

The gendered relationship with drunkenness among different generations in Mediterranean and Nordic countries

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Abstract

The study adopts a qualitative comparative approach to better understand how different dimensions affect social norms regulating alcohol consumption. Female and male attitudes towards drunkenness were analysed on the basis of data from 27 focus groups involving a total of 166 participants from Italy, Finland and Sweden, grouped by age cohort (17–20 and 50–65 years) and educational level. Results suggest that gendered drinking norms may be affected more by the drinking culture than by the degree of gender equality, thus providing a possible explanation of why gender differences in drinking are not always consistent with broader gender inequalities.

Keywords

alcohol, focus groups, gender, generations, qualitative methods

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The sociology of alcohol is a broad and long-standing field of study. In this field, a gender perspective has gained many scholars' attention and spawned a considerable number of studies (see, e.g., Gefou-Madianou, 1992; Obot & Room, 2005; Wilsnack & Wilsnack, 1997) that have explained differences between male and female drinking on biological, psychological and historical and cultural grounds (Holmila & Raitasalo, 2005). Female drinking has been approached in a paradoxical way. On the one hand, the literature has confirmed that women are less likely to drink alcoholic beverages than men, and that they consume less and are less inclined to engage in at-risk drinking styles (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2015; Gmel, Rehm, & Kuntsche, 2003; Global Health Observatory [GHO], 2018; Slade et al., 2016; Wilsnack, Wilsnack, Kristjanson, Vogelanz-Holm, & Gmel, 2009). In the predominant public health discourse, on the other hand, women are generally referred to as an at-risk target group, so that national and international health bodies support specific guidelines and prevention policies specifically addressed to women (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism [NIH], 2019; Obot & Room, 2005).

One explanation for the worry concerning women's drinking is that women are particularly vulnerable to alcohol: addiction develops faster in women than in men (Keyes, Martins, Blanco, & Hasin, 2010), as do several alcohol-related physical and mental problems (Graham, Massak, Demers, & Rehm, 2007; Rehm et al., 2010). Consequently, the consequences of drinking seem to be particularly negative for women (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2004; Wilsnack et al., 2009), including the risk of becoming a victim of violence (La Flair et al., 2012).

Another explanation for the special concern around female drinking comes from the predominant gender convergence thesis – stemming from epidemiological surveys – which holds that it is increasingly common for women to drink like men, i.e., the number of female drinkers has risen and their drinking style has

become more intoxication-oriented (Bloomfield, Gmel, Neve, & Mustonen, 2001; Grucza, Bucholz, Rice, & Bierut, 2008; Holmila & Raitasalo, 2005; McPherson, Casswell, & Pledger, 2004). This concern is expressed especially about young people, among whom gendered differences are even less evident (Cullen, 2012; Kuntsche et al., 2011).

To a certain extent, differences in gender drinking norms reflect broader gender inequalities. Thus, when women started to enter the labour market, they also had the opportunity to take on more “masculine” activities (Bergmark, 2004; Bloomfield et al., 2001). However, the changes have not occurred where they might have been expected, nor have they affected all aspects of drinking (Wilsnack, Wilsnack, & Obot, 2005). For instance, a cross-national study (Bloomfield et al., 2001) conducted in Finland, Germany, Switzerland, and the Netherlands confirmed the convergence hypothesis only in Finland, and only for mean consumption and drinking status, but not for at-risk drinking. The authors hypothesised that this could be explained by the drinking culture, and by the fact that the older tradition of abstinence among Finnish women had disappeared (Bloomfield et al., 2001, p. 50).

We agree that the cultural approach, focusing on social norms governing which drinking behaviours are expected and acceptable and which are prohibited and unacceptable, is a very informative perspective for understanding gendered drinking. According to this perspective, drinking behaviours have always been a way of affirming and reproducing gender roles (Wilsnack et al., 2005). Therefore, while heavy drinking has traditionally been linked to masculinity (Lemle & Mishkind, 1989), it has been strongly disapproved of for women, who are judged by a “double standard” (de Visser & McDonnell, 2012). Women who drink are thus subjected to moral judgement, as this deviance from gender roles supposedly implies sexual looseness (Bogren, 2008; Leigh, 1995; Room, 1996). Indeed, women have traditionally been expected to control their husbands' drinking,

rather than drinking themselves (de Visser & McDonnell, 2012). Although important social changes have occurred in recent decades and gender inequalities have been reduced in many areas, the double standard for alcohol use still persists. Studies, many of which focus on the UK, show that the night-time economy encourages women to drink and be sexy (Bailey, Griffin, & Shankar, 2015; Griffin, Szmigin, Bengry-Howell, Hackley, & Mistral, 2013; Nicholls, 2015). Nevertheless, the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable drinking seem to be difficult to navigate for these women. This is especially true for working-class women, who are judged even more harshly (Lennox, Emslie, Sweeting, & Lyons, 2018; Nicholls, 2015). Traditional and new media have made a major contribution to spreading and reproducing the double standard and associated stereotypes (Lennox et al., 2018; Rolando, Taddeo, & Beccaria, 2015; Roumeliotis & Törrönen, 2014).

These findings cast doubt on a simplistic interpretation of the gender convergence thesis. Indeed, though quantitative studies show that the prevalence of drinkers, the amount drunk and the frequency of drinking are more similar for both genders today than in the past, this does not necessarily mean that drinking styles, drinking habits and drinking norms have also become more similar (Demant & Törrönen, 2011; Simonen et al., 2014). Nor should we fall into the error of interpreting the changes in female drinking as a mere imitation of male patterns, since gender identities are constantly and actively constructed and deconstructed through normatively regulated consumption behaviours, and men and women express both traditional and innovative, masculine and feminine aspects when drinking (Beccaria, Rolando, Scavarda, & Torronen, 2017; Measham, 2002), which may also be blended (Törrönen, Rolando, & Beccaria, 2017). Thus, it should be recognised that male drinking styles and attitudes toward alcohol have also changed (Beccaria & Scarscelli, 2007; Callinan, Room, & Livingston, 2014; Kobin,

2013), influenced by cultural, social, and situational factors (Olsson & Törrönen, 2008; Simonen, 2013; Törrönen et al., 2017). For instance, it has been argued that educational level affects the idea of “masculine drinking”, as it has been found that heavy drinking – the traditional male drinking style in Northern countries (Lemle & Mishkind, 1989) – is not popular among highly educated adult men (Törrönen & Roumeliotis, 2014). Likewise, an Italian mixed-methods study (Beccaria & Rolando, 2016) has indicated that today men drink moderately, showing taste and knowledge about wine and beer, as a way of standing out socially.

However, gendered drinking patterns are embedded in a more general “drinking culture”, a concept long used by scientists that refers mainly to shared values and social control aspects underpinning and shaping drinking (Savic, Room, Mugavin, Pennay, & Livingston, 2016). According to this definition, Italy, on the one hand, and Finland and Sweden on the other, traditionally belong to opposite “wet” and “dry” drinking cultures (Pennay & Room, 2016; Savic et al., 2016), where alcohol – and notably drunkenness – have assumed different cultural positions (Room & Mäkelä, 2000). Briefly stated, wet cultures, typically wine-producing countries, have traditionally been characterised by a very high proportion of drinkers and frequent heavy drinking, but few social problems related to drinking, as alcohol’s main use-values were socialising and convivial or as a foodstuff, while intoxication was stigmatised. By contrast, dry cultures such as those characteristic of Northern and English-speaking countries, have usually been described as focused on spirits, with a lower proportion of drinkers and less heavy drinking, but higher rates of intoxication-oriented drinking, accompanied by more frequent alcohol-related social problems such as violence (Beccaria & Prina, 1996).

In the postwar period, alcohol consumption levels have converged across Europe (Leifman, 2002; Simpura, Karlsson, & Leppänen, 2002). In Italy, for instance, per capita alcohol consumption dropped from 17.92 litres in 1970 to

7.56 in 2014 (WHO, 2017) whereas in Finland during the same period it rose from 5.84 to 8.8 litres. In Sweden, the consumption trend has been more stable, passing from 7.86 litres (1970) to 7.3 (2014). Despite these changes, cultural studies have shown that differences persist in the informal regulation of drinking, i.e., social norms defining what drinking styles are socially expected and accepted by drawing “symbolic boundaries” between what is considered a normal/accepted way of drinking and what is not (Rolando, Törrönen, & Beccaria, 2014). In particular, following the old pattern, the social definition of being drunk seems still to play a main role in shaping differences (Beccaria, 2010; Katainen & Rolando, 2015; Rolando et al., 2014).

In a field of highly specialised and segmented studies where gender and drinking cultures are rarely analysed together, we claim that the drinking culture approach, and comparative studies in particular, can provide a better understanding of gender differences in drinking.

Though we are aware that multiple and possibly intertwined cultures can coexist in a globalised society and are not limited to or homogeneous at the country level (Pennay & Room, 2016; Savic et al., 2016), we think that comparing data collected in different countries as case studies can provide insights to better understand variation in cultures, as they are observed as consumption patterns represented with data, within and across countries, as well as between broader geographical areas, such as Northern and Southern Europe.

Table 1, based on WHO data (2014), shows that Sweden can be considered as occupying a position midway between Italy and Finland in terms of alcohol consumption levels and prevalence of heavy drinking. Looking at gender differences, Italy shows the lowest gender gap both in terms of total consumption – Italian women account for 37.7% of total consumption – and heavy episodic drinking.¹ The gender gap is lower if only drinkers are considered, since the majority of non-drinkers in all three countries are female.

Table 1. Alcohol consumption among men and women in Italy, Sweden and Finland.

| | Italy | Sweden | Finland |
|---|-------|--------|---------|
| Total per capita alcohol consumption, drinkers only (2010) (litres) | | | |
| Male | 11.9 | 17.1 | 23.6 |
| Female | 7.2 | 8.8 | 11.8 |
| Total (15+) | 19.1 | 25.9 | 35.4 |
| Prevalence of heavy episodic drinking, total population (%) (2010) | | | |
| Male | 8.0 | 33.2 | 51.8 |
| Female | 0.7 | 14.5 | 22 |
| Prevalence of heavy episodic drinking, drinkers only (%) (2010) | | | |
| Male | 9.8 | 44.2 | 69.8 |
| Female | 0.3 | 23.2 | 35.4 |
| Prevalence of abstainers, lifetime (%) (2010) | | | |
| Male | 13.0 | 6.2 | 7.2 |
| Female | 37.5 | 17.8 | 20.4 |

Source: Global Health Observatory data repository.

In the present study, therefore, we chose both similar cases (Finland and Sweden) and contrasting cases. Furthermore, we compared three geographical areas by adopting the strategy of “individualising comparison”, which assumes that the object of study may belong to different realities in each of them (Tigerstedt & Törrönen, 2007).

Aims and methods

We adopt a qualitative comparative approach where several aspects are used as the basis of comparison, the main being gender and drinking culture. We compare female and male attitudes toward drunkenness in three countries and among two different generations, including people with a high level and a low level of education. The aim is to elaborate on variations of perceived gendered drinking norms in different drinking cultures, and, within these cultures,

across different age cohorts and educational levels. By taking three countries as case studies, we seek to shed light on how different dimensions – drinking culture, age and educational level – contribute to maintaining, reproducing or undoing gender differences. Indeed, the high degree of specialisation in the field of alcohol studies has led to a fragmentation of topics and approaches, which often does not account for the concurrent influence of different dimensions.

To obtain comparable data, we used stimulus images illustrating different drinking situations (Sulkunen & Egerer, 2009; Törrönen, 2002). Pictures were shown to participants, who were asked to comment on them by describing the represented scene and indicating whether or not they were familiar with it. Framing a situation includes three main dimensions; first, defining the situation, i.e., what is going on in it. Second, defining what is expected, namely what is acceptable or normal drinking behaviour in the situation. Third, defining how one personally relates to it, i.e., whether one identifies with it or not and in what way (Goffman, 1974). The process of how pictures and their situations are framed in a focus group reveals common meanings and informal norms shared by the collectivity or the social group. Accordingly, we applied the concept of symbolic boundaries, i.e., “conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices” (Lamont & Molnár, 2002, p. 168). The analysis of symbolic boundaries shows how people are constantly engaged in a process of collective identity building by separating people into groups. This is a dialectical process which entails, on the one hand, drawing on criteria of similarity and group membership, and, on the other hand, “othering”, i.e., distancing themselves from “others” and their inappropriate behaviours. With a concept of symbolic boundaries, we analysed how men and women from different geographical areas and with different educational backgrounds draw symbolic boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable drinking norms for different age groups.

The focus group method was chosen as a research tool, since it stimulates social interactions whereby gender identities are constructed and negotiated (Törrönen et al., 2017). Sixteen focus groups for each country were conducted from October to December 2007 in the metropolitan areas of Turin (Italy) and Helsinki (Finland), and from 2008 to 2010 in the Stockholm area (Sweden). Participants were divided by gender and age, focusing on young people (17–20 years old) and adults (aged 52–55 years in Italy and 50–65 years in Finland and Sweden). Cohorts differed slightly between in the two countries, since time-periods were identified according to each country’s specific economic, social and cultural history in order to better capture the effects of socio-economic changes on different generations (Beccaria, 2010). Participants were also recruited in order to include people of different socio-cultural standing, mainly defined on the basis of educational level and work position. In Italy, participants ($N = 53$) were recruited mainly through a snowball technique with the help of key informants, and the aim was to form groups of people who did not know each other previously. In Helsinki and Sweden, the interviews mainly involved natural groups formed by contacting trade unions, workplaces and schools. The interviews were conducted either at the research institution or in places where interviewees study or work. A total of 52 participants were involved in Finland and 61 in Sweden.

In each country, two native language speaking researchers, one serving as moderator and the other as observer, conducted the focus group interviews by following common guidelines and using similar questions. The interviews lasted from 50 minutes to two hours. The final dataset is shown in Table 2.

While the interviews included several stimulus images, this article analyses how interviewees interpreted two pictures representing drunkenness. This choice was made because attitudes towards drunkenness have been a significant factor that separates the Mediterranean and Scandinavian drinking cultures from each

Table 2. Dataset.

| Italy (Torino) | | | | Finland (Helsinki) | | | | Sweden (Stockholm) | | | | | | | | |
|----------------|----------------------------------|---------------------|------------|--------------------|-------|---------------------|------------|----------------------------------|----------|-------|---------------------|------------|----------------------------------|--------|-------|---------------------|
| No. of FGs | Educational level (higher/lower) | No. of participants | No. of FGs | Gender | Age | No. of participants | No. of FGs | Educational level (higher/lower) | Gender | Age | No. of participants | No. of FGs | Educational level (higher/lower) | Gender | Age | No. of participants |
| 2 | H-L | 15 | 2 | M | 17-20 | 10 | 2 | H-L | M | 17-20 | 11 | 2 | H-L | M | 17-20 | 11 |
| 2 | H-L | 13 | 2 | F | 17-20 | 13 | 2 | H-L | F | 17-20 | 15 | 2 | H-L | F | 17-20 | 15 |
| 2 | H-L | 12 | 2 | M | 52-55 | 11 | 3 | H-L | M | 50-65 | 14 | 3 | H-L | M | 50-65 | 14 |
| 2 | H-L | 13 | 2 | F | 52-55 | 18 | 4 | H-L | F | 50-65 | 21 | 4 | H-L | F | 50-65 | 21 |
| Total 53 | | | Total 52 | | | Total 52 | | | Total 61 | | | Total 61 | | | | |

Note. FG = Focus Group; H-L = Higher-Lower; M = Male; F = Female.

other (Beccaria, 2010). The first picture depicts a man slumped over a table littered with glasses and bottles. A woman at his side has her arm on his shoulder and smiles at the photographer.

The second image shows three people, apparently male, on a flight of steps during the day. One of them, sitting with his head drooping, is still holding a bottle, while another is lying on his back and is apparently sleeping or unconscious. Backpacks and empty bottles are scattered around them on the steps.

The interviewees were shown each picture separately and then asked to discuss the following questions: What is going on in this picture? Does this picture correspond to your own experience of alcohol use? Can you identify with any of the characters shown in the picture? And, what will happen next? Even though the two pictures depicted male drinking, the questions we posed stimulated the interviewees to discuss whether women could drink in the same way as men do, and the reasons for similarities or differences (Törrönen, 2018).

Analysis employed a data- and theory-driven abductive approach (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Texts were coded using a template analysis model (King, 1998) including some a priori family codes – needed for comparability – based on Goffman’s conceptualisation of frame (1974) and boundary work theory (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). Through the coding process, however, each researcher was free to add other codes that were regarded as important. At the end of the process similar codes were refined and unified in a single list of codes (see Table 3). Data were coded using Atlas.ti, considering quotations as semantic units, possibly including more than one participant’s voice.

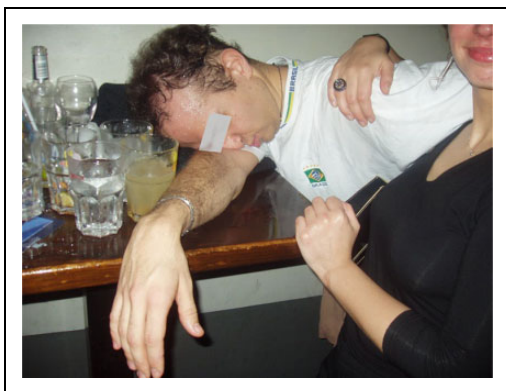
Results – Italy

17 to 20-year-old participants

In the eyes of 17 to 20-year-old Italian girls and boys, Picture 1 looked generally rather familiar, something often seen, i.e., common and therefore, to a certain extent, socially acceptable:

Table 3. Template analysis.

| Family codes | Codes |
|--|--|
| Situation (how the interviewees define the situation, e.g., what's going on) | S_extraordinary (e.g., celebration, special life events...) S_ordinary (e.g., Saturday evening) |
| Identification (how the interviewees personally relate to the portrayed scene) | I_yes I_not I_partial |
| Recognition (who – “others” – the interviewees relate to the portrayed scene) | R_young people R_immigrants R_foreigners ... |
| Acceptability (what is expected, i.e., acceptable or normal in the situation) | A_yes A_no A_depends |
| Boundaries (more or less explicit references to normal vs deviant characteristics of drinking/drinkers) | B_context B_company B_age B_time B_taste B_no intention B_control B_frequency Free codes and memos |



Picture 1. Drunk man slumped over a table.

“such scenes are just on the agenda” (Matteo, MH²). However, instead of simply identifying with the picture, the young Italians negotiated

the conditions and boundaries for acceptable drunkenness. First, the scene was related to special occasions – such as New Year’s Eve and birthday parties – rather than to ordinary situations. Another occasion where the youngest male interviewees stated that it is easy to overdo it is during “open bar” alcohol promotions at discos, when the quality of the drinks is very low. On ordinary Saturday evenings, such behaviour was not reported as generalised, but was attributed to certain young people “who are always the same”, those who cannot hold alcohol and lose control.

Second, though all the interviewees admitted to having been drunk at least once in their lives, girls often emphasised “not that much”, by which they meant that they did not drink so much that they vomited or were not able to stand. Third, many girls specified that they had been intoxicated only a few times as an experiment, or explained intoxication as an accident due to specific circumstances other than alcohol (e.g., being too tired, having eaten badly, being depressed). Many of the girls, as well as some of the boys, specified that drunkenness was something that occurred in the past, unintentionally, before they knew their own limits. Now that they were more experienced, they tried not to exceed the limit that separates euphoria, i.e., being tipsy, from intoxication.

- Paola: I remember two situations in which I’ve been so bad. New Year’s Eve and maybe another time. My friends very often.
- Carlotta: The most common situation is in the middle, where you maybe are beyond your limit, but not so far gone.
- Int: Paola, and then it didn’t happen to you anymore?
- Paola: Yes [it didn’t], also because I was a little bit younger and I didn’t know my limits, I mean, when you grow up you learn how to drink, this [experience] is part of the past, about five

years ago, [when I was] around 14–15 years old. (FH)

However, the girls and boys provided slightly different reasons to explain why they have not gone past the threshold of being tipsy. While girls emphasised their desire to avoid annoying others by becoming a burden, boys' arguments revolved mainly around avoiding unpleasant hangovers.

Carlotta: Sometimes [friends] even irritate me, since I have to support them, and so I try not to do the same thing, because I would be embarrassed. I would feel guilty about the others. (FH)

Other common boundaries separating acceptable from unacceptable drunkenness included getting drunk alone or when you have to drive. Conversely, the best time to drink was said to be on holidays, far from parental control and with no responsibilities for the following day.

Stefano: It happens to me rarely, but when it happens, it is on holiday, because I don't have to drive, since I'm underage, I don't have to come home and my mother can't see me. I don't even have to worry about having to do something the next day. (ML)

Picture 2 was interpreted as a typical scene of young people abroad, of students during a demonstration, or of young people who go to rave parties and take drugs in addition to drinking. In any case, none of the female interviewees identified with the pictured characters, except for an upper-class girl who said the scene was bleak, but admitted that sometimes, after a night out, one can be a little drunk and listless. All the other interviewees associated the situation with other people, not even friends, or eccentric friends. Being drunk during the day did not seem to be acceptable among young female interviewees, or among less educated boys, who distanced themselves



Picture 2. Drunk people on a flight of steps.

from the scene and associated it either with tourists from abroad or homeless people with alcohol or drug problems.

Verdiana: Personally it never happened to me, but not even to my friends. [...] Maybe on Saturday night it can happen, but in pubs, because on the street... I see this only during demonstrations.

Giorgia: [...] Yes, when there is a demonstration they have an excuse to have a beer at 8 o'clock in the morning. (FL)

By contrast, Picture 2 was familiar to the group of boys with a higher level of education, who interpreted it either as the end of a special occasion (e.g., the morning after New Year's Eve), or as an early morning after a night spent in a disco. Some participants did not hesitate to admit that they had experienced this kind of situation.

Adriano: The morning after a whole night spent at the disco! You have breakfast someplace, and then you sit on a bench, on the steps and you die... (MH)

52 to 55-year-olds

When discussing Picture 1, most 52 to 55-year-old female interviewees identified with the

helper instead of with the drunk man, who was associated with colleagues, friends, relatives, or sons. However, how the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable drinking were drawn were based on the drinker's age. When talking about their sons and daughters' intoxication experiences, female interviewees and especially teenagers' mothers were more understanding, indicating that drunkenness is acceptable as an unpremeditated part of growing up. For adults, drunkenness was not accepted, since they were expected to be able to control themselves.

Carla: I mean, if somebody feels sick because he ate something wrong, that's one thing, but if he has drunk too much . . . then if you are a teenager who has not yet found his limit, ok, but if he's an adult, it's not! (FH)

Therefore, only a few male and female interviewees (fewer than half of each group) identified with the drunken character and spoke of their personal experiences with drunkenness. Women framed their experiences as isolated funny incidents that occurred during extraordinary situations, and were either very positive – such as the first wedding anniversary – or negative, as in the case of a lower educated woman who had got drunk after a bereavement. In all cases, they stressed that they had not drunk very much, but had a low tolerance for alcohol. Both groups (highly and low educated) valued self-control, but assigned a more restrictive meaning to it than the younger cohorts.

Silvia: When I start drinking maybe a few more glasses, when we are with friends, I start laughing! Then I say “Stop it! It's better to stop”. I start laughing for no reason, and even my husband tells me: “You are laughing too much, maybe you drank a glass too much”, then I stop. (FL)

Whereas women drew boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable drunkenness on the basis of age and gender, and then evaluated whether it was voluntary or not, male interviewees discussed acceptability primarily in terms of frequency. As suggested by the following quote, when drunkenness is recurrent it is interpreted as a sign of a serious problem.

Piero: It didn't happen to me just like that, but one time in Sardinia I got drunk and they brought me back home, I was 35–36 years old and it was after a wedding [. . .]. There was a person who was in that state often, I think he had problems, since he got drunk once or twice a week. (ML)

As is clear from the following, however, drunkenness was not that infrequent among the male participants when they were young. It was socially tolerated as long as it was involuntary, while more blame was attached to women who get drunk.

Claudio: I've taken a lot of friends home, really a lot, and not just men but women too, unfortunately, which is a situation that I see as negative. Anyway, [. . .] I don't consider it positively. It can happen, as Flavio said, since it's not something you plan, but [. . .] when I see a person who feels sick, passed out, tormented because of alcohol, I'm even irritated. (ML)

Attitudes toward drunkenness were therefore quite negative, especially among lower educated men, as drunkenness was considered dangerous and harmful to others (e.g., by causing road accidents).

On the other hand, when male and female interviewees from lower and higher educational levels framed Picture 1 as representing people outside their own culture, they either

felt sorry for these people or were annoyed with them.

Vito: Just last night, at the pub downstairs, there were coloured people, non-EU people, they took him and brought him away. I feel a little bit sorry, and a little bit annoyed. I'm sorry. (ML)

None of the 52 to 55-year-old women or men identified with Picture 2, not even when they were young. Indeed, the image was interpreted as "a scene from today, that you see more and more often" (Elena, FL).

In the higher educated female group, the characters sitting on the steps were seen as Northern European young people who supposedly show themselves drunk on the streets. What made it unacceptable was the fact that drinking occurred during the day and drunkenness – likened to drug intoxication – was displayed in public places. This was compared to the past when drunk men could be seen on the streets, but that was related to personal problems, while it was difficult for interviewees to understand why young people nowadays "drink just for pleasure" (Maria, FH). Young women's public drinking in particular evoked a double standard and moralistic attitudes among the interviewees:

Cosimo: This ostentation was never for me, this exhibition. I've seen it [...] I'm not saying that they're pretending, but this posing, this showing off. There is not even... there's a word, decency, because even the women! (MH)

Results – Finland and Sweden

17 to 20-year-old participants

In Finland and Sweden, the male and female groups defined the situation in Picture 1 as a Midsummer party, a house party, a student party, an evening out in a night-club, a weekend after-party at home or a holiday evening in a ski resort. All focus groups saw the picture as

portraying familiar and acceptable heavy drinking in the context of festive situations during weekends or holidays:

Ellu: This looks familiar.
 Johanna: A party at home after an evening out, you know.
 Noora: When the pub closes they go to someone's place where there is a lot to drink. (FI, FL)

While the participants recognised that Picture 1 represents normal and acceptable drunkenness in their drinking culture, only young male interviewees identified with the drunk man, thus signalling that heavy drunkenness has a gendered character, and is especially acceptable for boys.

Teemu: This person could be me when I passed out in the bathroom.
 Petri: You were also in the same condition the Midsummer the year before. (FI, ML)
 Jonas: This describes a successful evening...
 Tobias: It has actually happened a few times (SE, ML)

Furthermore, the gendered difference towards heavy drunkenness was highlighted by the young female participants' identification with the helping woman, indicating that the boundaries and norms of how much one can drink are different for boys and girls: whereas it may be normal and acceptable for boys to end up losing control and passing out while drinking, this was not suitable behaviour for girls.

In the Finnish data, both less and more educated young male focus groups identified with the drunk man, whereas in the Swedish data only less educated young male participants identified with him. Thus, in Sweden, young males' boundaries towards heavy drunkenness varied by educational background.

Compared to Picture 1, Picture 2 aroused more negotiation about the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable drinking. When

the picture was framed as representing young people's first experiments with alcohol or their drinking in a specific festive situation or a celebration with a sport team, it was considered acceptable behaviour for boys. But when the picture was framed as representing regular drinking during the daytime, it was categorised as representing problematic behaviour outside the boundaries of normal drinking, probably including also drug use.

- Titti: They must have had a cruise [...]
 Titti: Or this is a journey of a sports team or the like [...] it is characteristic to drink heavily then [...]
 Mari: Or they may be alcoholics on the street, like this setup in the middle of the day [...]
 Titti: But they could also be drug users in principle. (FI, FH)

In all focus groups Picture 2 aroused multiple interpretations in which the situation was either included inside the boundaries of normal masculine heavy drinking or excluded from it, depending on whether the picture was associated with customary party situations in which it was allowed to get drunk, or with problematic substance use during the daytime that signified deviant behaviour. However, only one group – less educated boys from Finland – discussed Picture 2 as representing their own drinking habits. This suggests that Picture 2 represented the extreme limits of heavy drinking among the young participants from Scandinavia. Even if many of them included this kind of heavy drinking inside the boundaries of normal drinking, most of them distance themselves from it and expressed that it rather represented other young people's way of drinking than their own style of consuming alcohol.

50 to 65-year-old participants

While the young interviewees accepted intoxication as a normal part of their drinking culture but expressed gendered boundaries that specified women's intoxication as less acceptable

and more controlled than that of men, the 50 to 65-year-old interviewees drew even more clear-cut boundaries between male and female intoxication. Like the younger participants, the older interviewees categorised passing out as an acceptable behaviour for men in festive situations. However, in contrast to the younger participants who accepted female intoxication in a controlled form, the older participants considered female intoxication in general as having no place in acceptable female behaviour. They thus categorised male intoxication as natural and female intoxication as unnatural. Consequently, they were of the opinion that in heavy drinking contexts women's natural role was to take care of drunken men, such as their husbands or other present drunk men.

- Pasi: Wife is smiling
 Olli: Yes [...]
 Pasi: She is probably used to her husband being in this kind of condition.
 Saku: This may be the reality for many families every weekend. The mother and children are carrying daddy to bed. (FI, ML)
 Per: This situation happens in all parties
 Ulf: Yes
 Anders: Pretty much in every party. (SE, ML)

Interestingly, only less educated male groups from Finland identified with the picture and said that it could represent their current drinking habits. In terms of their own drinking, the other male groups from Scandinavia argued that they could have drunk like this when they were younger, thus giving off an impression that as they had grown older their drinking habits had become tamer. Nowadays heavy intoxication no longer belonged to their drinking repertoire.

In the same way as younger participants, the older participants interpreted Picture 2 as representing either normal heavy drinking among young people or their problematic drinking.

The older Finnish participants tended to frame the picture as representing teenagers' habitual heavy drinking, believing that young people themselves consider it belonging inside the boundaries of normal and acceptable drinking:

- Eki: Now we're talking.
 Lauri: This is now part of the normal "village culture" in Helsinki. It pisses me off to see youngsters going around with their 12-packs of beer and then at some point some of the bottles get broken.
 Reino: It looks like the Spring sunshine has aroused boys' desire to get wasted. (FI, MH)

Even though the oldest Finnish participants tended to categorise teenagers' heavy drinking as part of their normal drinking culture, especially for boys, they had ambivalent feelings toward it. By arguing that teenagers' heavy drinking is a normal part of their peer culture but then judging it as excessive and problematic, the oldest Finnish participants separated their own social norms around drinking from those of teenagers. In this way they expressed that they are concerned about how heavily teenagers drink today.

The older Swedish participants, in contrast, tended to frame Picture 2 as representing young people's problem drinking by categorising the characters in Picture 2 as marginalised or at risk of becoming marginalised. Both male and female Swedish interviewees framed the problem as one involving the family as a whole:

- Julia: They don't have a family that takes care of them.
 Katja: Parents work too much or don't give enough time to their children.
 Margareta: They only meet their friends [...].
 Rosa: And feel lonely. (SE, FL)

Discussion

By comparing results from different geographical areas, cohorts and educational levels, we can better understand how interpretations of gendered drinking and drunkenness are influenced by all these levels, which in turn are intertwined in complex combinations that change over time.

In terms of the differences that emerged between how women and men discussed the pictures, our female interviewees from both cohorts and all countries were more likely than the male interviewees to depict their own drinking as controlled and to distance themselves from intoxication, in line with the fact that women are less likely to drink to excess (CDC, 2015; WHO, 2018). This could also reflect a greater reticence and sense of shame at admitting to drunkenness: as noted in the studies conducted in the UK, women who drink feel criticised by both health professionals and the media (Watts, Linke, Murray, & Barker, 2015).

The emphasis that the Italian female interviewees put on the differences between being tipsy and drunk – i.e., on the boundaries that define the extent to which drunkenness is acceptable – recalls the need for women to maintain control over their drinking found in the UK studies (Bailey et al., 2015; Griffin et al. 2013; Nicholls, 2015). In Italy, however, male participants also referred to similar boundaries. This can be explained by the fact that negative expectations and attitudes towards intoxication are an important feature of the Italian drinking culture for both genders. Interestingly, aversion to intoxication still seems to be a valued social norm for younger Italian generations as well (Beccaria, Petrilli, & Rolando, 2015; Katainen & Rolando, 2015). In this sense, intoxication seems less gendered in Italy than it is in Britain or Scandinavia. The only slight difference found in our analysis concerns how women and men explained why it is necessary not to lose control when drinking: while women stated that drunkenness is unacceptable because it causes problems for friends, men saw

hangovers as the main problem with drunkenness. Both genders and all age groups had a very similar understanding of where the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable drunkenness lie: excessive drinking is acceptable for young people but not for adults, for whom drunkenness signifies immaturity and experimentation (Rolando et al., 2014; Rolando & Beccaria, 2018).

However, the older and younger age groups differed in their understanding of the social norms concerning female drunkenness. In Italy as in Scandinavia, interviewees from the older age groups showed greater disapproval of female drinking in public places than the younger interviewees. Overall, gendered norms regarding intoxication were more pronounced in Scandinavian countries than in Italy, despite the fact that the general gender gap (in terms of education, health, economic and political systems) in northern countries is much smaller than in Italy (World Economic Forum, 2018). This might be due to the fact that in Scandinavian countries with intoxication-oriented drinking cultures, drinking used to be a male activity and women entered the public drinking scene only in the late 1960s and 1970s (Simonen, Törrönen, & Tigerstedt, 2014). By contrast, Italian women – though drinking less than men – have never been excluded from drinking, as wine has traditionally been regarded as a complement to daily meals (Beccaria, 2010).

Since heavy drinking in public spaces has been a marker of masculinity in Northern drinking cultures (Törrönen & Roumeliotis, 2014), it is not surprising that all participants in Scandinavia accepted heavy uncontrolled male intoxication, whereas public displays of female intoxication were accepted only by younger participants. Heavy male drinking in public situations was seen as a cultural and social element, part of normal behaviour in certain festive situations. As a consequence, Finnish and Swedish participants put more emphasis than their Italian counterparts on gender differences in drinking in terms of social norms. Specifically, the older participants regarded drinking

to the point of intoxication as inappropriate for girls, especially in public situations. In this sense, they seemed to argue that heavy drinking is not to be considered a question of equality.

Though there were similarities between the Finnish and Swedish data, there were also differences indicating that Swedish culture stands midway between Italy and Finland as regards the regulation of intoxication (Törrönen et al., 2017). These differences were more evident when comparing cohorts. Among the older interviewees in both countries, the drinking identities of men and women were seen as separate and the interviewees agreed that men usually drink heavily and women usually take care of the men who have passed out. However, all Swedish participants distanced themselves more from excessive drinking, which is shown by the fact that while Finnish participants approached Picture 2 more dominantly by framing it as an event of teenagers experimenting with intoxication and having fun, Swedish participants approached it by categorising it as expressing a deviant behaviour of marginalised youth.

In all countries under study, the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable drunkenness varied by educational level and social class. In Italy, lower educated participants expressed more negative attitudes towards drunkenness than the more highly educated. They strongly disapproved of those who drink to drunkenness (young people, people living in other countries, immigrants), regarding them as less respectable “others” (Christensen & Jensen, 2012). By contrast, the higher educated Scandinavians were more critical towards drunkenness. These findings suggest that, in different drinking cultures, more educated people are less conservative in terms of preserving cultural drinking traditions and more open to changing them (Törrönen et al., 2017). Their openness to change may be understood as a desire to stand out socially, to differentiate themselves from the less educated, as has also been observed in Estonia (Kobin, 2013).

However, at the same time, in the Scandinavian data, the more educated – both male and female – assumed that drunkenness is more a problem of the less educated. In this way, they approach intoxication with a double standard (Lennox et al., 2018; Nicholls, 2015). This was manifested in their ways of talking about self-control; several focus group participants spoke of self-control as something that you either do or do not have. According to them, more educated people have it, not so much by conscious learning but rather by having lived a “normal” life.

Conclusions

The comparative study presented here produces useful insights that can provide a better understanding of the role of different factors in influencing gendered alcohol norms and how they have shifted over time. The gender convergence observed by scholars (Bloomfield et al., 2001; Grucza et al., 2008; Holmila & Raitasalo, 2005; McPherson et al., 2004) thus acquires a meaning that is more complex than the “masculinisation” of female drinking as a process in which women’s relationship to heavy drinking becomes more acceptable.

First, variations emerged across cohorts, suggesting that while traditional gender norms in drinking are changing, new norms are more gender-mixed and provide both genders with more opportunities to express their identities (Julkunen, 2010; Simonen, 2013). Second, our analysis suggests that gendered drinking norms may be affected more by the specific drinking cultures (Pennay & Room, 2016) than by the degree of gender equality. This seems to be the case at least when comparing such very different drinking cultures as the Mediterranean and Scandinavian cultures, thus providing a possible explanation for why gender differences are not always consistent with broader gender inequalities (Wilsnack et al., 2005). Finally, results show how drinking norms – like other norms regulating what behaviours in everyday life are considered respectable – are

subjected to multiple inequalities, where the intersection between gender and class provides a crucial key interpretation (Christensen & Jensen, 2012).

Limitations

The data presented here were collected between 2007 and 2010. As the article compares views of intoxication in a time continuum from the 1960s to 2010 by including two cohorts, we cannot say that the results of the study show how gendered social norms regarding male and female drunkenness are currently understood in Finland, Italy and Sweden. However, our study provides important historical knowledge on how gendered social norms regarding intoxication have changed or stayed the same in recent decades up to 2010. Moreover, by providing historical knowledge about gendered norms in intoxication, the findings can be of use in studies that aim to understand what is currently going on with such norms and how they may have changed, along with the present decline in youth drinking (Kraus et al., 2019).

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Notes

1. Defined as consumption of 60 grams or more of pure alcohol on at least one occasion in the past 30 days.
2. Quotations are identified with codes that indicate age group (e.g., 17–20), gender (female F or male M) and education level (lower L, higher H). Where the interviewer's questions are cited, these are introduced by "Int."

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