Kalle Tryggvesson

Freedom in a bottle

Young Swedes on rationales and norms for drunken behaviour
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**Abstract**

There is today much evidence for a positive relationship between alcohol and violence. There are however still many questions about the nature of the relationship. Somewhat simplified, the research on the link between alcohol and violence can be divided into four different lines of research, research focusing on: the effect of alcohol as a psychoactive substance, the drinking context, the personality of the drinker, and societal attitudes, expectations and values. The dissertation focuses on the last area, the importance of the cultural context. One influential theory within this field is the time-out theory formulated by MacAndrew and Edgerton in the late 1960s. Since drunken comportment varied between cultures and between different contexts within the same culture and changed over time, they suggested that the effects of alcohol on people’s behaviour was socially constructed. They suggest that many societies had a created a time-out situation for drunken behaviour that explained people’s behaviour while drunk.

The general aim for this dissertation is to study young Swedes’ attitudes, experiences and expectations around drunken behaviour, with a special focus on expectancies around alcohol as a cause and excuse for violence. Three different data sets have been used. The first study is based on 4 focus-group interviews with Swedish football fans during the European football championship in Holland in 2000. The second material is eight focus-group interviews involving 47 students aged 18-20 living in Stockholm. The last material is a nationally representative survey of young adults, 16-25 years old. One part of the survey consisted of 4 vignettes which we used to elicit cultural norms around drunken behaviour.

The findings suggest that young Swedes believe that alcohol can be used as a means to accomplish a pleasurable state of mind, and that alcohol could be used as a means to transgression – since alcohol reduce inhibitions it could be used to put them in a less controlled mode. The rationale for those changes was often described in terms of the psychoactive effect of alcohol. However, it was also shown that the context was important. When the situation demanded alcohol the most, their expectations together with the situation almost turned water into beer. It was also shown that there was a norm which said that one should not use alcohol as an excuse, but on the other hand, the participants said that they used alcohol as an excuse and that they thought that it was accepted. Alcohol could work as an excuse since alcohol made the aggressor look less deviant and the acts less severe. The vignette studies indicated that an aggressor who was drunk when he committed a violent act was seen as less blameworthy than a sober or less drunk aggressor. However, this applied only under certain circumstances: alcohol seemed to be a better excuse if the victim is drunk as well and the act is relatively severe.

Taken together, the studies suggest that the Swedish drinking culture provides people with a drunken excuse, which helps young people to expand the room for possible action.

Key words: Football supporters, time-out, alcohol, violence, vignette, intoxication, excuse, expectancy
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Papers I and IV have earlier been published in Swedish and are reprinted with kind permission of the editor from NAT. Paper II and III are reprinted with the kind permission of the journal’s editors.
To my brother,
Bosse Tryggvesson
(1967-1997)

Who once taught me to see the
beauty in a thought.
Acknowledgements

Writing scientific articles is for a man of many words a frustrating task. Everything has to be shortened, or even better, just taken away. In the end you are left with the feeling that almost nothing is said, and the things you have said are very shallow. Writing a dissertation sometimes means that you write several shallow articles within a very narrow perspective. When the day for the disputation approaches and you put your articles together, you suddenly understand that you are not only shallow, in addition you are repetitive – a somewhat unpleasant gathering of personal characteristics. So it is with very mixed feelings that I try to end this frustrating work.

However, some people have made the work less frustrating, and they deserve to be thanked. All my colleagues at the Department of Criminology and the Centre for Social Research on Alcohol and Drugs (SoRAD) – you have made my life and work more fun and interesting. Special thanks go to Lotta Pettersson and Martin Bergqvist at the department of Criminology for, besides being good friends, also having read my manuscripts and given useful comments. I thank Anders Sjöberg and Dave Shannon for help with the front side and proof reading when I ran out of time and faith. Dave has also translated papers two and four. Jessica Palm at SoRAD for all the intellectual and emotional support during the work with this dissertation. Sandra L. Bullock, from whom I have learned more about methods than I ever learned in school. Felipe Estrada, for the smooth collaboration within the football study, and for letting me inherit the project about young people and violence when he wanted to move on to do more interesting work. Finally, my two supervisors. Henrik Tham at the Department of Criminology, who has had the courage and trust to let me work without too much stress, and Robin Room at SoRAD who has read everything I have written, with great patience, commenting on everything – spelling mistakes, references and theoretical issues – within two days. I don’t always agree with you but I have great respect for your unusual combination of a brilliant brain and a humble heart.

And last, a special thanks to my family, which always has supported me, whatever I have done.

Kalle Tryggvesson
Introduction

*To alcohol! The cause of - and solution to - all of life’s problems.*
– *Homer Simpson*

The toast to alcohol proposed by Homer Simpson summarizes a lot of our view of alcohol and our ambiguous relation to it. Alcohol in different forms has been used in almost all cultures of the world for more than 6000 years. Alcohol has often had a central position in many cultures and has been used in festivals, celebrations and ceremonies. Alcohol has been used in order to attain or has been associated with joy, community, socialization, status, maturity, celebration and much more. Since alcohol and intoxication have continued to be such central phenomena in so many societies for such a long time it has even been suggested that alcohol could bring evolutionary benefits to a culture (Morris 1998). On the other hand, alcohol has also been associated with isolation, depression, violence and a number of other negative circumstances, and it has been very rare that cultures or societies have not created relatively strong restrictions around the use of alcohol. Thus it seems that most societies have seen alcohol as a double-edged sword. Although the double face of alcohol is understood in many societies, however, this fact is seldom reflected in alcohol research.

The research on alcohol has often been divided into two different perspectives, the sociological/epidemiological perspective, often with a problem-oriented focus, and the ethnographic perspective, focusing on the role and meaning of alcohol in society. The differences between these perspectives were shown very clearly in a well-known article from 1984, where Room suggested that many of the ethnographic studies on alcohol practiced problem deflation. Room (1984a) argued that the ethnographic literature had a tendency to systematically deflate the prevalence of alcohol-related problems in many of the tribal societies they had studied. Further, he suggested a number of provocative explanations for this, arguing that an underlying theoretical assumption of functionalism led to a focus on the good effects of a behaviour and a neglect of the negative effects. He also argued that the methodology most often used by ethnographers was effective in observing the pleasures of drinking often seen in social gatherings, whereas epidemiologists would be more effective in studying the private pains and the rarer but nonetheless serious occurrences of alcohol-related harm. He also suggested that many of
the anthropologists came from a wet generation, reacting against the temperance movement, and therefore had a positive attitude towards drinking or at least towards moderate drinking. Room’s article has given rise to a substantial amount of comment. Agar (1984) argued against Room on all his points, stating that the ethnographic studies gave another view of the phenomenon, not because of a focus on functionalism, but rather because of their emphasis on context and comparison. He also argued against the methodological questions raised by Room, admitting that ethnographers carried their own cultural baggage, but noting at the same time that this same argument applied for all disciplines. Besides the explanations of the possible deflation, the critical question was who would be in a position to tell whether a problem was being subjected to deflation, amplification or was being valued “correctly”. Room acknowledged the problem, but at the same time warned against a relativistic approach to alcohol-related problems, arguing that a phenomenon such as liver cirrhosis could be seen as an “objective” problem. It can be conceded as being very unlikely that anyone would classify liver cirrhosis as something good. However, focusing only on liver cirrhosis carries the risk of being overtly unbalanced. Liver cirrhosis is one aspect of what might be a long relationship with alcohol, a relationship which could include many pleasurable aspects. If alcohol consumption involves five positive aspects and one negative aspect, albeit a serious one, it might be a rational and understandable choice to drink. From this perspective, the underlying methodology or theoretical assumption is not the crucial difference. It is more a question of which factors and values should be incorporated into alcohol research, and of how different values should be weighted and compared to others.

Heath describes how alcohol research is often affected by alcohol’s cultural position in a country. Sweden has often been classified as a dry country. A dry culture is often assumed to have a high proportion of abstainers, few drinking occasions but with relatively many heavy drinking occasions, strong sanctions against drinking and a high degree of mystification around alcohol (Heath 1998). Dry countries or countries with an ambivalent view on alcohol are usually active in alcohol research and they most often focus on alcohol-related problems. This seems to be true for Swedish alcohol research. Reading the extensive literature on alcohol-related problems, it seems puzzling that in 2005 we know more about the dangers of drinking than ever, but nonetheless have the highest level of alcohol consumption for 100 years.
Why do people drink?

What the problem-focused research has difficulty in understanding and explaining is why people actually consume alcohol. The debate between Room and the ethnographers referred to above shows that in the US there has at least been a discipline which has focused on this kind of question, something which has been undeveloped in Sweden. In the last ten years, however, a tradition of ethnographic alcohol research has begun to emerge in Sweden, focusing on the meaning young people see in intoxication. Norell and Törnquist (1995) wrote a dissertation on the meaning of alcohol and intoxication among young people. Lalander (1998) wrote a dissertation about the ways in which the meaning of alcohol is constructed among young people and about how they use alcohol and its meanings to handle problems and possibilities in their lives.

With this introduction I want to stress both the complexity of how alcohol is used in our society, and the fact that research which focuses on one isolated aspect of this complexity carries the risk of not only being limited but also misleading. The use of alcohol might sometimes be a problem at one level whilst being beneficial at another. Room and Selin (2004) showed in a rather unusual study in Sweden that those who report the most benefits from alcohol also were those who reported the most alcohol-related problems. A top night out can result in a monetary problem which is nonetheless very much compensated for by the joy it produces. There is often also a direct relationship between what is perceived as good and bad. Alcohol can be used in a way which assists transgression, enabling a person to enter into a “liminal” reality – a situation where daily routines and limiting norms are abandoned. On the other hand, if the person in such a state of mind walks into a wall, the wall can be very much part of the normal world. The negative outcome can be a mirror of the positive. If it fails to acknowledge this complexity, alcohol research easily becomes limited. It is important to make this point, because the current work also has a tendency towards a problem-focus, even though it doesn’t have the aim of presenting an evaluation of the dangers of alcohol. Thus this work acknowledges that alcohol involves both pleasure and danger, and its aim is to produce a better understanding of how these possibilities are created.

This dissertation

The general aim of this dissertation is to study young Swedes’ attitudes, experiences and expectations relating to drunken behaviour. One aim is to better understand the rationale for drunken behaviour; why do people drink to get drunk, and why do they do what they do when they are drunk, and in particular why do some become violent? The theoretical framework is the work of MacAndrew and Edgerton (1969), who argued that drunken
comportment was socially constructed, and not an effect of alcohol’s toxic qualities. Basically, MacAndrew and Edgerton argued that many societies have created different norm systems for sober and drunken behaviour; drunkenness therefore involved a societally sanctioned freedom from every day norms. Drunkenness was described as a “time-out” situation. In this dissertation we will attempt to apply this theory, partly as a way of testing the theory, and partly as an attempt to understand the way young Swedes’ relate to alcohol.

Two aspects are of importance in the context of this theoretical framework. The first is that drunken comportment is socially constructed. The second, which according to the theory constitutes a precondition for the first, is that drunken behaviour is viewed differently from sober behaviour. We try to cover both these aspects in the current work. The first study primarily concerns the first aspect. It focuses partly on how alcohol is used as a means to enhance a social context, but also on how the social context determines the effects of alcohol. The following four articles focus more on the second aspect, namely whether alcohol changes the ways in which people and acts are viewed. All four of these articles focus on violence, and more specifically on violence between males. Thus, the dissertation has a focus on the relation between alcohol and violence, but the rationale for this relation is believed to apply to other behaviours as well.

The dissertation starts with an introductory chapter which is followed by five articles. In short, the introduction is used to locate the different articles in a context, and for an elaboration of some of the aspects that I believe have suffered most as a result of the page limits #inflicted on manuscripts by most journals. This includes a rather long review of the theory which has constituted the main influence on this work, and also a number of methodological considerations. Following the review of the theory, I attempt to suggest, briefly, how this work on alcohol and violence might fit into traditional criminological theories. Thereafter, the specific aims of the dissertation are presented. This is followed by a presentation of the material and of a number of methodological considerations. The subsequent section presents short summaries of the five articles included in the dissertation, and finally, the introductory chapter concludes with a short discussion of the main results noted in these articles.

**Alcohol-related violence/aggression**

One of the problems that is often connected to alcohol consumption is aggression or violence. Studies have shown that up to 80 percent of aggressors
and 50 percent of the victims of violence were under the influence of alcohol at the time of the crime (for reviews, see Lenke 1990; Pernanen 1991; Rying 2000). Time-series studies have shown a positive association between levels of aggregate alcohol consumption and rates of reported violence (see Lenke 1990; Norström 1998; Parker & Cartmill 1998; and Rossow 2001). Cross sectional studies have shown increased involvement in violence among those who drink heavily (Rossow 1996; Rossow et al. 1999; Bonmo et al. 2001; Swahn et al. 2004), and experimental studies have shown increased aggression when intoxicated (for reviews, see Bushman 1997; Gustafson 1993). However, the relationship has proved to be very complex. Most alcohol consumption does not result in violence and violence occurs among the sober. Time-series analyses have shown different effects and sometimes no effect at all (see above). Experimental studies often show no effect of alcohol if there is no provocation involved and it has been argued in relation to cross-sectional studies that both violence and drinking are the effects of the same underlying risk-factors. This has led people to draw very different conclusions about the relationship; some argue that there is no relationship, while others argue that there is strong evidence of a relationship. A more modest standpoint would be that proposed by Lipsey et al. (1997), who suggested a model that made it possible to search for a causal link between alcohol and violence, but only for some people and in some situations.

Graham, Wells and West (1997) identified over 50 different explanations that have been put forward in the scientific literature to explain the association between drinking and aggression. They later argue that these explanations could be collapsed together under four headings: (1) effects of alcohol; (2) effects of the drinking environment; (3) effects of personality, attitudes or other expectations of the drinker; and (4) effects of societal attitudes, expectations and values (Graham, West and Wells 2000).

The first area chiefly concerns the pharmacological effects alcohol has on the brain. Alcohol is assumed to create conditions in the brain that are generally associated with aggression, or there is an assumption that “the relationship between alcohol consumption and aggressive behaviour is mediated by the effects of alcohol on the cognitive, affective or behavioural functioning of the drinker” (Graham, West and Wells 2000, p. 848). One example of a hypothesis in this area is that alcohol potentiating inhibitory neurotransmitters that reduce fear, and therefore increases the risk that an intoxicated person will respond aggressively to a threat. Other studies have focused on how alcohol alters cortical functioning, which involves the control of emotions (for reviews see Graham, Wells and West 1997; Rehm et al. 2004).
The second direction focuses on the context in which alcohol is consumed. If the first area focuses on a rather direct relationship between alcohol and aggression, research in this second area concerns a more indirect relationship. Many of the settings where alcohol is consumed are in themselves environments which can be characterized as rather high risk environments. It may be a bar that is crowded and loud, which provides a context where self-presentation is important, and where violence might be an accepted way of handling conflicts. Several studies have been conducted which have identified different factors that moderate the relationship between aggression and violence, with a focus on the contextual or situational factors that tend to increase or decrease the risk for alcohol-related violence (for a review see Graham, Schmidt & Gillis 1996).

The last two directions, namely personal characteristics in the form of attitudes and expectations and societal attitudes, expectations and values are of course related to one another. Graham, West & Wells (2000) report that the following personal characteristics may predispose a person to alcohol-related aggression: age, deviant attitudes, a general concern with power, poverty, membership of a marginalized subpopulation, approval of violence and having specific expectations about the effects of alcohol. Most of these characteristics are also relevant to the last area of explanations. People develop their attitudes, expectations and values in interaction with others in society, and one might say that if the previous group of explanations focuses on the results of this socialization process, this latter direction focuses on the process or the culture that constitutes the starting point and which in turn influences the members of a given society.

Cultural/societal explanations for the link between alcohol and violence
This dissertation focuses on the last of the four areas outlined above: societal attitudes, expectations and values. In 1969, MacAndrew and Edgerton published a classic book in this field, Drunken Comportment: A Social Explanation. As the title suggests, MacAndrew and Edgerton argued that people’s behaviour under the influence of intoxicants and particularly of alcohol should be understood from a social perspective. They wrote the book as a polemic against the conventional wisdom of the time – that alcohol changed people for the worse as a result of its toxic qualities. Alcohol was seen as such a potent substance that it affected two fundamentally different behaviours. Firstly, it brought about a change in the sensorimotor capabilities, such as locomotor ability, coordination, visual acuity and reaction time. Secondly, conventional wisdom also explained changes in the character of social comportment by reference to alcohol’s psychopharmacological potency.
Or, in other words, alcohol was viewed as a moral incapacitator in the same way as it was a sensorimotor incapacitator.

Thus, the conventional wisdom explained drunken comportment by reference to alcohol’s toxic assault upon the brain. This view was held by everyone and was scientifically presented by the medical profession. At this time, in the mid 1950s, there was a change in how this toxic assault upon the brain was understood. Earlier, the popular belief had been that alcohol stimulated the nervous system and therefore increased aggression. The new explanation was that, on the contrary, alcohol produced changes in comportment by impairing the higher brain functions and thereby reducing inhibitions. Alcohol led to drunken comportment by paralysing the part of the brain where our inhibitions, restraint and judgement are located, rather than by means of a stimulant effect. This was formulated by Leon Greenberg, one of founders of the Yale Centre of Alcohol Studies:

A blood concentration of about .05 per cent of alcohol, which in a person of average size results from drinking two or three ounces of whiskey, depresses the uppermost level of the brain – the centre of inhibitions, restraint and judgement. At this stage the drinker feels that he is sitting on the top of world; he is ‘a free human being’; many of his normal inhibitions vanish; he takes personal and social liberties as the impulse prompts; he is long-winded and can lick anybody in the country. Such a man has undergone an obvious blunting of self-criticism... Contrary to old and popular belief, alcohol does not stimulate the nervous system. The illusion of stimulation results from the removal of inhibitions and restraints (Greenberg 1953, p. 88).

In MacAndrew and Edgerton’s interpretation,

The conventional wisdom takes it to be self-evidently the case that alcohol, by virtue of its toxic assault upon ‘the higher brain centres’, renders the drinker temporarily immune to the actions of those internalized constraints (‘inhibitions’) that normally serve to keep his comportment within proper bounds. With his otherwise operative powers of reason, judgement, and the like thus temporarily immobilized, the drinker becomes but the amoral vehicle for the actualization of his now-unleashed instincts (MacAndrew & Edgerton 1969, p 63).

The absence of restraint and judgement not only resulted in aggression between males, it also led to a number of behaviours that were considered to
constitute a threat to good moral standards. Even females who got drunk changed for the worse, and for them the most oft-mentioned example related to involvement in sexual behaviour.

The apparent ‘stimulation’ from alcohol is the result of the lower brain centres being released from higher brain controls. This reduces inhibitions, and behaviour which is untoward when the individual is sober becomes acceptable. For example... an always proper, ladylike woman may become obscene and promiscuous when intoxicated (Chafetz & Demone 1962, p. 9).

MacAndrew and Edgerton argued against this position. They agreed about alcohol’s effect on the sensorimotor system; however, when it came to the effect on drunken comportment they argued that there was no scientific evidence for this. As MacAndrew and Edgerton saw it, the conventional wisdom asserted that there was a causal relationship between events in two domains – changes in the inner domain, in the brain, and in the domain of one’s social comportment in the world of everyday life. If anyone wished to argue that such a relationship existed, and that a change in the former domain was the cause of the changes in the other domain, they needed to produce a thorough description of the events taking place in each of the two domains. And even if brain physiologists were able to explain the effects on the human brain, this would still not tell us very much about the relationship between this change and social drunken comportment, unless this latter phenomenon was also studied in detail.

MacAndrew and Edgerton passed over the effect on the brain and focused on what effect alcohol had on drunken comportment. The assumption was that if alcohol has the same effect on drunken comportment as it has on the sensorimotor system, drunken comportment would be rather universal and stable. By studying descriptions of drunken behaviour they wanted to analyse whether this was in fact the case.

Variations in drunken comportment
MacAndrew and Edgerton reviewed a number of ethnographic studies which described drunken behaviour in different cultures. They described four cultural patterns of alcohol consumption and its effects which they argued provided evidence against the idea that drunken comportment was determined by alcohol’s toxic properties. Firstly, they argued once again that there was a general and stable effect on people’s sensorimotor skills in every culture studied, but that when it came to drunken comportment there was a massive variation. In some cultures they found many examples of how
drunken people seemed to be changed for the worse, but in others there was no effect on people’s drunken comportment even when they drank large amounts of alcohol. They conclude: “In fact, in many of these societies there is scant evidence of anything that might reasonably be termed ‘disinhibited’” (MacAndrew & Edgerton 1969, p. 17). Secondly, drunken comportment changed over time. One example of this was found among the Tahitians, where it was possible to identify three different historical phases; the first where they avoided drinking; a second period where they drank heavily, and when they were drunk were often violent; and a third period when they continued to drink, often heavily, but without being violent subsequent to this drinking. These shifts in drunken comportment were often related to dramatic changes in the structures of the societies concerned. Thirdly, drunken comportment often varied between different contexts within societies. MacAndrew and Edgerton described how drunken comportment varied in accordance with the demands associated with a given, specific event, even though it was otherwise the same individual drinking the same beverage.

The within-limits clause
After describing this huge variation in drunken comportment between different societies, contexts and times, MacAndrew and Edgerton described a fourth pattern which they regarded as evidence against the psycho-pharmacological explanation. As mentioned above, many of the ethnographic studies described incidents where alcohol consumption was followed by a change in drunken comportment which could very well be described as a change for the worse. There were many descriptions from different societies of drunken parties where enormous amounts of alcohol were consumed, to be followed by horrifying violence.

At a drinkfest in Montabiong, a drunken brawl broke out in which five men were killed, one of them a kinsman. My sister Dukmin and I carried him away, already dead, for all the men were engaged in fighting (Barton 1963, p. 153).

Many of the descriptions of these incidents would instinctively appeal to a belief in the conventional explanation, that alcohol is a moral incapacitator. In fact, many of the accounts described a kind of violence which is difficult to understand in any other way than that the aggressor was completely unable to control himself, and was left as an amoral animal. But this did not seem to be the case. MacAndrew and Edgerton showed that there were almost always descriptions of norms or rules that no one went beyond, regardless of the state of drunkenness, something which they named the within-limits clause. Thus,
the within-limits clause stated that there were limits even for drunken comportment and that these limits were very seldom crossed. The within-limits clause was described in several ways and varied between societies. Sometimes it created limits regarding potential victims, e.g. children, women, people from the outside, people with higher status, etc. The within-limits clause could also limit the ways in which people’s aggression was acted out, as was the case for the Mixe Indians in Mexico.

The Mixe indulge in frequent fist fights, especially while drunk. Although I probably saw a hundred, I saw no weapons used, although nearly all men carried machetes and many carried rifles. Most fights start with a drunken quarrel. When the pitch of voices reaches a certain point, everyone expects a fight. The men hold out their weapons to the onlookers, and then begin to fight with their fists, swinging wildly until one falls down (Beals 1945, p. 29).

MacAndrew and Edgerton also gave examples of how alcohol consumption resulted in changes for the worse in one kind of behaviour, while in other kinds of behaviour there were rules that no one transgressed. Thus among the Pondo, a south African tribe, where a good drunken party ended with a big fight, the party simultaneously provided an opportunity for men and women to meet and indulge in limited sexual play, but without the norms for sexual behaviour being transgressed.

Thus, in the case of Pondo, it would appear that while alcohol ‘unleashes the aggressive instincts,’ thereby transforming otherwise peaceable men into brawlers, it canalizes the ‘sexual instincts’ into ‘socially harmless channels’ (MacAndrew & Edgerton 1969, p. 77).

In the same way as for violence, there were also examples of the within-limits clause when in relation to sexual behaviour. The Tarahumaras, a Mexican Indian tribe, were described as so reserved as a tribe that normal social life was almost impossible without tesguino, their alcoholic beverage. When they had their fiesta or tesguinadas, the relations between the sexes and the parties were described as “occasions of ‘licensed promiscuity or wife exchange’” (Bennett & Zingg 1935, p. 361). But even though the Tarahumaras’ behaviour went through a dramatic change during the tesguinadas, there were limits for this change - the Tarahumara women were never allowed to extend their promiscuity to Mexicans, and this limit was seldom transgressed.


**Drunken comportment as a learned behaviour**

MacAndrew and Edgerton argued that the conventional explanation that alcohol decreased inhibitions via its pharmacological properties could not explain this variation in drunken comportment. Instead they argued that drunken comportment was a social construction, not a direct result of alcohol’s effects on the brain; the effect of alcohol was the result of our expectations and experiences, of what we had learned about alcohol, mostly from others.

Over the course of socialization, people learn about drunkenness what their society ‘knows’ about drunkenness; and, accepting and acting upon the understandings thus imparted to them, they become the living confirmation of their society’s teaching (MacAndrew & Edgerton 1969, p. 88).

The above quotation constitutes MacAndrew and Edgerton’s general formulation of their explanation. However, at the same time they wanted to acknowledge that this statement, if read too literally, could be too deterministic: people’s behaviour should not be seen as solely a function of society’s teaching, and nor is all behaviour once and forever determined by something called society. What they wanted to stress, however, was that whether one intended to study people’s sober comportment or their drunken comportment, one had to study meaning in human behaviour. One cannot understand drunken comportment or alcohol’s importance for human behaviour if it is not understood in a context. With this in mind they went back to the ethnographic descriptions of drunken comportment and drunken changes-for-the-worse.

**The drunken time-out**

This review of the literature showed that in many of the societies described, drunken behaviour was measured on another scale than sober behaviour. Behaviour which would normally receive punishment was seen as something else, or at least as something less serious. Violence or other norm-breaking activities were understood and explained in a way that took the responsibility and the intent away. An evil act could therefore be committed by a non-evil man.

When they have returned to their senses, they say to you, ‘it is not we who did that, but thou who gavest us this drink.’ When they have slept off their drunkenness, they are as good friends with each other: ‘Thou art my brother. I love thee; it is not I who wounded thee, but the drink which used my arm’ (Jesuit Relations 1896, p. 49).
The alternative explanation for why there was a relationship between alcohol and changes in drunken comportment was therefore that society has created a different norm system for drunken behaviour compared to the more restrictive norm system associated with sober behaviour. Drunkenness is a societally sanctioned freedom from usual norms.

For a while – but just for a while, the rules (or, more accurately, some of the rules) are set aside, and the drunkard finds himself, if not beyond good and evil, at least partially removed from the accountability nexus in which he normally operates. In a word, drunkenness in these societies takes on the flavour of ‘time out’ from many of the otherwise imperative demands of everyday life (MacAndrew & Edgerton 1969, p. 90).

The drunken excuse
As empirical support for their hypothesis, MacAndrew and Edgerton report several examples of how alcohol removes or decreases accountability and punishment in many societies. When drunken behaviour is viewed differently, alcohol can be used as an excuse to make unacceptable behaviour acceptable.

They do not blame themselves for such occurrences. Instead, they blame the tescuino; more accurately, they blame the state of intoxication to which the ingestion of tescuino gives rise. And because of this, virtually all of these transgressions end up being excused (MacAndrew and Edgerton 1969, p. 94)

Why allow the drunken time-out?
This is MacAndrew and Edgerton’s major contribution, the new understanding about human behaviour while drunk. The next question, which they only speculated around is, if societies determine the consequences of drinking, why do they allow time-out situations? Why allow drunken behaviour which results in personal harm to citizens? Why is the drunken time-out so widespread?

MacAndrew and Edgerton argue that most societies are built on the assumption that a huge majority of the society’s members are willing to, and have the ability to, conduct themselves in the way the society expects. At the same time everybody knows that no society has yet shown an ability to socialize all people into wanting to do, being willing to do, and actually doing, what society wants them to do and nothing else. This disjunction between ideal and reality creates conflict in society, and this conflict constitutes a threat. Societies can respond to this challenge or threat by adopting different
positions on a continuum where the end points are to abandon all desire for order (anarchy) or to adopt a strict liability. Most societies have come to terms with this problem by adopting strategies somewhere between these extremes. The time-out concept is believed to have a number of beneficial aspects in this regard: it provides an opportunity for people to live out their aggression, at the same time as society can maintain its norms for the majority of the time.

We are arguing, then, that the option of drunken Time Out affords people the opportunity to ‘get it out of their systems’ with a minimum of adverse consequences (MacAndrew & Edgerton 1969, p. 69).

From this point of view, MacAndrew and Edgerton apply a sociocultural functionalism – something they also try to distance themselves from by acknowledging that even if the time-out may be a solution for one problem, it may also be the reason for other, more severe problems.

Limits and challenges
MacAndrew and Edgerton are rather convincing in their argumentation against the idea that drunken comportment is determined solely by the effects of alcohol on the brain. They were not very precise however in their formulation of the alternative explanation. This leaves us with a number of uncertainties as to the full potential of their explanation, and even more so when we try to apply their theory to modern societies. I will here address four questions or limitations regarding the time-out concept.

Possible interaction between paradigms in explaining the link
MacAndrew and Edgerton’s work could be described as a heated attack against the conventional wisdom and those who defended it. Their argument tends toward the position that if the pharmacological perspective could not explain every variation or every aspect of drunken comportment, the whole paradigm should be abandoned and replaced by the alternative explanation, which in turn seems to have the ambition to be the only explanation. This may be regarded as a simplification; even in their own examples there is room for some effect on the brain, even if they convincingly show that it cannot be the only factor. As Pernanen (1976) suggests, the absence of drunken aggression in some cultures could be explained by the “very ritualized sequence of drinking”, or in other words the effect on the brain could be universal but the norms which surround drinking might vary: in one context alcohol’s effects on the brain might be strong enough to increase violence, but in another context that effect might not be sufficient. Another argument could be that alcohol has
a disinhibiting effect caused by its pharmacological effect, reducing the ability to control emotions, but as long as the individuals concerned don’t have anything in their system that they have to act out, you would not expect a change in drunken comportment. Neither the pharmacological nor the social constructionist paradigm excludes the other – they can both be relevant at the same time – but MacAndrew and Edgerton’s kind of argumentation ignores the interaction which might exist between the perspectives. For example, the stronger the evidence for a pharmacological effect on the brain, the better the excuse that alcohol might provide.

The next three questions are to some degree related to each other, but they do have a number of special characteristics which qualify them for discussion under three different headings.

Rationale / context
In their work MacAndrew and Edgerton describe several different rationales for why the drunken excuse should be honoured, which in turn provide an indication of the circumstances in which one might expect alcohol to be used as an excuse. Firstly, when a person drinks alcohol he loses his responsibility. MacAndrew and Edgerton make the comparison with being possessed by an evil spirit. This suggests that a person should not be punished for his drunken behaviour since the deviance doesn’t come from him, but rather from the bottle. From this point of view it seems likely that the wrongdoer’s drinking should be enough to provide an excuse. Secondly, they refer to the drunken party as a time-out situation. This suggests that alcohol consumption in itself is not enough, that it is rather the context that matters, and that alcohol constitutes an excuse under circumstances of collective drinking as suggested by Room (2001). In this case the rationale would be more in terms of an acceptance of being part of a social context where people drink and misbehave than in terms of some evil property in alcohol. This is even clearer in the final rationale, where alcohol works as an excuse by shifting the blame to the victim. Since the consequences of drinking are so well known to everyone, the blame is transferred from the aggressor to the victim, since the latter should have know better and walked away.

And since to be forewarned is to be forearmed, there is an important sense in which those who remain have only themselves to blame should any mishap befall them (MacAndrew & Edgerton 1969, p. 171).
These different rationales for the drunken excuse suggest that the time-out may be dependent on contextual factors. And this might have important implications for where and when and for whom drunken behaviour can be excused.

Variations within a given society

Another shortcoming pointed out by Room (2001) is the variation within societies. MacAndrew and Edgerton provided many examples of how alcohol works as an excuse. They also gave a few examples of when alcohol did not work as an excuse. But they were not very precise as to when and under which circumstances alcohol did work as an excuse (except for the within-limits clause, which is described as a relatively stable norm that everyone in a given society is aware of and willing to follow). One way to understand this might be on the basis of the above-mentioned differences between contexts, but MacAndrew and Edgerton did not elaborate on this point. Another possibility is that more than two norms exist, the norm for sober behaviour and the norm for drunken behaviour. They do not elaborate very much on this either, but it seems unlikely that any society would succeed in a socializing process or teaching process that would lead every one to embrace the same norms. It seems more likely that people vary in their acceptance of the time-out. Accepting the fact that there are competing norms for drunken behaviour adds more complexity to the theory and calls for an understanding of how these norms might work together, how they are learned and why people have the norms they do, and so on.

It should be mentioned that MacAndrew and Edgerton were not the first to use the time-out concept in relation to drunken behaviour. A few year earlier Sherri Cavan (1966) employed the time-out concept, which she borrowed from the world of sports, to describe the phenomenon of bar behaviour. But in her research, the rationale for the time-out was not the drinking; instead she focused on the drinking establishment and had this as the rationale and limit for the time out.

The public drinking place is often treated as a setting where a variety of self-indulgent and otherwise improper acts can be engaged in .... What goes on in the bar is localized in time and place, and one need not anticipate being held accountable for one’s conduct at some later time or in some other setting (Cavan 1966, p. 67).
It is interesting to compare Cavan’s work with that of MacAndrew and Edgerton. Cavan was narrower in her research, only focusing on drinking behaviour in bars; on the other hand she conducted her research in the US in modern times. Cavan’s research suggests that there is variation in whether or not people accept the time-out concept. Even though she worked with a somewhat more well-defined drinking situation than that found in most of MacAndrew and Edgerton’s cases, and even if, as stated in the quote above, there was a powerful norm suggesting a time-out for behaviour in bars, there were always some uncertainties with regard to the shift in norms. One could never be completely sure about not being held accountable afterwards. This suggests the need for more research looking for inter-individual variations in these norm systems.

**Applicability in modern societies**

The empirical base for MacAndrew and Edgerton’s work comprises observations in small and homogeneous societies where the idea of a single social explanation or a single cultural influence seems reasonable, or where a single societal understanding can be embraced by all its members. The question is whether their analysis is applicable to the large polymorphous national societies of the modern age. Would it be fruitful to talk about a societal acceptance of alcohol as an excuse in an ethnically, religiously, occupationally and in so many other ways heterogeneous society such as the USA, or for that matter Sweden? On the basis of the above discussion it seems reasonable not to expect a general societal acceptance of alcohol as an excuse; if this didn’t work even in small homogenous societies, it is not likely to work in this way in a large and diverse society. MacAndrew and Edgerton do not elaborate very much on this issue; they simply spend half a page giving the matter some thought. Thus, they have earlier suggested that people learn about drunkenness what societies impart to them and then act in accordance with these understandings. They argue that the same logic would probably be possible to apply to the US, but with one difference.

We would propose that this formulation is similarly applicable to our own society, but with this difference: our society lacks a clear and consistent position regarding the scope of the excuse and is thus neither clear nor consistent in its teaching. Because our society’s teachings are neither clear nor consistent, we lack unanimity of understanding; and where unanimity of understanding is lacking, we would argue that uniformity of practice is out of the question (MacAndrew & Edgerton 1969, p. 172).
Thus, since there is no clear and consistent teaching of the drunken excuse, which is supposed to be a strong determinant of drunken behaviour, they assume that drunken behaviour would vary substantially, which in turn, when they look at drinking behaviour in the US, seems to be the case. The actual scope of the excuse varies, and it is more difficult to know in advance whether or not the excuse will work. It opens up space for differences between groups, with different levels of acceptance of the excuse in parallel systems which might be regarded as subcultural norm systems. The above-mentioned work conducted by Cavan (1966) in the USA seems to support MacAndrew and Edgerton’s assumptions as regards the question of how the time-out concept would work in a modern society.

The next question, then, is the following: is the concept of the time-out applicable to a society such as Sweden? There is no Swedish research that has had the specific aim of studying the time-out concept. When it comes to drinking patterns, Sweden traditionally has been seen as a “dry” country, with a relatively low total consumption of alcohol, but with comparatively many drinking occasions resulting in intoxication (Leifman 2002). A number of recent studies of Swedish youth have suggested that alcohol is used in a way that is similar to the time-out concept. Both Lalander (1997) and Trondman (1997) argue that alcohol is used with the specific aim of breaking away to a liminal reality where the standard norms are no longer applied. Without focusing on the time-out perspective, Lalander found the same rationale in his work, concluding that “in the Nordic countries, however, it seems that alcohol is a culturally established avenue to a no-restraints situation and to transgression, particularly for men” (Lalander, 1997, p. 40). He believed that alcohol could serve to facilitate transgression since alcohol made it possible to avoid responsibility for acts; alcohol was used to explain behaviour in a way that took the responsibility away. This is very similar to the excuse concept as an account that reduces responsibility. The drunken excuse is also often mirrored within Swedish culture, in newspapers, books and films. Thus, there are a number of indications that the time-out concept may also be highly relevant in a Swedish context. It seems fair to say that, at least in part, there is a clear and consistent teaching about drunken behaviour both when it comes to drinking to intoxication and in terms of the excuse value of alcohol.

What about MacAndrew and Edgerton today?

_Drunken comportment_ has been described as a landmark; it has been of major importance for the ways in which drinking to excess is understood (Room 2001). The text was published in the late 1960s but, as Midanik (2002) has pointed out, in a time where research is refocusing on biologically and
genetically-based individualistic explanations, the book is more relevant today than it has been for a long time. This has also been underlined by the appearance of a new edition in 2003.

Even though they made a huge contribution to our understanding of drunken comportment and the relation between alcohol and violence, MacAndrew and Edgerton’s theory has not been developed to any great extent. They have however inspired many researchers to integrate some aspects of their work into the more general framing of intoxication and aggression. For many researchers the main question has been that of whether or not alcohol consumption leads to aggression/violence. And in the search for an answer to this question, these researchers have also tried to distinguish between possible pharmacological effects and psychological or expectancy effects. A lot of this work has been carried out within the field of psychology or social psychology, often using experimental designs.

**Experimental psychological studies**

According to Bushman and Cooper (1990), most of the experimental research on alcohol and direct physical aggression has used one of two different designs, a teacher-learner task (Buss 1961) or Taylor’s (1967) reaction-time task, or variations of these procedures. In both paradigms, aggression is measured by electric shocks that the test subject gives to what they believe is another person (who in reality doesn’t exist). In the basic form, one wants to test whether subjects who have consumed alcohol administer a more intense shock or one with longer duration than those who haven’t consumed alcohol. To separate alcohol’s pharmacological effect from its psychological effect, the administration of alcohol is often conducted in a balanced placebo design. In the balanced placebo design, half of the subjects are told that they will receive a non-alcoholic beverage and the other half is told that they will have an alcoholic beverage. Within each of these groups half are given alcohol and half are not given alcohol. Thus there are four different circumstances, the person is told he is getting alcohol and gets alcohol, the person is told he is getting alcohol but is given placebo, the person is told he is getting placebo and gets placebo, and finally he is told he is getting placebo and gets alcohol. This provides an opportunity to study the pure pharmacological effect, the pure psychological effect and the combined effect. There are numerous such studies, with rather diverse results (for reviews, see Bushman 1997; Bushman & Cooper 1990; Gustafson 1993)

Bushman and Cooper (1990) state that alcohol does indeed cause aggression, but that the effects were moderated by certain methodological parameters.
Gustafson (1993) makes the interpretation that alcohol increases aggression but only under provocative conditions. When it comes to the pharmacological effect versus the psychological effect, Bushman and Cooper (1990) found that neither was enough to explain the increase in aggression. They suggest that both of these effects must occur at the same time. Others have gone a step further, ranking the different effects, and have concluded that the expectation of being under the influence of alcohol has a greater influence on behaviour than the alcohol in itself (Lang 1975; Källmén and Gustafson 1998).

There are a number of methodological issues that call for caution. Chermack and Giancola (1997) have pointed out some of these problems. The vast majority of laboratory studies on the relationship between alcohol and aggression have used self-selected student samples. This is problematic in several ways: it is uncertain to what extent the results can be generalized to other populations, and the fact that most aggressive acts are not committed by college students makes this issue a particularly critical one. Chermack and Giancola also raise a concern about external validity: to what extent is an electric shock applied in an experimental situation a valid measure of aggression outside the laboratory?

There are also problems related to the experimental situation. Both ethical and practical reasons limit the amount of drinking to a level of consumption lower than those at which most alcohol-related violence occurs. Even at lower blood alcohol levels, several researchers have reported problems with the manipulation of drinking. Even at blood alcohol levels as low as 0.053%, more than 90% of a sample saw through the deception of being served an alcohol-free drink (Lyvers & Maltzman 1991).

In addition to these limitations, experimental situations involve other limitations, even though many researchers have tried to include some of the conditions that may be met in the real world, mostly in the form of certain kinds of aggression or provocation. The laboratory context is very limited however when it comes to creating a real interaction with other people in circumstances where aggression naturally occurs. From a time-out perspective, it would be interesting to compare results from different cultural settings, involving subjects other than students in American colleges.

Experimental studies in the Swedish context
One way of studying the importance of cultural factors for the link between alcohol and violence would be to compare experimental studies from different alcohol cultures. A number of experimental studies have been conducted in
Sweden, but since there is variation in the results both within the US, where most other experiments have been conducted, and Sweden, it is difficult to draw any strong conclusions. In a review article of the experimental research conducted in Sweden, Gustafson (1995), concludes that alcohol *per se* does not increase aggression but only under frustration and under circumstances where the respondent is restricted to an aggressive response. When it comes to the question of whether the effect is due to a pharmacological effect or psychological expectancy, Gustafson suggests that one cannot rule out either. Thus, it seem to be rather much the same conclusion as for the US studies.

*Alcohol-related expectancy studies*

The above mentioned studies explicitly study whether there is a pharmacological effect of alcohol or whether it is rather the expectation that one has consumed alcohol which makes people aggressive. They show no interest in what expectations people have in relation to alcohol. There have also been some studies, again mostly in the US, which have focused on the expectations surrounding alcohol.

Gustafson and Källmén (1998) state that two different expectations are important in the explanation of why people behave as they do when they have been drinking; alcohol response expectancies and response outcome expectancies. Alcohol response expectancies consist of beliefs about how alcohol affects drunken behaviour; for example whether alcohol is expected to make people more aggressive. Response outcome expectancies are beliefs concerning the consequences of the behaviour of people when they have been drinking.

Most studies have focused on the first category of expectancies. For the most part, this has been done in two different ways. One way has been to include expectations within experimental studies, studying possible interaction effects between drinking and expectations concerning the outcome variable. These studies have produced divergent results. Rohsenow and Bachorowski (1984) reported that the expectancy that alcohol increased aggression was positively related to an increase in verbal aggression, but only in one of three studies. Another study by Chermack and Taylor (1995) showed that individual differences in alcohol-related expectancies affected physical aggression in an experimental situation. Those who believed that alcohol made them more aggressive more often used the highest electric shock setting than those who did not have this expectancy, even though they did not increase the average shock.
The second way of studying the effect of alcohol response-related expectancies has been to use self-report studies. Dermen & George (1989) and Leonard & Senchak (1993) found an association between alcohol consumption and involvement in physical aggression and also premarital aggression even for those who did not believe that alcohol causes violence, but they found that belief in such an association strengthened the association. Quigley et al. (2002) showed that the belief that intoxication causes one to become aggressive was related to having experienced alcohol-related violence. However, the relationship was moderated by individual differences in the respondent’s desire to be seen as powerful, which indicates that the picture is more complicated than most studies have been designed for. Zhang and colleagues (1997) also demonstrated an interaction between alcohol consumption and deviant attitudes and aggression.

The second form of expectancies, the response outcome expectancies, is mostly explored via the vignette methodology, focusing on how alcohol consumption affects the evaluation of a person and his/her behaviour. These vignette studies don’t say anything about actual behaviour, but try to identify norms associated with drunken behaviour. The majority of these studies have focused on sexual or physical violence against women, whereas only a few have examined the issue of violence between men. These studies have not been consistent in their findings. Richardson & Campell (1980; 1982) found that the perpetrators of wife abuse and rape were attributed less blame for their acts when they were described as being drunk, as compared to when they were described as being sober. They also found that the victim was considered as being more responsible, and her character was evaluated less positively, when she was drunk as compared to when she was sober. Critchlow (1985) found that the intoxication of the perpetrator lessened responsibility and blame, but only for more severe acts. Other studies (assault with a male aggressor and a male or female victim, and assault with a male aggressor and a female victim) have shown that perpetrators, as well as their victims, are blamed more when they are presented as being drunk as compared to when they are presented as sober (Aramburu & Leigh 1991; Leigh & Aramburu 1994). Aramburu and Leigh (1991) also found that aggression towards a drunken victim was more acceptable than aggression towards a sober victim. They also addressed the question of whether the increased blame for the victim was related to gender violation (women are not supposed to get drunk, and if they violate this norm it might then involve a lesser norm violation to hit them) but they found that blame increased with intoxication for both male and female victims. Some later studies have shown even more complex results. Stormo et al. (1997) found that the aggressor’s
alcohol consumption reduced the attributed responsibility in a date rape scenario when the aggressor and the victim were equally intoxicated, but increased the responsibility if the victim was more intoxicated than the aggressor. Wild et al. (1998) used five different scenarios: unwanted touching, date rape, assault and rape, vandalism and finally assault. Only one main effect of the offender’s drinking was found. A drunk offender was blamed more than a relatively sober offender in the unwanted touching scenario. They also found a two-way interaction in the assault vignette, where the offender’s drinking interacted with criminal history; for offenders without a criminal history, intoxication decreased the perceived blame. In two cases, the perpetrators were blamed significantly less when the female victims were drunk compared to when they were relatively sober. There was, however, some indication that the punishments assigned as appropriate were lower for drunken perpetrators in two of the vignettes, which in turn shows that there are differences between the concepts of blameworthiness and appropriate punishment which might be important for the concept of time-out or excuse value.

Besides the inherent limitations in the vignette methodology (see below), most of the vignette studies reviewed above have the same limitations as were mentioned in connection with the majority of experimental studies. All the studies reviewed were conducted in north America, one in Canada and the rest in the US, and the sample variation was minimal, with all but one using college students. Besides this limitation concerning the samples, the majority of the studies are concerned with male violence against females, which may not tell us much about the time-out concept when it comes to male on male violence.

Other relevant studies
During the last 15 years, there have also been a number of time-series analyses where the co-variation between alcohol consumption and a number of alcohol-related problems, including violence, has been investigated. These studies have limitations when it comes to testing theoretical understandings of the correlation. However, they suggest that in many areas and at many times there is a positive correlation between alcohol consumption and violence. The nature and the strength of this relation, however, varies both between regions and over time (Lenke 1990; Norström 1998; Parker & Cartmill 1998; Rossow 2001). For example, Room and Rossow (2001) show that there are three times as many homicides per extra litre of pure alcohol in northern as in southern Europe. This indicates that alcohol culture is important for the outcome of drinking even though the method can’t distinguish between whether this
culture influences the drinking pattern, which in turn increases the risk for violence, or whether alcohol culture instead influences drunken comportment independently of the drinking pattern.

In recent years some qualitative work has used the time-out concept, partly to develop the thinking around the time-out perspective and partly as a way to understand young people’s drunken behaviour. Abel and Plumridge (2004) use focus groups to study whether it is fruitful to talk about a societal norm when it comes to drunken behaviour. Their conclusion from a very limited sample (only two focus groups) was that there is little support for societal norms; they argue that the norms for drunken behaviour are different in different networks and that the level of analysis should be located to a meso, network level. Engineer et al. (2003) used focus group discussions with young people in England and Wales in an attempt to understand (among other things) young people’s experiences of crime and disorder, and how these experiences were related to drinking patterns, attitudes to drinking and binge drinking. They found that drunkenness was viewed as an acceptable excuse.

**Intoxication within criminological theory**

Even though crimes of violence constitute a rather central theme within criminology, and alcohol consumption is very often involved in criminal violence, alcohol is surprisingly absent from criminological theory.1 When Pernanen (1993) exemplifies the wide range of the research on alcohol and violence, he mentions epidemiology, sociology, psychology and biochemistry. It could be argued that the fact that so many disciplines are already conducting research on alcohol and violence means that it’s not necessary to incorporate research on alcohol and violence into traditional criminology. On the other hand, however, one could argue that the absence of criminologists constitutes a drawback. The knowledge criminologists bring with them might develop research on alcohol and violence, at the same time as this research might also provide an opportunity to develop criminological theories.

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1 Or it might not be so surprising. Room (1984a; Room 1984b) suggests that parts of the scientific world felt a need to dissociate themselves from the temperance movement, and that alcohol became a cultural divide. “In North America particularly, by the end of 1920s abstention from drinking or concern about alcohol problems became for young progressives an outdated cultural style associated with rural conservative know-nothings” (Room 1984b, p. 10). As a result, the importance of alcohol as a problem was de-emphasized in much scientific work for a period of 50 years. If the same logic were to apply to criminologists, this would explain the relatively low interest in including alcohol in criminological theories, at least those from the US, that have emerged during the period between 1940 and 1970.
Depending on which perspective one chooses as the basis for an understanding of the relationship between alcohol and violence, different perspectives within the criminological framework would be of interest. To put the time-out perspective into a criminological framework is not completely unproblematic. The theory has obvious similarities or connections with such theories as Merton’s strain theory (strain), Sutherland’s theory of differential association (criminal behaviour is learned), and Sykes and Matza’s techniques of neutralization (control theory).

If we take the learning aspect as the starting point, Sutherland seems to be the first choice. Sutherland’s theory of differential association suggests that criminal or delinquent behaviour involves the learning of techniques relating to how to commit crime, and motivates rationalizations and attitudes which are positive towards or at least approving of violations of the law. Sutherland argued that people received influences which were favourable towards crime and other influences unfavourable to crime, and a person who was exposed to many influences favourable towards crime was at greater risk of becoming a delinquent (Sutherland 1947). This is relevant to both how drunken behaviour is learned and how drunken comportment can be excused or rationalized.

If you focus on the underlying assumption that people need to get it out of their system, Merton’s (1938) strain theory is interesting. Even though a society provides alcohol as an excuse for all of its citizens, MacAndrew and Edgerton (1969) imply that the need for or the propensity to take advantage of this possibility might depend on the level of frustration within the individual. From that perspective Merton’s strain theory could be relevant.

If one focuses on the rationale or logic or the history behind the time-out idea, there are many similarities with Sykes and Matza’s techniques of neutralization. Sykes and Matza explained crime and especially youth crime by reference to the possibilities for neutralising one’s bad behaviour. Sykes and Matza wrote their seminal article, “Techniques of neutralization: A theory of delinquency” (1957) in opposition to Cohen (1955), who explained youth delinquency in terms of working class youth’s rejection of middle class norms – arguing that they created their own norms which allowed them to engage in criminal acts. Sykes and Matza argued that the middle-class values were held by all. Criminal behaviour was made possible by certain techniques which made it possible to temporarily overrule general norms for their behaviour. Sykes and Matza made the connection to Sutherland’s differential association theory in suggesting that the learning of these techniques of neutralization is
part of Sutherland’s learning process, of motives and rationalizations favourable to crime.

In the early 1960s, Austin wrote about accounts – explanations offered of one’s behaviour – as verbal devices that are crucial for the social order; they prevent conflicts by verbally bridging the gap between action and expectations (Austin 1961). A later and more specific definition of an account is “talk designed to recast the pejorative significance of action, or one’s responsibility for it, and thereby transform others’ negative evaluations” (Buttny 1993, p. 1). Austin (1961) divided accounts into two categories, excuses and justifications – both of which must be socially approved of. An excuse is an account in which the actor admits the negative significance of the action in question but denies full responsibility. An excuse has to be socially approved, and in most cases there are limits for the severity of the act that could be excused. Scott and Lyman (1968) distinguished four forms in which excuses are normally formulated: an appeal to accidents, scapegoating, an appeal to defeasibility and an appeal to biological drives (p. 47). The appeal to accidents is a way of referring to the hazards in the environment; a lateness to work could be excused because of unexpected heavy traffic. But if this excuse is used too often, the person will not be excused, since he should have known better and started the journey earlier. Scapegoating is a way of shifting the responsibility to another, to say that the behaviour was a response to the behaviour or attitudes of someone else. The last two have the most relevance for the alcohol excuse. Defeasibility relates to the mental elements in actions such as knowledge and will. An excuse can then be that the person did the bad thing but he was not fully informed or aware of the consequences, or that he did not intend the consequences: “if I had known that someone would get hurt I would not have done that”. Another way could be to contest the volition involved: “yes I happened to hit him but I did not intend to hurt him”. Scott and Lyman themselves made the connection to alcohol, as they state that both knowledge and will can be impaired by alcohol intoxication. The last form of excuse is the appeal to biological drives. This is a way of reducing responsibility by referring to a “natural” order that determines people’s actions. Scott and Lyman gave the example of how males have excused their infidelity by referring to the “higher male sexual drives”. This is interesting in connection with alcohol and violence, since people often express a belief that alcohol causes violence (see Graham & West 2001). It is also interesting since one of

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2 In the work of Sykes and Matza (1957), denial of responsibility is the first of their five techniques of neutralizations. There is no opposition between their logics but Scott and Lyman elaborate on this aspect more than Sykes and Matza.
the perspectives mentioned above more or less tries to establish a link between biological drives and alcohol-related violence. If such a link can be found, it will probably also increase the possibility of using alcohol as an excuse for bad behaviour.

Justification, on the other hand, is a socially approved vocabulary that neutralizes an act. The actor accepts responsibility for the act, but denies its negative quality. Scott and Lyman (1968) pointed out that the most relevant neutralization techniques when it comes to justification are those that Sykes and Matza (1957) called “the denial of injury,” “denial of the victim,” “condemnation of the condemners” and the “appeal to higher loyalties.” The first two seem to be the most relevant for alcohol-related aggression.

The time-out concept and techniques of neutralization share some fundamental aspects. They both resist the idea that norm-breaking behaviour is the result of inner evil or that alcohol per se changes people for the worse. Instead they understand norm-breaking behaviour from a learning perspective – that social behaviour is learned in interaction with others. They also carry the belief that norm-breaking behaviour is not the result of a moral collapse in society; on the contrary, they assume that most people embrace societal norms and in addition make a connection between norm-breaking behaviour and norm-abiding behaviour. “In that sense, the delinquent both has his cake and eats it too, for he remains committed to the dominant normative system and yet so qualifies its imperatives that violations are ‘acceptable’ if not ‘right’” (Sykes & Matza 1957, p. 667). Finally, they are very similar in their rationale for norm-breaking behaviour; breaking the norms is possible through a temporary redefinition of behaviours or the norm system.

The question then is: could the time-out concept be incorporated into the techniques of neutralization as a special sixth form of justification, focusing on alcohol? There is a significant difference between these perspectives. Sykes and Matza (1957) formulate their theory in opposition to Cohen’s theory, that there existed competing or countervailing values and norms, and built their theory on the assertion that the wrong-doer would be committed to the dominant social order. Since they believed that “everyone” was committed to these norms, their question was: why do people violate laws in which they believe? Thus, their concept of techniques of neutralization was formulated in answer to this question – these techniques facilitated the violation of norms. In MacAndrew and Edgerton’s theory, normal norms are changed to another set of norms in the time-out situation. Thus, it would not require a technique of neutralization to facilitate norm-breaking behaviour, since the norm itself was changed.
Both these formulations could be questioned. MacAndrew and Edgerton themselves were rather unclear about the extent of a general acceptance of the time-out concept, especially when it comes to a modern diverse society. Even in their own discussion they gave examples which questioned the generality of the changes in norms. In addition, they sometimes wrote about alcohol as an excuse, something which would be unnecessary if there was a general understanding of the fact that other norms should be applied for drunken behaviour. As for techniques of neutralization, it has been suggested that delinquents don’t need techniques of neutralization since they aren’t committed to conventional beliefs (see Agnew 1994 for a discussion). Or one might wonder whether there is a strict difference between a person who is strongly committed to a belief but who can override this commitment with techniques of neutralization and a person who has a weaker belief in conventional norms and therefore sometimes breaks these norms. The distinction between neutralization and a subculture perspective requires a stability in beliefs which might be questioned. It is therefore difficult to distinguish or test whether the time-out concept or techniques of neutralization constitute the most appropriate theory.

This work does not have the aim of testing which theory is the most relevant for an understanding of drunken behaviour. Using the categorisation presented by Scott and Lyman, they could complement each other, since excuses mostly relate to circumstances associated with the aggressor, and justification partly relates to the aggressor but also to the victim.

**Summary**

MacAndrew and Edgerton’s work on drunken comportment has had a major influence on the way we understand drunken behaviour. Their emphasis on locating the effects of alcohol in a social context was not only ground breaking, it is still influential 35 years later. As has been shown above, more recent research in several fields has provided support for the idea of going beyond the pharmacological effect of alcohol in the explanation of drunken comportment.

There are, however, a number of drawbacks. To some extent these drawbacks are related to the original theory. MacAndrew and Edgerton were not very clear about the importance of drinking context, nor about the possibility of having several different norm systems regarding the excuse value of alcohol. They were also uncertain as to the applicability of the theory in a large and polymorphous modern national society. Other drawbacks are related to the way the scientific world has tried to use and test MacAndrew and Edgerton’s
theory. Even though the theory places emphasis on cultural differences in the understanding of drunken comportment, most studies have been conducted in the USA and on a limited category of subjects, college students. An application of the theory in other societies and across a broader subject base would be good. More cross-cultural studies are needed, or at least more culture-bound studies in different cultures.

This dissertation
This thesis builds on two different projects which have been undertaken within a framework of studies of Alcohol and Drug Use in Youth Cultures and Subcultures at the Centre for Social Research on Alcohol and Drugs (SoRAD) at Stockholm University. The first paper derives from a project with the aim of studying the meaning of alcohol in different subcultures. The other papers are the result of a project which had a focus on expectations and experiences of intoxication and violence among young adults in Sweden. The first study was funded by the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs and the study was conducted together with Dr Felipe Estrada. The second study was funded by the Swedish council for working life and social research. Support has also been provided via a pre-doctoral fellowship at the Department of Criminology at Stockholm University. The first study was originally headed by Professor Robin Room and Dr Felipe Estrada. Dr Estrada conducted the focus groups, which then were analysed by Kalle Tryggvesson. The second phase of the study (the quantitative study) was headed by Dr Sandra L. Bullock and Kalle Tryggvesson, with Robin Room as the supervisor.

Aims
In a broad sense, the aim of this dissertation is to study young Swedes’ attitudes, experiences and expectancies around alcohol and drunken behaviour, with a special focus on expectancies around alcohol as a cause and excuse for violence. Thus it is both an attempt to understand more about young Swedes’ relations to alcohol and drunken behaviour but it is also an attempt to test and develop some aspects of the time-out theory.

Specific objectives
-To study the meaning and rationale of drinking and being drunk among Swedish youth and how drunkenness is constructed, with a special focus on pharmacological effects versus social effects.
-To study experiences, expectations and rationales among young Swedes when it comes to alcohol as a cause of and an excuse for violence.
-To study norms for drunken behaviour; are they different from norms for sober behaviour?
- If it is possible to find a change in the norm system as a result of alcohol involvement, is this change dependent on contextual circumstances such as the victim’s drinking, the severity of the incident, the relationship with the aggressor/victim, the level of drunkenness, the level of provocation, or the state of mind of the aggressor?
- If it is possible to find a change in the norm system, is this a general change accepted by all people or does it vary between different subpopulations?
- Is there a connection between holding a belief in alcohol as an excuse and experience of involvements in violence?

**Important concepts**

**Violence/aggression**

Violence is a very broad term, too broad to be really meaningful. There are few connections between violence during war, violence during sexual assaults and violence in a boxing match. Therefore there are several different definitions of violence in the scientific literature, focusing on the different nature of acts, relations etc. In this work we have not followed any strict definition. In study II our respondents were free to define violence as they wanted when they discussed their experiences. Most of the time the experiences were related to interpersonal physical violence between males. In our two vignette studies we defined the violence in the constructions of our vignette. Both vignettes described physical violence between two males in a bar. Our intention was to describe a violent act which was understood as intentional on the part of the aggressor and unpleasant and unwelcome for the victim. In our last study we gave the following definition of violence: any physical altercation including an incident involving pushing, shoving, hitting, a fight or assault whether physical or sexual.

**Age**

In MacAndrew and Edgerton’s work, they did not specify whether the time-out concept would be related to age. However, most studies which have tried to test different aspects of the time-out theory have used young respondents. Besides the convenience of using students, the interest in young people can often, as in Sweden, be justified by the fact that both intoxication and exposure to violence are high during these years. Young people report a high frequency of both alcohol consumption and involvement in violence. At the beginning of the 21st century, the highest alcohol consumption in Sweden is among people in their early twenties (Leifman & Gustafsson, 2003) and the experience of violence is highest among young people aged 16-24 years old (Häll, 2004).
Gender
As some of the quotes from MacAndrew and Edgerton highlighted, the time-out concept is not restricted to males, even though there is a gender difference when it comes to the nature of the acts one has to (or could?) excuse. Male drinking seemed to result in violence and sexual behaviour, whereas female drinking was mostly related to sexual behaviour; thus there was a difference not in the rationale but in the nature of acts needing to be excused. Landers, Pettersson and Tiby define gender theory in the following way: “Gender theory means that the researcher apply a theoretical framework which focuses on the relation between males and females, describes how gender is constructed, presented and structures our daily lives in all areas” (2003 pp. 7-8, my translation)

In a simplistic way this has two important implications for the current work. Firstly, if we believe that there are different norms operating for males and females, when it comes to the behaviour of interest, we need to study both boys and girls and we need do make it possible to visualise the differences between them. Secondly, it suggests that gender is not something static but an ongoing process – something which needs to be achieved and defended. As Zimmerman (1987) suggests, you can be afraid of becoming “unfeminine” but you don’t need to be afraid of becoming “unfemale”. This process is always alive, but there are probably some arenas or times that are particularly interesting when it comes to “doing gender”. The present work very much relates to such areas, where masculinity or femininity is “constructed”. Violence has been suggested to be the ultimate symbol of masculinity and in the same way heavy drinking has been seen as a way of showing masculinity – one might very well hear someone say “drink like a man”, whereas one would be very unlikely to hear anyone saying, at least not as a suggestion to drink more, that you should drink like a real woman. Thus, having a gender perspective may provide one way to understand the meaning of drinking, as well as the meaning of drunken behaviour.

Since we have reason to believe that there are different norms when it comes to drinking and behaviour when drunk, we have divided the youngsters into two categories, males and females. This is not however a way of explaining differences by reference to biological criteria, but is rather something we have done in order to understand the differences between norms system for boys and girls, and how alcohol may constitute a means of acting within the norms that prevail for boys, in the sense that alcohol can be used to prove masculinity for example.
Materials and Methods
The papers in this dissertation are based on three different empirical materials. Studies I and II are based on focus groups interviews from two different projects. Studies III-V are based on a quantitative data material.

Focus group interviews
In the first two articles we used the focus-group interview method. We chose this method since in both studies we wanted to achieve a deeper understanding of people’s attitudes and beliefs about alcohol and how attitudes and beliefs are constructed and articulated. Morgan (1996) describes focus group interviews as a “research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher” (p. 130). Morgan also notes that this definition is quite broad, but it points to three important aspects. Firstly, it states that the focus group is a research method with the aim of collecting data, and which is thus not devoted to other aims such as therapy, education etc. Secondly, it points to interaction in the group discussion as the source of the data. Thirdly, it recognizes the researcher’s active role in the data collection.

Focus group interviews are similar to group interviews, but with the specific aim of gaining additional information through the interaction between the respondents (Kitzinger 1988). The basic idea is to gather a group of persons and let them have a discussion around the subject that is of interest to the researcher. The discussion should be as natural or as like an ordinary conversation between the members of the group as possible. In addition, all focus groups have a moderator. According to Morgan (1996) focus groups can have different levels of structure, and it is the moderator’s responsibility to see to it that the interview takes place at the right level. Two aspects determine the level of structure. Firstly, when it comes to what the participants discuss, in a less structured interview the moderator leaves the decision as to what topics the group wants to talk about to the group itself, whereas in a more structured session, the moderator controls which topics are discussed. Secondly, the structure also depends on how much the moderator controls the group dynamics, – how active the moderator is in encouraging someone to talk or in holding someone back so that no one takes over the conversation.

There are no clear rules about how focus groups should be conducted. Wibeck (2000) suggests that each session should involve 4-6 participants. It has been suggested that 4-6 sessions should be held before one achieves saturation, at which point a new session would add very little new information. If the sampling strategy has been to cover different segments or different categories
of participants (such as people of different age, sex, marital status etc.), a higher number of sessions is needed. This is often also the case if there is a high diversity between participants in the groups or between the subjects discussed, or if the standardization is low (Morgan 1996). There is also a discussion in the methodological literature about whether participants should know each other before the session or if they should be strangers. It has been suggested that if the participants know each other there may be internal languages and structures that limit the researcher’s ability to understand the interaction in the group. In addition, some aspects might remain undiscussed, since the participants already know what all the others think. On the other hand, it has been argued that interactions between participants are often better between people that already know one another. A last argument has been that the use of existing groups facilitates the recruitment of participants (Wibeck 2000).

When, then, do focus group interviews constitute a fruitful method for the collection of data? Wibeck (2000) suggests that focus group interviews are especially fruitful to use when the aim is to elicit how the “participants together think about a phenomenon”, rather than what individual respondents think (p. 42), that is, when the aim is to study attitudes, norms and beliefs which one believes are common among people. Morgan (1996) adds that focus groups have an advantage over other research methods in that they provide important information not only about what people say; the interaction in the group also provides an insight into why people say what they say and do as they do. This reflects the fact that focus group participants are not only asked to present their standpoint on a topic; they also question each other and have to explain their standpoint to the others, “What makes the discussion in focus groups more than the sum of separate individual interviews is the fact that the participants both query each other and explain themselves to each other” (Morgan 1996, p. 139). In the same vein, Wibeck (2000) argues that people most often don’t have clear and stable views or opinions – these are often created in a context together with other people. How our views and opinions are formed in interaction with others is one of the important issues in focus groups. Thus, focus groups not only give information about people’s views or understandings, they also provide information on how these views or understandings are created. Finally, and sometimes crucially, focus groups also provide information on how stable or unstable these views and understandings are. In contrast, a survey involves a substantial risk of presenting an opinion as more stable than it actually is. On the other hand, Morgan (1996) argues that a traditional survey has an advantage if you are interested in the prevalence of a specific attitude or
experience. Thus there are good reasons to combine focus group interviews with other methods.

Morgan (1996) has shown that focus group interviews have often been combined with other research methods. Thus, focus groups can be used both as the sole data collection method, or they can be combined with other forms of data collection. Further, Morgan showed that focus groups were often used in combination with traditional surveys. This combination could take one of four different forms: with the survey as the main method and focus group interviews as a means to develop the themes and questions; secondly, with the focus groups as the main method and the survey used primarily as an aid in identifying people who might have something important to contribute in the focus groups; thirdly, with the survey as the main method, and with focus groups being used in a follow-up role as a means of understanding and interpreting the results; and fourthly, with focus groups as the main method and the survey being used as a follow-up method, as a way of testing findings from the interviews for example.

In Study I, the focus group interview was our sole method of data collection. The study is based on 4 focus group interviews which involved 17 males aged 17-27. The interviews were conducted during the European football championship in Holland in 2000. The only inclusion criteria were that the participants should be a group of friends who were Swedish football fans and below 35 years of age. The number of participants in each group varied, since our sampling strategy was to find existing groups. One group consisted of seven persons, two groups consisted of four persons each and one of the sessions involved two participants only, which makes it highly questionable if it can be called a focus group. We had no ambition to divide our sample into segments – we treated all participants as belonging to the same group of Swedish football fans. Both authors participated in every session; however, one had the responsibility of acting as the principal moderator. The sessions could be described as semi-structured; we had a semi-structured questionnaire protocol, with topics that we wanted to cover, and the moderator acted to facilitate a high level of involvement among all participants. However, with the exception of the large group, the discussions flowed well most of the time, and the majority of the participants became involved in the discussion without much effort from the moderator. We recruited the participants by walking the streets of Eindhoven, the town where Sweden played their two last group games within five days of one another. The sessions were held at different bars, an environment where the participants seemed to feel comfortable.
In our second project, focus group interviews were used in combination with our survey – we used the results when we constructed our questionnaire for the survey which constitutes the base for Studies III-V. The focus groups were also used independently as the material for the analyses presented in Study II. The sampling strategy was somewhat more complicated in our second project. This time there was an emphasis on covering different segments of society – we wanted representation from both working class and middle class, and youths with both Swedish and non-Swedish backgrounds. Since the recommendation is to use homogenous groups, using different groups to cover different segments, the number of sessions had to increase (Wibbeck 2000). This study drew on eight sessions involving a total of 47 students in the age group 18-20 (with one exception aged 23), and with a fairly even balance between the genders – 26 females and 21 males. All the students lived in the Stockholm area. The interviews were conducted during the first half of 2000. At that time, each school had a geographic catchment area, and since the city is relatively segregated we were able to combine information on school and educational programme (practical or academic) to identify classes which would result in a relatively good coverage of different segments. Contact was initiated through a teacher, who was instructed to select a number of participants, not all of whom were close friends. Two groups consisted of both males and females, three groups involved only males, and three groups involved only females. The ambition was to analyse differences between the segments and between the groups with different gender composition; this was never done in a systematic way, however. The sessions were held in a room at the participants’ school, with no representative from the school present during the interviews. The participants were rewarded with a cinema ticket. Two moderators participated in each focus group, one male and one female. A semi-structured question protocol was used.

Studies III-V are based on the quantitative data material which was collected for this project. A total of 1004 young adults between the ages of 16 and 25 from across Sweden participated in a computer-aided telephone interview study (CATI). Phone numbers were selected randomly, and if more than one person in a given household fell within the age criteria, the most recent birthday method was used to select the participant. The sample consisted of 485 males and 519 females. The average age was 19.7 years (SD = 3.0), and the response rate was 73.8%. Interviews lasted on average 22.5 minutes. The fieldwork was conducted in October, November and December of 2001 (for more information about the sample see the appendix).
Studies III and IV are based on the vignette technique. Both of those studies have used the vignette method to elicit cultural norms around drunken behaviour by studying whether respondents judge or evaluate behaviour differently depending on whether this behaviour is described as being performed by sober or drunk people.

The vignette technique
A vignette is a description of a particular situation or condition which involves certain elements of interest for the researcher. The story can be generated from different sources and can be presented in different ways, including as a written text, audio tape or video tape. After the vignette is presented, the respondents are expected to respond to it in some way. Sometimes the vignette is a stimulus to an in-depth interview and in other cases the respondents are asked to rate their responses on a standardized questionnaire. On occasion, as in our example, certain aspects of the vignette are manipulated in a way which makes it possible to study the influence of different factors in the situation (Hughes & Huby 2002).

The vignette technique has been used in social science for a long time, and Gould (1996) notes that its increasing popularity can be understood from the increasing awareness of the limitations of traditional questionnaires when one wants to study attitudes, perceptions, beliefs and norms. There are many advantages linked to the vignette technique when it comes to studying the social world. Compared with observational techniques, it is less expensive and faster, and it is possible to turn the respondents towards the question at issue. It can be applied when the focus is on behaviour that would be unethical or impossible to observe, either in reality or in an experimental situation. Compared to traditional surveys, the vignette technique has the advantage of reducing the influence of socially desirable responses (Hughes & Huby 2002).

The reduction in the influence of socially desirable responses is in our case a result of varying the independent variables between subjects. In each vignette we had four independent variables. For example, one of our independent variables was the aggressor’s level of intoxication. Each respondent was randomly assigned one version of the variable: sober, tipsy or drunk. The analyses were then performed between subjects; thus we compared the evaluation of the aggressor by those who were presented a sober aggressor with the evaluation of those who were presented a drunk aggressor. In other words, our respondents were not asked explicitly to answer self-consciously as to whether alcohol changed their moral evaluation of the aggressor or not.
All the independent variables were randomly assigned for each respondent. The possibility of manipulating a number of aspects in the vignette was an advantage for us since we wanted to study the effect of alcohol in different contexts. Our main variable was the aggressor’s drinking, and besides that we manipulated four\(^3\) contextual factors which could be relevant. Several earlier studies have shown that the severity of the event and the victim’s drinking are important. In addition, our focus-group interviews indicated that the aggressor’s mindset could be a determining factor for whether his drinking should provide an excuse, and finally we were interested in whether people would be more prone to provide the drunken excuse for someone they were familiar with than for someone else. However the manipulation of factors has its practical limits due to both power considerations and also conceptually. We therefore created four different vignettes in order to cover as broad a range of behaviours as possible. The focus in the project was on violence, and in the focus groups, which were used in order to create incidents relevant to the respondents, there were very few stories about drunken girls who became violent, thus our vignettes involved only male aggressors.\(^4\) Besides the physical violence between males which seemed to have a natural connection with alcohol consumption, the participants also talked about males who committed sexual offences or sexual violence towards females. We therefore constructed vignettes describing an unwanted touching (as yet not analysed) and rape (see Bullock, in press). In these vignettes we manipulated other contextual variables.

The remaining two vignettes, that are analysed in this work, concern male-to-male violence. Since many of the experimental studies (Gustafson, 1993) have shown that alcohol increases aggression under provocative circumstances, we constructed one vignette to describe unprovoked violence and one that described provoked violence. The possibility for making comparisons between vignettes is, of course, smaller than the possibilities for making comparisons between different aspects within each vignette, but in order to cover a broad range of behaviour this was the only possibility available to us.

The vignette technique has of course its limitations. The vignettes are simulations of reality, and even though the researcher tries to make this simulation as real as possible it can never reflect the dynamics of reality. In the words of Hughes (1998),

\(^3\) In total, we manipulated five different variables in the vignettes reported in this dissertation.
\(^4\) The focus groups showed that the drunken excuse was used by both males and females – the same rationale was used but for different behaviours.
The use of vignettes is, however, not unproblematic. Individuals are constantly responding to the people and the environment around them and one of the main criticisms levelled at the vignette technique is that it neglects the interaction and feedback that is a necessary part of life (p. 383).

Hughes points at a real problem: the simulations can never mirror or match the complexity of real life. However, how much of a problem this is depends on the purpose of the vignette. Hughes continues,

If vignettes are employed in an attempt to match real life experiences then they have clear limitations. If however they are used to provide an interpretation of the real world and present it in such a way that provides people with a situated context in which to respond then they can make a useful contribution to research methodology. Vignettes highlight selected parts of the real world that can help unpack individuals’ perception, beliefs, and attitudes to a wide range of social issues (Hughes 1998, p. 384).

Of course, even if one wants to provide interpretations of the real world, the quality of the interpretations depends on the design of the study and how the vignettes are constructed. Gould (1996) highlights some of the problems with vignette methodology and states that the most important problem concerns external and internal validity. External validity is related to the possibility of generalizing from the results. Two aspects are crucial here, the sampling method and the possibility of generalizing from one isolated behaviour to other behaviours. Compared to many other studies our sampling method is rather satisfactory. We used a random digit dialling sample with an acceptable result, which suggests a rather high likelihood that our sample is representative of young Swedes in the age range of 16-25.

The next question is more problematic: what is the possibility of making generalisations from the vignette context? Can our vignette tell us anything about drunken aggression under other circumstances than those described in the vignettes? Since we manipulated different variables in the scenarios in order to measure the effect in a special context, one should be careful in making generalisations to circumstances beyond those described in the scenario. However, looking at the different vignettes together would probably increase the possibility for generalization to a broader range of circumstances.

Three crucial aspects of the internal validity of our vignettes are: whether the vignette genuinely portrays the phenomena of interest, whether the
manipulations of the independent variables are conducted in a sufficient way, and whether the dependent variables measure what we intended. For a vignette to genuinely portray the phenomena of interest, it is important that the researcher constructs stories which are both real and relevant for the respondents, that they give sufficient information but not too much. To make our vignettes as real and relevant as possible we tried to build them upon the information we had collected from our initial focus groups. One problem associated with the relevance factor may be the respondent’s age. If the scenario is age-sensitive it might seem less relevant for some of the respondents (young people asked about behaviour only engaged in by adults for example). Since our respondents’ age span is relatively moderate and we did not specify the age of the people in the vignette, these risks were limited.

Our main independent variable was the aggressor’s intoxication. Three different options were considered for the manipulation of intoxication: firstly, by specifying the number of drinks the person had been drinking, which gives an “objective” measurement in the sense that everyone understands the exact level of drinking. On the other hand, people respond differently to the same amount of alcohol, so it might give little information about the person’s intoxication in the vignette. A second option was by specifying the vignette person’s subjective feeling of intoxication, which gives somewhat more information about the level of intoxication in the vignette. However, it gives less information if one wants to specify for which level of drinking alcohol can work as an excuse. The third way would be to provide examples of drunken behaviour, which might be the strongest indicator of intoxication, but also perhaps the most subjective, and with problems in specifying differences between levels – i.e. how to describe the differences between being slightly drunk and very drunk.

We decided for the second alternative. We were not interested in exact amounts of drinking, and we wanted to be able to specify different levels of intoxication. However it might have been problematic if the respondents read alcohol consumption in other ways than purely on the basis of our descriptions. Thus, if we describe a man in a bar who starts a fight, even if we have described him as sober, the rest of his behaviour seems to be that of a drunken man, and therefore the respondent may read in some intoxication even though we wanted them to see the man as being sober. As one of our dependent variables, we had asked the respondents how much they believed that the alcohol contributed to the incident. This variable could be used as an indication of how well our alcohol manipulations worked. In Study III we used three different levels for the aggressor’s intoxication: sober, tipsy and
drunk. When the aggressor was described as sober, the respondents ascribed less importance to the alcohol consumption (mean score 2.8) than when the aggressor was tipsy (mean score 6.9) or drunk (mean score 8.0). In Study IV we used only two different levels of intoxication for the aggressor: tipsy or drunk. When he was described as drunk, the respondents believed that alcohol contributed more to the incident (mean score, 7.1) than when he was described as tipsy (mean score, 5.9). The first figure presented in Study III in particular, showing that some respondents believed that the aggressor’s drinking contributed to the incident even though we described him as sober, indicates that our manipulation of the aggressor’s drinking was not perfect and to some extent it increases the risk that our results underestimate the effect of alcohol.

In the next step we did some pilot interviews to see if our vignettes and specifically the manipulated elements of them were understandable.

Dependent variables
The quality of vignette studies in large part depends on the dependent variables. There are different ways to measure the response. For example you can ask about expectations of behaviour or normative suggestions for actual behaviour, but you can also ask for value judgements. In our studies we have had the aim of eliciting cultural norms around drunken behaviour by studying how drunken behaviour is viewed compared to sober behaviour under certain specified circumstances. The operationalization of changes in the norm system has been done in different ways in earlier vignette studies in the field, but the main technique has been to ask the respondents to evaluate those involved in the incident described in the vignette. The evaluation has been done in different ways, often via the attribution of three different factors: blame, responsibility and cause, with the assumption being that these concepts are related but at the same time measure different things.

Thus, whereas causal attribution pertains to the factors that produce an event, attribution of responsibility involves a judgement regarding an individual’s accountability for the event and attribution of blame is an evaluative judgement concerning the implicated individual’s liability for censure (Bradbury & Fincham 1990, p. 18.).

Since we are interested in whether there exist other norms for drunken behaviour, we are most interested in the evaluative judgement of the person,

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5 A Scheffe post-hoc test showed significant differences between all three groups, p<0.001.
6 A t-test showed that the difference was significant, p<0.001.
not only whether he is responsible for the incident. In addition, blame is the most commonly used outcome variable in the literature and therefore the one with most potential for comparisons. One of our dependent variables was therefore the attribution of blame. The blame question was formulated “on a scale from 1 to 10, how much blame should be put on Håkan / the stranger / Tobbe) for this happening, where 1 equals none at all, and 10 equals a lot of blame?” In an attempt to isolate the moral aspect of blame from the more causal aspect of responsibility, we included a control variable in the models which measured how much the respondents believed that it was the alcohol which had led to the incident.

An important phenomenon, which MacAndrew and Edgerton used in support of the time-out concept, was that many societies gave, more or less formally, a reduction in punishment for drunken misbehaviour. Some studies have tried to go beyond the attribution of blame on an individual level and tried to measure the respondent’s view of the societal or institutional reaction to the drunken behaviour which is required. This has been done by asking for judgements concerning legal aspects such as punishment, which presuppose responsibility, but which also add something extra besides the inclusion of blame.

We tried to do something similar by including a question on whether the incident should be reported to the police. The inclination to report an incident to the police depends on several factors. Important factors that have been mentioned include, for example, the severity of the violence, the relationship between aggressor and victim, beliefs in the meaningfulness of calling the police, and fear of revenge (Häll 2004). From a time–out perspective, it is also possible that alcohol might be a determining factor. In the present work, (Study II) young Swedes felt that the act was seen as less severe and the aggressor as less deviant when alcohol was involved, which would probably would their likelihood of reporting an aggressive act to the police. That alcohol could affect the likelihood of reporting violence to the police was also supported in a Swedish study of reasons to refrain from reporting incidents to the police. One explanation for the decision not to call the police was “the aggressor was intoxicated” (Häll 2004, p. 77). Besides indicating a change in how the act was viewed, the above statement could also be an indication that people see it as meaningless to report drunken behaviour to the police. Thus, from the beginning we planned that this measure would be a measure of whether people viewed drunken acts differently, and whether this difference was important enough to also affect a rather concrete measure of whether state institutions should be involved or not.
The police variable was formulated: “on a scale from 1 to 10, should the police be called, and the incident reported, where 1 equals definitely should not call, and 10 equals definitely should call”?

The final article is based on traditional survey questions which are described in the article itself and are therefore not discussed here.

Summary of papers

Paper I. A part of the game – Alcohol, football fans and male comradeship.

Football is one of the world’s most popular sports, both when it comes to the number of players involved in the game and the number of spectators or fans. A lot of attention has been drawn to the supporters’ consumption of alcohol, most often in combination with violence. Less interest has been taken in the role and involvement of alcohol for the large number of supporters who do not become involved in violence. This study describes the role of alcohol for ordinary football supporters. What do fans drink and why? Our starting point was the research on the culture of football supporters where we identified three important concepts for the understanding of fandom: masculinity, belonging and participation. We then analyzed the importance of alcohol in relation to these concepts. Our empirical material was collected through four focus-group interviews with Swedish football supporters during the European Championship in Eindhoven in 2000.

Alcohol was a central part of the supporter culture. The supporters were quite clinical in their discussion of why, how and how much alcohol they consumed in connection with football. They claimed that alcohol in general, and more specifically beer, helped them to achieve a moment of joy and relaxation and a sense of collectiveness. We did, however, find evidence that made this explicit attribution of positive effects more complex. The perceived alcohol intake was more important than the actual alcohol intake in achieving a desired level of intoxication. We therefore argue that beer has a symbolic importance for football supporters and that it was the specific situation that our supporters were experiencing, as much as the alcohol itself, that created the effect of the alcohol.
Paper II. The ambiguous excuse: attributing violence to intoxication – young Swedes about the excuse value of alcohol.

This study is a qualitative study of young Swede’s attitudes, experiences and expectations around alcohol, intoxication and violence. Eight focus-group interviews were conducted involving a total number of 47 participants aged between 18 and 20 (and one aged 23). Two groups were a mix of both males and females, three groups consisted of males only and three groups consisted of females only.

The aim of the study was to gain a deeper understanding regarding young people’s attitudes and beliefs about alcohol and violence, with a special focus on their experiences and beliefs regarding alcohol as an explanation and excuse for violent behaviour.

When the youths discussed their experience of violence, they talked about two different kinds of violence and two different arenas for violence. First, fights between males in school: those involved are sober and the fight is a “normal” end of a longer sequence of teasing. Second, fights between drunken males outside school, most often in connection with bars. This kind of fight, often between people unknown to each other, was only possible to understand and be seen as “normal” if those involved are drunk, otherwise there was something wrong with them.

The participants reported a strong belief in alcohol as a cause of violence. The rationale was most often related to the psychoactive effect of alcohol, that alcohol made them disinhibited, or more aggressive, more focused on the moment, focused on their image and so on. There were also references to the context, the crowded bar with a lot of males, but also to the fact that drunken persons are often clumsy and therefore provocative. Thus both the aggressor’s and the victim’s drunkenness were relevant.

The youths expressed somewhat ambivalent opinions about the excuse value of alcohol. On the one hand, asked a direct question, they said that intoxication was not an acceptable excuse. On the other hand, when they discussed their experience of violence or the use of alcohol as an excuse, they said that they used it, that other people used it and that it was accepted. They also suggested two different ways to understand the rationale. First, since alcohol can make people do things that they don’t really want to do, intoxication protects them from being seen as deviant – a drunken aggressor is just a drunk person doing something stupid, a sober aggressor is probably a psychopath. Second, somewhat related to the first, since the aggressive act is
not performed by an aggressive man, just a drunk man, the act is seen as less severe.

**Paper III. Is it a fight or are they just drunk? Attributions about drunken behaviour in a hypothetical male-to-male aggression scenario**

This paper uses a quantitative material to study cultural norms around norms for drunken behaviour. The theoretical framework is the time-out concept formulated by MacAndrew and Edgerton (1969). According to MacAndrew and Edgerton many societies have a double standard of norms, one for sober behaviour and another for drunken behaviour. In this paper we examine the excuse-value of alcohol in a hypothetical provoked male-to-male violence scenario. Since there are some uncertainties about in which context alcohol can be used as an excuse, we also varied three additional variables, the victim’s drinking, a relation between the respondent and either the aggressor or the victim, and the severity of the outcome. The changed norm system was measured in two different ways: does intoxication result in decreased blame, and does intoxication lessen the propensity to call the police?

Our sample consists of 1004 young Swedes aged 16-25. The interviews were conducted by RDD quantitative telephone interviews. The response rate was 73.8%. Besides the aggressor’s intoxication, the severity of the outcome, the victim’s intoxication and the respondent’s hypothetical relationship to the aggressor or to the victim were also randomly manipulated. Besides the manipulated variables, we also used in the analysis a number of background variables, for example drinking patterns, age, attitudes towards violence, peer behaviour etc., in order to see if a drunken excuse was stronger among certain groups or if it was evenly spread among our respondents. Whether the police should be called and the attribution of blame to the aggressor have been analysed using ANOVA in SAS.

Analyses were stratified by sex. For male respondents, the aggressor’s intoxication interacted (4-way) with all the manipulated variables in predicting the attribution of blame. In the more severe act, intoxication tended to reduce blame; the least amount of blame was assigned when both the aggressor and the victim were intoxicated. For female respondents, the aggressor’s intoxication was involved in a three-way interaction. For them, intoxication also decreases the blame for the severe acts but not for the less severe acts.
The aggressor’s intoxication had very little effect on whether or not the police should be called. The same was true of the background variables. The only time background variables showed a significant interaction was for females; those who had friends who often get drunk became less likely to call the police when the aggressor was drunk. This tends to indicate that there is a rather evenly spread opinion that alcohol to some extent can be used as an excuse. Alternative possible interpretations are that we did not have enough information to identify groups with different views, or that as a result of power considerations we had constructed too difficult a test.

This study of a hypothetical provoked male-to-male violence scenario indicated that there might be other norms for drunken behaviour, since intoxication reduced blame for the aggressor, but only for certain acts and under certain circumstances. We also made the interpretation that alcohol changed the way people perceive acts of violence.

**Paper IV. ”Oh, he was just drunk” Young adults’ views on alcohol as an excuse for violent behaviours.**

The aim of this study was to elicit cultural norms around drunken behaviour. The theoretical background is the time-out concept formulated by MacAndrew and Edgerton which suggests that a different norm system is applied for drunken behaviour, and drunken misbehaviour can therefore be excused. One aim in this project was to study whether the excuse-value of alcohol would differ between different contexts. Experimental studies have shown that provocation is an important divider – alcohol consumption increases aggression but only under provocative circumstances. We wanted to see if this also had implications for the excuse-value of alcohol. We therefore constructed vignettes with different levels of provocation. In this paper we examine the excuse-value of alcohol in a hypothetical unprovoked male-to-male violence scenario. In an attempt to study contextual factor facilitating or limiting the drunken excuse three other factors were manipulated besides the aggressor’s intoxication: the victim’s intoxication, the severity of the violence and the aggressor’s mindset. Excuse-value was conceptualised by means of two main questions. Does intoxication result in decreased blame? Does intoxication lessen the propensity to call the police?

The sample and the analyses were the same as in Study III. Analyses were stratified by sex. For male respondents, the aggressor’s intoxication interacted with the victim’s intoxication in predicting the attribution of blame. When the victim was drunk, the blame attributed to the aggressor decreased, whilst
there was no effect of the aggressor’s intoxication when the victim was only slightly drunk. For female respondents, the aggressor’s intoxication interacted with the severity of the outcome. Intoxication decreased the blame for severe acts but not for less severe acts.

The aggressor’s intoxication had no effect on whether the police should be called or not.

Our conclusion was that alcohol intoxication seems to provide some excuse-value for violence. However the assumption that there should exist one norm for drunken behaviour seems to be overly simplistic; the aggressor’s intoxication provides some excuse-value but it is limited and dependent on contextual factors.

**Study V. Is a belief that drinking is an excuse related to involvement in alcohol-related violence?**

The aim of this paper was to examine the relationship between alcohol consumption, attitudes regarding the excuse value of alcohol and involvement in alcohol-related violence.

1004 RDD quantitative telephone surveys were completed with Swedes aged 16-25. The response-rate was 73.8%. The survey included questions on alcohol consumption, alcohol-related attitudes and expectancies and norms for drunken behaviour and experience of violent behaviour. A principal-components factor analysis with a varimax rotation was conducted on the attitudinal questions. Among eight factors, one emerged which we labelled belief in alcohol as an excuse. Logistic regression analyses were used to study the relationship between alcohol consumption and attitudes and the probability of having reported involvement in alcohol-related violence.

Results: 88.9% of the respondents reported having drunk alcohol over the last twelve months. Of these, 15.9% reported at least one incident of alcohol-related violence. Frequency of intoxication, drinking in public places and heavy intoxication all showed a significant correlation with involvement in alcohol-related violence. When the different alcohol consumption measures were included in a logistic regression model, only heavy intoxication remained significant. In addition, the belief in alcohol as an excuse showed a significant correlation with involvement in alcohol-related violence. However the strength of this relationship diminished when heavy intoxication was included in the regression model.
**General discussion**

The common theme among the chapters in this dissertation has been young Swedes’ attitudes, experiences and expectations around alcohol and drunken behaviour. The theoretical background has been MacAndrew and Edgerton’s time-out theory, which suggests that the effect on drunken comportment is to some extent a social construction.

**Specific objectives**

- To study the meaning and rationale of drinking and being drunk among Swedish youth and how drunkenness is constructed, with a special focus on pharmacological effects versus social effects.
- To study experiences, expectations and rationales among young Swedes when it comes to alcohol as a cause and an excuse for violence.
- To study norms for drunken behaviour; are they different from norms for sober behaviour?
- If it is possible to find a change in the norm system as a result of alcohol involvement, is this change dependent on contextual circumstances such as the victim’s drinking, the severity of the incident, the relationship with the aggressor/victim, the level of drunkenness, the level of provocation, or the state of mind of the aggressor?
- If it is possible to find a change in the norm system, is this a general change accepted by all people or does it vary between different subpopulations?
- Is there a connection between holding the belief in alcohol as an excuse and experience of involvements in violence?

As the objectives are formulated, the first two more or less correspond to the qualitative studies while the last four primarily are answered by the quantitative studies. However, there is also a considerable overlap. A number of positive aspects were attributed by the participants to the consumption of alcohol and the state of intoxication. Alcohol had a symbolic meaning in the sense that the way you drink tells other people who you are. It seemed that drinking beer was a ticket into the collective of football fans, but drinking too much could ruin a reputation of being a serious football fan. Another interpretation would be that drinking too much could ruin the image of the drinker as a serious football fan, but only as the participants presented themselves to the researchers; other stories indicated that they could drink rather heavily when the “situation” was right. Alcohol was also used in a more instrumental way, as a means to achieve certain goals related to their football fandom. Drinking helped the participants to feel that they were part of a big collective of supporters, to extend the match situation, to relax and to increase their courage. They ascribed mainly positive effects to alcohol, but
there were also negative aspects of drinking, as mentioned above: being too drunk during a football game could ruin the football experience, and it could also constitute a threat to their reputation as a real supporter. Moreover, the participants in the focus groups in Study II indicated rather the same reasons for drinking and they ascribed similar effects of drinking on people’s comportment. Alcohol was expected to increase courage, to decrease inhibitions, to result in a greater focus on the moment. Since their discussion was related to violence to a rather high degree, violence was also seen as an effect of drinking. Their belief in a relationship between violence and alcohol was shown in several ways; in fact, many times they found it difficult to understand violence if alcohol was not involved. Both the qualitative studies show that one powerful reason for drinking is to decrease inhibitions. Alcohol is used to put the participants in a less controlled mode, and this uncontrolled mode opens up possibilities for both good and bad. They become free from the usual restraints, but at the same time increase the risk of becoming involved in violence, for example.

When the rationale for changes in drunken comportment was discussed, the pharmacological effect on the brain seemed to be the first idea that came to mind. On the other hand, both in the participants’ discussions and indirectly in the circumstances surrounding the interviews, it became clear that the changes in drunken comportment could be due to expectations and attitudes around alcohol and drunken behaviour. This became very clear in one of the interviews with the football supporters: they described a way of drinking where they talked about alcohol as if it was a medicine – what amount they had to drink to achieve exactly the right level of effect. What they didn’t know was that the beer they were drinking had a much lower alcohol content than they had expected, so even though the “medicine” they were given was much less potent than they thought, the same “dosage” was enough to give the right effect. This should not of course be seen as a scientific experiment and we can’t generalize from the incident, but it suggests at least the possibility that for some people under certain circumstances the expectations around alcohol are enough to turn water into beer.

When asked about whether alcohol could be used as an excuse, two things become clear. There was a norm which said that you should not make excuses; you should stand for what you do, even when drunk. On the other hand, there seemed to be a powerful norm that alcohol was in fact used as an excuse and

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7 On the Town Mayor’s order, only half strength beer, 2% alcohol, was sold during Euro 2000 (Chaudhary 2000)
that it worked. The informants suggested two primary rationales for the drunken excuse. First, a drunken aggressor was seen as less deviant and more normal. The same act, if it was done by someone who had not been drinking, would classify the aggressor as a “sick” person; if alcohol was involved, the aggressor was seen as a “drunk” person, which is a rather temporary state, and when sobered up, he could be seen as a normal person. Secondly, the act was sometimes seen as less severe when committed by a drunken aggressor.

As a result of the participants’ ambivalent feelings regarding the drunken excuse, it was difficult to learn about any contextual limits for the excuse value. Sometimes they stated that one could not use alcohol as an excuse. In stories about their lives, however, they also said that it was possible to excuse everything with intoxication. The way people argue in the focus groups suggests that alcohol is used as an excuse and that it is accepted. A few other recent studies have pointed in the same direction. Lalandier (1997) has shown how Swedish youths used the same logic when they explained certain forms of behaviour in a way that took the responsibility away. Abel and Plumridge (2004) and Engineer et al. (2003) argued that young people from New Zealand, England and Wales used the drunken excuse. However, they also indicate that the alcohol excuse is ambivalent and that there are different competing norm systems for drunken behaviour. Abel and Plumridge (2004) in particular suggest that research should focus on a meso, network level, concluding that different groups had different norm systems which ought to be studied. Even our participants indicated ambivalent attitudes or beliefs regarding the excuse value of alcohol, but, not so much in the way described by Abel and Plumridge. Our participants showed ambivalence about whether or not alcohol could be used as an excuse. Faced with a straight question, which of course carries the risk of getting a politically correct answer, they said that alcohol was not supposed to be used as an excuse; you should stand for what you do. However, when the focus was on something else, they were able to discuss for which acts alcohol could be used as an excuse. And finally, when they discussed their experiences without the normative focus, there seemed to be a very widespread agreement that alcohol was used as an excuse for almost everything and that it was accepted. This might suggest that Abel and Plumridge draw the wrong conclusion: norms are indeed not stable, but this may not be the result of a difference between networks; it might rather be a result of ambivalence even within the same network.

Much the same ambivalence about norms was expressed by some of the football fans, even if in their case it was about norms for drinking. They argued extensively that it was important for a real football supporter to avoid
being too drunk, that the intoxication should be controlled and used only to maximize the match experience. However, later they said that it might be OK to be drunk, as long as they remember everything. Of course, if someone offered them a drink they couldn’t say no, they continued; so finally they said that it might be OK even to drink so much that they didn’t remember anything at all, as long as they had a good time! Both these examples are a bit puzzling, showing that there are norms, but that in the “right” situation they are highly breakable.

Thus, it seems that many rules about drunken behaviour are breakable, if only the situation is right. Drunken behaviour, though, is not a condition totally free from norm systems. In the focus groups for Study II there were discussions about both males’ and females’ norm-breaking behaviour under intoxication. However very few stories involved female aggressors of physical violence. When females discussed their experience of drunken norm-breaking it mostly concerned behaviours such as talking too loudly, being too honest and thereby making people sad and flirting with the wrong guy. This suggests that intoxication does not totally override traditional gender roles and that norm breaking at least to large part take place within usual norms for respective gender.

The next question then might be what possibilities alcohol has within different gender roles? This project has strong limitations when it comes to that question, our vignette only deals with male norm breaking and our focus groups are poor in the analysis of female norm breaking since there were so few stories reported on females becoming violent in combination with alcohol. Some speculations can however be made on the basis of the focus groups. Many of the states of mind, which the participants ascribe to alcohol can be related to a traditional masculinity – you increase your courage, and you get cockier and aggressive. Thus it seems that alcohol can be used as a means of doing masculinity. The participants also made this connection when they discussed why alcohol is so connected to violence. Men drink alcohol and become manlier, then they meet each other at a club where they want to be even manlier in front of the girls and then, with all that manliness in the same place it can only end in violence.

However, the meaning of alcohol could vary from context to context. The football supporters agreed that it would be impossible to go on a supporter trip together with women. That would be impossible since women are “different” they want to do other things, they want to discuss other things and they want to drink other drinks. However, it was no problem at all travelling
with women to a music festival even though such event also involved the same kind of drinking. Our interpretation was that in the context of the masculine football world, drinking was related to a certain form of masculinity, that they would have difficult to act out if women they know had been present.

The next question then would be what alcohol can provide for females when it comes to norm-breaking behaviour. Which kind of freedom can a woman achieve by her drinking without being afraid of losing in femininity? Many of the desired effects were of course the same even if the behaviours were structured into different lines of behaviour. A reduction in inhibitions seemed to open up for flirting for females and flirting and violence for males. With the exception of flirting, which can probably be seen as being related to “doing gender”, we didn’t get much information on which possibilities alcohol had for increasing the room for behaviour connected to doing gender for females. But again, since our main focus was on violence, our study was not designed for questions of this kind. The differences in drunken behaviour though are interesting; one interpretation would be that it is not the alcohol which is dangerous, but rather the male gender norm.

In the two vignette studies, we tried to study norms around drunken behaviour by analysing how intoxication affected the evaluation of a person who committed an aggressive act. We also tried to study whether this change in norms was related to other factors such as level of provocation, victim’s intoxication, the severity of the incident, the relation to those involved, and the aggressor’s mindset. If alcohol changed how the aggressor was evaluated, we also tried to examine whether this change was a generally approved change or if it varied between different segments of the sample. The results from the two vignettes did not provide very clear answers to these questions. In both studies, alcohol consumption reduced the attributed blame for the aggressor, but only under certain circumstances, and those circumstances showed a very complex pattern. The question of provocation was not directly testable, since this was a between-vignette difference and since the vignettes included different manipulated factors. In total we manipulated five variables: aggressor’s drinking, victim’s drinking, aggressor’s mindset, a relation between the respondent and either the aggressor or the victim, and severity of the incident. The aggressor’s mindset showed no effect at all. The relationship variable had very little effect: a relationship with either the aggressor or the victim did not affect the inclination to report the incident to the police, although we have some doubts as to how this variable was understood. For male respondents, the aggressor’s intoxication formed a complicated four-way
interaction (aggressor’s intoxication x victim’s intoxication x relation x severity) in one vignette and a two-way interaction (aggressor’s intoxication x victim’s intoxication) in the other. A somewhat exploratory interpretation would be that the drunken excuse is most likely to work, in the sense that the blame would be reduced, when the act is severe and when the victim is drunk. One should bear in mind that the “severe” act in our vignettes describes how someone punches the victim until the victim’s nose starts to bleed, a description that is rather vague. A punch like this may result in a severe injury, but it could also result in a minor injury, and it might very well be seen as a rather low-severity incident compared to the picture of violence many people hold.

For the female respondents the aggressor’s intoxication formed a three-way interaction in one vignette (aggressor’s drinking x relation x severity) and a two-way interaction (aggressor’s drinking x severity) in the other vignette. For the females, the victim’s drinking had no effect at all on the aggressor’s blame as a result of his drinking. An interpretation of the two vignettes suggests that the only factor with relevance is the severity of the aggression. When the act was severe the blame was decreased, and when the act was less severe the blame didn’t change much, indicating that the differences in evaluation by severity weakened as a result of the aggressor’s drinking.

The other variable we used in the vignette studies was the likelihood that the incident would be reported to the police. On the one hand, this constituted an attempt to study concrete acts, and on the other hand, it was used as a measure of whether the act could be seen in another way. The results from the two vignettes strongly support the conclusion that the likelihood that the incident would be reported to the police would not change as a function of the aggressor’s drinking. However, we have argued in the articles that opinions on whether an incident should be reported to the police might be a bad test of the excuse value.

We also tried to study whether the relationship between the aggressor’s alcohol intake and blame would be the same among different segments of the sample. We assumed that the norms for drunken behaviour would differ between different groups, and that this would affect the attribution of blame. In the vignette studies the analyses were stratified for gender. The basis for this procedure was partly that the focus group discussions indicated that violence was to a large extent limited to males, both as aggressors and victims, and partly that preliminary analyses pointed towards differences between male and female respondents. From a theoretical perspective, one could
assume that those who don’t take advantage of the expanded norms for drunken behaviour would be less inclined to offer others that excuse, and from this point of view we would expect females to be less prone to accept alcohol as an excuse for violence. Our results do not support this idea; instead the relationship seems to be somewhat different, and something we can’t explain. A third vignette, analysed by Bullock (in press) shows a result in this direction – that males were more likely than females to reduce blame as a result of the aggressor’s drinking in a vignette concerning a rape. On the other hand, the act in this vignette is quite different, involving a female victim, so the difference in results may have other explanations. For our two male-to-male physical assault vignettes there were very modest differences between males and females.

Besides the differences between genders, we also tested a number of variables to see if they affected the inclination to reduce the blame or the likelihood of reporting the incident to the police, as a function of the aggressor’s drinking. We included variables about sociodemographics, alcohol consumption history, drinking patterns, history of involvement in violence, attitudes towards aggression and peer norms around alcohol and violence. With one exception (females with a high proportion of friends who often get drunk were less inclined to call the police when the aggressor was drunk), none of the contextual variables showed any effect on the drunken excuse. With regard to the number of tests we conducted, we would also suggest that even this exception should be interpreted with great caution. This result was a bit surprising. One possible explanation could be that the test was weak due to power considerations, another explanation could be that our contextual variables didn’t identify the right sub-groups.

The fifth study was an exploratory attempt to see whether individuals who had attitudes favourable to a drunken excuse would have more experience of alcohol-related violence. Our data could only provide a limited test of this. In particular, we had a problem with our dependent variable: we could not define the role of aggressor versus victim and we had no information on the contextual circumstances of the violent experience. We showed that the pattern of alcohol consumption was associated with the risk of having experienced alcohol-related violence. We also showed that favourable attitudes towards the drunken excuse were associated with the risk of being involved in alcohol-related violence. However, in a regression model controlling for alcohol consumption patterns, the attitudes became insignificant. How this should be interpreted is not self-evident. In one way it suggests that the effect of attitudes is minor, but it might also indicate that
both attitudes and consumption patterns are markers of a culture that accepts both heavy drinking and its negative outcomes.

Putting the results from the qualitative and quantitative work together, we find some differences and some similarities. Both methods produced results that indicated that alcohol could be used as an excuse. When it comes to the reduction in blame, the vignettes were less supportive and indicated that the excuse value was restricted by contextual factors, while the qualitative studies seemed to be more supportive. It should be mentioned, though, that the focus groups were not constructed with the intention of generalizing to the whole population – they were also conducted on a more limited sample, comprising younger people from the metropolitan area of Stockholm – so one has to be careful in making comparisons. Keeping this in mind, the focus-group results can still shed some light on the results from the vignette studies.

The analyses of the vignettes were conducted using a between-subjects design. This means that we made comparisons between groups of people, where one group was read a story about a sober person becoming violent, and one group was read a story about a drunken person becoming violent, and we were then able to see whether a different level of blame was attributed to the violent person. This design, where the respondents are not asked directly whether the blame changes between different levels of intoxication, is an attempt to get around the tendency of attitude surveys to elicit politically correct views. On the other hand, the focus group interviews showed how difficult it was to elicit a stable opinion when the participants discussed the blameworthiness of a drunken aggressor. They more or less presented views on a continuum stretching from the view that alcohol cannot excuse anything to the other extreme, that alcohol could excuse everything. The question is, then, which level the vignettes reflect. It seems most reasonable that they would correspond to the views presented rather early in the focus groups, which would imply that the vignettes underestimate the excuse value of alcohol.

Another interpretation is that the vignettes give a correct picture of a general view of the excuse value of alcohol. It can function as an excuse, but only under certain circumstances. If these circumstances differ between people, it is not very likely that we will construct a vignette which captures them. In other words, we would find very modest reductions in blame at the national level, even though many persons, under relevant circumstances, would reduce the blame for a drunken aggressor. On the other hand, in a focus group where you talk about your experiences, even if you have only been in one situation in your life where you have needed alcohol as an excuse, that situation might
come up as an example. If we are facing a situation where there are many different norms for drunken behaviour, not only between people but also within the same person, and which change from time to time and from context to context, the excuse value would look stronger in a qualitative study, which has the possibility of finding odd behaviour.

Theoretical implications

We raised some theoretical questions at the beginning of this chapter. One question was whether the time-out concept would be relevant in a modern society. MacAndrew and Edgerton often argue for the existence of two different norm systems, one for sober and one for drunken behaviour. They were uncertain, however, about how this would turn out in a large polymorphous society. Both the quantitative and the qualitative work in the present study indicate that the situation is more complicated than can be described in terms of two clear norm systems. On the other hand, results from both methods suggested that alcohol could be used as an excuse, whether measured at the national level as in the vignettes or at a network level as in the focus groups. This suggests that the time-out concept is not irrelevant even in a “large” polymorphous society.

Another limitation was that the time-out theory, with only a few qualitative studies as exceptions, hasn’t been tested in other cultures than the American. The focus groups in the present study support the idea that alcohol is used as an excuse, which is in line with the results from New Zealand and Great Britain. With regard to what was argued above, i.e. that the focus groups seem to indicate a wider acceptance of alcohol as an excuse than the vignettes, it is somewhat difficult to interpret and compare the vignettes with the results from the US. If one assumes that the vignette result is related to the “actual possibility to use alcohol as an excuse” in the same way in Sweden as in the US, we can make some cautious comparisons. As was mentioned earlier, only a few vignette studies have focused on violence between males and those have produced divergent results. Wild et al. (1998) found some support for a reduction in levels of blame, provided that the aggressor had no history of criminality, whereas Aramburu and Leigh (1991) found, on the contrary, an increase in blame as a result of the aggressor’s drinking. Since the results in our studies varied according to the contextual variables and provided a rather restricted reduction in blame, it is difficult to draw any strong conclusions about differences between the American and the Swedish acceptance of the drunken excuse. If we widen the perspective and also include Bullock’s (in press) study of alcohol’s excuse value in relation to rape, a picture emerges where Swedish studies have rather consistently found that alcohol appears to
reduce blame, whereas the findings from North America have been more contradictory.

So, is it possible to buy freedom in a bottle? There are some indications for that in this work. Young Swedes say that they use alcohol as a means to achieve several pleasurable effects. One of these pleasurable effects is a reduction in inhibitions. Alcohol consumption seems to help people to dare to do more things than they normally do. Intoxication helps people to preserve a picture of themselves as normal even when they do abnormal things (or normal if you are drunk). Our results further indicate that other people are willing to accept that you increase your room for behaviour or action when you have been drinking. They would blame you less for any wrongdoing if they know that you had been drinking at the time. Thus, our results suggest that Swedish drinking culture provides people with the drunken excuse, which helps young people to expand the room for possible acts. The last question would be – what should you put in the bottle? Our results might be taken as indicating that other people only need to believe that you have been drinking alcohol; in terms of yourself, our results indicate that it might work with something cheaper.
REFERENCES


## Appendix A.

### Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>n</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sex</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>485</td>
<td>48.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>519</td>
<td>51.7</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mean (SD)</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Marital status</strong></td>
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<td>unmarried</td>
<td>808</td>
<td>80</td>
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<tr>
<td>cohabiting</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Working situation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>work full-time</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>work part-time</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>school full-time</td>
<td>519</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unemployment, military, other</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Household composition</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>living with parents</td>
<td>618</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>partner and/or children</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alone</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student residence or roommates</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Response rate and reasons for non-participation in the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Response rate according to research agency</th>
<th>Our estimates</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gross sample</td>
<td>16,425</td>
<td>16,425</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>non functional number</td>
<td>3,790</td>
<td>987</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>402</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wrong re-direction of call</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>373</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fax</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>language problem</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>267</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No one in age group</td>
<td>10,876</td>
<td>12,757</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sum of excluded</td>
<td>15,211</td>
<td>15,064</td>
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<tr>
<td>Net sample</td>
<td>1,214</td>
<td>1,361</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no contact</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sick</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>refused because of time</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>refused on principle</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>non-response</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>357 (210+79+68)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total interviews completed</td>
<td>1,004</td>
<td>1,004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response rate</td>
<td>82.7%</td>
<td>73.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The response rate reported to us from the research agency was 82.7%, which was suspiciously high. In their calculation they had not differentiated between invalid numbers, business numbers and numbers where no one answered after the maximum number of tries. Some of the households where no one answered probably included a person within our age limit and should therefore have been placed in the net sample and thus decreased the response rate. We therefore used an earlier study with a more exact account of the response rate to estimate the number of functioning numbers where no one had answered. Since 1 out of 10 of the households reached included an individual within our age group, 10% of the households not reached were put into the net sample. Our relatively conservative response rate of 73.8% is based on the assumption that all of those households would include an eligible person and that this person would decline to participate in the survey. (For a similar procedure, see Leifman 2001).

Bullock (in press) showed that our sample was somewhat younger (mean age 20.6, SD=3.7; p<0.0001) than the national population within the age group. Respondents aged 16-18 were overrepresented in our sample, thus our sample to a higher degree was still in school and had a lower educational level than the national population aged 16-25.
The response rate is considered to be satisfactory for this kind of survey. Similar figures have been shown in Leifman (2001). One should however be aware of the fact that the non-response is probably selective. For example Kühlhorn et al. (1999) have shown that problem drinkers are often over-represented among non-respondents. We have made some analysis of those who have been harder to reach as an indicator of the bias in the non-response. Using the chi² test, we compared with the rest those who the research agency had to call the maximum of 6 or 7 tries. Those difficult to reach had a significantly (p< 0.05) higher proportion of friends who often got drunk, and they themselves also drank to intoxication more often than the rest of the sample. On the other hand, they did not have a higher proportion of friends who often get into fights, they had not been involved in fights more often, and they did not have more accepting attitudes towards violence or alcohol as an excuse compared to the rest. Based on those who answered late, we can project that the non-respondents would be different when it comes to alcohol consumption, but it is not certain that they differ very much when it comes to attitudes regarding violence. However, since our interest is mainly focused on societal norms understood by “the majority” we believe that a somewhat selective non-response is not necessarily a devastating problem for our analyses.