Learning to become an alcohol user:

Adolescents taking risks and parents living with uncertainty

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Please do not quote. All corresponding to: jo@sociology.ku.dk. The following are extracts from a lengthier article that I just finished writing. Readers who are interested in the article in its full length are very welcome to contact me at to the above mentioned email.

Abstract

This article investigates how adolescents aged 14-16 learn to become alcohol users in a country like Denmark characterised by extensive drunkenness among young people and a low number of abstainers among adults. Following Howard Becker's famous study (1953), it is revealed that like there is a road to 'become a marihuana user', there is a road to become an alcohol user. In integrating Becker's three learning steps with modern socio-cultural theories of risk and the notion 'controlled loss of control' (Measham and Brain 2005), it is argued that crucial for whether adolescents become alcohol users is a process of demystifying the experience of risk associated with alcohol intoxication and thereby learning to find pleasure in losing control. This perception of how to become an alcohol user is present both among the teenage parents and the adolescents, though for different reasons. The data used for analyses are both quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative data comes from a survey of a representative sample of 2000 adolescents aged 15-16 (born in 1989). The qualitative data consists of 28 focus group interviews with adolescents in the eighth and ninth grade in different parts of Denmark and eight focus group interviews with parents who have a child aged 14-16. The method used for combining the qualitative and quantitative material is Becker's idea of the orderly sequence model of the three learning steps and Abbott's argument (1992) that quantitative data analysis should focus more on process, the story, and less on discovering causality. In this sense, the article follows Becker's argument that interpretations of 'hard findings' rely on "the less easily measured, though still easily observed aspects of social life."(Becker 1993:222)

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> "…I never really did work on deviance as such. What happened was I did my master's thesis on musicians. After I got out of school, I did the marijuana study, which I wanted to do because I read Alfred Lindesmith's book on opium and addiction and thought, This is really terrific I could do the same thing with marijuana. It'll be interesting because it's not addictive. It'll be kind of an interesting comparison." Interview with Howard Becker (Plummer et al 2003:22).

INTRODUCTION

Half a century ago, when Howard Becker wrote 'Becoming a Marihuana User' (1953) he was inspired by Lindesmith's study on opium. Likewise, Becker's study is the inspiration for this article. The aim is to reveal that while there is a certain road to becoming a recreational marihuana user, there is a similar road to becoming a recreational alcohol user. Compared to other European countries, the road to becoming an alcohol user begins at a relative young age in Denmark (Hibell 2004) and once on the road, very few get off (Bloomfield 2003). In a country where only 7% of the adult population is classified as abstainers (Eurobarometer 2007), the question is not only whether adolescents should be allowed to drink alcohol, but how they learn to use the drug alcohol. In answering the latter question, Becker's famous article (1953) will lead the way for two reasons. *Firstly*, as Becker says in the above-mentioned quote, the theory of deviance is added later on, as he wrote the book 'Outsiders'[1]. Even though Becker's labelling theory has aroused much criticism for instance for neglecting dimensions of power and for siding with the 'underdog' deviants (Fox 1996), the purpose of his article is first and foremost to describe the process of learning to use a psychoactive drug on a recreational[2] basis. And precisely because Becker is describing this path it is possible to compare the road to learning to use an illicit drug (marihuana) with learning to use a licit drug (alcohol).

When Danish adolescents are 14-16 years old, drinking alcohol is not novel as a majority has tasted alcohol before the age of 13 (Due & Holstein 2002). However, the experience of intoxication

[1] 'Becoming a marihuana user' was first published in the American Journal of Sociology, 1953, a decade before the book 'Outsiders' (1963) was published.

[2] The concept of recreational users is defined in sharp contrast to misusers or addicts. As Lindesmith is arguing, in formulating a sociological theory of drug addiction, addiction is when pleasure, which might have been established in the initial phase, no longer holds true (Lindesmith 1938:596). Becker takes this as his point of departure, as he argues that the purpose of the paper is 'to describe the sequence of changes in attitude and experiences which lead to the use of marihuana for pleasure' (Becker 1953:235).

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is new (Gundelach & Järvinen 2006, Hibell et al. 2004). Hence between the age of 14-16, Danish adolescents, like the novice marijuana user, find themselves in a situation, where they must learn to recognise and handle the effect of intoxication. In fact they must learn to handle intoxication caused by heavy alcohol consumption, because Danish adolescents' way of consuming alcohol can be characterised as extensive drunkenness (Room and Mäkela 2000, Ahlström et al. 2004; Demant & Østergaard 2006).

The intoxicated state as described by Becker could be seen as quite different from alcohol intoxication, because the two drugs have different psychoactive effects (Plant and Plant 2002) and there are different socially and culturally learned ways of enhancing the desired and appropriate intoxicated behaviour (Orcutt 1978). Hence the intoxicated state of marihuana is usually described as 'internally oriented' whereas the intoxicated state of alcohol are usually described as more 'externally oriented' (i.e. alcohol will encourage sociable interpersonal behaviour) (ibid:386). However, despite these differences Becker's three learning steps can still be applied as a common denominator, because no matter whether one is a novice marihuana or alcohol user, one still has to 1) learn the techniques to produce the real effects (i.e. getting drunk), 2) learn to perceive the effects and connect them with the drug use, and 3) learn to enjoy the feeling of being intoxicated (Becker 1953:235).

Secondly, 50 years ago, in a rebellious act against that time's image and approach to drug use, Becker introduced the pleasure of drug taking (O'Malley 2004). Since then research has only to a limited degree focused on 'drug use and pleasure' (Measham et al. 2001; O'Malley 2004, 1998; Parker 2005; Calafat 2001) compared to the attention given to 'drug use and risk' (Bjarnason 2005; Dobson et al. 2006; Peretti-Watal 2003b, Leigh 1999). In the slipstream of Ulrick Beck (1992) and Giddens (1992, 1994) the dominating approach has been 'risk management' and 'risk assessments' (Fox 1999; Hunt 2007). Hence a final and important reason for using Becker as inspiration is to add the notion of pleasure in understanding how recreational drug use is learned among adolescents. The article will draw on a combination of quantitative and qualitative material.

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LEARNING CONTROLLED ALCOHOL USE

[TO THE READER: The theoretical discussion is left out in order minimize the number of words. The interested reader is very welcome to email me and receive the paper in its full length].

THE PRESENT STUDY

The aim of this article is three-fold. First of all, by following Becker's three learning steps, *learning the techniques, learning to perceive the effects* and *learning to enjoy the effects*, the aim is to show that like there is a career into non-conventional drug use (Pedersen 1998; Parker 1998 et al; Parker 2005), there is a career into conventional licit drug use. As studies from both the UK and Denmark suggest, children, at the age of 10 and 6, respectively, have a very negative attitude towards alcohol, but this attitude weakens as they become teenagers (Plant and Plant 1992:20; Sabroe 1995). Inspired by Becker's learning theory, it is hypothesised that the changed attitude towards alcohol involves a process of demystifying[3] the alcohol intoxication.

The second aim of the article is to integrate Becker's theory with the argument of 'controlled loss of control'. In comparison to the UK, Danish adolescents have a very similar way of consuming alcohol (Hibell 2004), but it has not yet been investigated whether the notion is applicable in a Danish context in a group of 14-16 year-old adolescents. Furthermore, by adding the notion 'controlled loss of control' to Becker's social learning theory, the purpose of this article is to test whether the process of demystifying the alcohol-related intoxication is essentially about gaining control while being intoxicated – learned through trial and error (i.e. 'practising losing control' (Decorte 2001).

Finally, in placing the sequential model of the recreational drug user in a broader context (Becker 1963:61), Becker draws attention to how continuous drug use also depends on a number of external factors, one of them being availability and accessibility of the drug (see also Parker 2005). At the age of 16, it is legal for Danish adolescents to purchase alcohol (both spirits and beer), but even for under-age adolescents there seems to be few obstacles to getting hold of alcohol (either from the store or from parents) (Jørgensen et al. 2006; Gundelach and Järvinen 2006). Hence at the age of 14-16, the act of experimenting with alcohol can hardly be labelled criminal or deviant. In fact, in light of the percentage of abstainers in the general population, it might be more accurate to approach 'not drinking alcohol' as rule-breaking behaviour and therefore boldly label this as 'deviant behaviour' in Denmark. This point of view is not only present among the adolescents

[3] The concept 'demystify' is used deliberately instead of the concept normalisation (Parker 2005; Peretti-Watal 2003b) as alcohol is a (normal) aspect of adults' everyday life (Eurobarometer 2007).

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(Demant and Järvinen 2006), but also representative of the adult population (Järvinen 2003; Elmeland 1996), and in particular among teenage parents (Järvinen and Østergaard 2006). Hence the final and third aim of trying to grasp how Danish adolescents become alcohol users at a relatively young age is to investigate how parents teach them 'the controlled use of alcohol'. [TO THE READER:The hypothesis are left out]

DATA AND METHOD

Three different data sets are used to test the hypotheses. Of greatest importance are analyses based on data from a survey on adolescent drinking habits, which was conducted under a major Danish research project on 'Youth and Alcohol'(The PUNA survey) (Gundelach and Järvinen 2006). In January 2005, a questionnaire was sent to 2,000 Danish young people born in 1989. The response rate was 72% (n=1445). At the time of data collection, 85% of the adolescents were attending the 9^{th} grade, 11% the 8^{th} grade, and very few were in the 7^{th} and 10^{th} grades. The adolescents responded to questions about their experiences with drinking and drunkenness; how often they go to parties; positive vs. negative consequences they experienced when drinking, etc. Secondly, the paper will draw on two different sets of qualitative material, 8 focus group interviews with parents (n=50) who had one child in the 14-16 age group, and 28 focus group interviews with adolescents (n=117) aged 14-16 (Morgan 1997). The focus group interviews with parents were mainly conducted to elaborate on the results of the survey study (Morgan 1998). Via the school teachers of a year group of 9^{th} grade students, the parents of the adolescents were approached by personal letter. The 28 focus group interviews with adolescents were conducted by Demant (see also Demant & Järvinen 2006; Demant & Østergaard 2007) as part of the research project Youth and Alcohol (PUNA) (Gundelach and Järvinen 2006). [TO the READER:left out more details about the focus group study…]

The method used to combine the quantitative and qualitative material can be described as an analysis of '*orderly sequence*' (Becker 1963). This approach is inspired by Becker's sequential model (Peretti-Watel 2003a), but also by Abbott (1992), who argues that quantitative analysis should focus more on describing narrative sequences and less on discovering causality. Hence the different materials are not used to validate each other, but used in such a way that they tell the story – the 'orderly sequence model' – of how to become an alcohol user. In this way the narratives behind the numbers are revealed. Quantitative data are not that different from qualitative data as they are also objects of narrative interpretations (Kritzer 1996).

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Mixed methods were also applied in a large international research project on risk and control in the recreational drug culture (see Calafat 2001). Their main focus is illicit drug use (especially ecstasy) among young adults. However, inspired by Becker they divide the young adults into different user groups depending on their frequency of drug use (ibid: 38). Likewise, the adolescents participating in the PUNA survey will be categorised into four user groups based on their drinking experiences. However, for comparison between novices and connoisseurs, only adolescents attending the 9th grade will be selected for the analysis (n=1219). The four different user groups can be described as follows: The *abstainers* (11%) are those who have never consumed alcohol; the *novices* (16%) are those who have consumed one unit of alcohol, but never been intoxicated. The *occasional* (28%) users are those who have been intoxicated, but haven't been binge drinking (5+ units) within the previous 30 days. The *regular* users (45%) are defined as those who have been binge drinking once or more within the previous 30 days. Hence regular use does not refer to systematic and daily use of alcohol, but to regular heavy weekend consumption[4]. The distinction between occasional and regular users is supported by the fact that regular users report first intoxication at a much younger age than occasional users[5], and have been more frequently intoxicated within the last year.

Contingency tables based on the Pearson chi squared statistic and - in the case of two ordinal or binary variables - the γ-coefficients are used for measuring the degree of association between user groups and diverse indicators of the three learning steps. In case of continuous variables, t-tests are used for comparison of means in the various groups and in variables measuring before and after an event. An exploratory factor analysis (a principal component method with varimax rotation) is used to identify specific risk dimensions among eight indicator variables. All analyses were computed using SPSS.

LEARNING THE DRINKING TECHNIQUES

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[4] Binge-drinking adolescents, however, would most likely not define themselves as regular users as this term has strong connotations of addiction. They would more likely see themselves as experimental users, which in fact is in agreement with Becker's use of the concept regular user. However defining binge drinking adolescents as regular users corresponds to how that consuming rather large amounts of alcohol is now socially acceptable in many western industrialised countries (Sheehan et al. 2001).

[5] Among the regular users 29% experienced their first intoxication at the age of 13 or younger. Among the occasional users only 13% experienced their first intoxication at this age ($\gamma = 0{,}3$ $p < 0{,}001$)

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Drinking techniques: the parents' perspective

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Learning the drinking techniques: the adolescents' perspective

[TO THE READER: LEFT OUT]

LEARNING TO PERCEIVE THE EFFECTS

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Learning to recognise 'how to be'

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LEARNING TO TAKE RISK WITH ALCOHOL

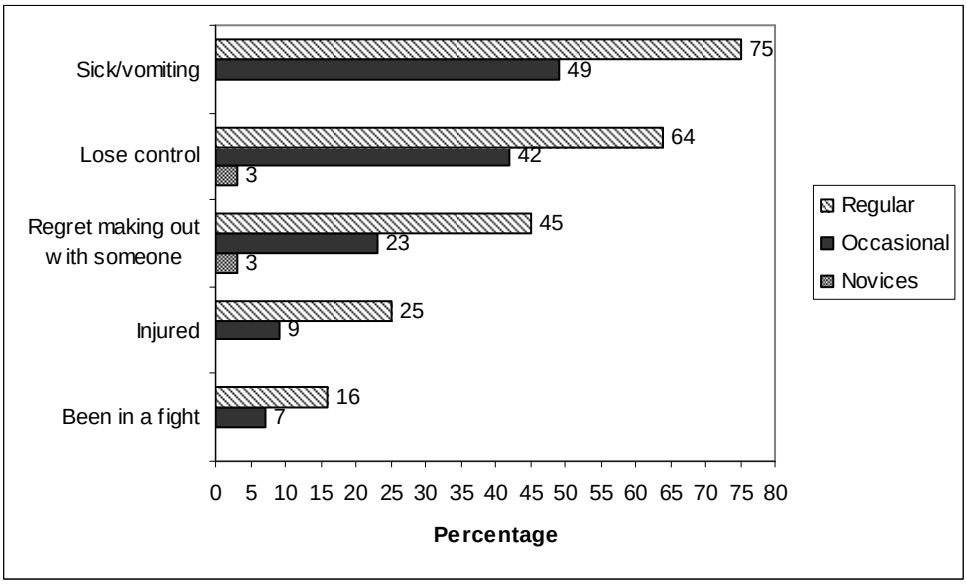
According to Becker, the premises for learning to enjoy the effects are that the initial negative experiences, such as dizziness, sickness, and no sense of time or distance, are turned into positive ones. In the following it will be tested (3a, 3b and 3c), whether having many negative experiences is more common among the regular users and what type of risk-taking action is most common. Then it is discussed how adolescents and their parents perceive these negative experiences as part of the process of demystify alcohol use.

In the focus group interviews, the adolescents describe their many unpleasant experiences with alcohol and how they have seen their friends getting sick, etc. The more common experiences are feeling uncomfortable, throwing up and not remembering one's acts, whereas the more severe experiences are shivering, passing out, being taken to the hospital for observation or pumped out. The survey shows the same pattern as the two most common reported negative experiences are throwing up and feeling loss of control. As hypothesised, the regular users have to a much greater extent experienced loss of control (i.e. throwing up is also considered loss of control). Figure 2 reveals how 75% of the regular users have experienced getting sick from alcohol and 64% feel they have lost control at one point. In contrast 49% and 42%, respectively of the occasional users have experienced these two risk factors. And close to none of the novices have experienced taking risk with alcohol[6]. Few ,but still a considerable proportion, have experienced to be seriously injured and getting into a fight. The regular users predominately account for these negative experiences.

[6] The abstainers were not asked about alcohol-related negative experiences.

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Figure II. Percentage of novices, occasional and regular using adolescents, who have experienced any of the following alcohol related risks once or more (since they began to experiment with alcohol).



As hypothesised, boys and girls report having different negative experiences with alcohol (se appendix A, table 1.4). The regularly using boys have to a far greater extent experienced getting into a fight. The regularly and occasionally using girls, on the contrary, have to a greater extent experienced regretting making out with someone. Hence it seems that risk-taking actions associated with alcohol are also intertwined in traditional gender roles – girls have to a higher degree than boys regretted sexual contact, whereas it is mainly the boys (although still very few of them) who end up fighting. However, it is not the case that boys have lost control to a higher degree than girls. In contrast this is reported particularly by the regularly using girls. This might be explained by the fact that the girls worry more about losing control than the boys, and therefore are more attentive towards it. After all, the consequences of losing control could be said to be more decisive for the girls, since their boundaries are tighter, as Measham (2002) suggests in her study.

The fact that the regular users top the list in figure 2 could be an outcome of they, on average, begin their journey to become alcohol users approximately 4[7] months before the occasional users. Hence regularly using adolescents have been drinking for a longer period, which might explain why

[7] The average age for intoxication debut is 14 years and 2 months for the occasional users and 13 years and 10 months for the regular users.

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two thirds of them have experienced to get sick from alcohol. Another explanation is that as they began to drink at a younger age, they were less aware of the effects of alcohol (for instance also about the above-mentioned drinking techniques). However, a final and perhaps the most significant explanation of the high number of risk-taking actions among the regular users is the general belief among both parents and adolescents that learning to become an alcohol user requires that one is experimenting, with losing control as the premise for learning to gain control. As some of the girls suggest when asked, in the focus group interviews, whether they can find their own boundaries:

> E(g): //Well, there is kind of like a boundary, but it's not like I've tried to lie there throwing up.
> T(g): You need to have that experience
> J(g): You have to try it, I think. It must be tried one time before you know it [the boundary]. Because next time I'm drinking, I know how much to drink.
> E(g): Yes because it does happen, from time to time, right?
> J(g):It can happen to everyone!
> E(g): There are some for whom it is more difficult to acknowledge their boundaries [looks at T], right, isn't there?

In the initial phase, losing control is the way to find one's boundary and become a connoisseur. However, as the girls are saying, it must just not happen too often, especially if one is a girl, which, as mentioned above, is something both boys and girls agree on.

Although it is expected (by the adolescents) and to some degree accepted (by the parents) that adolescents engage in these risk-taking actions, it is not without worries and concerns from parents (and as we shall see later from the novices and occasional users). In the following quote a mother is describing her vivid experience of when her daughter was heavily intoxicated for the second time:

> L(w): I was very scared and said: you will NOT do that again [referring to the first time her daughter was very drunk]. And then she comes home, drunk as a lord, a second time and then I go really angry, but it wasn't like I felt she should be punished or something like that, that I should be raging at her. But I got scared, because she couldn't control it. Because if she could [control it], she wouldn't have gotten so drunk. [..] And her little sister came running in to me: "Mum, Anna is just laying on the bed with all her clothes on!". Then I went to see, and I couldn't get through to her. Had there been a guy, he could have raped her five or 17 times. [..] I'm very angry that she isn't in touch with herself, that she knows: that's the boundary. It is that boundary I will like for her to learn, and I'm not sure she has learned it yet.

In this sense the parents are living with a strong sense of uncertainty as they accept that that the only true way of becoming an alcohol user is by going through a period of experimenting with one's boundaries, as perceiving the effects of alcohol cannot be taught; it is a bodily experience.

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Demystifying the fear of intoxication

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CONCLUSION

By following Becker's three learning steps, this article has demonstrated that while there is a certain road to learning to use non-conventional and illicit drugs, there is a similar road to using the conventional and licit drug alcohol. In Denmark, this journey begins at a relatively young age - when adolescents are 14-16 years old. At this point, the adolescents, like the novice marihuana user, must learn to master and control the risks associated with heavy alcohol consumption in such a way that consuming rather large amounts of alcohol become a pleasant experience. Essentially this is a process, during which the adolescents have to learn 'controlled loss of control'. The first step in this direction is to learn about specific drinking techniques, e.g. to drink water in between, not to drink on an empty stomach and to avoid mixing alcohol products, to begin with beer, etc. All these techniques are formulated to ensure that the right (sufficient) dose is achieved. However, the reasons behind achieving the right dose are different for parents and adolescents. Among the parents, the drinking techniques are ways of minimising the risks, whereas among the adolescents the drinking techniques are perceived as ways of maximising the pleasure associated with alcohol intoxication, i.e. to have fun together with their friends at parties. Furthermore, if the adolescents can demonstrate that they know how to have fun while heavily intoxicated, they can distinguish themselves as connoisseurs. For different reasons then, neither parents nor adolescents desire unbounded alcohol consumption. In this sense 'controlled loss of control' is what the adolescents are aiming at, especially if one is a girl, as unbounded alcohol consumption is less acceptable for girls than for boys.

The analysis of the second step - learning to perceive the effects – supports the argument that becoming an alcohol user is a question of learning to gain control of the intoxication. On average the adolescents perceive themselves to be more in control in their most recent intoxication than at their intoxication debut, despite the fact that on average they consumed more units of alcohol when recently intoxicated than at their intoxication debut. Furthermore, uncontrolled consumption, which according to the focus group study was associated with aggressive and annoying behaviour, was generally not how the adolescents wanted to be seen when intoxicated. However, the regular users did, to a higher degree than the occasional users, see themselves as acting out of control, but they

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also saw themselves as changing to having more positive characteristics, such as becoming more affectionate and brave. Learning to become an alcohol user then also seems to be about learning that one is acting differently when intoxicated, and preferably to be so much in control that one can maintain a positive self-image. This result clearly indicates how learning to be in control of the intoxication is a social and cultural process, in fact a process which draws on very traditional gender roles, as the regularly using girls would see themselves as more affectionate, whereas the regularly using boys would see themselves as becoming more aggressive.

Finally, the analysis of the third step – learning to enjoy the effect – suggests that a presumption for continuous and more extensive use of alcohol is to learn to demystify the negative experiences. Hence both parents and adolescents were of the opinion that controlled alcohol consumption could only be learned through a period of 'trial and error', which essentially means that the adolescents experiment with their boundaries and thereby lose control and throw up. In this way the parents unintentionally end up legitimising risk-taking actions, so it is hardly surprising that the regular users in particular have had many negative experiences with drinking alcohol. However ,this did not make them fear the alcohol intoxication. On the contrary, it seems that this extensive practice with taking risk with alcohol has demystified any initial fear, which was still dominant among the less experienced users. By drawing on the post-modern socio-cultural theory of risk, it can therefore be argued that among the less experienced users, the risks associated with drinking alcohol outweigh the pleasure and therefore continued use is not taking place. On the contrary, among the regular users the pleasure of drinking alcohol outweighs the risks, and therefore extensive alcohol use can be maintained.

FUTURE PERSPECTIVES: SEEKING PLEASURE BY TAKING RISKS WITH DRUGS

The story of how Danish adolescents become alcohol users ends where it is anticipated that continued use only takes place when the feeling of being intoxicated is perceived as pleasant. Becker (1953) never really discusses in depth the meaning of pleasure. However, future research could benefit from elaborating on drug use and the meaning of pleasure and investigate how it might be different depending on use of either licit or illicit drugs, or among different groups. As mentioned above, an English study of young females taking the drug Ecstasy (Hutton 2003) reveals how young females use drug taking as a way to experiment with their sexuality and traditional modes of femininity. However, the study also show how the young females feel that the outside

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world (represented by in particularly men in mainstream clubs) is quick to see drug-taking women as being more 'up for it' sexually, and how this puts pressure on them to be more sexually active or at least expressive[8]. This might likewise be the case in this study of 14-16 year-olds, especially as it is indicated that it was predominantly the girls who regretted that they had made out with someone while intoxicated. The pressure to be more 'up for it' sexually (that one is willing to flirt, kiss and make out) is then certainly a risk the girls seem to be facing when starting out on the road to becoming an alcohol user. However, at the same time this can also be turned into something positive, as the girls also see themselves as more brave when intoxicated. In this sense taking the risk of making out with someone gives the girls access to play with their sexuality and perhaps experience a sense of pleasure, which is otherwise restricted. Other research (see Demant 2007) based on the same focus group interviews suggests that this is also the case for the boys, although the boys (of the same age) are somewhat restricted to seeking pleasure in smaller male-only groups where heavy drinking is giving them access to explore a different kind of sexuality. In this sense heavy alcohol consumption gives the adolescents access to be 'up for it' sexually and perhaps experience a form of pleasure which is otherwise restricted.

Furthermore it would be fascinating to apply Becker's learning theory in a number of countries with equal and/or different types of regularity of drinking and extent of drunkenness (Room et al. 2000). Is the road to becoming an alcohol user different in countries where it is not accepted or expected that adolescents engage in heavy alcohol consumption at a relatively young age? This article has revealed the notion of 'controlled loss of control' as the focal point among Danish adolescents, like it is in the UK where young people have similar drinking practice. But it would be interesting to investigate if this is also the case in countries where heavy alcohol consumption among young people is less common.

Finally, it should be underlined that not all Danish adolescents become alcohol users and not all Danish parents approve of their children starting to experiment with alcohol use. The deterministic element presented in this article can be circumvented by using quantitative longitudinal data. In that case, it could be revealed if many negetive experiences or a particularly negative experience might cause some adolescents to stop drinking alcohol, just like Becker is

[8] In this sense Hutton touches on the symbolic meaning of the drug, something that Becker is expressly eliminating in his study: "The term "use for pleasure" is meant to emphasize the noncompulsive and causal character of the behaviour. It is also meant to eliminate from consideration here those few cases in which marihuana is used for its prestige value only, as a symbol that one is a certain kind of person, with no pleasure at all being derived from its use" (Becker 1953:236). This is perhaps one explanation of why he does not elaborate any further on the (symbolic) meaning of pleasure.

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arguing in relation to marihuana users. However as Denmark has very few abstainers, the deterministic element presented in this article is probably not far from how many Danes experience it: Once on the road to becoming a recreational alcohol user, it is very difficult to get off.

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