Social Representations of Drunkenness Among Maltese University Students

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Abstract

The drinking patterns of young people are subjected to continuous monitoring. Their social representations of drunkenness and how these are influenced by cultural constructions have been less extensively examined. This paper discusses the findings emergent from a focus group study with young Maltese people. The findings explored how youth give the state of being intoxicated meaning within the particular social groupings they inhabit. Using the Constant Comparative Method, five conceptual categories that throw light on the social representations of drunkenness among this population emerged: drinking as social imperative, normalisation of intoxication, constituents of drunkenness, discourses of drunkenness and importance of setting. The analysis documents how young people actively construct their understanding of drunkenness in interaction with those around them through the transmission of ideas, beliefs and understandings. The paper concludes with some recommendations for prevention and harm reduction.

Keywords: Social Representations; Emerging Adults; Malta; Drunkenness; Alcohol.

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Malta Öğrencileri Arasında Sarhoşluğa Ait Toplumsal Gösterimler

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Öz

Gençlerin içki örüntüleri sürekli bir gözleme nesne teşkil etmektedir. Gençlerin sarhoşluğa dair toplumsal gösterimleri ve bu gösterimlerin kültürel inşalar tarafından nasıl etkilendiği son derece az incelenmiştir. Bu çalışma, genç Maltalı insanlar ile yapılan odak grup çalışmasında ortaya çıkan bulguları tartışmaktadır. Bulgular gençliğin içinde yaşadıkları belli toplumsal gruplaşmaların alkollü olma haline verdikleri anlamın ne olduğunu incelemektedir. Daimi Karşılaştırmalı Yöntem kullanıldığında bu nüfus arasından sarhoşluğun toplumsal gösterimlerine ışık tutan beş kavramsal kategori ortaya çıkmaktadır: toplumsal zorunluluk olarak içme, alkollü olmanın normalleştirilmesi, sarhoşluğun bileşenleri, sarhoşluk söylemleri ve yer ve zamanın önemi. Çözümleme gençlerin etrafındakiler ile iletişim içinde düşünce, inanç ve anlayış iletimleri yolu ile sarhoşluk anlayışlarını etkin olarak nasıl inşa ettiklerine kanıt sunmaktadır. Çalışma önleme ve zarar azaltımı için öneriler ile sonlanmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Toplumsal Gösterimler, Ergenler, Malta, Sarhoşluk, Alkol.

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Introduction

The use of alcohol by Maltese young people has become a growing concern among health professionals and policy makers. Despite the legal purchasing and drinking age being 17, the research among 15 and 16 year olds in Malta shows that many students use alcohol first at a young age. The evidence shows that by age 13 or less a number of students in Malta had consumed alcohol (ESPAD, 2015). Among 15/16 year-old young people, ESPAD registered high percentages of reported lifetime use (86%), last year use (80%) and last 30 days use (54%). The 2015 ESPAD saw a decline in alcohol use among 15 and 16 year-old young people in Malta, yet their alcohol intoxication remains of concern since the latest ESPAD data from 2015 provides evidence that 38% of 15 and 16 years olds had been drunk at least once in their lifetime, 31% reported being intoxicated in the last year and 14% in the last month (ESPAD, 2015). Almost half of the students (47%) had engaged in heavy episodic drinking[1] during the month preceding the study. Adolescents are increasingly being initiated into a forceful culture of drunkenness (Measham, 2006; Measham & Brain, 2005). The age of the first alcohol consumption has decreased (Roche et al., 2008) and binge drinking is commonplace (Farrington et al., 2000). Researchers have also found that inebriation is defined as a 'good night out' for young people (Keane, 2009; Measham and Brain, 2005; Munro et al., 2009) and intoxication is becoming increasingly normalized. While ESPAD shows that alcohol consumption and heavy episodic drinking of Maltese students is among the highest in Europe, Maltese students repeatedly report significantly lower percentages of drunkenness. This requires explanation. ESPAD reports that "on the country level there is a strong positive relationship between reported alcohol consumption for the last drinking day and the perceived level of intoxication on that day. Thus, in countries where students reported that they consumed larger quantities of alcohol they also reported higher levels of intoxication" (Hibell et al., 2009). This could not be applied to Malta. Given that intoxication is a self-reported state, the research agenda therefore aims at exploring young people's understanding of what constitutes drunkenness and if, and how, the experience of drunkenness is socially constructed and not just physiologically experienced. This research also attempts to explore how constructions of intoxication are established, communicated and maintained in the social worlds inhabited by youth in Malta.

Traditionally, the northern and the southern regions of Western Europe have noticeably different drinking cultures. Several authors have recently proposed two traditional norms, attitudes and practices for Western European cultures (Davies, 1984; Heath & Cooper, 1988; Hupkens et al., 1993). Southern European ("Mediterranean") patterns have been characterized as 'wet' cultures, (primarily wine drinking) and are typically found in Italy, Spain, Portugal, southern France and Greece. In northern Europe one finds the Nordic 'dry' pattern with a predominance of beer and spirit consumption. The latter is found in

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[1] Consumed more than five drinks in one drinking session

Scandinavia, the Netherlands, Britain, and north and eastern Germany. A blend of the two norms appears to be found in northern France, southwestern Germany, Belgium, Austria and Switzerland (Engs, 1995). In the South, wine is most commonly consumed as part of one's diet and drunkenness is frowned upon. Young people are introduced to wine in the context of the family. Wine drinking is culturally accommodated and there are few perceived psycho-social problems associated with its use (Heath & Cooper, 1988; Garnsey & Saller, 1987; Davies 1984; Davies & Walsh, 1983; Lolli et al., 1958; Smith & Hanham, 1982).

In contrast, the Nordic attitude to drinking is ambivalent, characterized by extremes of serious drinking versus total abstinence, with beer and spirits mostly consumed often in contexts other than meal times. Heavy drinking is more likely to occur on weekends or special occasions and drinking with the goal of getting drunk is common, but a high percentage of the population abstains. Age limitations for legal alcohol consumption are extensively policed and alcohol is prohibited for minors even within the family setting. Drinking is generally perceived as problematic (Davies & Walsh, 1983; Jellinek, 1962; Smith & Hanham, 1982). These cultures are likely to foster temperance movements (Levine, 1992). The attitude towards alcohol is very ambivalent. Alcohol is not integrated into activities of daily life and so people use it in a problematic way or not at all. However, according to Engs (1995, p. 229) "'traditional' drinking patterns have been changing, particularly since the 1960's. … These rapidly changing trends may soon forecast a blended pattern throughout Western Europe". In Malta, many years of British colonization and Malta's economic reliance on the leisure and hospitality industry, have likely impacted its drinking culture. This paper will contribute to the continued debate by exploring what drinking and the state of being intoxicated means to Maltese university students, in the social context of a central Mediterranean society, and how this construction of drunkenness is established, communicated and maintained in the social worlds inhabited by youth in Malta. It will do this through a social representations approach.

Conceptual Framework

According to Hogg & Vaughan (2008, p. 102) social representations are "consensual understandings shared between group members … which emerge through informal everyday communication". Social representations may be conceptualized as ideas that are culture-dependent and rooted in lay beliefs and interpretations (Sammut et al., 2012) and consequently diffused through communication between groups of individuals (Crisp and Turner, 2010). In this framework, representation is viewed as constitutive, as part of the occurring event, in this case drunkenness. This constructivist view of representation as process explores the way in which meaning is given to things. The idea of social representation was introduced by Moscovici (1972) who claimed that social representations concern systems of values, ideas and practices that serve two kinds

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of functions: firstly, by removing the mysterious edge from new phenomenona, they bring order to the social world; secondly, they allow for better communication. Social representations are similar to schemata at the individual level, but the societal origins and effects of shared bodies of information are emphasized. It is therefore being proposed that young people's understandings of drinking and drunkenness and the meanings they attribute to this 'state' are constructed through interaction and social negotiation. This paper will contribute to an understanding of both how this occurs, as well as the end product. Discussing Durkheim's sociological understanding of collective representations (Durkheim, 1924/1974), Moscovici argued that, given the multiplicity of representations co-existing in the public sphere, it may be better to speak of social rather than collective representations (Sammut et al., 2015). In effect, the 'state' of being drunk is sensed in many ways, across different cultures. A social group's understanding of the concept of drunkenness reflects the establishment of norms and values surrounding drinking, hence, reflects what is considered acceptable or otherwise (Sammut et al., 2012). Through adopting a social representations approach to understanding drinking behaviour, this study concentrates on the meaning-making processes employed by young people in this regard. Social representations are created and recreated through the two processes of anchoring and objectification (Moscovici & Farr, 1984). Anchoring reduces unfamiliar ideas into familiar contexts (Howarth & Sammut, 2014), while through objectification these yet abstract ideas are then made more concrete, reassigning "what is in the mind to something existing in the physical world" (Moscovici & Farr, 1984). By means of these two mechanisms, 'presentations' of societal phenomena are reinterpreted to fit existent social representations contributing to the fluid nature of social representations (Howarth & Sammut, 2014). The social representations approach allows the analysis of common sense understandings in different social and cultural groups.

Drinking Patterns Among Maltese Young People

In Malta the legal alcohol-drinking and purchasing age is 17. The European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) showed how Maltese students under the age of 16 believed that it would be "fairly" or "very easy" to obtain alcohol and how the prevalence of alcohol consumption is high among this age group. The types of alcohol most commonly consumed in the last 30 days were spirits (48%) and wine (43%), beer (36%), alcopops (26%) and cider (16%). In the month prior to the study, 37% of students had purchased an alcoholic beverage off-premise, while 50% of students had used alcohol on-premise (in a pub, bar or disco). 31% claimed to have been intoxicated in the last year and 14% in the last month. Almost half of all students (47%) had engaged in heavy episodic drinking (i.e. consumed five or more drinks on one occasion) during the month prior to the study. Between 2011 and 2015 there was an overall decline in all alcohol-related behaviours measured and these were more evident for boys than girls, leading to the convergence of some rates or to higher rates among girls. The gender gap

with regards to drinking is clearly narrowing in Malta. The data from a general population survey, conducted with 18 to 65 year olds in Malta in 2013 (Muscat et al., 2014), compared the findings with the data registered in the past ESPAD surveys. The students who had participated in the 2007 and 2011 ESPAD surveys would be aged between 18-24 years in the General Population Study in 2013. When examining this age cohort, this survey reported lifetime use of alcohol at 87.2%. A high 77.5% of ever drinkers of alcohol are also current drinkers and the highest percentages of these are aged between 18 and 24 years of age. The use of alcohol in the last 12 months was reported by 85% of those aged between 18-24 years whilst similar percentages were reported in ESPAD in 2007 (87%) and 2011 (86%). When comparing the use of alcohol in the last 30 days, such consumption was reported to be 73% in the 2007 ESPAD and 75.9% in this survey. Arnett (2005) has suggested that increases in drinking during emerging adulthood are becoming normative in Western society. Social control lessens during this period and along with identity exploration and trying out various behaviours, emerging adults may seek out the altered states of consciousness that different substances can induce. Constructing an adult identity can be confusing and some emerging adults may use substances as a rite of passage into adult worlds (Bagnall, 1991). The General Population Survey conducted in Malta in 2013 showed that the consumption of alcohol is very common within Maltese society and the consumption of alcohol among emerging adults is on the increase. A study by Cefai and Camilleri (2009) exploring health behaviours among University of Malta students found that approximately 11% of the sample consumed alcohol daily. 79% of the students drank occasionally or during weekends and only 10% never drank alcohol. Male students reported drinking more often than females. Approximately 38% of all alcohol drinkers had at least 6 drinks when they socialized, while 29% had from 3 to 5 drinks. 13% of the students engaged in binge drinking regularly, either every weekend (5%) or frequently (8%). A lifestyle survey among 18-24 year olds in post-secondary and tertiary education conducted in 2006 by the Maltese National Agency against Drug and Alcohol Abuse (sedqa, 2006) registered alcohol as the most commonly used substance amongst students, with 96% having consumed alcohol during their lifetime, 95% in the last twelve months and 79% in the last month. 64% of students reported heavy episodic drinking.

Research Agenda and Design

The objective of this research was to examine social representations of drunkenness among students at the University of Malta who were between 18 and 30 years of age. The period of emerging adulthood, is marked by identity formation and the transition to new adult-type roles (Arnett, 2002). It is also a time of increased alcohol use and abuse (White & Jackson, 2005). The research approach was qualitative, allowing for the understanding and yielding of participants' views, thoughts and perceptions on drunkenness. The data

of the study was collected through the use of 3 focus groups. The participants were 19 Maltese university students between the ages of 18 and 30: 8 females, and 11 males. These students were studying a wide variety of subjects. The mean age of the participants was 19.58 years. The focus group questioning route explored a number of issues, most notably: the role alcohol plays in Maltese society; the conceptualisations of drunkenness; the expectations associated with alcohol use; the contexts in which drunkenness was acceptable or otherwise; the perspectives on intoxication related to gender and age; the perceived consequences of intoxication. The focus groups were audio-recorded and the transcribed text subjected to the Constant Comparative Method as proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990). Ethical clearance from the University Research Ethics Committee at the University of Malta was obtained.

Data Analysis

Has drinking become a social imperative?

The data indicates that drinking and intoxication were viewed as essential lubricants to social interaction. "In my opinion, alcohol loosens you up, and a person is no longer socially withheld, thus the person feels more comfortable to socialize with others" (AZ). Anthropologists have long proposed that alcohol consumption levels off differences between individuals and groups and facilitates sociability in group settings (Hunt et al., 2014). "It is something you do when you are out, you know, 'let's go out and have a drink, and discuss how things were', or something like that" (ID). Friends are often integral to drinking experiences and cultural norms surrounding youth socialization practices play a definitive role in shaping drinking behaviour when those norms become internalized.

Alcohol use was linked with hospitality when welcoming guests: "Even when you have guests at home, you offer some kind of alcoholic drink" (EG), and as essential to celebrations marking important events "It is part of our culture, of how we welcome people" (KC); "if you are at a wedding, it is the first thing; they give you a glass of champagne or something" (AC). The National Alcohol Policy (Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity, 2018) recognizes that the use of alcohol has been part of traditional Maltese culture. Social motives facilitate the consumption of alcohol in social contexts however such motives are often associated with lighter, less frequent alcohol use and tend not to be associated with excessive alcohol use (Read et al., 2003). The data indicates that Maltese University students have a strong social imperative to drink. Alcohol is utilized as a means of fitting into and/or belonging to the social group. "There are individuals who see others drinking, and for the sake of not being left out, or feeling like a fish out of water, reason that they 'might as well' drink" (AM). This imperative to drink is demonstrated by the key role alcohol plays in the social activities young people engage in. As one focus group participant puts it, "drinking has become idealized" (JC) and taken-for-granted.

Many participants talked about how they would not consider abstaining from alcohol "Alcohol leads to things happening, if you have alcohol, you're expecting more of a fun night, and at a fun night, a lot of things happen especially if you're in a group. As in, if there is no alcohol, it is a boring night" (CC). Maltese emerging adults view the drinking of alcohol as an inevitable aspect of social life and associate it with a sense of pride rather than shame or embarrassment. "To a certain extent, alcohol consumption brings with it some form of level of pride, for example mentioning to your friends that you went out the night before, and you had a lot of fun, you feel proud" (AZ).

The Normalization of Intoxication

Parker et al. 2002) popularized the idea that intoxication has become normalized among young people in Europe. Their studies, Illegal Leisure in the 1990's and more recently Illegal Leisure Revisted (2013) have put forward the argument that alcohol use, and to a lesser extent, illicit drug use, is commonly engaged in by young people as a form of 'time out' from the stresses and strains of a fast paced late modern existence. They propose that given the large numbers of young people using both licit and illicit substances, researchers can no longer claim that young people with difficulties are the only ones using substances. Intoxication as a form of recreation has become normalized. In the present study participants perceived intoxication as normal behavior even to be expected and somewhat accepted by parents, "it is nothing out of the ordinary, your friends expect it and even your parents ... parents expect that their children are coming back home drunk after a night out" (KC). Some of the participants additionally attributed the responsibility for the transmission of extreme definitions of what constitutes drunkenness, highlighting how the concept of intoxication is a social phenomenon, constructed through the communicated ideas, understandings and belief systems of society (Sammut, Tsirogianni, & Wagoner, 2012):

"I'm going to be subjective, but I think that we learn from our parents when they say 'Don't you dare come home dead drunk, vomiting, and unconscious, as we will not let you into the house!', so then we learn that being drunk is this; coming home and collapsing to the ground or not remembering a thing" (ID).

However while the use of alcohol in moderation is somewhat encouraged, evidenced by participants' claims that they were commonly offered a drink by superiors, others highlighted that generally, drunkenness is frowned upon only by the older age groups; "if an elderly woman sees you, she would, most probably, shame you" (KA). It is, in fact in the South of Europe, and, amongst the young, that a culture change in the conceptualization and acceptability of drunkenness has been most pronounced (Järvinen & Room, 2007). It has been discussed above how while drinking is part of the fabric of traditional Mediterranean culture, drunkenness is not. However, participants' experiences shed light on the very rapid changes in societal expectations, accentuating concomitant changes

in social representations. "In my eyes, even though it's a bit odd seeing adolescents of thirteen or fourteen years of age in Paceville, I have to say it's almost becoming normal; I don't want to accept it...but I can't say that it's bad, as it's normal" (AC). Room (2004) has documented the rapid change young people in southern Europe have experienced in their environments (Järvinen & Room, 2007).

Social representations reflect the gendered structure of society. Women's behaviour tends to be more strongly policed than men's. This is especially true for behaviour occurring in the public domain, such as drinking (Cree, 2016). Participants alluded to this gender bias, "there are reasons why women are more frowned upon (for drunkenness); there are more possible consequences" (JC). Even in this regard, however the data indicates that social representations of women in Maltese society are changing. "In fact, up till a few years back, I used to comment when seeing a girl in a drunken state; it was more serious than if it were to be a boy. However, nowadays, especially when in Paceville, I consider women and men as being equal, and it is normal to see people of both genders drunk" (AC).

The focus group data therefore cogently elucidates the culture-dependent nature of social representations (Sammutn et al., 2012) and how they are generated and sustained through group communication (Sammut et al., 2015). It also underlines how young people's social representations of intoxication have altered to espouse a more extreme understanding of the phenomenon. It is hypothesized that this will facilitate a change in behaviour.

Constituents of Drunkenness

The study aimed to explore young people's understanding of what it means to be drunk. In exploring the content of this social representation, the participants talked about lack of control over their physical, behavioural and emotional selves as a primary indicator of intoxication. The participants referred to the physiological effects arising from alcohol consumption as providing clues as to the degree of their intoxication. These clues were labelled as signifiers of various levels of intoxication. Mild drunkenness was identified by the participants as including decreased "reaction times" (AA), inhibited "reflexes" (JC) and "limited mental capacity" (CC). On the other hand "unsteady gait" (AA), sickness and nausea, vomiting and fainting were seen to be more representative of drunken behaviour. The data clearly indicates that study participants conceptualized drunkenness as being an extreme physiological response, again indicating that only extreme intoxication is represented as drunkenness. "For one to say that another person is truly drunk, the other has to be throwing up, that's a real indicator that a person is drunk; when he/she shows physical symptoms such as vomiting, fainting etc." (KC). Focus group participants even mentioned that unconsciousness or black outs are the true representations of drunkenness: "if a friend of mine were to tell me that he was drunk the night before, I automatically imagine him lying on the ground unconscious, not knowing what is going on around him" (AZ). These social representations of drunkenness impact on young people's

drinking patterns, as the data indicates that focus group participants do not deem themselves drunk prior to reaching such biological states and therefore might lead to excessive drinking. Participants also identified loss of control as an important constituent of drunkenness; "when a person is not conscious of his actions, and does things he is completely unaware of" (KC) including loss of control over one's social behaviour: "actions which the person regrets upon sobering up" (KC). Intoxication is evidenced by individuals "not able to reason, and speak(ing) nonsense" (EG). The extreme nature of this representation of drunkenness and how this differs in Malta when compared with other societies is eptiomised by the following quote: "what is the standard of drunkenness? It might be slight dizziness for a foreigner, yet for us Maltese one has to be on the ground, in a knot, unconscious" (AZ). Maltese youth appear to only consider extreme drunken state and behaviours as true representations of intoxication, while young people from other cultures define intoxication through the earlier symptoms of the process of intoxication. This might explain why while Maltese youth report higher levels of binge drinking, their self reports of drunkenness are lower than other European young people.

'Talking About' Drunkenness: An Analysis of The Discourse

Throughout the focus group sessions, a number of terms, some of them Maltese, were utilized to describe the various stages of drunkenness depicting emerging adults' social representations of intoxication. Being "tipsy" (KA) was used to describe a state where one engages in excessive talkativeness and inappropriate laughter while other terms were used to describe the state of 'drunkenness' characterized by more extreme behaviours. A common term used was "patata" (TM), a term which translates to 'potato', illustrating individuals' vegetative state (Bartolo, 2016). Other commonly used terms that were identified include "żibel" (NN) and "ħara" (MM), literally translating to 'garbage' and 'shit' respectively, referring to "individuals who become dead drunk; literally licking the ground, not knowing what is going on" (JB). Another popular term among young people to explain being drunk and which was emergent in the focus groups is "ħara mejjet (dead drunk)" (ID), 'mejjet' meaning 'dead'. The reference to death emphasizes the extremely degraded physiological state, signified in Maltese emerging adults' social representation of drunkenness. The term also indicates the experience of a blackout "forgets everything and wakes up the following day with a massive hangover" (ID). "mandra"(AZ), "maħta" (TM) and "ċappetta" (DV), were also commonly used in the focus groups. These terms translate to 'pig-sty', 'snot' and 'knot' respectively. It is interesting to note that while describing the varying drunken states, participants and people in their social circle have been in, the conversation was accompanied by much laughter, implying perhaps that emerging adults may perceive such states as more comical, as opposed to potentially life threatening. One participant mentioned that "some individuals consume alcohol up till the point where they end up in hospital" (MM), while stating that "it would make up a good story" (MM).

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The Importance of Setting

Research on substance abuse has long explored how experiences of intoxication are impacted by the set (their attitudes) and setting (the physical setting) (Withington et al., 2012). Drunkenness does not occur in a vacuum, but rather, takes place in various social settings that impact on the outcome (Szmigin et al., 2008; Hunt et al., 2014; Leigh and Lee, 2008). While young adults may drink with the goal of intoxication, the participants underlined how this may only be done in some contexts where they presume drunkenness to be commonly engaged in and accepted by others in that context. In Malta, Paceville is the leisure destination for thousands of young people every evening. Paceville is a district heavily populated with nightclubs, bars, strip clubs, pubs and restaurants, and is perhaps the most important nightlife location in Malta. Social representations theory has extended its domain into the analysis of representations of geographical space as an object of investigation. One of the topics form this line of enquiry, social memory anchored in space (Haas, 1999; 2004; Haas and Jodelet, 2007), is particularly relevant to this discussion. Jodelet (1982) proposed that public spaces, like Paceville, may be treated as a "social and historical reality" where the experience of social actors, in our case, young people, takes place. Jodelet highlighted the value of understanding the social meaning of spaces whereby the interaction between humans and their environment is mediated by society. Young people actively construct the spaces they inhabit. This participation consequently grants them an identity and provides a historical, social and cultural reference. Young people manage their consumption, making ongoing decisions as they time and coordinate their drinking with peers in particular locations. Measham (2006) called this 'controlled loss of control'. The focus group data locates Paceville as the principal setting in which intoxication is expected and commonplace: "a hub of clubs, right at our own doorstep" (MM). Paceville seems to be socially represented as an alcohol accepting and drunkenness-expecting setting, being followed by village feasts and organized summer parties, "where drunkenness is accepted, as a result of the availability of alcohol" (NN). Participants stated that particular occasions require greater alcohol consumption and heavier drunkenness for appropriate celebration.

Conclusion: More Than Just a Physical State

While the physiological dimension of intoxication is an important consideration in the documentation of young people's experiences of drunkenness, this paper has attempted to demonstrate how social representations approach can contribute to a deeper understanding of this phenomenon. The study has shown how representations both reflect and shape individual and societal values, attitudes and behaviour with regards to intoxication. Some researchers (Järvinen and Room, 2007; Kuntsche and Cooper, 2010) have suggested that a process of assimilation to Northern European drinking cultures is occurring. In Malta, concern about youth drinking has led to greater enforcement and

stronger prevention that appears to have had positive results according to the latest ESPAD. This study does, however, clearly indicate a strong social imperative to drinking amongst Maltese youth. In a Southern European Mediterranean culture where controlled drinking was culturally promoted, intoxication has become somewhat normalized and an essential ingredient to leisure. The analysis indicates that the social representations of intoxication held by young people play an important role in shaping the way they drink, as well as the experience of difficulties associated with drinking. The increasing influence of Northern European cultures on Southern European drinking cultures maybe linked with potentially unfavourable changes in the attitudes and behaviours of youth from Southern Europe that have the consequence of encouraging heavy drinking and the ensuing problems this may cause (Ahlström and Österberg, 2005; Bjarnason et al., 2010). This paper contributes to an understanding of the procedural aspects of the normalization of alcohol intoxication through an examination of the social representations of drunkenness. Maltese youth appear to only consider extreme, adverse drunken behaviours as true representations of drunkenness and intoxication, yet fail to comprehend milder behavioural indicators of drunkenness as classifying as such. These representations might be a significant, contributing factor leading to decreased reports of drunken behaviour among Maltese individuals. This finding has important implications for prevention and harm reduction. Prevention efforts would do well to consider addressing these representations, contesting them and aiming to replace them with less extreme representations of drunkenness. The analysis has emphasized how the language used to describe episodes of drunken behaviour, betray the notion that drunkenness is equated with extreme degraded physiological states. The unpacking of these cultural texts, together with young people, in the process of a harm reduction strategy would contribute effectively to a redefinition of inebriation. If youth may come to understand that intoxication is occurring way before one becomes 'ħara mejjet' then they may minimize the risk by helping them learn how to "master intoxication" by redefining what this state means to them (Østergaard, 2007). In this way young people may come to see alcohol consumption as a complement to social interaction rather than a goal in itself, and consequently disapprove of drunkenness rather than attributing a sense of pride to it. The culture of intoxication manifests itself in young people through their tendency to interpret drinking alcohol as primarily a means of getting drunk (Lindsay et al, 2009).

This paper has shown how the focus group setting is able to provide young people with the opportunity to reflect more critically on the issue of drunkenness and collectively deconstruct how it is socially represented, and similar activities could be introduced as part of school prevention programs. The aim would be to change the cultural logic of drinking to intoxication which was so evident in the data collected via the focus groups. Getting drunk was represented as natural and normal, which is exactly what effective social representations do.

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