

‘Social Health’, ‘Physical Health’ and Wellbeing: Analyzing the Interplay between the Practices of Heavy Drinking and Exercise among Young People with Bourdieusian Concepts

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Abstract : In the article, we examine the interplay between the practices of heavy drinking and exercise among young people as patterned around the ‘social’ and ‘physical health’ approaches. The comparison helps us to clarify why young people are currently drinking less than earlier and how the neoliberal healthism discourse, as well as the feminine tradition of taking care of one’s body, are modifying young people’s heavy drinking practices. The data is based on interviews (n = 56) in Sweden among 15-16-year-olds and 18-19-year-olds. By drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus, field, and capital, we examine what kinds of resources of wellbeing young people accumulate in the fields of heavy drinking and exercise, how these resources carry symbolic value for distinction, and what kind of health-related habitus they imply. The analysis suggests that as heavy drinking is no longer able to stand as a practice through which one may acquire capital that is more valuable than the capital acquired in other fields, this lessens peer pressure to drink among young people. Our analysis further shows that the healthism discourse modifies young people’s heavy drinking practices both from inside and from outside. The interviewees translate the symbolic value of healthism discourse to social vulnerability and deploy it for the purposes of increasing one’s social status among peers. Moreover, our analysis demonstrates that the social spaces and positions in intoxication and exercise are shaped by gendered dualisms of masculine dominance. However, while the interviewees naturalize the gender binaries in intoxication as based on biological drives, they understand gender binaries in exercise as normative social constructions of neoliberal society. As these binaries emphasize the struggle for recognition of the symbolic value of bodily look, they may shift young men’s attention from risk-taking to issues that traditionally have been female concerns.

Keywords : young people, decline in drinking , health, intoxication, exercise, Bourdieu

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