociality and sexual violence. By showing how some men construct degrading male sexual discourse and discussing these stories within a framework of homosociality (Sedgwick 1985), we hope to contribute to the growing body of literature on male sexuality and male sexual storytelling.

The study was conducted in Norway, which forms part of the North European so-called ‘binge-drinking belt’. Here, alcohol has been associated with heavy intake on the weekends and has been less accepted on weekdays and in everyday life (Room and Mäkelä 2000; Kuntsche, Rehm and Gmel 2004). In recent decades, the night-time economy has expanded considerably, in the same way as in other countries (Schwanen et al. 2012). In the ‘binge belt’, this has been accompanied by an increase in the number of transgressional and liminal spaces, characterised by drinking in ‘a controlled loss of control’ manner (Measham and Brain 2005). For a country that has been regarded as one of the most gender-equal places in the world (Sainsbury 2001), the gender-based differences in alcohol consumption are remarkable, with men drinking more heavily than women (Author 2013). Several studies point to a substantial prevalence of sexual victimisation, with women as victims (Hilden et al. 2004). A recent study revealed that a considerable minority of mid-adolescent girls have been victims of sexual assault while too drunk to resist (Pape 2014). In this liminal context, transgressions are structurally produced—some would argue as part of the business model of the night-time economy (Hayward and Hobbs 2007).

We focus on degrading language in the drinking stories of men. The stories were paraded and celebrated in the aftermath of dubious sexual experiences and made us consider ‘how the narrative potential of sexual harassment may motivate men to engage in such practices’ (O’Neill 2014, 356). A key aspect of these stories of alcohol and degrading talk is that other men seem to play a large role in them. The stories seem to reinforce a certain type of masculinity. The aim of this paper is to explore stories told by young men where sex and alcohol are at the centre and degrading and belittling talk about women occurs.

Addressing gender power dynamics, we look at why locker room talk is important, suggesting that it is used for: (i) male bonding, (ii) exploring ambiguous and

confusing sexual experiences and (iii) excusing sexual events characterised by overt aggression. We explore the role of masculinity and homosociality in these practices and discuss how such stories, rather than being just innocent locker room talk, may contribute to a drinking culture that facilitates sexual assault and victimisation.

Masculinity, homosociality and language

Connell (1995) famously described the many masculinities that can be found in modern society, including protest masculinity, which insists on heterosexuality, for example by bragging about sexual conquests. An emphasis on language or talk in drinking stories can further highlight the fluidity of masculinities. Men can align with or distance themselves from particular masculine discourses when needed (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). For example, Bridges and Pascoe (2014, 251) suggest that even while resisting violence against women, men may demonstrate and support characteristics that are aligned with 'toxic' masculinities (see also Ging 2017, 3). As an example, they argue that jokes may reinforce problematic masculinities even when practices demonstrate the opposite (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). Through locker room talk and drinking stories, men—sometimes against their own will—reproduce a social order characterised by degrading attitudes towards women. This talk often takes place in homosocial contexts.

Homosociality refers to social bonds between people of the same sex, and more broadly to same-sex-focused social relations (Flood 2008, 341, 356). Moreover, homosociality works as the 'organizing force in the sociosexual relations', generating the type of storytelling that incites competition, collective and group sexual activities, and acts of surveillance. It may be fruitful to differentiate between *vertical/hierarchical* and *horizontal homosociality*, where the first is related to hierarchies and power dynamics, whereas the latter points to more inclusive relations between people, such as those based on emotional closeness and intimacy between men (Hammarén and Johansson 2014). Recent studies suggest that homosocial bonding is important in topics as diverse as the construction of heterosexual desire on internet dating sites (Mortensen 2015), ideals of brotherhood and male bonding in military organisations (Wadham 2013), or gender segregation and recruitment processes in workplaces (Bygren 2013). Similarly, Grazian (2007) has explored the meaning of 'girl hunts', where status and prestige in the male peer group play a key role: 'One's male peers are the intended audience for competitive games of sexual reputation ... and rule transgression, and in-group rituals of solidarity and loyalty' (222). Thus, even in complex heterosexual games with roots in partying and the night-time economy, homosociality may play a role.

Several studies have reported how homosociality is enforced in talk in male-dominated settings. The use of degrading and objectifying language, profanity, bragging and boasting may help men bond as men, while separating them from what is perceived as 'feminine'. In a similar vein, Decapua and Boxer (1999) observed how the use of profanity in male-dominated settings was an important performative act among brokers that formed part of their competition. In a study on fraternities, Kiesling (2005) explored the linguistic aspects of homosociality, claiming the use of 'insults, boasts, and other competitive linguistic forms' (721) was used to create gendered relationships between men. Vulgar, degrading and profane words also legitimised other transgressive behaviours, such as 'public taboos: talking explicitly about sex, engaging in unsafe, dangerous,

and prohibited behaviour, and using taboo lexis in public situations' (Kiesling 2005, 699). Masculinity and homosociality are crucial components of male storytelling practices, and some forms can be linked to problematic sexual behaviour.

Narrative theory and drinking stories

A narrative—or story—is a form of discourse characterised by temporality and causality, involving two or more events and revealing the link between them (Polletta et al. 2011; Riessman 2008). Narratives construct or confirm the social identity of the narrator (Holstein and Gubrium 2000) by drawing selectively on experiences (Presser 2009) and making a point (Polkinghorne 1988). They are important cultural resources that can be used in anything from entertainment and establishing and confirming social bonds, to establishing norms and communicating knowledge (Gubrium and Holstein 2009). People who have experienced dramatic, traumatic or other extreme events are drawn towards stories, because story form or narrative structure can give chaotic and ambiguous events sense and meaning (Sandberg and Tutenges 2015). Dramatic or extreme stories will also often draw an audience because they are 'newsworthy' (Silverman 2006) and they break from what is expected.

Drinking stories are traditionally a male narrative genre centring on dramatic or extreme stories (Workman 2001). They are often told with a tinge of irony, humour or sarcasm. Drinking stories combine a high intake of alcohol combined with some kind of transgression (Jenks 2003), and typical themes include urinating and vomiting, blacking out, stripping, nudity and sex—often in inappropriate places, and often with an audience. Some stories centre on taboos, such as homosexual acts, impotence, prostitution, use of illegal drugs and crime, whereas others may resemble a comedy of intrigue, where people get entangled in absurd or carnivalesque situations where they have little or no control (Sandberg, Tutenges, and Pedersen 2019).

Often, male drinking stories of sexual conquest can be linked to traditional conceptualisations of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Stories about sexual exploitation and degrading sex are often associated with what has been described as protest masculinity (Connell 1995). It is often found in working class contexts, and linked to physical strength, competitiveness, overt heterosexual behaviour, combined with the rejection of femininity and 'weakness' (Keddie 2007). The protest, in protest masculinity, is often seen as being towards the power relations in the production sphere (Walker 2006), or situations where ethnicity and class intersect against the backdrop of marginalisation (Collins et al. 2000; Dickson-Gomez et al. 2017). It can, however, emerge everywhere.

The narrative turn in the social sciences is inspired by poststructuralism, e.g. in the explicit constructivist approach and emphasis on interpretative openness and ambiguity. Frank (2010) follows Bakhtin's (1984) emphasis on intertextuality and heteroglossia, or the many voices and layers of a text. This connects well with the poststructuralist emphasis on a plurality of small local narratives (Lyotard 1984) and the multiple meanings of narratives (Derrida 1978). The meaning of stories is always marked by some degree of 'undecidability', which is part of their 'draw' (Barthes 2004, 177).

In this study, we adopt the view of narrative as being a constitutive rather than an objective account, or as subjective interpretation (Presser 2009). Like other stories,

drinking stories have the power to mould present discourse as well as future actions (Tutenges and Sandberg 2013). For example, Ricoeur (1984) claimed that narrative can be viewed as a 'shaping experience'. We also follow dialogical narrative analysis in emphasising the work stories do instead of what goes on inside the head of storytellers (Frank 2010). Combined, these observations provide the research question: what work do the degrading sexual stories of males do for the storytellers? Instead of looking at stories as records of real events or as participants' own interpretations of these events, we focus on the meaning generated and masculinities enacted through storytelling.

Methods

In the larger study, we draw on qualitative interviews with 104 occasional heavy drinkers (50% of them male) participating in the night-time economy in Norway (Pedersen, Tutenges, and Sandberg 2017). Stories of alcohol and violence (Pedersen, Copes, and Sandberg 2016; Sandberg, Copes, and Pedersen 2019), as well as of sexual transgressions (Pedersen, Tutenges, and Sandberg 2017; Tutenges, Sandberg, and Pedersen 2019) were prevalent and popular among both men and women in this sample. The data set contained numerous descriptions of transgressive sexual behaviours, e.g. one-night stands, group sex, and sex with exhibitionistic and voyeuristic elements. There was usually an entertaining dimension to these stories, and we have used the material to develop a more general theory of the drinking story as a narrative genre (Sandberg, Tutenges, and Pedersen 2019).

Participants were in their twenties (mean age 25) and either studying or working full-time or part-time. Participants were recruited and interviewed by researchers who had been trained by two of the authors. Interviewers often used their own social networks and already established relationships when recruiting. The interviews lasted between 90 and 120 minutes and included themes such as descriptions of contexts where alcohol was used, the experience of drunkenness, 'hooking up' and episodes of unwanted sexual experiences. Although a semi-structured interview guide was provided, the interview style was informal, where new topics were introduced during the conversation.

The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and coded using HyperRESEARCH. When analysing interviews for the present study, we concentrated on the males (N = 52). Within thematic analysis, there are two competing ideas: domain summaries versus shared, meaning-based patterns (Braun et al. 2018, 845). We draw on the latter idea, and we view the key themes in the paper as reflecting a pattern of shared meanings organised around the central organising concept of homosociality. Thus, this concept unites data that occurs in multiple contexts. In other words: it may be seen as the output of coding, or as a result of 'considerable analytic work ... to explore and develop an understanding of patterned meaning across the data set' (Braun et al. 2018, 848). Still, the coding process started out in a more descriptive manner, with what is often labelled as 'domain summary'. We first used predefined codes, such as 'stories of sex', 'sexual degradation' and 'sexual predation' where the participants' own sex experiences as well as those of others were coded. Gradually, as part of this reflexive thematic analysis, we identified broader thematically organised stories that we considered non-normative with regard to sexist content and where elements of degradation and

predation, usually targeted at women, were present. Since one of the themes we identified in the text analysis was stories, our analysis also draws heavily on narrative analysis (e.g. Riessman 2008).

These stories mainly derived from eight men, or 15% of the sample. Most of these men came from a middle-class socio-economic background; they typically had some college education, and were working in the public sector (education, social work) or in the private sector (banking, graphic design). They varied as to how they talked about women, and sometimes these degrading stories were balanced with others that had a very different tone and focus.

All men we quote in this study were sexually active and none identified as gay, homosexual, bisexual or queer. In all of the interviews in this paper, the interviewer was male and approximately the same age as the participants. Sometimes, the interviewer and interviewee shared social networks or friends. Hence, all talk sequences were generated in a casual male-to-male context where the interviewer was positioned as a friend or acquaintance. The presence of a male interviewer of the same age and sometimes from the same social networks as participants probably created an atmosphere similar to their ordinary male-dominated conversation. Interviewers were instructed not to confront possibly sexist slang or remarks. The stories were organised and told in such a way that made us suspect that they had been told more than once, perhaps retold as drinking stories shared in male peer groups during pre-parties. Owing to the highly sensitive nature of these stories, one has to assume that some underreporting of such issues was present as well (Suarez and Gadalla 2010).

We do not go into great detail on positioning in conversations (Wetherell 1998) or the positionality of research participants and interviewers in the analysis (Presser 2004). It is important however to be aware of the context of these interviews to understand the work that the degrading stories do for storytellers. They were very much a result of a homosocial context and reflect forms of interaction between interviewer and interviewee and should be understood as such. Narrative repertoires vary considerably and are seldom univocal (Polletta 2006; Frank 2010). One should therefore be careful when generalising about subjects' 'real' attitudes towards women. It seemed more apparent that degrading talk was one of the many ways in which they had learned to express experiences of drinking and sexual relations.

Results

All the incidents we describe occurred in partying and drinking contexts, which are often characterised by 'modified moral orders', in which transgressions are often allowed, expected and valued (Fjær and Pedersen 2015). Guided by values such as hedonism, participants may challenge typical norms and categories regarding gender and sexuality (Abel and Plumridge 2004). In the analysis that follows, we present eight men's drinking stories that include sexist and degrading language. Male friends often played a role during the sex acts, as well as in the aftermath in the peer groups, when the experiences were retold. We emphasise the homosocial or male bonding dimension of degrading talk about women and demonstrate how locker room talk and humorous drinking stories were useful in dealing with ambiguous sexual experiences. We also document how such talk is used to neutralise and excuse aggressive or abusive sexual events.

Degrading talk, homosocial bonding

Locker room talk often has a teasing yet friendly tone and seems to offer a retreat into the intimate context of same-sex friends. At the same time, the hierarchical homosocial dimension of such talk (Hammarén and Johansson 2014) is typical, e.g. the use of degrading slang. In a study of male fraternity cultures, Martin and Hummer (1989, 466) found that the young men described women they met as sexual 'prey' or 'bait'. The minority of men in our study described themselves in terms such as 'alpha males' or 'players', while women could be described as 'so fat you can't imagine'. In such contexts, having sex with as many women as possible is often illustrative of a 'good weekend' (Wetherell 1998). Such talk can be seen as 'departures' from ordinary language and moral orders, and of norms regulating what is regarded as good or bad, right or wrong (Garfinkel 1964, 249).

For example, Ralph used the term 'meat market' for women he met out on the town and described what he referred to as 'gaming': 'If you said the right things, worked on those right things, then you could trick any woman into going to bed with you.' Thus, the main aim of a night out was to 'trick' a woman into bed. He also described how, while serving in the military, having sex with what they considered unattractive women was a sign of being 'wild':

Ralph: We had what we called a dogfight, ... it's like taking home the ugliest, fattest, I mean ... as long as there's something wrong with her. Because then it's like: 'Damn, that guy is wild! He fucks the wildest, ugliest women!' Right, and that, in the military, is a kind of status symbol. Very (laughs), very strange. Then it was like, when I came to Oslo, it wasn't a status symbol here....

Interviewer: So you understood that [it was not a status symbol anymore], or?

Ralph: Yes, then you change your habits pretty quickly! (Laughs).

The term 'dogfight' implied the reframing of having sex with 'ugly' or 'fat' women from being stigmatised to being 'wild'. Similarly, Samuel had been out on the town with his friend Ethan, ending up by taking 'a beast' home:

I remember going home with a real, real beast, and even though I was wasted, I had to consider fucking her, because I'm not very picky when I'm in that mode. I remember having sex, and right after I come, I get the chills. It's just as if a light switch had turned on, a beam of light coming across her face. And I'm so ashamed. I tell her 'just relax, I'm going to get myself a glass of water', and she says okay. So, I close the door to my room, and I go over to Ethan's bed, and sleep with him that night. (Laughs).

Although he admitted to feelings of shame, Samuel's escape into the bed of his male friend was accompanied by laughter when he related the incident in the interview. He had also talked in depth about it with Ethan, in a teasing and humorous manner,

pointing to the transgressive dimension of having sex with ‘a real beast’. Gailey and Prohaska (2006) used the term ‘hogging’ for a similar practice and defined it simply as ‘a practice where men prey on overweight or unattractive women to satisfy competitive and/or sexual urges’ (32). However, we suggest that describing these practices as ‘dog-fights’ or ‘hogging’ was often a homosocial performance; male peers would give them credit, stating affirmatively that the practice was ‘wild’. Giving questionable sexual practices a humorous name, and making entertaining drinking stories out of them, also neutralised or justified an ‘unacceptable’ desire for unattractive women to male friends (see also Prohaska and Gailey 2010).

Some of the young men discussed how such experiences and the associated stories could go public via internet and social media, which have become increasingly prevalent (Tanenbaum 2015). Nate related such an incident. When retelling the incident, he highlighted the term ‘walrus’ to describe one large and unattractive woman:

Nate: Keith gets a lot of criticism for that walrus he had sex with.

I: He slept with a woman who was pretty large?

Nate: Yes, one who could be characterised as a walrus. He was the one that introduced that term in a film that he made when he was drunk.

I: He was filmed?

Nate: Yes, when he came home.

I: From the walrus?

Nate: Yes, from the walrus.

The story is presented as entertaining, with the ‘walrus’ metaphor as the main punchline. The humorous effect on a male audience may remove guilt, taboos and/or embarrassment about the episode. Nate reported that everyone who knew Keith had heard the walrus story and that the film may have been distributed on social media. Recent research suggests that the digital images of bodies that circulate online as a result of such practices are highly gendered, as the public feminine body is typically conflated with pornographic clichés and indicative of sexual promiscuity, in contrast to the male body, which can serve a range of purposes (Salter 2016). Rachel O’Neill (2018) analysed the emerging broader cultural context of the ‘seduction industry’—a male community in which intimacy and sexual relations are conceived as knowledge-based practices that can be learned. The industry sells success in ‘the seduction game’, underpinned by rhetoric with a striking similarity to the ‘gaming’ practice described by our participants.

Lyman (1987) describes how humour is central to male bonding, claiming that joking strengthens male group intimacy and collective heterosexual identity. Moreover, humour may be used to reinforce dominant myths about the social roles of men and women. Young male binge drinkers may use drinking stories about sexual encounters to claim male status. Thus, humour and degrading talk in drinking stories are closely linked to constructions of masculinities. There is a thin line between hegemonic and phenomena such as protest (Connell 1995) or oppositional (Messerschmidt 1994) masculinities

in relation to bragging about sexual conquests and describing women in degrading terms. The traditional concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' as a singular monolith has long been questioned (Beasley 2008, 97) and the stories we present here may perhaps be better captured by concepts such as hybrid masculinities, a term which refers to 'men's selective incorporation of performances and identity elements associated with marginalised and subordinated masculinities' (Bridges and Pascoe 2014, 246). These young men had broad repertoires of humour and talk, of which this degrading type was only one, usually reserved for homosocial contexts.

Teasing and exploring ambiguous sexual experiences

In the larger sample of this study, we observed a variety of transgressive types of sex, in particular exhibitionism, voyeurism and S&M described by both genders. A key element in these stories was heavy alcohol consumption. Participants reported having been 'shit-faced, dead drunk, zombie drunk' in their sexual encounters. Contexts where such behaviour occurred were often chaotic, described in terms such as 'a war zone', reflecting the traditional 'heroic' binge drinking patterns in the Nordic countries (Demant and Törrönen 2011). Among the eight men in our subsample, sexual experiences, which included degrading behaviours, were always linked to heavy alcohol consumption. When trying to explain what had happened, they often struggled with the memory and described these episodes in terms of ambiguity and confusion.

In the following story, Leif relates a friend's sexual experience, containing both shame and arousal. A key element was the smell of vagina on his friend's fingers the following day. The story started with a sticky note the friend had placed on the door of their common apartment after they both had been out on the town. The message on the note had a confessional yet teasing dimension: 'I feel so dirty.' Here as well, the fact that the woman in question was unattractive added to the story:

We met two girls, one very pretty and the other pretty ugly; not to be mean, but she wasn't very beautiful. I was, like, trying to sit next to the hot blond one, and, like, not end up sitting by that ugly woman.

They then went to an after-party with both women, and Leif 'got lucky' with the pretty one. He described it while laughing, and compared his friend's experience to his own:

He hadn't got lucky with that [unattractive] woman; he didn't get to fuck, but he was allowed to finger her—in the dirtiest vagina ever (laughs). And I remember the whole [next] day, every time he smelled his fingers, when he was going to eat or something, his hand just reeked of pussy

Leif described, in a seemingly malicious manner, how his friend had not 'hooked-up for a long time', and when he did, it was not all the way, and not with an attractive girl. On the surface, the story centres on Leif's success, as his own hook-up was a great experience. However, analysing the narrative in more detail reveals the more subtle dimensions of the interaction with his friend, where they talked about his ambiguous sex experience at length. Leif was teasing him, but in a friendly manner. Teasing is often

defined as ‘an intentional provocation aimed at some undesirable action of the target’ but accompanied by ‘markers which signal that the provocation is to be taken in jest’ (Keltner et al. 2001, 234–5). In a previous study of the interaction between male friends during hangovers the day after hard partying, such teasing was typical. In the same way as participants in this study, targets of teasing often appreciate it and describe it as ‘just kidding’ (Fjær 2012).

The attraction to the dirty, nasty, forbidden aspects of sexuality (see Donnan and Magowan 2009) also played a key role in these stories, such as Leif’s friend’s constant dwelling on ‘the reek of pussy.’ Thus, the homosocial dimension of the retelling and exploration of what actually happened the night before allowed clarification and support, as well as a possible re-erotisation of the forbidden dimension of ‘dirty’ sex. The horizontal and intimacy-producing homosocial communication (Hammarén and Johansson 2014) between Leif and his friend is key to understanding the importance of this kind of locker room talk.

Stories are often ambiguous and intertwined, and they may contain different voices (Frank 2010). In some of the stories in our data, several sexual fetishes were present at the same time, such as the following story about violent sex on the bonnet of a car. The participant described having sex with a girl in public, watched by others. The ambiguity regarding the female’s consent is at the centre:

Ralph: Then I get this feeling of sexual aggression. I take her over to a car, throw her on the hood of the car, take off her pants and start to fuck her on the car.

Interviewer: On the street?

Ralph: In the middle of the street! My friends are standing there. He’s about to take out his phone, and I’m just like: ‘No! Don’t you dare! Motherfucker!’
I: When was this, was this in the after-party hours or...?

Ralph: It was totally weird; it was right after a pre-game; we were going out on the town. But I just got this feeling over me, that: ‘No! This is happening. Now!’ And there were people walking past (laughs). I just winked! Fuck!

The event was described as exciting and spontaneous, and the exhibitionism of having sex in public added to the story. The presence of other people and the fact that it happened early in the evening may indicate that this was at least a semi-consensual sexual act. Nevertheless, the story weaves a fantasy of male sexual domination, where the woman figures primarily as a desirable object. Homosociality is manifest in the story’s emphasis on the interaction between the men during the act (winking and talking). Thus, the focus is on what happens between the male friends rather than between Ralph and the woman (Flood 2008). His friends took out their phones and filmed the event, possibly to share the videos with other male friends, in a practice coined as “visual gossiping” or “non-consensual nude sharing” (Bindesbøl Holm Johansen, Pedersen and Tjørnhøj-Thomsen 2018), to have a laugh about it later and add a visual element to the drinking story.

In the interview context, there is also a clear homosocial dimension: Ralph was enthusiastic when he related the incident. He self-reflexively admitted that he wouldn't do it again, but 'there and then, it was just right'. Thus, we witness an exploration of the situation, combined with the gradual development of a defence of his acts, in the 'safe' context of a male interviewer of the same age as himself. Whereas homosociality is often seen as being based on competition and exclusion, Thurnell-Read (2012) in a study of stag tour groups uncovered how the male participants worked to maintain and develop group cohesion, togetherness and intimacy. In this study, sexual experiences could be explored and understood in a new light when retold in a homosocial context, not least when linked to humour and laughter.

Tutenges and Rod (2009, 363) suggest that drinking stories may even allow narrators to externalise painful and complex experiences by sharing them with others, thereby making them more bearable. As we have demonstrated, sexual experiences may also be re-eroticised, and an intimate dimension may be added when retold to other men. In this way, drinking stories contribute to gendered relationships between men and ambiguous masculinities that can allow intimacy as well as legitimise transgressive and sometimes problematic sexual behaviour (Kiesling 2005).

Excusing and stirring up unwanted sexual behaviours

Rape fantasies are prevalent, even among some women, and are often accepted as a form of fetish (Critelli and Bivona 2008). However, as illustrated by the interview extract above, stories with such elements may raise questions about female consent. In our data, stories about threesomes with two men and one woman were sometimes mixed into what possibly may be labelled rape fantasies. The underlying dramaturgy of these sexual acts, and the way they were narrated, reflected stories from contemporary mainstream pornography (Dines 2010). The emphasis was on male domination, and perhaps more surprisingly, on homosocial or even homoerotic communication during the sex act. For example, Ralph described an episode that may constitute a possibly non-consensual sexual assault:

Ralph: I got her into the bedroom and then, five minutes into it, my brother comes in, butt naked. He'd been warming up his shaft to porn on TV (laughs) meanwhile, and then he comes in with a boner and ...

I: How does she react to that?

Ralph: She was actually a bit negative in the beginning. Or she was ... very perplexed, it wasn't exactly what she had expected—understandably so—I can see that. But she ... yeah, in a way, she didn't have so much time to react. Because he went right over there and stuffed his cock in her mouth (laughs). So yeah, she agreed to it, it wasn't like she was forced, but ... in a way...

I: Was she like holding back a little?

Ralph: Yeah, a little. Maybe a little like uncertain and careful.

This story, probably meant to be funny, was challenged when the interviewer made him

take the perspective of the woman. From here on, the story wavered between trying to justify the sex engaged in (see e.g. Maruna and Copes 2006) and reflexively admitting that it was problematic. Ambiguous and possibly non-consensual sexual transgressions were often regarded as funny and accepted by these participants. They were probably part of drinking stories told in male contexts and could sometimes also be 'accepted' in the research interview context. However, in some instances, the telling of a questionable story in a male-male context also allowed self-reflexivity as well as embarrassment. Some men did not regard sexual acts that we considered clearly aggressive to be true assaults, echoing research on men who have supportive attitudes towards rape (Plaud and Bigwood 1997). However, even in this highly selective subsample, most seemed to realise that such behaviour could be problematic and their drinking stories clearly demonstrated this ambiguity.

Christian was aware of the problematic elements of a sexual act he had engaged in as a teenager, while still framing it from a predominantly male perspective:

I mean, it wasn't like whatchamacallit rape, it had nothing to do with assault, but I tried really hard [to have intercourse with her]. Maybe a bit like time after time. [She] ended up in tears. It wasn't fun. So then I realised, in a way ... or ... I remember I was drunk and stuff, so then I realised most of it actually when I woke up the day after and was very, very, very embarrassed.

As in many other such instances, Christian became vague when describing his partner's degree of consent and resistance, even though he recalled her crying. In a study of how young people talked about casual sex experiences, Beres (2010) found that both genders described similar communication mechanisms. They reported understanding their partners' communication, whether this involved acceptance or rejection of a sexual invitation. Thus, the main finding of the study was that most have a rather clear idea of a potential partner's willingness. When asked about whether he felt shame or regret, or had a guilty conscience about the situation described above, Christian, in a similar manner, answered that he had mixed feelings: 'I realised it, but at the same time I was a bit irritated in a way, this time, I remember, that it was...damn, like, can't we experiment a bit together?'

Other forms of unwanted sexual behaviours recounted by the young men included rude behaviour towards women working in the night-time economy, such as waitresses and strippers. While on a holiday in Tallinn, Estonia, John and his friends frequented strip clubs, reflecting a tourism pattern also observed in other Nordic countries (Hesse and Tutenges 2011). One of his friends, 'instead of putting bills inside strippers' underwear, insisted on stuffing them with coins, just so he could hear coins hit the floor. It was incredibly funny'. Such behaviour took place in tourist destinations such as Pattaya, Thailand, described by Nate as 'the hooker capital of the world'. Arguably, such degrading behaviour was made possible by sexual storytelling, where such transgressions were deemed acceptable and served to integrate the collective of friends, both as amusing events and as material for shared narratives (Fjær 2012).

There is a close link between the use of alcohol and sexual harassment, even if surprisingly few studies evaluate how alcohol interact with other risk and protective factors (Abbey et al. 2014). We will argue that party settings may be particularly interesting

in this respect, as they seem to provide a space for coercive behaviour. Drinking stories and other forms of locker room talk may neutralise assaults while placing the blame on alcohol, or degrading the victim, thus justifying the abusive elements (Weiss 2009). Male drinking stories may contain female objectification, male domination and degrading language, linked to protest (Connell 1995) and oppositional (Messerschmidt 1994) masculinities. However, such drinking stories can also be seen as part of more mainstream identity constructions of masculinities, thus illustrating the fluid character of masculinity (Bridges 2019). Drinking stories occupy a central role in contemporary masculinities and homosocial contexts, making them crucial in understanding sexual assaults against women. Although it may not be intentional, they establish scripts for behaviour that may be acted out, either by the storytellers themselves or by members of the storytelling audience.

Discussion

The eight young men in this study represent a minority of men participating in the night-time economy. The quotes we have included are not 'representative' of them either, so one should be careful about generalising them to their general attitude towards women. However, we may hypothesise that such drinking stories are part of a drinking culture that is responsible for unpleasant experiences for women and also for a considerable proportion of sexual assaults. The young men's narratives provide us with a glimpse into the sexual dynamics that may exist within drinking cultures, where abusive experiences may be framed as drinking stories and sexual assaults and other unwanted sexual behaviours are justified and neutralised through humour. We suggest that this type of communication may contribute to the exploration of ambiguous sexual experiences as well as in maintaining friendship bonds. Note that these men were not characterised by the social marginalisation typical of some studies of masculinity. Participants were white and none identified as gay. Thus, we investigated what Bridges (2019, 25) recently described as 'privileged social categories'.

It can sometimes be difficult to establish the difference between an unpleasant experience and a sexual assault. For example, Peterson and Muehlenhard (2007) argued that although 'the dominant model treats sex as either wanted or unwanted, many people report ambivalence about sex' (73). However, what is definite is that sexualised drinking stories that belittle and commodify women are themselves a form of sexual harassment. On the other hand, the act of telling a story that has an aggressive dimension provides an opportunity for a reaction, sometimes in the form of a correction, from the audience. We suggest that it is especially in a male-male setting that the opportunity to prevent sexual aggression arises through the acts of shaming, changing perceptions and raising the awareness of the participant.

Although these were extreme cases and stories from our data, the results highlight sexual victimisation and problematic male sexuality in nightlife settings. Stories about rape fantasies and enactments of them reveal ambivalence to rape, the ambiguity of male-male sexual experiences and sexual behaviour that is as rough as it is erotic. The young women were typically described as willing participants. They often consented to some initial sexual activity, which may blur the borders to later non-consent. The men did not consider themselves to be sex offenders, but they often had a number of implicit

and explicit attitudes towards rape, reinforced by the initial agreement of the woman to participate in sex acts (Nunes, Hermann, and Ratcliffe 2013). Through such mechanisms, sexual violence may be normalised (Hlavka 2014), and such men be the target of prevention efforts (Casey et al. 2017).

We argue that homosocial sexual storytelling is another part of the way that sexual violence is normalised. The stories we have highlighted were interlaced with recurring themes, such as rape fantasies, sex with unattractive women and erotic fetishes. These stories were used for a number of reasons, many of which are similar to those found in other studies on drinking stories. Tutenges and Rod (2009) emphasised that drinking stories are often used to entertain the audience, make sense of 'distressing experiences', explore taboos and reinforce male bonding (see also Tutenges and Sandberg 2013). The aspect of male bonding was particularly important in the derogatory stories we have presented here. Male friends usually play a key role, and the homosocial dimension is essential. It was not only the forbidden aspect that formed part of the storytelling, but also what was considered dirty and gross. The repugnant aspects of sexuality were often considered memorable and a frequent topic of laughter among males in this study.

One can argue that it is important to share these stories in order to make sense of awkward, unusual or even traumatic experiences, especially in front of other men. This could be positive, as the men's sexual attitudes may change and evolve by way of retelling or reconstituting narratives. One could also argue that on the nightlife scene, men are not only on the 'hunt' for women, but also for good and extreme stories to tell their male friends at a later stage. Nevertheless, derogatory stories commodifying women and enacting pornographic scripts through stories may probably contribute to creating dangerous situations. In combination, certain pornographic genres, storied and gendered sexual expectations and the night-time economy with its emphasis on the heavy intake of alcohol probably increase the risk of sexual assaults.

These stories provide us with a glimpse into the ambivalent world of sexual experience, where an erotically charged situation suddenly transgresses into a non-consensual one. Future research could expand on this by exploring both male and female narratives of the same situations, exploring the ambivalence that exists in both acts and stories of borderline rape and sexual assaults. Aspects such as the line between rape and fantasy could be probed further, bringing out alternative aspects of sexuality, and 'highlighting possibilities for non-normative pleasure and change within the realm of the dominant' (Beasley 2015, 141). Exploring both sides of the story would help increase our understanding of rape and assaults more generally, as well as the particularities of gendered sexual storytelling.

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