

‘THE BEST DRIVERS IN THE WORLD’

Drink-Driving and Risk Assessment

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The paper analyses risk behaviour as described by a group of convicted drink-drivers. Risk assessment is seen as a part of a complicated process reflecting moral values in specific socio-cultural settings and within a specific framework of time. The respondents’ retrospective accounts of their drink-driving are interpreted as part of moral identity negotiations, focusing on four dimensions: drink-driving as non-voluntary behaviour, drink-driving as strategic behaviour, drink-driving and control, and drink-driving and ‘normalcy’. Central to these negotiations is the fact that many respondents come from social environments (be that friend groups or workmate groups) where drink-driving is common and that they therefore do not regard—or did not regard—drink-driving as deviant behaviour.

Keywords: Drink driving (DUI), risk, control, identity, qualitative method

Introduction

This paper analyses risk assessment and risk behaviour in relation to drink-driving. The theoretical starting point is a ‘relational’ risk approach, in which risk assessment and risk behaviour are seen as parts of a complicated—and often contradictory—process reflecting moral values in specific socio-cultural settings and within a specific framework of time. The data to be analysed are drawn from qualitative interviews with a group of Danish men and women convicted of drink-driving.

Driving under the influence (DUI) has severe consequences for a considerable number of people each year. According to statistics from the EU, alcohol accounts for 10,000–17,000 road deaths a year in Europe, that is, at least one-quarter of all road deaths. Around two-thirds of these are deaths of people other than the drink-drivers themselves: pedestrians, passengers and drivers of other cars (EMCDDA 2007; Anderson 2007). To this may be added a large number of non-fatal traffic accidents involving alcohol.

In Denmark, survey data indicate that at least 25 per cent of people with a driving licence have driven while under the influence of alcohol (Behrendorff and Steentoft 2003). Each year, about 10,000 Danes (out of a population of 5.4 million) are convicted of drink-driving. The group with the highest prevalence of DUI-convictions are men aged 18–24, while 25–64-year-olds account for approximately one-third of the convictions (Bernhoft *et al.* 2008). Most alcohol-related accidents in the bigger cities are registered at night, especially on Saturday nights, while, in the countryside, many DUI-related accidents also happen after closing time at workplaces, indicating that workplace drinking or drinking immediately after work is often associated with DUI (Bernhoft *et al.* 2007).

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As shown by the statistics, driving under the influence may be classified as a serious 'social harm' (Hillyard *et al.* 2004; Hillyard and Tombs 2007) in Europe, affecting the welfare and safety of a considerable number of people. Yet, DUI is an under-researched and under-theorized social phenomenon within criminology. While previous research has mostly been quantitative and focused on the prevalence of drink-driving in different populations and on the demographic characteristics of convicted drink-drivers, this paper is qualitative and inspired by risk theory. We analyse DUI as social harm by focusing on *the meaning of risk* seen from the perspective of a group of convicted drink-drivers. Which constructions of risk can be identified in the drink-drivers' accounts; how is risk related to social context and social relations; how do the drink-drivers (retrospectively) explain their DUI; and how do their explanations and possible legitimizations correspond to the 'techniques of neutralisation' described by Sykes and Matza (1957)?

Theoretical Frame

In his text 'Manifesto for a Relational Sociology', Emirbayer (1997) argues against sociological approaches, according to which 'it is entities that come first and relations among them only subsequently' and in favour of an analytical alternative that reverses this basic assumption. While the former approach takes 'substances' of various kinds (be that things or human beings) as the fundamental units of inquiry, the latter 'depicts social reality in dynamic, continuous, and processual terms' (Emirbayer 1997: 281). Substances should not be seen as 'independent beings present anterior to any relation but ... gain their whole being ... first in and with the relations which are predicated on them' (Cassirer 1953, quoted in Emirbayer 1997: 287).

Inspired by this perspective, we analyse risk behaviour as a 'transactional' process by which actors immersed in a specific social context and, to use Emirbayer's expression, situated 'in the *durée* of lived experience', engage with others in collectively organized action contexts (Emirbayer 1997: 294). This is the opposite of a risk analysis approach in which individuals are seen as 'pre-constituted', fixed entities, knowing from the start what their interests are, how to act on them and what the odds are for various favourable and unfavourable consequences. With time and social context included in the analysis, risk assessment is seen as a process that includes the person's attitudes and behaviour both before, during and after the risky act (here drink-driving) and as a process that reflects the moral values of his or her social world.

According to Douglas (1986), risk assessment is predominantly made by social groups and not by individuals: 'The social environment in which the decision-maker finds himself determines what consequences he will anticipate [and] which ones he will ignore' (Douglas 1986: 83). A person's experience of things and situations as either safe or risky is always mediated by conceptual categories fabricated in social interaction. If people ignore some manifest risks, it is often because their social network (directly or indirectly) encourages them to do so. Social networks, then, 'do a large part of the perceptual coding on risks' (Douglas 1986: 66). Risk assessments are, as Douglas (1992) points out, made in emotional environments and underpinned by assumptions of moral accountability. A person's assessment of risk is typically filled with conflicts and contradictions (Zinn 2008). Risk is a 'polyseme'—a phenomenon holding many different and often inconsistent meanings (Boholm 1996). Wilkinson (2001: 9) criticizes traditional, psychometric risk research for 'recording snapshots of risk judgments outside the specific social context in which people

live out their day-to-day lives’. Instead, individuals’ perceptions of risk should be seen as embedded in processes of social discourse and as variable over time and in relation to changing social settings and experiences of life events (Wilkinson 2001: 9).

In this paper, we analyse drink-driving from the point of view of a relational risk theory, inspired by Emirbayer (1997), Douglas (1986; 1992) and others (Katz 1988; Wilkinson 2001; Lupton 1999; Lupton and Tullock 2002*b*; Reith 2005; Zinn and Taylor-Gooby 2006; Ellwanger 2007; Zinn 2008; 2009). We do this by highlighting the following aspects of our interviewees’ accounts on risk and drink-driving.

First, we focus on the moral standards visible in the drink-drivers’ accounts and the relationship of these standards to time. From the perspective of the interviewees, all forms of DUI are not equally ‘bad’; there are some ways of driving under the influence—and some ways of relating to this behaviour afterwards—that are less reprehensible than others. When the interviewees talk about their own experiences with DUI, they clearly negotiate moral identities for themselves, such as by defining their drink-driving as a non-volitional act and by describing extenuating circumstances for their actions. In doing this, they make use of specific ‘techniques of neutralisation’ (Sykes and Matza 1957). According to Sykes and Matza (1957: 666), ‘rationalisation’ often follows deviant behaviour, protecting the individual from self-blame and the blame of others. Individuals who commit deviant acts do not necessarily hold norms and values opposed to those of mainstream society, write Sykes and Matza (1957; see also Shiner and Newburn 1997). The primary difference between deviants and others lies in the generation by the former of neutralization techniques that allow them to engage in deviant behaviour while at the same time ascribing to consensus values (Shiner and Newburn 1997: 526). Sykes and Matza (1957) identify five different neutralization techniques. People may define a deviant act as unintentional (denial of responsibility); they may claim that nobody was hurt by the act (denial of injury) or that the injured party was a wrong-doer him/herself (denial of the victim); they may question the moral right of other people to criticize them (condemnation of the condemners) and they may defend their own behaviour by according precedence to norms other than those held by mainstream society (appeal to higher loyalties). In the final part of the paper, we relate our interviewees’ accounts to these techniques.

Second, and related to the question of neutralization, we focus on the ‘transactional’ dimensions (Emirbayer 1997; Douglas 1992; Lupton 1999; Lupton and Tulloch 2002*a*; 2002*b*; Wilkinson 2001; Zinn 2008) of the interviewees’ accounts of their drink-driving. We show that many drink-drivers in our sample come from social environments (be that friend or workmate groups) that (according to the interviewees) share, or have shared, their attitudes and behaviour relating to drinking and driving. And, in fact, many interviewees actively use their social network when it comes to explaining why they have been driving under the influence of alcohol. They have done so, they say, because it is, or used to be, ‘normal’ behaviour in their group of significant others. This is not to say that the interviewees are still in agreement with these standards. On the contrary, many of them actively dissociate themselves from them during the interview and say that they have now changed both their risk attitudes and behaviour.

The Danish Law against Drink-Driving

In Denmark, driving with a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) level of 0.05 per cent or above is defined as DUI and subject to sanction. BACs between 0.05 and 0.2 carry

a graded fine¹ and three years' suspension or conditional suspension of the driving licence (with the BAC limit for unconditional suspension being 0.12 per cent). BACs above 0.2 per cent carry 20 days of imprisonment. Depending on the circumstances surrounding the DUI incident, unconditional suspension may be changed to suspended imprisonment with mandatory treatment for alcoholism and/or community service. In severe cases, the imprisonment most often remains unconditional and may even be extended to a maximum of 18 months. Additionally, stricter sanctions apply for younger drivers, who always get banned² from driving on conviction for DUI, and for habitual offenders, who are often sentenced to unconditional imprisonment (e.g. Waage 2007). All this basically means that the current Danish legislation corresponds to what could be called a general European standard with a lower BAC limit of 0.05 per cent and with sanctions ranging from fines to suspended and unconditional long-term imprisonment (Rocakova-Filemon and Eksler 2008; ICAP 2002; SafetyNet 2009).

A/T Courses

Since 2002, all Danish drivers who have had their licence unconditionally suspended or have been banned from driving due to DUI have had to pass a course on alcohol and traffic safety (A/T course) before being able to regain their licence. In 2005, the system was extended to include drivers with conditional suspensions. In practice, this means that, today, everyone who has been caught driving with a BAC of minimum 0.05 per cent needs to pass an A/T course if they wish to be able to legally drive a car. Participants for A/T courses have to register for the course on their own initiative as well as pay a fee of 2,000 Danish Crowns.³ An A/T course consists of a weekly two to three-hour session over four weeks (Carstensen and Larsen 2009). The course curriculum is outlined by the National Commissioner and legally authorized by a 2001 amendment to the Road Traffic Act.⁴ According to this outline, the aim of the A/T courses is to 'influence the participants to refrain from driving a motorised vehicle while under the influence of alcohol' by teaching them to know the limits of drink-driving and to pay attention to the risks DUI is associated with (National Commissioner 2002). A/T courses usually have 10–20 participants (Carstensen and Larsen 2009). No one is obliged to provide information about personal matters apart from their name and age, and nobody is referred to the course by authorities such as, for example, the Prison Service.

Data and Methods

We interviewed 25 participants—20 men and five women—of five courses in three different locations. The courses were more or less typical of the average Danish A/T course in terms of programme and the demographic profile of the participants (Carstensen

¹The graded fine is calculated as the monthly net salary multiplied by the BAC multiplied by 10. Example: a monthly net salary of 3,000 Euros and a BAC of 0.15 will carry a fine of $3,000 \times 0.15 \times 10 = 4,500$ Euros.

²A driving ban is imposed on young drivers with a blood alcohol level between 0.05 and 0.12 per cent, which, for mature drivers, would imply a conditional suspension. A driving ban is practically equivalent to an unconditional suspension of the driver's licence, though the ban will be lifted upon completion of an A/T course and the passing of a supplementary driving test. Until then, the young drivers have to deposit their licence at the local police and are not allowed to drive.

³Equivalent to approximately 275 Euros.

⁴Law no. 498 of 7 June 2001.

and Larsen 2009). Contact with the interviewees was established in the following way. To begin with, the teachers at the courses handed out a short folder about our project and asked course participants to contact us for an interview if they were interested. Later in the process (after having conducted the first interviews), we were allowed to visit the courses ourselves, present the project for the participants *in situ* and make arrangements with those who were interested in participating in an interview. All those who agreed to an interview were given a gift voucher to the value of 300 Danish crowns.⁵

The interviews were carried out over a period of approximately two months in early 2010. We used a semi-structured interview guide focusing on five broad themes: the circumstances of the participant’s current DUI arrest (and possibly previous DUI arrests), the participant’s attitudes towards and experiences with drink-driving, their alcohol habits, their work history and their family situation. We did not follow the interview guide strictly but rather used it as a check-list towards the end of each interview. This was because we wanted the participants to describe their experiences as freely as possible, in their own way and in their own words. We took care to create a relaxed and informal atmosphere and to make the interview as different from an interrogation as possible. The interviews lasted from 48 to 110 minutes, with an average length of about 80 minutes. All interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed.

The average age of the participants was 38; the youngest was 20 years old and the oldest 69. As regards occupational status, five were carpenters, six were unskilled workers, three were students or trainees, two had retired early (one housewife, one civil engineer), two were old age pensioners and the rest of the sample consisted of one clerk (in job training), one cosmetologist, one cook, one self-employed person and three unemployed people. Thirteen of the participants were married/cohabiting, two participants were in a steady relationship but lived alone, seven were single or divorced and three were widowers. When it comes to drink-driving, one-third of the participants had been arrested for DUI at least once before their current conviction and almost all admitted to drink-driving at least five times prior to their last arrest (with more than half of the sample admitting to regular DUI over longer time spans). With these characteristics (gender, education, occupation and cohabitation), the participants in our sample are more or less representative of all convicted drink-drivers in Denmark and of participants at A/T courses (Carstensen and Larsen 2009). Among convicted drink-drivers in general, men are strongly over-represented (90 per cent), as are carpenters and people with no other education than mandatory primary school (Bernhoft *et al.* 2007).

When analysing the interviews for the present paper, we focused on the following questions: What (if any) risk perceptions do the participants associate with driving under the influence? What stance do they take on their own DUI—in terms of reasons, circumstances and consequences? What kind of ‘subject position’ (in relation to DUI) do they place themselves in during the interview *and* at the time of their drink-driving, and have their conceptions of and attitudes to DUI changed since their conviction?

Dimensions of Risk Accounting

We now present the four most important dimensions along which the drink-drivers in our sample account for their DUI. We analyse the following dimensions in turn: drink-driving

⁵Equivalent to approximately 35 Euros.

as a non-decision; drink-driving as strategic behaviour; drink-driving as controlled behaviour; and the 'normalcy' of drink-driving.

Drink-Driving as a Non-Decision

A very common expression used when the interviewees reflect upon their own drink-driving is 'I didn't think, it just happened'. The expression indicates that they do not see their own driving under the influence as following from a deliberate decision, where they, possibly after having weighed up the pros and cons of DUI, *decided* to drive. The following excerpt from the interview with Mike (39 years old), who has driven under the influence of alcohol 'time and time again', is a typical example:

Mike: I have driven when I was plastered, when I was completely gone.

Interviewer: Did you think about the consequences when you sat down behind the wheel?

Mike: No, because I was drunk. I didn't think. I was in my own small world.

Interviewer: And you thought nothing would happen?

Mike: I didn't care. I didn't think about it ... I would say that after the first three or four drinks I probably had a small dispute with myself, should I drive or should I not? But after that, no, I didn't give it a thought.

As may be seen from the quote, Mike explicitly relates his 'non-thinking' to the fact that he was drunk. According to him, and many other interviewees, alcohol consumed in larger amounts turns the drinker into a person who does not know what he/she is doing. In this perspective, drink-driving is not something the person chooses to do: it is rather the alcohol that makes the decision on their behalf. Earlier in the process, though, when Mike was not yet drunk (but had consumed a few units of alcohol), he was still a thinking subject, conscious of the risks of driving under the influence of alcohol.

Another interviewee who says he 'did not think' because he was drunk is Ib, 21 years old, who, in spite of his young age, has considerable experience with drink-driving. Reflecting upon the DUI incident that led to his arrest, Ib says 'It could have gone terribly wrong. I could have run somebody down. But that's not something you think of when you have been drinking. You just drive'. Like Mike above, Ib describes heavy drinking as incompatible with thinking. It is only before he got drunk and afterwards (e.g. in the interview situation) when looking back upon the DUI episode that Ib positions himself as a conscious subject, aware of the hazards of drink-driving.

Significantly, it is not only alcohol/drunkenness that 'explains' why a drink-driver does not think before he/she drives. Long experience of drink-driving, a 'drink-driving habit', may be assigned the same role. According to some interviewees, they 'do not think' because they have driven under the influence so many times—in some cases daily, for many years—that this has become routine behaviour. Routine behaviour is unplanned, 'automatic' behaviour and hence not behaviour based on conscious decisions. As Rhodes (1997: 217) points out, 'behaviours which are habitual do not demand risk assessment or calculation for their doing, they are simply done'. If you, for instance, are a person used to drinking at work or after work before driving home, or a person regularly using your car when you go partying/clubbing, you do not 'stop to think' each time you start your drive home. If you think at all in these situations, the practised drink-drivers say, you

think of all the times you have 'successfully' driven under the influence of alcohol and use this experience as a legitimization for repeating the act. Answering the interviewer's question 'Haven't you been worried about being stopped?', Helene, 42 years old, says 'No, almost never, I've just thought I will make it this time too. I have managed so many times before, so why should I start worrying about it now?'

Drink-Driving as Strategic Behaviour

The second dimension of risk accounting in the interviews describes drink-driving as strategic behaviour. In many ways, this characterization contrasts with the accounts presented above where DUI was associated with 'non-thinking'. Interestingly, though, the two types of accounts are often put forward by the same interviewees. By 'strategic behaviour', we mean behaviour that is carefully planned in order to manage the risks involved—typically the risk of being stopped by the police.

One central risk management strategy concerns the question of *how* you should drive in order not to attract the attention of the police. Anders, 69 years old, and a practised drink-driver, explains

I drive more carefully, but not too slowly. If you have a police car behind you and you drive too cautiously on a motorway, or elsewhere for that matter, they think something is wrong with you. . . . If you have a police car in front of you and they drive 70 where you are allowed to drive 80, for instance, I overtake calmly and quietly If you stay behind them, they think you're afraid of them. I overtake and sometimes I wave my hand at them and they wave back.

Other strategies are related to the *when* and *where* you should drive in order to minimize the risk of detection. Per, 44 years old, has driven under the influence of alcohol 'hundreds or thousands of times' and also during periods when he has lost his driving license after a DUI conviction. Per says:

I have never driven during weekends or at night . . . only in the morning and afternoon when there is a lot of traffic on the road. I have driven [drunk] behind or in front of the police many times without a licence . . . but nothing happens if you know how to behave.

Part of Per's strategy is to avoid small roads: 'If you meet the police on a small road where you're the only driver, they almost certainly stop you.' Other interviewees disagree with Per on the question of small roads and say it is safer to drive on them because the police only have the resources to control the motorways. Some of the younger drink-drivers living in the countryside, for instance, say that they always take the 'liquor road' home when they have been partying in town, referring to a carefully planned route involving small roads where they have never seen police cars. Another question surrounded by disagreement is whether the risk of detection is bigger or smaller if you drive in a work car (a car with yellow number plates). A couple of middle-aged interviewees say that the police are more focused on private cars and that they often let yellow-plated cars pass uncontrolled in traffic operations. Other interviewees say that this is a tall story or, alternatively, that things have changed and that the police are (now) especially attentive to cars with yellow number plates.⁶ Thomas, 32 years old, whose drink-driving for many

⁶Of these two alternatives, the second seems to be closer to the actual practice of the police than the first. The police tell us that they pay more attention to work cars than to private cars when it comes to stopping drivers for DUI.

years has been interwoven with his work life as a paver, says ‘Never drive drunk on a Friday and never ever drive home in your work car Thursday or Friday night . . . Always use your own car. Both times I was busted I was driving in a car with yellow plates’.

Not all our interviewees describe risk management strategies when driving under the influence of alcohol. Mike, 39, says he was a daily drink-driver for many years when he commuted between his home town and his work place in a bigger city, but he never took any precautions: ‘I drove long distances all times of the day, morning, noon, evening, night. I drove like a lunatic, dead drunk in a company car . . . It’s incredible that they didn’t stop me, incredible.’ On the other hand, Liz, 20, is of the opinion that ‘all people think about these things when they drive under the influence. They all get themselves a regular route where they drive when they are drunk’—Liz just believes that many people do not want to admit they use these strategies.

A very visible pattern in the interviewees’ descriptions of their risk management strategies is that all of them concern the risk of being detected (typically by the police but sometimes also by the driver’s partner or neighbourhood) and not the risk of getting involved in accidents. The following section touches upon some of the explanations for this imbalance in the interviewees’ (reported) risk management strategies.

Drink-Driving and Control

The third dimension of risk accounting concerns the interviewees’ presentation of themselves as being ‘in control’ of their own drink-driving. Just like the second dimension above, this dimension seems to clash with the interviewees’ insistence that they ‘do not think’ when they drink-drive. It also conflicts with the many incidents of actual black-outs, road accidents (of varying severity) and high blood alcohol levels that the interviewees report. Nevertheless, a very typical statement among the drink-drivers in our sample is that they are also safe drivers when they are drunk and that they (almost) never lose control of the car. Thomas, 32, explains: ‘I have never run somebody down or been involved in other serious accidents when I’ve been drunk. So my conscience is fairly clear . . . I have never driven in a rotten manner, never. I have always driven decently.’ Claire, 43 years old, says the following about the incident when she was apprehended by the police: ‘I didn’t make mistakes or anything. I drove very nicely . . . The police actually told me I drove well. They just stopped me because I had a problem with my headlights.’ And Dirk, 66, describes a specific occasion when he and his wife were on their way home in their car after a dinner party: ‘We drove round the roundabout and my wife said to me “You’re such a good driver even when you have been drinking” . . . I never drive poorly when I’m drunk.’

Humour and self-irony are sometimes used in these accounts about the drink-driver being in control. Kenneth, 34, says ‘I am the best driver in the world, you know [laughs]. I believe that’s what I thought. Now that I’m cold sober, I can ask myself what the hell I was thinking of’. Like Kenneth, many interviewees use expressions like ‘the world’s best driver’, ‘superman behind the wheel’ or an ‘extraordinarily good driver’ to describe their self-conception at the time of the DUI. These humorous remarks indicate a certain distance between the subject position the participants place themselves in during the interview and the one they say they occupied when they committed the act of DUI. They used to think they were impeccable drivers but today they realize that this was partly self-delusion. We write ‘partly’ here because most interviewees still seem to regard

themselves as relatively safe drivers even when they are drunk. To the extent that they acknowledge drink-driving as risk behaviour, it is mostly with reference to *other people's* unexpected acts or foolish behaviour and not because of their own impaired driving ability when drunk. Because they are able to retain a certain degree of control over their DUI—even in situations when they were 'dead drunk' and 'did not think'—they do not really jeopardize the lives of other people, at least not in the way the average drink-driver would, they reason.

Drink-Driving and 'Normalcy'

The fourth dimension of accounting we will analyse concerns the tendency among the interviewees to 'normalize' their DUI. 'Normalize' means two things here. First, participants are often of the opinion that 'most people in Denmark' drive under the influence of alcohol now and then. The others have just been lucky enough not to be caught by the police, say the participants who know from their own experience that the probability of getting stopped for drink-driving is very low (as already mentioned, many of them have practised DUI for years without being apprehended by the police). Second, many interviewees normalize drink-driving by presenting this behaviour as exceptionally prevalent in their own social environment. In these cases, the interviewees describe—or, sometimes, excuse/legitimate—their driving under the influence by referring to a collective DUI identity in the specific part of the population they belong to.

A social identity as drink-driver may be formed and enacted together with other people, such as in the interviewees' neighbourhood, at their workplace or in their group of friends and acquaintances. In either case, the DUI identity is described as something that transcends the individual. By relating to a particular social identity, individuals become capable of acting according to the norms in their social group without necessarily feeling that they 'choose' to behave in a particular way when action is required. Furthermore, it is often, but not always, in social situations together with one's reference group that the 'decision' to drive under the influence is made. Risk taking in the form of drink-driving, then, may be seen as socially conditioned behaviour in specific settings (Lupton 1999; Wilkinson 2001; Lupton 2002; Zinn and Taylor-Gooby 2006; Pilkington 2007), such as drinking beer with one's workmates at knocking-off time, or gathering with other kids in order to drink outside the local petrol station—both examples mentioned by several of the participants.

In our interviews, two rather different kinds of social DUI identities are especially conspicuous, one relating to a specific professional group, the other to sub-cultural street life.

DUI Identity: 'We the Carpenters'

Daily beer drinking together with colleagues during working hours was, until recently, very prevalent in Denmark, especially among blue-collar workers. Jørgen, a middle-aged carpenter, explains:

Jørgen: The masons and bricklayers were the worst.

Interviewer: How about in your own working environment?

Jørgen: What do you mean?

Interviewer: I am thinking about the people *you* worked with.

Jørgen: Drinking is drinking. I don't know. We had a custom of drinking. . . . We went to work at 7.30 am. At 8.30 we had 'lunch' and a bucket full of beers would come to the table. The same happened at 10.30 when we had [another] fake lunch and again at 12 and 2.30. It has always been like this amongst construction workers.

According to Jørgen, drink-driving was a natural part of this work-related alcohol culture. Throughout the day and week, he and his colleagues had BAC levels that exceeded the legal limits for DUI and, because they used their cars both during the work day and to drive to and from work, a commitment to the identity of heavily drinking carpenter also involved repetitive drink-driving—a practice Jørgen and the others 'did not really reflect upon'.

Drinking at workplaces has diminished considerably since Jørgen entered the labour market 20–25 years ago (Järvinen 2003) and, in National Health Board surveys in 1997, 2002 and 2005 involving approximately 2,000 representative Danish companies, a steady increase is shown in the implementation of policies against alcohol consumption in the workplace. In 2005, 89 per cent of the companies reported having a policy against alcohol and the large majority of these companies claim that the rules and guidelines *are* being followed by the employees (Sundhedsstyrelsen 2002; 2005). Most of our interviewees agree with this and think that the restrictions on workplace drinking is a positive development, while a few say they miss the 'community spirit' and sociability that drinking together with their colleagues used to be associated with. Yet, the old 'we carpenters drink a lot' identity is visible also among some of our youngest interviewees. Carpenters are not *expected* to drink at work anymore but some of them still do, and many have a couple of beers with their colleagues after work, especially Friday afternoon, before driving home. For the young carpenters we have interviewed, driving under the influence of alcohol (probably with lower BACs than their predecessors, though) is still a natural part of their professional identity. Jesper, a blacksmith in his early twenties, says that his girlfriend sometimes criticizes him for drinking too much, but that 'she has to understand that me and my friends drink a lot—we are carpenters, aren't we?'. Jesper drives under the influence now and then and obviously regards an eventual apprehension by the police as a practical problem rather than a moral matter. Asked about how his employer took it when he lost his driving licence, Jesper answers 'He did not say a thing. He said it could have happened to everybody'.

DUI Identity: 'I Come from a Rough Neighbourhood'

In particular, the younger drink-drivers in our sample tend to relate hazardous driving to a 'rough neighbourhood' lifestyle that is often associated with crime, violence, extensive alcohol and drug use—and sporadic or more repetitive drink- (and drug-) driving. This pattern can be seen among participants from both rural and urban environments. The focus among these interviewees is not on drink- and drug-driving as hazardous, but more on how one can control the DUI, and the risk of getting stopped by the police, and thereby gain respect in one's social environment. Drink- and drug-driving in these cases is part of a broader repertoire of activities together with one's peers testing the

boundaries between legality and illegality, control and loss of control. The following excerpts from the interview with Freddy, 20 years old, show how DUI may be considered 'normal' behaviour in a group of friends:

Freddy: Two and a half years ago I was involved in a car accident The driver had a BAC of 0.22. I was asleep in the car when it happened, so I don't remember anything from the accident. They tell me I was four minutes from bleeding to death

Interviewer: Were you drunk too?

Freddy: Yes. I had been drinking and then I asked him [the driver, Freddy's friend] if he could take me home. He did not want to. So I said: 'I'm going in the car to get some sleep. Wake me up when we are leaving!' And the next thing I remember is the white walls at the hospital after having been in a coma for four days.

Interviewer: Can you tell me how much you have considered that driving under the influence may be dangerous?

Freddy: Well, the thought hits you every time you drive the car if you have been drinking a little

Interviewer: But you drive the car anyway?

Freddy: Yes.

Interviewer: How come?

Freddy: I actually don't think I can answer that question.

Due to his own near-death experience, Freddy knows the potentially fatal consequences of drink-driving better than many of the other young drink-drivers who have not been involved in serious accidents. But he disregards this experience and decides to drink-drive himself, because it is a common—and socially legitimate—thing to do in his social network: 'I know a lot of people who always drink-drive at the weekends. They go out, they take the car, and they get seriously pissed, and then they might just as well drive the car home.'

Ib, a young man from the countryside, was stopped by the police for speeding within city limits with a BAC of 0.1 per cent. When asked about how his friends took it, he refers to the same collective drink-drive attitudes as Freddy: 'Well, some of my friends told me that it was extremely stupid [but] they probably meant that *getting caught* was stupid.' Prior to his conviction, Ib had once written off a car when losing control on a bend while driving at 140 km/h. He was racing with a few other cars between two parties and heavily influenced by alcohol. During the interview, Ib often emphasizes the problem of risking the lives of other people by describing drink-driving as 'completely irresponsible'. But, at the same time, he is (or was) part of a social group of people who regularly drive when drinking and doing drugs, and whose behaviour he obviously still accepts. He thus lets the norms of his social group overshadow his own ambitions—as described in the interview—to 'behave decently and responsibly'.

References to a carpenter identity or living in a rough neighbourhood are not the only ways of 'normalizing' drink-driving among the participants. Some interviews also contain information about family members' convictions for DUI (fathers, brothers, uncles and brothers-in-law are mentioned), indicating that drink-driving, and often also heavy drinking, is an integrated part of the interviewee's social environment. Furthermore,

female interviewees often say that they drink and drink-drive less than their husbands or boyfriends. The impression one gets from these interviews is that it is the male partner who usually drives when the couple is out drinking and that it is only exceptionally, when the husband/boyfriend is extraordinarily drunk, that the woman is assigned the task of driving. In these cases, the female interviewees are often indignant at the DUI conviction, feeling that they were wrongfully arrested for a behaviour that is far more prevalent—in essence ‘normal’—among the male members of their social network.

Discussion

This paper has analysed four dimensions of accounting in interviews with drink-drivers. In this concluding section, we focus on the temporal and social dimensions of the participants’ reflections on drink-driving as risk behaviour. Much of the contents of the four dimensions described above may be read as attempts at self-defence and legitimizations/excuses on the part of the participants (cf. Sykes and Matza 1957). Driving under the influence of alcohol is an illegal act, and an act (at least at the higher BAC levels) surrounded by strong moral condemnation in society. The interviewees are naturally aware of this condemnation and therefore struggle to present themselves as individuals who, despite the fact that they have been convicted of drink-driving, are reasonable and responsible. As Douglas (1992: 31) points out, people relate to risks by the use of culturally constructed ‘censors’, with culture here meaning ‘a system of persons holding one another mutually accountable’. Risk taking—and retrospective talk about this risk taking—is always an ethical project where ‘a person tries to live at some level of being held accountable which is bearable and which matches the level at which that person wants to hold others accountable’ (Douglas 1992: 31).

Of Sykes and Matza’s (1957) five techniques of neutralization—denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of the victim, condemnation of the condemners and appeal to higher loyalties—four are clearly visible in our interviews. The tendency of the participants to define drink-driving as a non-deliberate act corresponds to Sykes and Matza’s ‘denial of responsibility’. Sykes and Matza (1957: 667) describe the ‘billiard ball’ self-presentations of individuals who deny responsibility by pointing at ‘forces beyond their control’ as explanations of their deviant acts. In a similar way, our interviewees say they were ‘at the mercy of alcohol’ and therefore ‘did not choose’ to drive under the influence. Three interviewees even claim that they were ‘set up’ to drink-drive, that other people (e.g. a partner or friend they were on bad terms with) tricked them into driving, knowing full well that they risked being stopped by the police. Because DUI was a non-volitional act on their part, and an act other people made them commit, they appear less blameworthy than they would otherwise have been. In parallel with this description of themselves as not being in charge, however, the interviewees also claim that they were able to control their driving. Although they were drunk and ‘did not know what they were doing’, they nevertheless drove cautiously and correctly. They were therefore not really a danger to their surroundings—a claim that may be compared to Sykes and Matza’s (1957) ‘denial of injury’. Sykes and Matza talk about acts that are ‘illegal but not immoral’ and this is exactly the line of reasoning many of our interviewees use. They admit to having committed an illegal act but, because they regard themselves as skilled drivers who do not risk the lives of other people, they do not define their behaviour as immoral.

There are also elements of ‘condemnation of the condemners’ and ‘appeal to higher loyalties’ in the interviews. Some drink-drivers are of the opinion that all Danes practise DUI now and then and that people who condemn DUI are, therefore, ‘hypocrites’ or ‘deviants in disguise’, as Sykes and Matza (1957: 668) put it. A conviction of DUI is ‘a matter of luck’ rather than a righteous sanction that sets them apart from other people, the interviewees reason. Many of them also ‘normalize’ their DUI by referring to the social milieu they belong to or used to belong to. In doing this, they neutralize their behaviour, not by rejecting the norms in society at large, but by temporarily according precedence to ‘other norms, held to be more pressing’—cf. Sykes and Matza’s (1957: 668) description of ‘appeal to higher loyalties’. The last of Sykes and Matza’s techniques of neutralization, ‘denial of the victim’, is not really present in our interviews, apart from in one exceptional case. This is an episode in which a drink-driver collided with another car, the driver of which was also drunk. Although the interviewee admits that the accident was his fault, he shows no regret whatsoever in relation to the other driver, whom he clearly does not regard as a ‘victim’ but as someone who deserved what happened to him. In the rest of the interviews, the victims of alcohol-caused accidents are regarded as innocent others who certainly ought to be pitied.

Douglas (1992: 44) criticizes research approaches that assume that ‘risk taking is a trait of individual personality’. Risk analyses should, according to her, take into consideration inter-subjectivity, consensus making and social influences on decisions. In risk taking and risk assessment, the self and its surroundings should be seen as reciprocal notions (Douglas 1992: 103; Lianos 2000). ‘Risk’, in this perspective, is not a thing, but a ‘social way of thinking and a highly artificial contrivance at that’ (Douglas 1992: 46). Similarly, Pilkington (2007: 373–4) analyses risk understandings as ‘ambiguous, contradictory and changing’ and as founded not in cognitive judgments alone, but also in ‘hermeneutic judgments’ (see also Zinn 2008) embodied in taste, lifestyle, leisure and sub-cultural group membership. As Emirbayer (1997: 294) points out, agency (here, risk behaviour) is always a dialogic process, by means of which actors ‘enter into relationships with surrounding persons, places, meanings, and events’. Risk behaviour is not a ‘self-actional notion of the human will’, but a dynamic process inseparable from the unfolding dynamics of social consensus making and changing frameworks of time and place (Emirbayer 1997: 294).

That risk understandings may be ‘ambiguous, contradictory and changing’ (Pilkington 2007: 373–4) and that risk behaviour varies in accordance with ‘the *durée* of lived experience’ (Emirbayer 1997: 287) is very visible in our interviews. Contradictions show, for instance, in the participants’ time-related reflections on control. On the one hand, they say they felt ‘in control’ of their vehicle at the time when they drove under the influence. On the other, their retrospective assessments often contain a redefinition of this condition: they *thought* they were in control but now they ‘know better’. Typically, however, this redefinition is ambiguous. The participants insist that they *are* able to drive their car safely even when they are ‘dead drunk’, and hence that their drink-driving is not really risk behaviour. Their potential—momentary—loss of control was something they allowed themselves to do and therefore a form of ‘controlled loss of control’ (Measham *et al.* 2001). Contradictions also show in the participants’ tendency to account for their drink-driving with reference to their social network. Many interviewees describe drink-driving as being, or having been, normal and acceptable behaviour among their friends and/or workmates. At the same time, however, they say that the norms and

practices of their social network are reprehensible and that they have now dissociated themselves from them. They do not associate with their old friends/workmates anymore and, if they do, they no longer identify with the network's (illegitimate) norms. Still, when asked to reflect upon drink-driving as potential risk behaviour, they refer to exactly these norms, indicating that drink-driving is not really dangerous if one is an experienced (drink-) driver, that DUI is sometimes 'a practical necessity' (if there is no public transport available, for instance) and that it is important to know how to 'cheat the police' when driving under the influence.

The interviews illuminate drink-driving as it is legitimated and experienced by the participants. What stands out in relation to a risk perspective is, first and foremost, that the interviewees only marginally see their own behaviour as dangerous to other people (or themselves, for that matter). That they nevertheless claim to respect the moral standard of not risking harm to innocent others is a paradox in this perspective. The 'risk management' they practise when they drink-drive is primarily focused on avoiding detection and seldom—as far as can be seen from the interviews—on strategies aimed at reducing the risk of accidents. Although most participants agree that alcohol affects road safety in a negative way, they tend to regard the risks of drink-driving as related to other people's behaviour: inexperienced and reckless (drink-) drivers or other road users' unpredictable acts in general, and not to their own impaired driving ability.

One of the central assumptions behind Sykes and Matza's (1957) theory on neutralization is that justifications and excuses do not only *follow* deviant acts, making it easier for agents to handle blame retrospectively: neutralization also *precedes* deviant acts and increases the probability that they will be committed again (Järvinen 2000; Järvinen and Demant 2011). A considerable number of the participants in our study have practised drink-driving time and time again and, very likely, some of them will continue with this behaviour.

It is our claim that the four dimensions of accounting described above have something to say about the participants' future drink-driving probability. The more the interviewees neutralize their own behaviour by saying that they did not choose to drive under the influence; that they are exceptionally good and safe drivers even when drunk; and that DUI is normal (in society at large or in their own social group), the more probable it is that they will drink-drive again. And, conversely, the more they tell us that they did have a choice; that their own DUI behaviour is as dangerous as that of other drivers; and that they no longer feel that they belong to a subgroup of heavy drinkers and routine drink-drivers, the lower is the probability that they will relapse to DUI. In essence, the less they turn to techniques of neutralization when talking about their drink-driving, the lesser is the risk of relapse. And, related to this, the more marked the difference is between the subject position of the interviewees at the time of the drink-driving and their subject position in the interview situation—as self-reflexive individuals looking *back* on their own behaviour—the better their 'prognosis' in terms of dropping their DUI practice.

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