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A young person's game: Immersion and distancing in bar work

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Previous research indicates that bar workers report high levels of alcohol consumption, but the bar work experience itself has been little studied as a means to understand health threats associated with this job role. The subjective experience and meaning of bar work was explored in this study by interviewing current and ex-bar workers from a district in an Irish city that had a high density of bars and busy tourism industry. A total of 12 participants took part in focus groups (FGs) and seven in individual interviews. Four themes were identified in a thematic analysis. The central depiction of bar work was of an initial immersion in an intensive lifestyle characterised by heavy drinking, with subsequent distancing from the extremes of the lifestyle. The participants affiliated strongly with the bar work occupational identity, which included alcohol use in group scenarios for drinking during work, after work and on time off. The bar work lifestyle was most intense in the 'superpub' environment, characterised by permissive staff drinking norms and reported stress. Although an important identity, bar work was ultimately a transient role. The findings are considered in relation to research on occupation-specific stress and alcohol use, social identity and developmental needs in young adulthood.

Keywords: bar workers; alcohol; thematic analysis; occupational stress

Introduction

Alcohol use in Ireland ranks among the highest in the European Union (EU; Hope, 2007). Average consumption was 12.4 litres in 2008, indicative of substantial health risks (Carew, 2010). As in many western countries, much alcohol use in Ireland takes place through binge drinking in areas of night time drinking culture with a high density of bars. This study of bar workers took place in one such district, comprising approximately 15 bars, in an Irish city that is a centre for tourism and festivals. Outdoor drinking occurs in surrounding pedestrianised streets during peak periods. Late night licences permit alcohol serving until 2 a.m., when several thousand adults drink and socialise in the area at any one time.

The bars include smaller pubs and so-called 'superpubs'. The former are well established through steady trade from the local community, supplemented by increased custom from locals and tourists during weekends, holidays and the tourism season. Superpubs have opened in the area over the past 20 years. Each comprises

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several interconnected bars and can include live music venues. Larger premises cater for up to 500 customers each and have led to greatly increased alcohol sales in the area.

The focus of this study is the subjective experience of bar workers, whose chronic exposure to heavy drinking customers and demanding shift work has received little exploration. Binge drinking is especially prevalent among 18 to 25-year-old Irish adults (Ramstedt & Hope, 2005), the typical demographic of servers in the district we studied. As an occupation, bar work is associated with relatively high prevalence of hazardous and problem drinking (Ames, Grube, & Moore, 2000; Banwell, Dance, Quinn, Davies, & Hall, 2006). In England and Wales, bar workers have the highest occupational rate of mortality from alcohol-related problems (Romeri, Baker, & Griffiths, 2007). A US survey of young adult workers in a chain of alcohol-serving restaurants classified 21% of respondents as alcohol dependent, with 71% self-reporting hazardous levels of drinking (Moore, Cunradi, Duke, & Ames, 2009).

Bar work, occupational stress and alcohol use

The relationship between problem drinking and work is at least partly explicable through models of stress and strain, job conditions that include ready access to alcohol, and social influences such as permissive co-worker drinking norms. Each offers useful insights largely unapplied to bar work. Recent research trends have highlighted job context and occupational identity as additional reference points.

The job conditions of bar work typically involve relatively low rates of pay and work shifts outside conventional 9–5 hours (Bøggild & Knutsson, 1999; Mullally, Greiner, Allwright, Paul, & Perry, 2008). Busy evening work shifts in the hospitality industry are acknowledged as sources of cognitive and emotional strain (Gordon, Cleary, Parker, & Czeisler, 1986; Lo & Lamm, 2005; Pienaar & Willemse, 2008). The dislocating impact of shift work contributes to outcomes including imbalanced diet (Harrington, 2001), a particular issue in the late night economy where fast food is readily available (Prentice & Jebb, 2003).

Qualitative studies of professions like nursing, policing and teaching illustrate distinctive patterns of work stress (Mazzola, Schonfeld, & Spector, 2011). Thus, workplace assault and risk of patient aggression are significant sources of trauma in acute psychiatric nursing (Woods & Ashley, 2007), and although police officers are exposed to abusive and threatening behaviour as well (Kirmeyer & Diamond, 1985), this is typically encountered in less-controlled environments and with a different professional relationship to the aggressor. Abusive behaviour in bar work is usually associated with drunken customers (Green & Plant, 2007; Pienaar & Willemse, 2008).

The conjunction of shift work and staff drinking in bar work might reflect alcohol use as a coping response following job-related tension (Bøggild & Knutsson, 1999; Nesic & Duka, 2008). While it is important, tension reduction is not the sole motivation for drinking behaviour. Social norms are also highly relevant (Cooper, 1994). Bar work is an occupation oriented toward sociability, in which permissive drinking norms encourage high consumption (Nusbaumer & Reiling, 2002). Alcohol is strongly associated with expectations for bonding and affiliation with group peers (Kuntsche, Knibbe, Gmel, & Engels, 2005).

Contextual perspectives on alcohol use and occupational stress suggest novel insights on bar work. For instance, Ames, Duke, Moore, and Cunradi's (2009)

mixed-method study of informal socialisation showed that US navy recruits assimilated beliefs about work conduct and off-work behaviour from peers and role models. They were exposed to binge drinking as a group activity, motivated by boredom during leisure hours and facilitated by ease of access to alcohol.

Although social learning theory has been offered as an explanation of peer drinking norms (Ames et al., 2009), social identity theory has the scope to expand on this analysis through consideration of occupational identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). A shared work environment based on communication contributes to identification with the co-worker group (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). These conditions are relevant to bar work, suggesting it as a coherent occupational identity that may influence behaviour when enacted in specific contexts where it is salient.

Individuals hold multiple social identities based on ascribed attributes such as gender and ethnicity or shared activities including occupation. Those social identifications salient in a given situation trigger behavioural expectations (Kobus, 2003). There is an increasing recognition that social identities based on occupational status have important implications for health and well-being (Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009). This extends to a negative correlation between social identification and self-reported stress in one study that included bar workers (Haslam, O'Brien, Jetten, Vormedal, & Penna, 2005). Similarly, theatre group members who identified strongly with the team were less likely to report burnout during the peak activity of theatrical performance (Haslam, Jetten, & Waghorn, 2009).

Research aims

Research on stress, alcohol use, social identification and job context may be relevant to understanding the meaning of bar work as an occupational experience. There has been limited application of these frameworks to the job role, and a consequent need to conduct an exploratory study of its personal and health implications. The aim of this study was to develop a thematic representation of young adults' subjective experiences of bar work in a high-volume serving environment. We utilised a qualitative research design to elicit perceptions of the job and analyse its impact.

Method

Design

We used a multiple-method qualitative research design that incorporated semi-structured interviews and FG discussions to study experiences of working in bars in the area studied. The data-collection methods allowed personal experiences to be probed and explored in individual interviews, alongside discussion of the same topics in an interactive group context.

Participants

The 19 participants comprised 14 males and five females, ranging in age from 23 to 35-years-old (mean = 28, SD = 3.5). Five were 25-years-old or less, nine were aged 26–30 and five were over 30. In all 14 were Irish nationals and five were non-nationals.

The participants were knowledgeable and had extensive experience, having worked in a bar in the area for between one and seven years (mean = 4.76 years, $SD = 1.76$). At the time of the study, eight participants were full-time and five part-time bar workers. Six participants were ex-bar workers, having left within the past two years. With the exception of one participant, the FGs comprised current workers. Five of the seven individual interviews took place with ex-bar workers. Seven participants had gained experience as supervisors or bar managers after first working as servers.

Recruitment and sampling

Purposive sampling took place to recruit participants with experience of working in bars in the bar district we studied. Current bar workers were recruited along with individuals who had recently worked in a bar in the area. This provided for accounts from within the bar work culture and from individuals who had the opportunity to reflect on bar work after choosing to leave the job. Variation was sought in terms of full- and part-time job status, gender, and bar size. The first author carried out the study as part of an undergraduate degree. He had four years of experience as a part-time bar worker in two pubs in the area, and used personal contacts to identify prospective participants. Each person was told individually about the study and given an information sheet to explain the purpose of the research. Informed consent was obtained on the day of the interview. Ethical approval for the study was given by the authors' institution.

Procedure

Interviews and FGs took place in a quiet space in a bar or another suitable location. The duration of interviews ranged from 48 to 71 minutes. Three interviews were conducted by Internet telephony with participants who had emigrated or were travelling. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, using pseudonyms to protect anonymity. The first FG contained seven participants and the second included five participants. Each group comprised workers from several different bars.

We were aware that drinking habits were likely to emerge as a significant factor in the accounts given by participants, but did not wish to frame the interview as a discussion of their alcohol use. The interview schedule was constructed to elicit a contextually-driven account of bar work that included topics such as job tasks, variations in work demands, differences between bars and social life. Our decision to pursue the nature of bar work rather than specific issues like drinking or stress was informed by informal consultation with work contacts. These contacts suggested there would be sensitivity about being thought of as having a problem with drinking. This approach also informed the decision not to include a measure of dependency or quantitative measure of alcohol use. Despite taking these steps, we noted some reticence in discussing personal drinking habits in one FG in particular. Quantification of alcohol consumption could have impaired the trust and rapport in an interview focused on studying the experience of working in the area. The references to past or present alcohol consumption reported in interviews exceeded binge drinking criteria.

An interview schedule was devised comprising questions and probes for individual interviews. These were presented as more general topics in the guide

written for carrying out FGs. We began the interview with requests for descriptions of area in terms of tourism, trade and nightlife, asking also for contrasts between the district and other parts of the city. Questions about customer familiarity and knowing customers individually were followed by a request to characterise what it was like to work in the area.

The next topic in the interview asked about the social life connected to working in a bar. The third topic asked about variations in work intensity over the course of the week and the year. The final set of questions asked about managing drunk customers and attitudes to customer drinking. Within this broad discussion specific incidents and attitudes were probed further. The approach to the interview did not emphasise topics such as stress or alcohol use for participants to discuss, but enabled exploration of these topics in a contextual discussion of bar work.

Analysis

Interviews and FG transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) applied to the goal of developing a conceptual representation of bar work experiences. Each author read the verbatim transcripts of each interview independently. The analysis began with initial coding of each transcript to structure the text in preparation for later development of thematic concepts. The interviews and FGs were analysed simultaneously in this first phase of coding. Attention was applied during the analysis to comparing interviews with FGs. Both sources described bar work as a busy, intensive job role with an associated lifestyle. The retrospective accounts of the job given in the five interviews with people who had left bar work resonated with accounts given by current workers and contrasted with the sustainability of their current lifestyle.

We employed several descriptive coding methods in the first phase of the analysis to generate an extensive list of code labels. These consisted of topics (e.g., 'customer aggression', 'poor diet'), in vivo short phrases from the interviews, process codes describing actions and activities ('drinking after work', 'busy work shift'), and codes to represent affective states ('feeling fatigued', 'burned out under pressure'; Saldana, 2009). Individual terms and associated text were compared and categorised into larger groups.

In the next phase of the analysis, we proposed underlying thematic concepts and re-read the transcripts to finalise the representation of bar work. The key themes were labelled immersion and distancing to convey a process of moving through the bar work experience. Two other themes explored stressful work experiences and attitudes to alcohol use in relation to these concepts. Each theme was organised through a central concept and sub-themes that represented distinct elements of the concept.

Findings

Four themes are identified that represent an initial immersion in the bar work environment followed by varying degrees of distancing from the intense lifestyle associated with it.

An immersive experience

The area where the bars were located was acknowledged as a centre for socialising and drinking ('focal point of nightlife', Connor), an upbeat, busy location for tourists and locals alike ('loads of bars all next to each other, kind of giving a good feel about when you arrive in [the] city', Stuart). Superpubs comprised different, inter-connected bars with particular customer profiles. Keith described one of these: 'the main bar would be a mixture, the back bar would be Rugby heads through all their 30s, top floor you're talking about 21s, 22s and [in the other bar] just your more older clientele who want a more comfortable sit down' (FG1).

Working in these bars was an immersive experience, with some participants living in the immediate area as well as working and socialising there. The participants were highly mobile. Some had emigrated from another country, moved to the city from elsewhere in Ireland, or had regular periods of travelling abroad. There was an extended social network of ex-bar workers in other countries. Keith said 'I could go away, you know somewhere like New Zealand, give them a text message, coming over, I've a spare bed here for you' (FG1).

Busy, bonded and confident

Bar work was stimulating and absorbing when it was busy. Matt described his ability to keep his head and exert mastery in a demanding environment:

If you have two hundred people standing within six inches of you all screaming at you at the same time wanting drink, and most of them would be intoxicated...you learn to...in your head, just to stay calm and take a step back and get into a routine...you might be serving for six hours and never actually stop moving.

Despite constant motion during busy shifts, the work took place in a positive atmosphere ('a good laugh behind the bar', Matt). Strong social bonds arose from work interdependencies and shared experiences ('comradeship', Devin; 'they know your pain', Connor). Participants had found themselves capable in an environment demanding sociability and became confident about managing social situations, difficult events, and busy environments ('you're sober and the rest of them are drunk. You feel in control', Devin). Finding themselves in a new country, non-Irish participants had an additional reason to become immersed in bar work ('I need friends and that's probably the best way to do it', Deirdre). Co-workers became the person's main social network:

Nick: I'd say a huge volume of all your friends would be connected in some way to work or

Enda: Big time

Nick: You know, I've worked with them or

Niamh: Or used to work with them.

Nick: Living with other people you work with. (FG2)

It was normal for romantic relationships to involve other bar and hospitality industry workers, within the circle of people with similar lifestyle and shift work patterns ('it's the only way really you can sustain a romantic relationship', Niamh, FG2). Yet such shared interests also extended the pervasiveness of bar work. Dorothy said 'sometimes we had to stop ourselves talking about work when we're at home. It doesn't matter what we're talking about it would always finish about work'.

Realisation of costs

Immersion entailed varied costs. The bar work lifestyle partly cut the participants off from people on a different schedule ('I still find it a bit strange walking to work at five or six o'clock in the evening when you see everybody else walking away from work', Brian, FG1). Getting wrapped up in bar work had an unintended impact on family and friends ('I started drifting away from my regular friends', Devin).

The draining demands of the job represented another cost ('just shut up and deal with it, that you're going to work 15 hours tonight, that after your hard night you've got to clean this bar', Stuart). The long work shift had unpleasant connotations ('crappy hours, crappy diet, drink too much, bad sleep patterns', Deirdre), but being in the job meant accepting these as inevitable costs ('a fifteen hour shift... it really does take away from you', Matt). The social validation of heavy drinking within pub work teams was not without personal consequences ('reality kicks in and you feel really shit', Stuart). As a student working part-time, Stuart was aware that immersion in bar work could take over from college ('[you] easily can just slip away and forget about what they actually wanted in the end because the bar has done that to them').

Immersion through alcohol

Regular drinking was a significant support to immersion in bar work. Summing up the social and stress relief functions of alcohol use, consumption scenarios varied from heavy drinking during days off, to moderate on-going drinking during the shift, and celebratory drinking.

Everyone likes a drink

The weekend was the busiest time at work ('every Saturday I'd be doing 14 hours', Seamus, FG1) and the days following were usually free ('Monday and Tuesday is...our weekend', Keith, FG1). The bar worker weekend emphasised alcohol consumption in the form of binge drinking ('everybody will be really, really drunk... they'll spend €50 in an hour, they'll throw five double vodka and Red Bulls into them in an hour', Devin). When Nick first started working in a bar, he would 'be drinking crazy pints... just because the craic was so good and the crew you're with'. As a result, his time off from the job could be spent in the pub as a customer:

Nick: And it'd be, Jesus, come Wednesday night man we'd be trying to ask someone for a sub because all my wages disappeared out of the ATM machine maybe left in [a nightclub], somewhere in the bar....

Enda: There's always somebody like because you know so many people in bar work. There'll be somebody off on a Monday, there's someone off on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. (FG2)

Heavy drinking after work was habitualised ('on a Saturday night I'd probably easily have five or six pints and go home. I wouldn't even be drinking to be drunk, I'd just be drinking... socially with other people in the pub when they finish', Matt). Female participants described a similar lifestyle. There was a strong attraction to co-worker drinking groups, but it was also difficult to depart the group early. It was permissible only following the application of social pressure and group opprobrium ('it's very difficult to go home early without some sort of a slagging', Deirdre).

Drinking in bar work was thus an attraction and a normative requirement. Combined with late-night shift work, drinks after work had a significant impact on the participants' diet. Fast food was 'grabbed' quickly to counter hunger. Nick spoke about 'hoofing into them before you do clean up then you know' (FG2). The next two FG participants described a casual approach to food late at night:

Seamus: I'd have it in my head to get a kebab on the way home like, always.

Danny: Something to munch. (FG1)

Fulfilling different functions

Alcohol contributed in different ways to immersion in the bar work lifestyle. After closing time, free drinks were enjoyed for bonding with co-workers and gaining stress relief. Thus, Brian saw alcohol as incidental ('it's not really about the drink, it's just, you know, "will you have a pint?," goes without saying', FG1), while Dorothy described drinking after work for a sedative effect ('you're so hyper you can't go to bed because you won't fall asleep. You need something to knock you out'). Drinking during breaks made the shift go more easily. Off duty, participants were regular drinkers themselves. The pub was integral to their social habits, as in this example of organising an evening out after a day shift:

Other bar staff would come in during the day... they'd be like... 'we're heading over to the [name of bar], do you want to meet us at five?'... you'd have a crew together... probably spend the entire night drinking. (Matt)

Socialising was generally drinking-themed, reflected in the casual decision to 'wander off for a quick pint' when meeting someone on the street (Danny, FG1) and in organised events such as the annual football match that Matt described:

We played the game in the morning time... we'd a massive marquee set up there with kegs and we just went out and had a party for the whole day... we were actually ringing people coming to the party telling them not to bring beer because we had too much... we were drinking beer for about a month afterwards.

The routine and the extreme

The routine use of alcohol was illustrated by casual drinking on break with colleagues at a neighbouring pub ('a cheeky pint on break', Matt). Initiation into the job incorporated the normalisation of such practices ('everyone does it, I think nobody says it', Fiona, FG1). It was seen as a positive, for Stuart it meant 'everyone kind of gets on a good level' and for Nick (FG2) it 'just takes the edge off' a long shift. Managers turned a blind eye so long as tacit norms were observed, enabling a daily pattern of having one or two pints during breaks (i.e., four standard drinks), but intervening if someone exceeded the community rule ('having three or four pints, I don't agree with that', Keith, FG1).

Recalling back to when he took full part in the binge drinking culture with superpub staff, Nick remarked that 'it got so bad... people going out on the piss and maybe not coming up, late for work or hung-over or, like it got, maybe late drinking', but also 'you'd look forward to your staffies on a Friday and Saturday'. The other FG members agreed:

Enda: Yeah, yeah.

Nick: And you'd have great craic and then we'd still be there Sunday.

Niamh: Yeah (laughs).

Nick: And you'd end up in the early house [a bar in another part of town that had a licence to serve alcohol from 6 a.m.].

Nick: And you're come back in for your [work shift], you know, you'd be crazy so by the time you got your two days off you'd be wankered but you'd be ready to go and do it all over again. (FG2)

The extremes of bar work and of alcohol consumption were found in 'race week', a horse-racing event that attracts thousands of people to the city during the summer. A festival atmosphere, extended pub opening hours and crowding combined to threaten overwhelming demands:

It's going to be nine deep with people screaming at you for nine hours straight and you're never going to stop and no-one's going to give you any sympathy (Matt)

The response to such extreme demands was an exaggeration of existing drinking practices ('go for as many pints as possible on their break and then have as many pints as possible after work and then work really long hours the next day', Andy). Alcohol use was a coping response to deal with the extreme stress during the week. In its role as a stress reliever, more alcohol was required to calm down, to mirror the intensity of the work experience ('you've come through the barricades... you're psyched up', Brian, FG1), especially in the superpubs with their 'serious drinking culture' (Niamh, FG2).

Race week work shifts were punishing ('you wouldn't be finished... till maybe seven in the morning. Going for a couple of pints getting to bed maybe by ten... stay in bed as long as you can... getting up again at four o'clock', Connor). Following drinking for tension reduction during the week itself, the end of the week was marked by alcohol-themed partying in a celebratory environment ('the last night it's just an all out party, like every pub in Galway is, every barman is just drunk', Matt).

Stressful rather than busy

While stimulating and sociable, bar work also included periods of being stressed more than in control. These experiences were especially likely in the superpubs, which were a high-intensity alcohol-serving environment. Camaraderie at work helped but did not fully compensate for work demands:

Johnny: Especially when it's a long shift, you know like I personally try to, like all of us try and have as much fun as possible when you're working, have the craic but Jesus when it comes to clean up then.

Sean: Depressed off your face.

Johnny: ... like you're exhausted and it's hard to, you're knackered. (FG1)

Physical fatigue and mental tiredness were integral to the job. Here, several FG participants compared notes on recent work patterns:

William: Kind of affects me when I'm working at night and then I've got to be in at nine because I've been working pretty late and, you know, I've got to be up, like, for eight... like I only got five hours sleep last night...

Nick: Same as. We were working last night. What time did you get to bed at?

William: Three, four, maybe.

Nick: I think I went to bed around half two or something.

Interviewer: And you had to be up for college and you had to be up for?

William: I had to be up for eight for work so.

Nick: I was up at seven. (FG2)

Superpubs and traditional bars

The immersive bar work environment was most evident in superpubs, a more recent development alongside pre-existing 'local' bars ('lads that would work in superpubs would fall into that close-knit family', Devin). Superpubs were larger, particularly busy, and catered for binge drinking ('serving them till their drunk as long as they don't get violent', Andy). Traditional bars were relatively small, and while regularly busy at weekends and holidays, they were for the most part oriented toward 'regulars'. These bars were seen to enforce a comparatively restrictive threshold on the acceptability of customer drunkenness.

The superpub was more tolerant of heavy customer drinking, and as a result was a far more demanding job role ('you're going to get treated like shit', Stuart). Staff drinking norms were also more tolerant ('ah sure, fuck it, we're up now anyways we'll just stay drinking more', Niamh, FG2). The intensity of serving hundreds of customers in nightly binge drinking sessions was the basis for a vibrant, busy form of immersion. Deirdre found a big difference when she moved workplace from a superpub to a traditional bar:

A much more stressful environment which may have something to do with the increased amount of drinks...and more staff there. It was a younger more party environment, there was definitely more encouragement to drink on a more frequent basis.

In your face

Offensive customer behaviour emerged amid crowding and binge drinking behaviour in the bar environment ('your average nine to five worker isn't going to have some guy threatening to hit them because they wouldn't give them a pint,...it does make me want to get out of bar work', Connor). The expectation was that bar staff would manage abusive customer behaviour ('everyone gets threatened, all bar staff', Sean, FG1). This pushed some participants away from bar work. Enda (FG2) decided to leave after having an experience of 'four hours of people roaring at you'.

The most extreme demands took place during race week. A discussion in FG2 illustrates this, beginning with Nick introducing the physical effects he experienced from working in race week, getting a laugh from the group:

Nick: It's not good for your heart, like, you know.

Niamh: No...

William: That's when everybody's angry is, like, race week, like.

Nick: I ground down, one year I think I ground down all my back teeth, like. I wasn't even sleeping. It was just from working, like.

All: Laughter

Nick: Fuck me, like. Be lashing out the pints, like.

William then expands on his point in support of Nick, relating it to a stress-based account of pressure due to customers being in your face:

William: ...it's the one week you see them literally, not physically, but verbally, like, very aggressive, like...

Interviewer: The bar workers?

William: Yeah, exactly because you're under so much pressure, like. People are being idiots, people are probably being more drunk then they would be so they're just...in your face, kind of.

Nick: It's just liquid for cash as fast as possible. That's all it is.

Exposure to verbal aggression was part of the job. In particular, superpub customers, who were permitted to drink well in excess of criteria for binge drinking, were prone to confrontation ('calling us every name under the sun', Keith, FG1). Difficult situations and risks arose routinely due to unpredictable customers and fights breaking out in a highly crowded environment ('stuff happens very fast that is out of your control', Matt). Tolerance for serving drunken customers in superpubs resulted in higher volumes of alcohol sales but entailed increased exposure to workplace aggression for bar workers. Peer groups were a supportive influence through socialising but appeared silent on the difficulty of absorbing work pressures ('no one actually tells anyone "hey listen, I'm stressed"', Stuart).

Both male and female participants were expected to put up with abuse, but it took gendered forms. Threats were more likely for male workers, while females were exposed to demeaning and sexualised verbal abuse. In this example, Diane (FG2) distinguishes sexual harassment she experienced in some situations from menacing or threatening behaviour:

I got the whole 'I will break your face, follow you home, kill you, etc.'... [then] there's kind of behind sleazing, staring, drooling over the counter. There's nothing, you can really say to the person because they'd be like 'what are you talking about? I didn't do anything'... there's nothing you can pinpoint.

A female participant in the other FG made the same point, conveying the loss of control as the central issue:

You don't have personal space when you work in a bar, like you are subjected, like people approach you whether you want to be having a conversation with them or not, they will sit at the bar and you have no choice but to be in that space... for however long they decide, you know you lose a lot of control... being a woman and working in a bar. (Fiona, FG1)

Distancing

The participants described initial immersion in the bar work culture followed by a greater realisation of lifestyle costs. They took different positions on distancing at the time of the interview. Connor continued to work but described himself as having expanded beyond the bar work lifestyle ('I'm glad to have an evening free away from the pub'). For Dorothy, who had left the job, it was in hindsight a destructive lifestyle ('you're just destroying yourself and you have nothing apart from drinking'). Five of the six participants who had left bar work had done so in the past year, citing it as unsustainable and unsatisfying.

Moving on

Bar work was depicted as a time-limited occupation. Remaining in bar work after 30 could indicate occupational failure, unless by moving into a management role ('I simply don't want to work in a bar for the rest of my life', Devin). Brian felt that customers saw themselves as superior to bar workers, 'they're like "sure what are you, I saw you sweeping up my dirt there," you know what I mean and then when someone tells you... what they're going to do and tries to belittle you' (FG1).

William's view reflected the group norm, that 'the average age of a bartender in town is probably what, eighteen to thirty... you can't do it forever' (FG2). Participants still in bar work reported an attenuation of earlier alcohol consumption excesses, but several still participated in drinking during breaks, after work and ongoing alcohol consumption to binge levels.

There was a disavowal of drinking on breaks among current bar workers in FG1. Seamus distanced from it as a habit based on social opportunity: 'I used to do it... so many staff would be getting breaks at the same time and when you're with a group of people you go for a drink'. Fiona concurred with this: 'I don't do it at all now but it was more out of like habit, ... you can't go home, what will I do, I'll just go and sit down somewhere and have a pint'. In the other group, William also described stopping drinking on break, but for him it was because he wanted more alcohol once he had begun drinking ('... stopped doing it because once I have the first one I kind of have the lip for the second one', FG2).

There was more reticence talking about current drinking practices among FG1, a hesitance reflected in Brian's description of drinking late into the night: 'there's been one or two times where it would be 8 or 9 in the morning... come back in and do the day shift, I'll be shot for saying that' (FG1). While portraying themselves as becoming distant from excess, recent incidents of unrestrained drinking were also related in the same group:

Keith: ... the bar staff would be there skipping queues, shouting. I've done it myself sometimes but we would be the worst customers ever, we should know better.

Seamus: You'd like to think it like, but

Danny: You on Monday night.

Interviewer: What did you do on Monday night?

Seamus: I had a couple of drinks in the [name of bar] after work there, I was working, I did the whole shouting thing that you were talking about.

Interviewer: What were you shouting?

Seamus: I don't even know.

Danny: Everything. (FG1)

Nick and Enda worked part-time while in college. They described a growing distance from the intensity of bar work, looking instead to the next phase in life:

Nick: as I got a bit older as well I'm just trying to save money to go travelling and shit....

Enda: That's it. It's an age thing really... you're kind of over the buzz. (FG2)

Enda had moved out from the city centre and now the culture was less available to him ('there was always someone that would ring you... "Well, go on, I'll go

for one.” Now...I probably go out once a week’). Niamh described a similar approach in the other FG. Going into final year at college forced her to change: ‘I’ve stopped just because it’s my final year...I’m not working late night every weekend...when I was working Friday, Saturday, Sunday there wasn’t a chance I’d go in Monday Tuesday... You’d be exhausted’ (FG2).

An unsustainable lifestyle

Bar work was viewed as unsustainable by the participants who had left. Deirdre’s change in outlook extended to drinking habits:

I got up to being able to knock back ten pints of Carlsberg at one stage... If I drank that now I’d be in a coma... towards the end of my time... I cut down my drinking anyway because I just started to feel revolting.

Deirdre described a re-interpretation of elements of the lifestyle such as reliance on fast food among superpub workers. In retrospect, she saw her diet while working in a superpub as impoverished (‘cup of soup at two o’clock... pick at chips... and some sort of pub meal’). The smaller pub she moved to had different job conditions, with disapproval of excessive drinking by older, respected staff members and access to a better diet of fresh food and home-made soup.

Stuart recalled a similar realisation of the negative impact on diet when he said ‘you don’t feel good because you’re eating quick foods, getting quick hits... you’re constantly eating sugary things to keep you buzzing... you got 23 year olds looking like 38 year olds’. In this context, moving on was a positive change. Matt reported feeling better and drinking less after leaving the area and job behind (‘I’ve lost about five or six kilos without even trying and I feel a lot fitter... I’ve cut down my drink intake by ten-fold easily’).

Distancing involved a progressive realisation of stress and excess associated with bar work, along with the additional impact of negative events. Niamh said ‘I suppose it’s just you kind of get sucked in to a life that, it’s not healthy, like, and it’s very hard to get out of... I had an absolutely fantastic time up until this year but you do kind of go “Jesus, I could not sustain that for much longer”’. Other participants in the FG agreed with her:

William: There’s strains.

Niamh: Something has to give like.

Nick: Especially, like, in busy places... you’re doing bar and doing table service and taking orders at the bar or whatever, it’s, your juggling all the time, like, you know, so. Even on a quiet day, like, going and getting cutlery and putting dockets in the kitchen and running out and topping up a pint, you know. (FG2)

Devin was distinctive in describing panic attacks that knocked his confidence and sense of mastery abruptly:

You think you’re going to die... with all that stress on top of you... maybe it was just my body telling me that I didn’t want to do this anymore... I feel dizzy, I’d feel like I wouldn’t really know where I was for a minute and I’d panic... I thought there was something wrong with my heart... I kept telling myself there was something wrong with me.

His growing feeling of strain came to a head soon after this overwhelming experience, resulting in a relatively abrupt exit from bar work compared with participants who gradually withdrew. Deirdre came to the conclusion that working

in bars had 'consumed my life' after gaining some distance by first leaving the superpub environment, prompted by an abusive superpub manager ('he made me feel quite shit like with words...I could not hack going in. I was sick of feeling nervous and stuff when he was around'). After working at a traditional pub, Deirdre discovered she liked having greater lifestyle balance and left bar work altogether.

Discussion

Group cohesion and intensive job demands meant that bar work was an immersive experience that routinely spilled over personal, social and job boundaries. This finding reflects permissive attitudes towards alcohol consumption in earlier studies of alcohol servers and hospitality staff (Green & Plant, 2007; Larsen, 1994; Nusbaumer & Reiling, 2002; Pienaar & Willemsse, 2008; Romeri et al., 2007). Working, socialising and, in some cases, living in an area with a high density of pubs, drinking practices were integral to the experience of bar work.

Bar working was an immersive lifestyle that brought group members together but dislocated them from mainstream nine-to-five work routines. Immersion had different connotations in the findings. It referred to being absorbed in a highly demanding job environment that was overwhelming at times. Social immersion offset this cost through shared activities, valued affiliation and mutual identification. The balance shifted towards distancing as a long-term strategy. The findings suggest original perspectives on bar workers' health and well-being in relation to stress, alcohol use, job context and social identification.

Bar workers cited consequences of job stress such as anxiety, fatigue, and impaired sleep. Although these have been reported in other occupations (Coffey, Skipper, & Jung, 1988), they were situated in an occupation-specific profile of job strain (Mazzola et al., 2011). Long shifts and offensive customers were significant stressors, particularly during peak periods. Stress from job conditions helps to account for the prominence of alcohol to relieve tension and unwind after work (San José, van de Mheen, van Oers, Mackenbach, & Garretsen, 2000). Superpubs were more stressful than smaller bars due to cognitive overload and frequency of abusive customers. Consistent with the stress-reduction hypothesis, these larger bars were also associated with heavier staff drinking (Vagg & Spielberger, 1998).

Interpersonal conflict is among the most prevalent stressor across occupations (Mazzola et al., 2011). In common with psychiatric nursing and policing (Dick, 2000; Jenkins & Elliott, 2004), unpredictable individuals were a primary source of conflict in bar work. Aggression took a particular form specific to the bar work context, arising from characteristic sources of disagreement such as refusing to serve the customer more alcohol or asking drinking groups to leave the bar. Responses to stress were also occupation-specific, with drinking in the workplace an everyday practice. In common with navy recruits (Ames et al., 2009), bar workers reported drinking more than usual following a period of sustained stress.

Thus, alcohol use was linked to both socialising and stress relief (Ames et al., 2009). All the drinking settings described were in a group context. Permissive drinking norms among bar workers were contextualised by a more general societal acceptance of binge drinking. Bar workers were core participants in a vibrant night

time pub culture, and as a result alcohol was readily accessible during work, afterwards and on time off (Ames et al., 2000; Flores-Pereira, Davel, & Cavedon, 2008). Consumption on breaks during day or evening shifts was implicitly condoned by supervisors, an enabling factor reported in a study of drinking groups among factory workers (Ames & Janes, 1987). Some participants said bar workers did not drink more than people in other occupations, but drinking during work hours is relatively uncommon reported by only 7.1% of respondents to a US national survey across a range of occupations (Frone, 2006).

Routinisation of drinking was especially marked in superpubs, comparable with associations between team affiliation and alcohol use in surveys of college athletes (Grossbard, Hummer, LaBrie, Pederson, & Neighbors, 2009; Zamboanga, Rodriguez, & Horton, 2008). The health implications of an occupational identity for bar work should not be underestimated. Self-categorisation as a bar worker entailed valuing team membership and identifying with other young adults employed in pubs in the district. Group cohesion was promoted by co-operative, shared duties during long work shifts, dislocation from nine to five schedules and ready access to co-worker friendship networks (Ames & Janes, 1987). Social immersion in bar work created the affiliation and group bonds acknowledged to support health and well-being (Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, et al., 2009; Haslam et al., 2005).

Negative consequences of immersion included excessive drinking, impaired sleep and poor diet. Tension and fatigue were accepted as integral to the job. These consequences challenged job continuance. Women described episodes of heavy drinking as well as men, and were able to appropriate this practice as consistent with socially acceptable behaviour (MacNeela & Bredin, 2011). Yet they had to contend with gender-specific forms of abuse from men. Bar work was a permeable occupational category that participants could readily exit. Unlike socialisation into a profession such as nursing, where long-term commitment is normative, distancing from bar work was an adaptive strategy to manage an identity ultimately regarded as transient.

Its transience can be contextualised developmentally by reference to emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Immersion enabled relevant developmental achievements such as greater confidence, enhanced interpersonal competence and social integration (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Bar work was sociable and stimulating, but to remain in it too long was counter-normative and indicated lack of personal progress in life. Distancing from the lifestyle over time was an assertion of personal autonomy amid the increasing salience of other developmental tasks.

Most of those who had left the job described gradual withdrawal, illustrated by working at a quieter bar, no longer living in the area and reducing alcohol consumption. This form of distancing enabled a transitional exit from the job and the area, but was not shared by all. One person described an abrupt end to the job after becoming overwhelmed by stress. Two ex-bar workers chose to move from bar work into a different job in the same district, re-negotiating their relationship with the area on a more sustainable basis.

Participants still in the job represented themselves as active agents in distancing from the excesses of bar work, speaking about tolerant drinking practices in past and the increased salience of college and careers. Nevertheless, they also described current drinking patterns consistent with regular binge drinking (Ramstedt & Hope, 2005). Several had moved into manager roles and might stay in bar work but the remaining individuals had yet to transition fully from bar work.

Implications

Community-based health promotion among bar workers is an important issue (Easterling, Gallagher, & Lodwick, 2003; Murray, Nelson, Poland, Maticka-Tyndale, & Ferris, 2004). Preventative and harm-reduction initiatives offer appropriate approaches to address risky drinking, diet, and workplace stress, with adaptation required to the bar work context. Drinking patterns acquired in young adulthood predict alcohol consumption patterns several decades later (Sloan, Grossman, & Platt, 2011), and are thus an important issue to address among bar workers. The risky drinking patterns associated with bar work were a sensitive subject. Strategies that have been effective with college student populations, such as feedback on personal alcohol consumption (Walters, Vader, & Harris, 2007) might be relevant to engaging bar workers in self-assessment of alcohol consumption. Enhanced stress management skills and mental health awareness are other priorities, building on existing acknowledgement of stress and fatigue (Jorm, 2000). Female participants were expected to accept sexual harassment in the work environment, despite its stressful and distressing implications (Karatepe, Yorganci, & Haktanir, 2009). Individual strategies would be best incorporated in a participative approach appropriate to a setting characterised by social identification and group cohesion (Campbell & Murray, 2004; Jayne, Valentine, & Holloway, 2008).

Limitations

The experience of immersion and distance described in this study occurred in a particular social, developmental, and geographical context. The findings explore the meaning of bar work for young adults in a high-density bar district in an Irish city, but have limited direct generalisability to other alcohol-serving settings. Another limitation concerns the participant profile. With a few exceptions, they spoke about bar work being challenging, while remaining broadly capable of managing demands and negotiating an exit from the job. This portrayal could under-represent the experience of individuals who require assistance to successfully transition out of bar work.

The cross-sectional interviews yielded a retrospective account of movement from immersion to distancing which requires further investigation through longitudinal research. This would assist critical examination of the personal development discourse that ex-bar workers used to justify exit decisions, or the moderation discourse exercised by current bar workers when they spoke about becoming increasingly detached from the lifestyle.

Conclusions

A busy work environment and close-knit peer group contributed to the emergence of bar work as an immersive occupational identity with expectations for heavy drinking. The busyness of bar work frequently became stressful, tiring, and helped justify daily drinking. Although the associated lifestyle generated significant risks to health and well-being, bar work provided opportunities for social enrichment and personal growth relevant to developmental goals. Ultimately, bar work was perceived as a transient occupational identity, with immersion followed by gradual distancing. It was, nonetheless, an environment in which harmful drinking patterns

could become established. The same social ties that contribute to alcohol consumption may be the basis for participative, community-based health promotion responses.

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