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# Relational drinking geographies: Towards vital flows and ‘open’ methods

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## Abstract

Jayne and Valentine offer opportunities to engage with alcohol, drinking, and drunkenness in ways that do not unreflexively reproduce ‘alcohol studies’ ontologies and epistemologies, which are infused with moralising, disciplining, and normalising discourses. I expand their contribution by proposing two ways to account for the complexities of alcohol, drinking, and drunkenness. First, I argue that the concept of ‘vital flows’, drawing on the work of Stern, can contribute to the proposed research agenda, giving agency to an array of more-than-human actants. Second, I contend that a participatory research design, including ‘open’ novel methods, can allow insight into relational geographies. I illustrate this through a proposed empirical account with young people in Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities, who have been under-explored in relation to drinking geographies and beyond.

## Keywords

Alcohol, participatory, qualitative, relational, vital flow

## Relational drinking geographies and vital flows

Jayne and Valentine (2023) argue that problematic ‘alcohol studies’ approaches give causality to alcohol as a catalyst of problematic drinking, particularly in the context of alcohol-related violence. Here, I propose the concept of ‘vital flows’ (Stern, 2010) as a way of giving agency to more-than-human actants without reinforcing moralising, disciplining, and normalising discourses.

Stern (2010: 3) introduces the concept of ‘vitality’ to call attention to human experience that remains largely ‘hidden in plain view’. Vitality is an intersubjective flow – a manifestation of being alive. Movement, time, force, space, and intention/directionality, together,

give rise to the experience of vitality. Central to Stern’s (2010) work is that ‘most affect attunement occurs out of conscious awareness, as the body is affected through multiple registers, in its psychobiological rhythms, in multisensory dynamic flow, and in the dynamic shifts and patterns of the body in movement in and out of constantly emergent assemblages’ (Boldt, 2020: 207). Drawing on research from literacy and curriculum theory, Boldt (2020) argues that researchers and teachers need to attend to students’ embodied expressions of vitality which communicate the energy of a given

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classroom event. As Boldt (2020: 212) states, 'vitality is produced and keeps things in motion; it does not belong to any of the elements but is the energy that flows through the elements, belonging to the event'.

In the context of Reception classrooms, Bryce-Clegg (forthcoming) discusses what happens when adults stop vital energy, often in the aim of policy-driven pedagogy. There are parallels between the disruptions of vitality in the classroom, documented by Bryce-Clegg (forthcoming), and people on nights out when moods or rules are broken. To draw on one of MacLean and Moore's (2014) examples, young adults may feel suddenly out of place in the night-time economy when denied entry to a club, due to some perceived unsuitability (e.g., 'being too drunk'). Understanding this through a vital flow lens can help us see that the young adults' vitality has been read as potentially dangerous, and by denying entry their energy, movement, and affective and embodied connections have been restrained (Boldt, 2020). Bryce-Clegg (forthcoming) argues that such vital energies may be diverted and must now find a new outlet, which can potentially be reconstituted and/or perceived as problematic behaviour.

The concept of vital flows is useful for the study of geographies of alcohol, drinking, drunkenness by working to avoid oversimplified searches for causality and instead challenges researchers to pay attention to 'the felt experience of force – in movement – with a temporal contour, and a sense of aliveness, of going somewhere...accelerating, exploding, and fading' (Stern, 2010: 8). Relational conceptual frameworks can be used in conjunction with 'open' methods; by this, I mean methods that are both open to being shaped by participants, and which avoid researcher prompts, thereby allow for insight beyond drinking geographies *per se*.

## Participatory research beyond alcohol consumption *per se*

Methodologically, I agree with Jayne and Valentine (2023) that there is a need to engage with approaches that add value to our understandings of alcohol, drinking, and drunkenness. These methodological approaches should be congruent with a

conceptual apparatus that offer a relational challenge to 'vertical' imaginaries bound up with the 'truth claims' of politicians, policymakers, and academics. A participatory approach is one way of achieving this. Participatory research focuses on a process of sequential reflection and action, carried out with, by, and for people, rather than on them (Wilkinson and Wilkinson, 2018a, 2018b). Local knowledge and perspectives are not simply acknowledged; they are a fundamental component of the research design (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995). I explore this in the context of a proposed empirical account of the drinking geographies, and beyond, of young people in Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities, whose experiences of alcohol, drinking, and drunkenness have hitherto been largely unexplored.

Van Hout (2010) claims that due to social exclusion, discrimination, lack of awareness, and difficulties in engaging with addiction treatment protocols, Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities are vulnerable to problematic alcohol use. This is one such example of bumping up against ontological 'fixity' (Joronen and Hakli, 2017: 573). We approach a dualism where, on the one hand, this community is considered vulnerable to problematic alcohol use, and, on the other hand, there is a discourse that for many young people, alcohol is a fundamental component of identity exploration (Riordan and Carey, 2018). There is a need to explore 'what really happens' in this community, bound up with alcohol consumption. I argue that working with project partners with close ties to the research community and/or peer researchers can be beneficial, as they may have first-hand insights into matters affecting the community, often being affected by the same issues themselves (McCartan et al., 2012).

In the spirit of a participatory design, methods are indicative. Researchers must be open to research methods being shaped by the participants. As a starting point, I propose the use of group narrative interviews and group craft-elicitation interviews as methods enabling young people from Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller Communities to communicate 'what has felt vital to them' (Boldt, 2020: 210) to tell their drinking stories in 'culturally credible'

ways (Leyshon, 2002; Wilkinson, 2016). As Fox and Alldred (2015: 407) explain, ‘interviews can be used to identify assembled relations, and the affects and the capacities produced in bodies that together make an assemblage work’. Moreover, due to the potential for the dynamic sharing of ideas, emotions, and experiences, the group nature of these interviews can better enable insight into intersubjectivities. I now elaborate on each of these methods.

First, with regards to group narrative interviews: Gypsy, Roma, and Travellers are a highly oral culture, regularly engaging in lively conversation, due to close family networks and prioritisation of social interaction (Condon et al., 2019). Small group narrative interviews may enable them to tell their drinking stories, without the interruption that may come from more structured interviews. Second, in relation to craft-elicitation interviews: craft-making is culturally significant for Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities (*Travellers Times*, 2023). Craft-based research facilitates an uninhibited state, generates rich and novel data, and breaks down power relations (Ogden and Harrison, 2021). Participants should have the choice of ‘opting into’ creating – using materials chosen by participants – something that represents their relationships with alcohol, drinking, and drunkenness. The final product, along with the process of crafting, would act as a catalyst for research discussions (Ogden and Harrison, 2021).

The ‘open’ nature of the research design and the proposed methods allows for insight into relational geographies, looking beyond alcohol consumption *per se*, to provide a fuller, richer, more detailed understanding of how alcohol, drinking, and drunkenness constitute the lives of people in these communities. A story-telling methodological approach eradicates the issue of not asking the right questions of participants due to an inability to overcome ‘truths’ that travel with the researcher from previous research in other contexts. This approach resists researchers’ ‘prompts’ to focus on the topic at hand, avoiding leading questions (Jayne and Valentine, 2023), and enables finding out more of drinking-not-drinking practices, experiences, and performances. This approach can provide a way for researchers to overcome their own situated knowledges, and avoid

foregrounding alcohol in a way that eclipses other threads of empirical evidence.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, Jayne and Valentine’s (2023) contention that geographies of alcohol, drinking, and drunkenness remain both under theorised and under researched rings true. Through this brief commentary, I have offered the conceptual lens of ‘vital flows’ (Stern, 2010) as a fruitful avenue beyond a search for ‘root causes’ that suggest violence and/or disorder can be understood as simply being ‘down to the drink’. Moreover, through the example of proposed empirical research *with and for* young people in Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities, I have indicated how a participatory research design and culturally credible ‘open’ methods are ways of de-centring alcohol, providing a richer understanding of how alcohol, drinking, and drunkenness constitute the lives of people in these communities and beyond. There is a need to explore the nuances and complexities of alcohol, drinking, and drunkenness in the lives of other underexplored groups (for instance, homeless young people), where alcohol has hitherto been largely negatively imbued with causality as a ‘pathway to homelessness’ (Mallett et al., 2005). I urge researchers to engage with project partners and peer researchers from the communities they are interested in engaging with, and collaborating with researchers beyond disciplinary boundaries, with the aim of conceptual and methodological innovation to inspire new and exciting relational drinking geographies scholarship.

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