



Research Repository UCD

Title	Alcohol consumption among 11-16 year olds:"Getting around" structural barriers?
Authors(s)	Hyde, Abbey, Treacy, Margaret P., Boland, Jennie, Whitaker, Teresa, Abaunza, Pilar Santos, Knox, Barbara
Publication date	2001-12
Publication information	Hyde, Abbey, Margaret P. Treacy, Jennie Boland, Teresa Whitaker, Pilar Santos Abaunza, and Barbara Knox. "Alcohol Consumption among 11-16 Year Olds:"Getting around" Structural Barriers?" Blackwell (Wiley), December 2001. https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1442-2018.2001.00093.x .
Publisher	Blackwell (Wiley)
Item record/more information	http://hdl.handle.net/10197/4131
Publisher's statement	The definitive version is available at www.blackwell-synergy.com
Publisher's version (DOI)	10.1046/j.1442-2018.2001.00093.x

Downloaded 2025-08-16 18:57:34

The UCD community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you. Your story matters! (@ucd_oa)



© Some rights reserved. For more information

Pre-proof version. The definitive version is available at:

Hyde, A., Treacy, M., Boland, J. Whitaker, T. Abaunza, P.S., Knox, B. (2001) 'Alcohol consumption among 11-16 year olds: 'getting around' structural barriers?'. *Nursing and Health Sciences*, 3 (4):45-54.

Contact: abbey.hyde@ucd.ie

ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION AMONG 11-16 YEAR OLDS: 'GETTING AROUND' STRUCTURAL BARRIERS?

Abstract

This paper presents qualitative data from Irish children and adolescents on their experiences in relation to alcohol consumption. A sample of 78 participants (average age 11.5) was selected. A proportion of this initial sample were interviewed at intervals over a period of three years. The participants' consumption patterns were analyzed and generated four categories: *covert unsanctioned*, *overt unsanctioned*, *overt sanctioned*, and *peer unsanctioned*. As the children got older, peer drinking became a stronger feature of the data, although it mediated other patterns of behaviour. Although children displayed agency in circumventing adult rules relating to alcohol consumption, the participants were subjected to structural constraints by virtue of their status as children. Moreover, the agentic powers of the participants were procured through their social network rather than arising from an essentialist agency possessed by each individual child. The impact of childhood as a structural dimension weakened to some extent as the participants got older and had more freedom to circumvent adult-defined barriers to alcohol consumption.

Introduction

While the popular stereotypical image of the Irish as an alcohol-prone race has been contested by empirical evidence (Cassidy 1997), a recent comparative European study of drinking patterns among school children found that Irish children reported higher than average alcohol consumption and experiences of drunkenness compared to their European counterparts (Swedish Council for Information on Alcohol and Other Drugs 1997). Furthermore, there is growing concern expressed in policy (Department of Health 1996, Department of Health and Children 1999a) and media reports (Crosbie 2000, Doyle 2000, O'Brien, 2000, O'Mahony, 2000) about an apparent rise in teenage drinking.

Virtually all existing Irish studies on the issue have been quantitative surveys that give an indication of the scale of adolescent alcohol consumption. A recent National Health and Lifestyles Survey of health behaviour in school children in Ireland found that 15% of boys and 1% of girls in the 9-11 year age group reported having been 'really drunk' at least once (Department of Health and Children 1999b). In the 12-14 year age group, the figure rose to 28% for boys and varied with the socio-economic group (SEG) for girls, ranging from 12% of those in the higher SEGs, to 28% in the lower SEGs. As expected, admissions of ever having been 'really drunk' were higher still among older adolescents, with gender and class variations. A greater percentage of boys compared to girls in the 15-17 age group, reported having been 'really drunk' at least once, as did more children (particularly girls) in the lower SEGs compared to those in the higher SEGs.

While knowledge about the numbers of children who drink and the quantities they consume is very useful, existing Irish studies do not capture the dynamics involved in adolescent alcohol consumption and the complex social processes involved. This paper reports on a qualitative study in which the social practices and context of adolescent alcohol consumption are detailed. At a theoretical level, the structural barriers that the children confronted in experimenting with alcohol, as well as their agency in trying to surmount these barriers are explored. Pavis et al (1998), using British data on adolescent health behaviour, contested recent postmodern sociological theory that suggests that individuals have become disembedded from structural constraints and are free to map out their own biographies. They argued that both social class and gender continued to impact, to a considerable degree, upon youth health behaviour. However, perhaps because they focused on older adolescents (15/16 year olds), Pavis et al (1998) did not address the constraints that childhood as a structural dimension posed for youths in their study. It will be argued that for participants in this study, however, the extent to which childhood as a structural category in which participants were still embedded to a considerable degree, represented the most obvious constraint on their alcohol-related actions. The more specific issue of *why* young study participants consumed alcohol, however, is beyond the scope of this article.

The study

The data set presented in this article is part of a wider study that aimed to understand the experiences of children in relation to aspects of their health and lifestyles. These aspects include cigarette smoking, illicit drug use and alcohol consumption. This

article focuses on the social practices and context of the participants' alcohol consumption.

The study is comparative and longitudinal. It is comparative insofar as three countries are involved - the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, and Spain. Ultimately a comparison will be made between the findings from each nation (see Hyde et al 1999, Rugkasa et al 2001a, 2001b). The study is longitudinal in that the sample from each country is followed for three years from initial contact, with four sets of cross-sectional data over the three years.

The following account on methodology details the strategy utilised by the Republic of Ireland's research team. A sample of 78 youths (44 girls and 34 boys) with an average age of 11.5 years was selected from 11 different youth clubs. These clubs were drawn from an unrestricted and comprehensive list of over 100 possible youth clubs, compiled with the help of numerous youth organizations, throughout the Republic of Ireland. The 11 clubs chosen (approximately 10% of the overall youth club sampling frame) were selected on the basis of the youth club leaders' willingness to support the research and the accessibility of the youth club location. The children's initial source of information about the study was through their youth club leader. The research team believed that an approach by the leaders would bring credibility to the research and increase the involvement of the participants. Since the initial invitation to participate in the study came from the youth club leader, the proportion of children who refused to participate is not known.

While the majority of the initial sample were selected from mainly working-class areas of Dublin (n=71), a smaller number (n=7) of subjects were selected from Galway city and Bray (an urban centre in Wicklow, extending from Dublin). After having obtained consent from the child's parent, each of the 78 participants was interviewed individually at a youth club, with the intent of re-interviewing them at given intervals over a three year period. It was anticipated at the outset of the research that a proportion of participants would be lost to the study over time. This indeed happened. While 78 children participated in the first round of individual interviews that were conducted from July 1997 to March 1998, only 48 of the subjects were re-interviewed between June 1998 and July 1999. Nineteen of the original 78 participants were interviewed for the third time in July and August 1999.

The fourth round of data collection spanned from May to July 2000 and involved 33 (19 females and 14 males) of the original 78 participants. In contrast to previous rounds that utilised individual depth interviews, a variety of data-gathering techniques were used. These techniques consisted of 5 individual in-depth interviews, 7 paired interviews, and 4 focus group interviews. Paired interviews, with one exception, were same sex. Focus groups were both mixed and same sex, and each contained between 3 and 5 participants. The particular technique utilized was determined by who presented for an interview, and the particular preference of the interviewees. All interviews were conducted at the respective youth club.

For individual interviews, a topic guide was used by the interviewer. The guide covered issues such as cigarette smoking, drugs, alcohol, recreational activities, and health perceptions. During each round of individual interviews, the topic guide

became more focused on particular issues that had been identified as important emerging themes from the previous interviews. In keeping with the spirit of in-depth interviewing, the children were encouraged to develop their own narratives on the identified topics. Data analysis was facilitated by using the software package NUD*IST. Like items of data were grouped and re-grouped and themes were developed from these.

Findings

The majority (73%) of children who imparted information about their experiences with alcohol reported that they had at least tasted it. However, the quantities consumed and the social circumstances in which consumption occurred varied. A striking feature of data was the immersion of the children's lives in a culture where adult social drinking was the norm. Even those who reported that they had never tasted alcohol, or disliked its taste, predicted that they would be part of that culture as adults.

Yeah, at Christmas I tried some wine, but it was disgusting.

Interviewer: Will you ever try it?

Yeah, when I'm older. I'll go to the pub with my friends.

(Participant 13, first round, female)

and (the same participant in second round)

Interviewer: Do you think you will drink when you are older?

Yeah, I would say so it is only normal to have a drink. It is not abnormal not to drink but it is not against the law you know.

(Participant 13, second round, female)

Among the majority who had tasted alcohol, four distinguishable consumption patterns emerged within the three years of the study. These were categorized for conceptual purposes as: *covert unsanctioned*, *overt unsanctioned*, *overt sanctioned*, and *peer unsanctioned*.

Covert unsanctioned consumption was characterised by the child consuming alcohol alone and without the prior approval of parents. Sampling alcohol usually happened when the child took a sip from an adult's (usually parent's) drink. In most cases the adult was temporarily absent and the child simply seized the opportunity to taste the drink.

Interviewer: Have you ever tasted it?
Yeah (child laughs). . . .
Interviewer: What was it that you drank?
Becks, me ma had to go and answer the phone.
Interviewer: So she didn't see you?
No
(Participant 51, first round, male)

While the quantity of alcohol consumed usually amounted to no more than a few sips, occasionally children reported consuming more than this. Here, while children were active in transgressing the boundaries that childhood still imposed on them, they nonetheless did not *openly* challenge established restrictions.

The dominant pattern of *overt unsanctioned* consumption was for the child to try to negotiate access to the adult world by tasting alcohol openly in the parent's presence. This was done, however, without the prior permission of the parents. Where participants commented on their parents' response to this, the latter generally disapproved of the child's action.

Interviewer: Have you ever tasted their beer?
No
Interviewer: Not even a sip?
Yeah a sip. . . .
Interviewer: Did your parents see you take it?
Yeah.
Interviewer: What did they say?
They just said, 'Don't be going near that you are too young'.
(Participant 36, first round, male)

It is quite possible that the children were testing their parents' reactions in these instances, as they attempted to encroach into the adults' territory. Nonetheless, the adult usually quickly re-asserted the child-parent roles by a swift reprimand.

The practice of *overt sanctioned* consumption was characterised by participants consuming alcohol openly under parental surveillance. This practice most frequently involved drinking small quantities of alcohol, usually wine or shandy, on special occasions like Christmas or New Year. Mathrani (1998) found that the majority of young people in her study had their first drink on such occasions. This ‘supervised’ alcohol consumption may be perceived as adults invigilating their older children while the later practiced the adult behaviour of alcohol consumption in a relatively safe and controlled manner.

I was allowed have a glass of wine at Christmas because it was a special occasion. But they don’t really let me - only on special occasions.

(Participant 5, third round, female)

Peer unsanctioned drinking depicted the most complex of the patterns. It was the practice of children drinking alcohol with at least one peer and without the approval of parents. This category represents a departure from both lone and parentally monitored drinking, and constitutes what might be seen to be the first unsupervised *social* drinking of the children.

Since legal sanctions provided a structural barrier to purchasing alcohol, the two mechanisms by which the children acquired alcohol were either through ‘stealing’ it from the supplies of parents, or by purchasing it indirectly, usually through older teenagers. Raiding parental supplies often occurred when larger than usual quantities of alcohol were available in the children's homes, such as at Christmas time. This reduced the chances of any 'stolen' alcohol being missed by parents.

Interviewer: Have you ever tasted it?

Yeah at Christmas. . .

Interviewer: Did your parents know?

No

Interviewer: Where did you get it?

Took it out of the house.

Interviewer: And your parents didn't miss it?

No, cause they had two trays of it.

(Participant 56, first round, female)

As was found in Mathrani's (1998) study, older youths and others collaborated in the covert activities of the children by buying alcohol for them:

Interviewer: Would you have any problems getting the drink?
Sometimes, but me friend that was on the bike with me is now 18. But he is tiny even though he has an ID card. He is smaller than me.
(Participant 2, second round, male)

Financial limitations were also a structural constraint for the children. It influenced both their choice of beverage and the frequency of consumption. Some children reported that their peers stole money from parents to buy alcohol.

For some children, a regular pattern of alcohol consumption had begun to be established insofar as they could identify definite intervals between peer drinking sessions. This pattern strongly reflected norms already established in the adult world, with heavier weekend drinking.

Every weekend we would go out drinking.
(Participant 6, second round, male)

Since the children were too young to be admitted to public houses, a number of other social spaces were used to consume alcohol, including fields, slumber parties, the homes of friends, and while camping. Thus, children either created their own social spaces or temporarily re-defined existing social spaces, such as bedrooms to enjoy social drinking.

Interviewer: Do you drink with your friends?
Yeah. I don't drink all the time. I just drink the odd time.
Interviewer: What would you do? Would you go out?
No 'cos we wouldn't get in anywhere. We look too small. . . .If me friend is babysitting or anything I would sleep in her house. And we would just drink in her house.
(Participant 1, third round, female)

Children who engaged in peer drinking spoke at length about the outcomes of alcohol

consumption – dizziness, giddiness, drunkenness, hangovers, headaches, and vomiting, thereby engaging with the whole culture associated with alcohol consumption. In many cases the child involved reported more serious consequences for his or her friends than for himself or herself.

Interviewer: And what's it like when you get locked? How does it feel?
Well I just get all giddy and laugh all the time, me friend just falls all over the place, that's Alice and Joan she just falls over the place and starts crying, it makes her real depressed.
Interviewer: Right.
Mary gets sick and Eleanor laughs.
(Participant 68, second round, female)

In their quest to engage in adult behaviour, these adolescents displayed agentic powers in defining not just their own individual experiences of adolescence, but also aspects of a normative category for adolescent alcohol behaviour within youth culture.

The dominance of patterns over time

These categories are not necessarily presented as stages through which teenagers pass through in their journey to adult drinking, but rather as analytical categories which encompassed the children's experiences. All four categories of experience may apply to the same child at different periods within a short time frame. From the first round of data collection, all four patterns were in evidence, along with a sizeable minority who reported that they had never tasted alcohol. However, the most dominant pattern to emerge at the first round of interviews was covert unsanctioned alcohol consumption. The next two phases of interviewing saw an increasing shift in emphasis towards peer unsanctioned drinking alongside the other consumption styles. In addition, participants became much more vocal and descriptive about the after-effects of consumption and the regularity of the practice. It appears that alcohol

consumption as a social and shared practice was beginning to become part and parcel of the social life of many of the children. This concurs with findings from quantitative studies in Britain, where the practice of drinking occasional sips of alcohol changed to a consumption pattern almost akin to that of adults in the years between 11 and 16 (Wright 1999).

A variation of overt sanctioned alcohol consumption that became evident among a small number of participants by the fourth round of data collection was parental permissiveness about their child's drinking within the home (or, in rarer instances in public houses) on occasions other than special ones:

I'm allowed to drink . . . three months since I was fifteen, so it doesn't matter really I just have to stay away from me ma drinking and then I'm allowed. Me dad lets me . . .

Interviewer: Why do you think your da lets you?

Because I'm old enough to, I know it's eighteen but, he knows I'd just do it behind his back so he'd rather let me do it in front of him.

(Participant 44, fourth round, male)

A small number of participants also reported a sense of outgrowing the novelty and excitement associated with furtive drinking in the streets or fields, or had moderated their consumption on the basis of previous experiences of negative consequences.

I'm allowed to go up to the field but I don't drink up there anymore.

Interviewer: Alright.

Because I'd just be cold and wet and all, so it is just easier drinking in the house.

(Participant 75, fourth round, female)

I still drink a flagan. People think they are great and then they puke it all up, that's just saying you can't handle your drink, they fall all over the place . . . now I know what I can handle I won't push it. I just sit down and enjoy myself. I'm not getting drunk in front of people and puking.

(Participant 9, fourth round, female)

However, by the last round of data collection, while some parents were relatively permissive about alcohol consumption, others were not. Indeed, a number of participants claimed to drink either nothing or hardly at all, because they feared the responses of their parents.

Yeah. Like if I got caught I would be killed . . . I wouldn't be able to get away with it if I was seen smoking hash and drinking cans, that kind of thing.
 Interviewer: So do you think that's a major factor why you don't?
 Yeah
 Interviewer: And if your parents weren't strict do you think you might?
 No, like, I wouldn't smoke,
 Interviewer: And what about drink?
 I might . . . you want to go somewhere on a Friday night, like I want to go to one of the discos and stay in my friend's house afterwards and they'd have to ring up and find out everything.
 (Participant 12, fourth round, male)

The extracts below provide a good example of one of the female participants' transition from sipping, to increasingly regular alcohol consumption, and by the last round of data collection, to drinking in a public house with her family.

Round 1 interview

Interviewer: And when did you first try drinking, can you remember?
 I was about eleven
 Interviewer: You were eleven and what was the occasion?
 Well . . . all my sister's friends were all in the house and I just go, 'Can I try some of it?' and they go 'Take a little bit.' . . .
 Interviewer: And how often would you drink?
 I don't really. I only drink when they [sister and her friends] drink and I only get a couple of sups 'cause my sister wouldn't buy it for me 'cause she says I'm too young and I'm not to be drinking. Like if my mum found out she'd be in trouble.

Round 2 interview

Interviewer: Where would you drink . . . ?
 In a field or if one of my friend's parents were out we would go there.
 Interviewer: How much would you have to drink?
 I never really got drunk . . . 'cause like when I drink I don't have that much, but I get on a high and always laughing and smiling. . . .
 Interviewer: How often would you go up to the fields?
 Only about every 3 weeks - not that often only when we have the money.

Round 3 interview

Interviewer: So all your friends drink? Tell me about that?
 Saturday night we get a flaggin (of cider) between two people. . .
 Interviewer: Do you enjoy it?
 Not really. It is funny when you are on a buzz and you are just laughing and all.
 But you just think the next day. You usually puke that night as well. It is horrible.

Round 4 interview

. . . like we go out for the day to [names area] and everyone goes to the pub and they let me drink.
 Interviewer: Would you be merry . . .
 Sometimes, not really, like I've gotten used to when we go out drinking with mum and dad and all, it doesn't really bother me.

Another interesting dimension in analysing the children's transition over the 3 years, is that many of those who had reported not having tasted alcohol initially still reported abstinence in the later rounds of interviews.

DISCUSSION

The data suggest that the young adolescents were embedded in a drinking culture. While a minority reported never having tasted alcohol, the remainder experienced alcohol consumption in a variety of ways. These ranged from non-social and spontaneous drinking ('sneak' sipping) to more organized, approved social drinking with family or covert drinking with peers. At every round of interviews, each of the various styles of consumption was present and often cross-cut each other, with some children engaging in all four patterns at any one time period. However, non-social covert consumption was found to be more dominant in pre-adolescence or early adolescence. Social drinking with peers became a stronger feature of data as the children moved further into adolescence. While the data demonstrated the participants' own agency in circumventing the adult-defined rules, the children's drinking behaviour was also shaped by structural barriers that the children encountered through the use of adult power.

The secret transgression of alcohol prohibitions through furtive 'sipping', the circumvention of legal barriers in purchasing alcohol, and the creation or improvisation of available social space for engaging in peer drinking all signify the agency of these young participants. Other studies have noted that young people often create a social space for themselves and that this constitutes a form of resistance

to adult power (see Valentine et al 1998:7). As participants in this study progressed in their adolescent years, the degree to which they developed their own underworld increased. Peer drinking might constitute a sequestered social activity from the adult world, yet for many adolescents in this study, it was an *integrated* part of their world. Corsaro (1997:5) notes that children have the capacity to contribute to their own childhoods and to 'childhood' *per se* in an abstract structural sense. In this study, participants engaged in peer drinking were contributing in a creative and innovative manner to their own individual adolescent experiences and to 'adolescence' as an abstract structural phase.

Corsaro (1997:9) argues that traditional socialisation theories were based on a deterministic model. Within this model, the child was depicted in a passive role, being shaped and moulded by society. An alternative model is a constructivist one which perceives the child as an engaged subject with an impact on shaping the world around him or her. Corsaro criticises constructivist theories for their emphasis on the child's *individual* development (congruent with the discipline of psychology from which they tended to be mooted). He is also critical of their overemphasis on the transition from childhood to adult competence thereby focusing predominantly on the outcome of development. Instead, he proposes a socialization theory that both recognizes the agency of children and the collective and communal dimension of children's contribution to the society they inhabit. This shifts the emphasis from the individual child to the collective level. This is where Corsaro believes cultures are shared, negotiated and created between adults and children. Indeed, Corsaro (1997:18) rejects the very word 'socialisation' in favour of 'interpretive reproduction' to convey the creative and innovative contribution of children to society, while also acknowledging the limits that existing social structure and societal reproduction places on children.

The perspective of power being generated in micro-social interactions and being omnipresent rather than concentrated in structures or institutions has arisen mainly from the influential work of Michel Foucault's (1979). However, Foucault's re-appraisal of power has come under criticism when applied to the interactions of specific groups in favour of more traditional concepts of power as something enjoyed to different degrees, depending on one's position in the social structure (Porter 1996). While some of the children in the present study were forthright in testing and even transgressing the boundaries of their role, the adults still held a greater degree of power than the children. The most obvious structural barriers that the participants experienced in relation to alcohol consumption was the (adult-created) prohibition on buying alcohol or the consumption of alcoholic drinks in public houses (arguably for the good reason that children do not always understand the outcomes of their actions). In addition, the parents were frequently reported to use the authority vested in the parent role to directly forbid consumption when the children challenged the boundaries of childhood and tasted alcohol in their presence (as in the case of *overt unsanctioned* drinking). The children could really only claim ownership of an alcoholic beverage in social space shared with adults on terms directed mainly by the parent (that is, being 'given' a drink at Christmas). In this sense, the participants were still subjected to centralised controls created by the adults, albeit they were not passive in accepting such controls.

A further consideration regarding the agency manifested by the participants in this study is that the children's agentic capacity was largely facilitated through the processes of their social labyrinth rather than possessed by them as individuals. In

proposing the notion of an 'immature sociology' (the development of sociological theory that is fit for children) Lee (1998:459) distinguishes between the notion of agency as the possession of individuals and agency as a social attribution that is context-dependent. Drawing on extant works that have shifted thinking away from a property model of agency (Casper 1994; Callon 1986; Haraway 1991; Mouffe 1993), Lee favours a notion of agency as 'derived from a distributed network of materials, texts, bodies and persons.' The foregoing data suggest an agency emanating from the children's engagement with, and opportunities arising within, their social plexus. For example, the acquisition of alcohol sometimes depended on the actions of the children's parents who stocked additional quantities on occasions and were sufficiently remiss not to notice missing supplies. Success in the action of buying alcohol depended on the co-operation of older adolescents who understood the social cues and were 'insiders' of the culture of youth alcohol consumption. Going to public places, or indeed re-constructing existing social space to accommodate social drinking, depended on the absence of authority figures from such locations and the collusion of peers prepared to engage in similar behaviour. The participants' agency, therefore, was influenced and enabled by conditions in their social network that facilitated them in exploiting weakness in structural obstacles. In doing so, the participants constituted their own normative behaviour or structural conditions for the phase of adolescence.

The data set presented here offers empirical evidence of the theory of structuration first proposed by Antony Giddens (1976:121). The crux of his theory is that 'social structures are both constituted *by* human agency, and yet at the same time are the very *medium* of this constitution ' [original italics]. Giddens (1976) rejected any notion that

social structures had autonomous powers over and above the actions of people. However, more recent versions of structuration (Archer 1988, 1990, 1998, Parker 2000) suggest that while social systems are produced by social actors, they acquire powers beyond the actors who created them.

This is not to suggest that adolescents engage in peer drinking and all the social processes that go with it, in order to purposefully contribute to adolescence as a structural form, anymore than people marry to reproduce the nuclear family, or work to sustain a system of capitalism (Bhaskar 1989 cited in Joseph and Kennedy, 2000). As Joseph and Kennedy (2000:515) argue, while structural components are reproduced through human agency, ‘they are independent of the individual conceptions that these agents may have, often being the unintentional consequences of action.’ Drawing on Joseph and Kennedy’s notion, participants’ social actions may correctly be deemed intentional, yet the outcome of such actions in contributing to structural properties are to a large degree unintentional.

In accord with Pavis et al’s (1998) findings, the children in this study were not unfettered from structural constraints and free to map their own biographies. They noted that income (which they related to socio-economic position) was a structural influence on behaviour around alcohol and tobacco consumption. They also found that the type of beverage drunk (that is, beer, spirits and so forth) demonstrated a traditional gendered pattern. In the present study, it appeared that income as a structural obstacle to alcohol consumption stemmed more from the participants’ status as minors who depended on pocket-money (or low-paid casual employment in a climate of labour shortages in Ireland in the late 1990s, and early 21st century) than

their disadvantaged class position. The focus by Pavis et al (1998) on social class and gender as structural components, with no reference to the constraints placed by the non-adult status of respondents, may reflect the fact that, as indicated earlier, their sample were on average older (15/16 years) than the participants in this study.

The increasing strength of the category *peer unsanctioned* consumption over the duration of the present study suggests that, as the children moved closer to adulthood, the opportunities to circumvent structural barriers increased. For example, the children were allowed to go camping, to stay with friends with minimal surveillance, and to leave their homes without supervision. All of these behaviours facilitated *peer unsanctioned* drinking. The overall argument, presented by Pavis et al (1998), that the subjective experience of the youths in their study did not support theories of structural disembeddedness is supported by the data in the present study. However, the focus of this study has been on the dimension of childhood as a structural constraint to unbounded agency. The impact of gender and social class, as well as the extend to which these mediate each other and cross-cut the structural category of childhood, will be explored at a later time.

Conclusion

The subject of adolescent alcohol consumption remains a socially defined moral category since those in the adult world have constructed it as an adult activity that is only permissible for adolescents under parental control. This limits the scope that adolescents have in altering the structural components relating to it. Acknowledgement of the higher authority of parents in the equation does not mean

that the children's agency cannot, ultimately, alter structural conditions related to the issue of teenage drinking. For example, structures in society may well be adapted to allow adolescents social space for recreational activities and alternatives to the consumption of alcohol.

A further issue may be that adolescents may be quite happy with the existing social arrangements, whereby excitement is generated by attempting to get 'one up' on adults by creating their own secret underworld. The secret activities associated with creating social space for themselves, or utilising existing social space for their own secret transgresses, contributes to their own creation of the category 'adolescent'. Thus, as Miles (2000) notes, the feeling of being both free, yet simultaneously constrained, is arguably central to young people's teenage experiences.

References

- Archer, M.S. (1988) *Culture and Agency*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Archer, M.S. (1990) Human agency and social structure: a critique of Giddens.' In J. Clarke, C. Modgil, and S. Modgil (eds) *Antony Giddens: Consensus and Controversy*. Basingstoke: Falmer Press.
- Archer, M.S. (1998) Introduction: realism in the social sciences. In M.S. Archer, R. Bhaskar, A. Collier, T. Lawson and A. Norrie (eds) *Critical Realism*. London: Routledge.
- Bhaskar, R. (1989) *The Possibility of Naturalism*. Hemel Hempstead, UK: Harvester.

Callon, M. (1986) Some elements of a sociology of translation: domestication of the scallops and fishermen of St. Brieuc Bay. In Law, J. (ed) *Power, Action and Belief: A New Sociology of Knowledge?* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Casper, M.J. (1994) Reframing and grounding non-human agency: what makes a fetus an agent? *American Behavioural Scientist*. 37 (6), 839-56.

Cassidy, T.M. (1997) Alcoholism in Ireland. In Cleary A. and Treacy M.P. (eds) *The Sociology of Health and Illness in Ireland*. Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 175-92.

Corsaro, W.A. (1997) *The Sociology of Childhood*. London: Pine Forge Press.

Crosbie, J (2000) Government to examine cheap drink offers to young in night clubs. *The Irish Times*, 16th September.

Department of Health (1996) *National Alcohol Policy Ireland*. Dublin: Department of Health.

Department of Health and Children (1999a) *Youth as a Resource: Promoting the Health of Children at Risk*. Dublin: Department of Health and Children.

Department of Health and Children (1999b) *The National Health and Lifestyles Survey*. Dublin: Department of Health and Children.

Doyle, D. (2000) Boys will be bother. *The Sunday Tribune* August 27th.

Foucault, M. (1979) *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. London: Allen Lane.

Giddens, A. (1976) *New Rules of Sociological Method*. London: Hutchinson.

Haraway, D.J. (1991) *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: the Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Hyde, A. Treacy, M. Whitaker, T. Santos Abaunza, P. and Knox, B. (2000) Young people's perceptions of and experiences with drugs: findings from an Irish study, *Health Education Journal*. 59, 180-88.

Joseph, J. and Kennedy, S. (2000) The structure of the social, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*. 30 (4), 508-27.

Lee, N. (1998) Towards an immature sociology, *The Sociological Review*. 46 (3), 458-82.

Mathrani, S. (1998) *Young People, Alcohol and their Social World: a Qualitative Study*. London: Health Education Authority and Research Works Limited.

Miles, S. (2000) *Youth Lifestyles in a Changing World*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Mouffe, C. (1993) *The Return of the Political*. London: Verso.

O'Brien, B. (2000) Tragedies stemming from middle-class malaise. *Irish Times*, September 2nd.

O'Mahony, J. (2000) The dangers of alcohol. *Irish Times*, September 15th.

Parker, J. (2000) *Structuration*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Pavis, S. Cunningham-Burley, S. and Amos, A. (1998) Health related behavioural change in context: young people in transition, *Social Science and Medicine*. 47 (10), 1407-18.

Porter, S. (1996) Contra-Foucault: soldiers, nurses and power, *Sociology*. 30 (1) 59-78.

Rugkasa, J., Knox, B., Sittlington, J. Kennedy, O., Treacy, M.P., Abaunza, P.S. (2001a) Anxious adults vs cool children: children's views on smoking and addiction. *Social Science and Medicine* 53 (5), 593-602.

Rugkasa, J., Kennedy, O., Barton, M., Abaunza, P.S. Treacy, M.P., and Knox, B. (2001b) Smoking and symbolism: children, communication and cigarettes. *Health Education Research* 16 (2), 131-142.

Swedish Council for Information on Alcohol and Other Drugs (1997) *The 1995 European School Survey Project on Alcohol*. Stockholm: ESPAD.

Valentine, G., Skelton, T. and Chambers, D. (1998) Cool places: an introduction to youth and youth cultures. In Skelton, T. and Valentine, G. (eds) *Cool Places: Geographies of Youth Cultures*. London: Routledge, 1-32.

Wright, L. (1999) *Young People and Alcohol: What 11 to 24 Year Olds Know, Think and Do*. London: Health Education Authority.

