

**Full title: Shouting and providing: Forms of exchange in the drinking accounts of young Australians**

**Running title: Forms of exchange in drinking accounts**

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## **Abstract**

### ***Introduction and Aims***

Australian health promotion campaigns encourage people to manage their alcohol consumption by avoiding involvement in a form of round drinking known as ‘shouting’. We consider this individualist advice in light of our analysis of the social relations established by young people through collective drinking, in which we conceptualise friends, family and work colleagues as participants in complex networks of exchange.

### ***Design and Methods***

Data were gathered during in-depth, semi-structured interviews and ethnographic fieldwork conducted in a socio-economically disadvantaged outer suburb of Melbourne, Australia. The interview sample comprised nine men and seven women of diverse ethnic backgrounds, with a median age of 21 years.

### ***Results***

We identified two types of exchange – ‘shouting’ and ‘providing’ – enacted by round drinking and other collective drinking practices. ‘Shouting’ is a form of balanced reciprocity in which participants take turns buying drinks for all others in the group. It is an immediate, direct exchange of alcoholic gifts that are equivalent in value. ‘Providing’ is characterised by indirect reciprocity in which the social aspects of the transaction are emphasised over the value of the goods exchanged. In addition to risking social exclusion, rejecting this form of collective drinking may also risk rejecting the other resources exchanged in this form of sharing, such as food, transport and accommodation.

### ***Discussion and Conclusions***

Exchanges of alcoholic gifts complicate the straightforward application of individualist health promotion advice. Social relations need to be taken into account when designing health promotion interventions that seek to reduce alcohol-related harm.

### **Key words**

Round drinking, exchange, social relations, health promotion, qualitative research

## **Introduction**

Recent Australian health promotion campaigns have encouraged people to manage their alcohol consumption by avoiding involvement in a form of round drinking known as ‘shouting’, a type of balanced reciprocity in which participants take turns buying drinks for all others in the group. The assumption inherent in this advice is that such collective forms of drinking prevent individuals from being able to control – and sometimes even be aware of – how much they drink. In this article, we consider two types of exchange – ‘shouting’ and ‘providing’ – enacted by round drinking and other collective drinking practices among young people in an outer suburb of Melbourne, Australia. We argue that the social relations enacted by these forms of exchange challenge health promotion’s individualist ideology and should be taken into account when designing interventions that seek to reduce alcohol-related harm.

## ***Background***

Australian health promotion campaigns often advise that excessive alcohol consumption and associated forms of harm can be reduced by avoiding shouting. For example, the Australian National Preventive Health Agency, in its ‘Practical tips for low-risk drinking’, advises drinkers to ‘Avoid keeping up with friends drink for drink or being in “shouts”’ [1]. The Victorian Government’s Better Health website advises drinkers to ‘Opt out of “shouts”’. Drink at your own pace. If you can’t avoid buying a shout, get yourself a non-alcoholic drink’ [2]. Similarly, the Australian Drug Foundation, in its advice on ‘How to control your drinking’, recommends that people ‘avoid getting “rounds” or “shouts”’ [3]. Such advice is based on three implicit and perhaps related assumptions about drinking in social settings: (1) engaging in round drinking reduces control over the amount of alcohol consumed, (2) opting out of round drinking increases one’s awareness of, and ability to control, the amount of alcohol consumed, and (3) the social relations established through, and governing, round

drinking practices can be easily set aside in favour of individual choices. This focus on the rational, individual actor, who prioritises the avoidance of risks or harms at the expense of other benefits, is common in health promotion interventions.

Previous research has highlighted the importance of shouting in Australia as central to enacting an ideology of egalitarian autonomy, particularly in the formation of social relations among men in commercial venues such as pubs and bars [e.g. 4]. According to this research, shouting performs three functions: maintaining group solidarity, demonstrating social equality and achieving similar affective states of intoxication. For example, Cutler and Storm argue that ‘group solidarity is reflected in a strict adherence to group norms’ [5, cited in 6, p.126]. Norms include the speed of consumption, and drink and brand choice [5,7]. Shouting is also understood to signal the equality of those participating [4–6], although this research observation has often been made in relation to homogenous groups (mainly older, white, working-class men) with little variation in gender, age, ethnicity and social class. Equality among group members is enhanced by the fact that shouting is a form of exchange. Previous research has noted that shouting has a ‘strong undercurrent of reciprocity’ [6] in that the return of the gift takes place immediately and is of equivalent value. Shouting is usually associated with licensed venues, in which these exchanges are arguably more public and more ritualised.

More recent qualitative research has offered additional findings highlighting the importance of collective drinking for establishing social relations. An Australian study argued that young adults use alcohol as a technology for building friendships and intimacy [8]. An important part of creating affinity is through the achievement of similar states of intoxication alongside the physical act of drinking together [8, see also 9]. Another article from the same study observed that round buying ‘was seen by many as an important way of demonstrating

connections with friends' and that there was '[l]ittle to no difference [...] across gender regarding views about round buying, round buying practices or the impact of round buying on overall consumption' [10]. Other research has found that abstaining from drinking may undermine social relations because it carries the risk of social exclusion [11].

Quantitative Australian research has also explored alcohol consumption and social relations. For example, a recent study examined the 'social worlds' of drinking by measuring the influence of friends, workmates and family members on levels of alcohol consumption and attitudes to drunkenness [12]. Drawing on a representative sample of 2,483 adults, Room et al. found that participants who drank 'socially' (defined as drinking more than once a week at a bar, party or friend's home) or 'riskily' (defined as drinking more than six standard drinks on a single occasion) were more likely to report greater perceived influences from others. Pressure to drink more was exerted by work colleagues and friends – particularly the latter – and this pressure was most commonly reported by those who were categorised as social *and* heavy drinkers. The authors argued that 'efforts to change a drinking culture ... must take account of the collective nature of drinking and of the interplay of influences at interpersonal and subcultural levels if they are to be effective' [12, p.1] and that further qualitative research is needed in order to understand *when* people experience pressure to drink, and in particular the 'norms and the functioning of the social worlds of drinking and heavy drinking' [12, p. 7].

In this article, we explore the forms of exchange and social relations of collective drinking through our qualitative data. However, we do not conceptualise friends, work colleagues and family as external sources of pressure and/or influence but as participants in networks of exchange. Thinking about collective drinking practices as forms of exchange may be useful in exploring the symbolic aspects of drinking and how specific forms of exchange enact

social relations between persons [13,14]. Our analysis is informed by anthropological approaches to reciprocal and gift exchange, which focus on the circulation of resources through sharing and redistribution, and which emphasise the kinship and other forms of social relation constituted by and constitutive of such transactions [e.g. 13-20]. We explore the extent to which round drinking such as shouting follows a reciprocal form, how these practices are involved in producing and reproducing notions of equality and inclusion (or exclusion) [16, 17], and how social relations are maintained and renewed through alcohol exchange.

## **Methods**

The data presented in this article were gathered during 16 in-depth interviews and ethnographic fieldwork conducted by the second author (AH) in Broadmeadows, a socio-economically disadvantaged outer suburb of Melbourne, between September 2012 and September 2013. Interviewees were recruited during ethnographic fieldwork, predominantly in a public housing estate and community centre. Potential interviewees were screened to determine whether they had engaged in a 'big drinking session' in the previous 12 months, defined as approximately 10 or more standard drinks in a single session. Interviews were semi-structured and focused on participants' 'last [most recent] big drinking session' including who they were with, the location(s) of the event, transport, activities, alcohol products and quantities consumed, time and means of purchasing and their approximate cost, other drug use and time spent drinking. Three participants reported that they had not drunk heavily within the past 12 months and these interviews therefore explored reasons for *not* drinking heavily. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and participants were compensated AUD40 for their time. Ten participants were interviewed alone and six were

interviewed in pairs. Where interviews were paired, dyads were well known to each other, either as family, partners or co-workers who sometimes socialised together.

The sample comprised nine males and seven females aged between 18 and 24 years (median age 21 years). Five had casual part-time employment and 11 were unemployed; three were involved in formal study (with two also working). The sample was ethnically diverse with six interviewees of Anglo-European heritage, three Indigenous, two Turkish, two Lebanese, one Polynesian, one Serbian, and one for whom ethnicity was not recorded.

The study received approval from the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (HR108/2012). The field notes and interview transcripts were entered into the NVivo 10 software program. Coding and analysis of data was conducted mainly by the first and second authors. The material was coded according to themes derived from the existing literature on alcohol consumption and collective drinking practices. Conceptual and descriptive codes were developed after reading a small number of interviews and field notes, and following discussions between the authors. These codes were then tested on the rest of the material, and supplementary codes were added in a systematic way across the data set. In particular, we coded for themes that related to exchange in the context of alcohol consumption. We begin our analysis by focusing on the theme of 'shouting'.

## **Results**

### ***Shouting***

The interviews include accounts of shouting in licensed venues, such as in bars, nightclubs and concert venues. For example, Ulla, a 19 year old female participant of Polynesian background, provided an account of a recent evening when she and a group of female friends

attended a live concert in the city. On this occasion, the shouting practices were consistent with the norms of shouting in male groups described in earlier research [6]. Each member of the group took a turn going to the bar to buy drinks for the others. Ulla's story hints at the contemporary significance of shouting as an expression of equality in the sense that one bought drinks for all members of the group, which was then reciprocated by all others in turn:

Ulla: I only went [to the bar] once. I went the first time and that's when we had the first round. But then it was fine for me to stop, so they just kept going.

Interviewer: [...] So, each time – one of you would go to the bar and bring back a drink for everyone?

Ulla: Yeah

Ulla's account suggests that the practice of shouting, and its associations with solidarity and equality, may be understood and pursued by groups of women in commercial venues. The practice of round drinking amongst women was also noted in the recent Australian qualitative study cited above [10] but is an aspect that was often overlooked in earlier research on round drinking amongst men. In addition, the involvement of women in round drinking within mixed gender groups has received little attention. Barbara et al. [6, p. 127] noted that the few female drinkers observed in their fieldwork did not seem to adhere to the 'rules' of shouting, which led the authors to suggest that women may either have been unaware of these rules or were exempt from such expectations. However, we need to bear in mind that Barbara et al.'s study was conducted in the 1970s and in predominantly male environments. Lindsay's [21] more recent ethnographic study of Melbourne venues found that in inner-city 'niche' venues (mainly small bars), there was greater similarity between men and women in terms of the amount of alcohol consumed than in larger 'commercial' venues, but she did not investigate



round drinking practices. Clearly, further research is needed on women's contemporary participation in round drinking.

Another example of round drinking in the interview data is provided by David's account of an outing to the casino with a large group of male friends to celebrate his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. As has been noted in earlier analyses of shouting [4–6], David's story provides a striking account of how shouting practices can work actively to exclude people rather than merely reflecting divisions between existing groups. On this occasion, shouting made obvious the distinction between the men who were employed and those who were not – a distinction that may not have emerged in the absence of shouting. As David recounts, the inability of the unemployed men to participate in direct exchange with the whole group because of a lack of finances meant that they were forced not only to stop consuming but also to leave the group completely:

David: I go, "Youse are here, with all of us at work and you've got no money already. We've still got a lot of money, it's we gotta [buy] youse a drink, or that, that's not happening", so they left.

Interviewer: They left [the casino]?

David: Yeah, they actually left because we should share our drinks, like if you had a job, you could have kept drinking.

Sargent [22, p.120-121, cited in 6] argued that taking turns to pay for drinks increases the sense of solidarity of the group and that this solidarity is enhanced by excluding those who are outsiders. David's account suggests that the financial demands of shouting could work to socially exclude existing members of the group if they did not possess the resources to take part. In the example provided by David, he emphasises that the excluded members were

unemployed and therefore unable to participate in the shout as equal members. David's account demonstrates the way in which shouting actively brings about the formation of groups, rather than simply reinforcing the boundaries of pre-existing groups as suggested by the literature.

In addition to the men at David's birthday outing who did not have enough money to buy rounds, and were therefore excluded from the evening's activities, there were other men present who did not participate in shouting because they had chosen not to drink alcohol. Interestingly, however, these men were not excluded from the evening. Although their decision attracted derision from one member of the drinking group (according to David, 'he started calling them a bunch of pussies and stuff like that', thus emphasising the link between drinking alcohol and masculinity [11, 23]), it was accepted by the other drinkers present. This incorporation of non-drinkers into the group – if not the shouting – may have been facilitated through David's approval when they informed or reminded him that they were intending not to drink alcohol. As he recounts, 'So I'm like, "Yeah, all right, youse don't drink, come out, don't worry about it, drink water, drink whatever, as long as youse is there to have fun with me, you know?"' The second reason for their acceptance is that, unlike the unemployed men who wanted to drink but did not have the necessary resources, the non-drinkers did not attempt to participate in the shout. Frank, another participant in the study, also provided an example of how abstaining from alcohol did not necessarily lead to exclusion – in this case, him being accompanied on a night out by Muslim friends who observed the religious avoidance of alcohol. These examples suggest that abstaining from drinking is not necessarily a barrier to participating in a night out with drinkers in those instances where there is a subsidiary non-drinking group consisting of several members, where no attempt is made to join the shout without contributing to it financially or where religious beliefs inform (non-)drinking.

Kamal, a study participant with a Turkish background, provided an account of exchange with a particular friend that marked their relationship as special, and this practice also took place when they were part of a larger group. He describes how this form of exchange extended beyond alcohol consumption:

Yeah, most things we do, you know .... Say if I went to go get food, I'd buy a big portion ... it would be between me and him, you know. ... Like if we go [to the] movies, if we go out or if there's a big group of us, it's either like me pay for him one day and then [the] next day, him pay for us. You know, just a close mate thing.

In the arrangement between Kamal and his friend, shouting is a way of making this relationship concrete. The phrase 'close mate thing' that Kamal uses to refer to his general pattern of reciprocity with his friend is quite intimate and, as he notes, operates as a (special) reciprocal arrangement within a larger social group. This arrangement seems to be a variation on the usual form of shouting in groups, in which each individual is expected to participate equally.

Previous research on shouting has focused mainly on licensed premises and on homogenous groups of mainly older, white, working-class men. By contrast, our interviews and ethnographic observations include young men and women and those from a wider range of ethnic backgrounds. Interestingly, the form of round drinking known as shouting remained evident among these groups and, with the exception of the example provided by Kamal, was similar to that described in previous research.

### **Providing**

In addition to reciprocal exchanges such as shouting, our interview accounts include descriptions of a second form of exchange, 'providing', characterised by indirect reciprocity

and which is ostensibly altruistic – the ‘true gift’ [19]. In these forms of exchange, the social features of the transaction are emphasised and participants downplay the material aspects. Although gifts create obligations and social relations between the giver and receiver, there is little calculation or monitoring of the monetary value of the goods exchanged, the time at which the gift is returned is open and indefinite, and failure to reciprocate does not necessarily result in the giver ceasing to provide in the future.

Our first example again features Ulla. After the concert drinking described earlier, Ulla and her friends attended a party at the house of Ulla’s cousin. In the following extract, Ulla describes her alcohol consumption at the party and how her older cousin provided alcohol (and food) for her without any expectation of reciprocation:

Interviewer: OK, so with the two Jack Daniels and the six or seven Midori Cruisers, where did you get those from?

Ulla: Oh, they were already there at the house. ‘Cos my cousin lives just across from the [off-license outlet] and so I’m guessing that they’re already bought home with them.

Interviewer: OK, so it was her shout?

Ulla: Yeah, it usually is [laughing].

[...]

Interviewer: So she [the cousin] lives alone? And she works?

Ulla: Yeah, she has two jobs

Interviewer: She has two jobs. So she can afford to shout?

Ulla: Yeah.

Interviewer: And do you often shout her?

Ulla: No. Oh, I try to ... 'cos we even go out to rugby games at [venue] and we always like drink there ... and 'cos she's older [mid-twenties], she always thinks she has to shout for me, 'cos I'm the youngest. So, no, it's usually her shout [laughing].

Interviewer: OK, so she's happy to do that? How do you feel about that?

Ulla: I feel bad most of the time ... 'cos not only that, she tries to pay for like a feed as well. Not only alcohol – she'll always try and buy food for us and stuff. I always say I'm going to buy my own stuff ... she's already paid for it though.

In addition to providing alcohol and food, Ulla's older cousin provides a place to socialise. A male cousin also provided transport to the party, which is another service often exchanged among the young people in our study. The family relationship and age difference between the two women seem to be significant in the sense of obligation Ulla attributes to her cousin ('she always thinks she has to shout for me'). Buying drinks is a way of demonstrating, or making concrete, this social relationship.

Ulla's account is also notable for the unspoken understanding between participants in the arrangement, suggesting that this form of exchange and one's location within it are well recognised by those involved. Given that Ulla's cousin does not receive any material benefits, we might ask what she derives from the exchange. It is arguable that respect accrues from these arrangements – both from the younger cousin but also from the extended family. One's senior social status is also confirmed through providing for younger family members. In Ulla's account, her cousin's elevated status is emphasised through being employed, living independently and having more resources at her disposal.

Another example of the obligation to provide for a younger relative appears in the interview account co-produced by cousins Marwan (aged 20 years) and Fadi (aged 24 years). Marwan describes the pattern of alcohol gift exchange between them:

Marwan: He's bought me drinks countless times.

Interviewer: OK and is it [the exchange] sort of even between you?

Marwan: He's bought me more than I've bought him [laughing].

Interviewer: Right.

Marwan: But he's my cousin ... so ...

Interviewer: So that's all good?

Marwan: Sort of [laughing].

Interviewer: Does it sometimes cause conflict if one person has sort of shouted a few times in a row and another person hasn't?

Fadi: I don't care [in background].

Like Ulla's account, the obligation extends to purchasing alcohol. There is little expectation of turn-taking because they have a 'cousin' relationship. There is a shared understanding of this arrangement, although in both this and Ulla's cases it seems not to be discussed between those involved. Fadi's comment, 'I don't care', also seems to close down any further discussion of the apparent one-sidedness of the exchange between the two men.

Although there is little expectation to reciprocate, both Ulla and Marwan emphasise a desire to do so. In Ulla's account, in particular, her attempts to reciprocate are usually thwarted by her cousin ('she's already paid for it though'). This type of exchange – of alcohol, food and

transportation – occurs within extended family groups and was evident among study participants from several cultural/ethnic backgrounds. Ulla, for example, as we noted earlier, identifies as Polynesian, and Marwan and Fadi are of Lebanese background. These forms of exchange may also be seen as ways of enacting kinship rather than simply reflecting recognised or existing family relationships, and highlight the importance of ethnicity in shaping drinking practices [see also 24,25]. We draw on the example of Briony, Deborah and Shari from the study field notes and interviews to explore this issue further.

Briony, aged 25 years, is the head of a household comprising several younger members, primarily two younger women, Deborah and Shari. All have an Indigenous Australian background. Briony describes them as ‘family’. Deborah and Shari explain that they are related to Briony through being named as the godmothers of Briony’s son as well as growing up with Briony’s younger siblings. According to Hal, a community worker who knows the family well, Briony provided Deborah and Shari with drinks, cigarettes and accommodation. Like the relationship between Ulla and her cousin, and between Marwan and Fadi, these practices of sharing resources – food, alcohol and shelter – are ways of enacting kinship [26]. In return, Briony also receives benefits that are of significant value to her:

Briony wants to help them [Deborah and Shari] out. It seems that the family connection between them is genuine and warm. Hal thinks that Briony’s hosting of them is at least in part altruistic, but it’s likely that at times she enjoys their company and having a drink and smoke with them. (AH field notes, 2013)

In addition to company, Briony also received benefits in terms of gaining respect and social status within the community for providing what she considers to be a safe house. As in the other examples of providing, reciprocity is diffuse and open rather than direct and immediate, with an older, more financially stable member of the extended family network providing for

younger family members. Like other examples of exchange in this category, there are some benefits to the giver but, in general, reciprocation is neither direct nor balanced. 'Providing' as a form of exchange makes explicit particular kinship and (hierarchical) social relations through exchange. It is also a form of nurture and sentiment within kinship groups.

## **Discussion**

Australian health promotion campaigns such as those referred to earlier frame decisions about collective drinking as individual choices. However, the existing literature and our study findings suggest that non-participation in round drinking is not straightforward because of the complex social relations enacted via alcohol (especially so in a context where resources are scarce). Understanding some of these complexities may offer opportunities to intervene in drinking practices to reduce alcohol-related harm. Whereas Riazi and Maclean [10] suggest 'identifying and disseminating strategies to resist pressure to buy rounds', our data suggest another, complementary, approach. For example, it may be possible to encourage alternative forms of shouting that preserve social relations but reduce harm. Such forms might include encouraging shouting within small sub-groups at social events involving large groups of drinkers. Shouting within these smaller groups would facilitate greater control over the amount of alcohol consumed while also acting symbolically as a proxy for participation in exchange and the accompanying social relations with everyone present [a practice also observed in 6,10]. This suggestion could be framed in a way that acknowledges the symbolic meaning of collective drinking while managing some of the problems, such as the cost and difficulty of purchasing a round of drinks for a large group, and the harm sometimes associated with heavy drinking. Another alternative may be to encourage a form of alcohol exchange that is not dependent on *immediate* reciprocity (as is the case in shouting) but is extended in time across multiple occasions.



The examples of exchange of alcoholic gifts that we have called ‘providing’, like reciprocal arrangements such as shouting, also complicate the straightforward application of health promotion advice. Not only do individuals risk social exclusion if they opt out of collective drinking – as is sometimes also the case with shouting – but they may also be endangering access to the other resources exchanged in sharing from which they benefit, such as food, transport and accommodation. This seems particularly important in contexts where resources are scarce, as was the case for many of our research participants. Rather than understanding these practices as governed by individual choices, collective drinking and other sharing practices enact social relations, such as family or family-like arrangements, that are imbued with particular obligations and status within these groups.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, we have taken up Room et al.’s [12] injunction to consider more carefully the ‘interplay of [drinking] influences’ and the ‘functioning of the social worlds of drinking’. However, rather than understanding these influences and functioning in terms of ‘pressure’, we have instead highlighted some of the ways in which the two forms of exchange we have identified – ‘shouting’ and ‘providing’ – are both influenced by and enact social relations. Current Australian health promotion campaigns frame drinking and the associated decisions as matters of individual choice rather than as being entangled in complex social relations. Our findings suggest that drinking is an intrinsically social practice and exchanges of alcoholic gifts complicate the straightforward application of individualist health promotion advice to avoid engaging in round drinking. Such statements disregard the importance of forms of exchange and the social relations they enact, and overestimate the ability of individuals to set them aside, particularly in contexts of scarcity. Health promotion should not ignore the meanings and contexts of alcohol consumption but rather draw on existing social practices to

reconfigure round drinking in ways that acknowledge the social relations enacted through drinking while also reducing its costs.

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