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PLEASE CITE THE PUBLISHED VERSION

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s41978-020-00068-x>

PUBLISHER

Springer Science and Business Media LLC

VERSION

VoR (Version of Record)

PUBLISHER STATEMENT

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REPOSITORY RECORD

Thurnell-Read, Thomas. 2020. "if They Weren't in the Pub, They Probably Wouldn't Even Know Each Other': Alcohol, Sociability and Pub Based Leisure". Loughborough University.
<https://hdl.handle.net/2134/13651340.v1>.



‘If they weren’t in the Pub, they Probably wouldn’t Even Know each Other’: Alcohol, Sociability and Pub Based Leisure

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Received: 3 April 2020 / Accepted: 17 September 2020 / Published online: 2 October 2020

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Abstract

While the form and function of pubs is diverse and has changed over time, there remains an at least notional consensus that the pub plays an important social function by providing a place for people to come together in pleasurable and meaningful social interaction. Drawing on qualitative research involving focus groups with pub goers and interviews with pub staff, this paper examines the forms of sociability that take place in UK pubs. Pubs are shown to be sites for varied social interactions which differ in form, intensity and meaning. This includes regular pub going rooted in customer routines but also occasional pub going linked to a wider range of events and associated leisure activities. A common theme across these forms of pub sociability is the value placed on feelings of social connections provided by different forms of social interaction and sociability which are facilitated by the hospitable atmospheres many pubs offer. Pubs are therefore cast as important sites through which various forms of sociability are enacted and enabled. The article contributes to ongoing debates about the social role of alcohol based leisure practises but also stresses the decentring of intoxication apparent in many of these accounts and, further, indicates an increasing diversification of pub based leisure.

Keywords Alcohol · Drinking culture · Pubs · Social interaction

1 Introduction

The centrality of the pub to the fabric of British society is well documented (Jennings 2007). While the social, cultural and economic functions of pubs, inns and taverns are varied and have changed over time (Lane 2018), the pub still plays

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a symbolic role in British popular culture as a representation of the social heart of community life (Furnham et al. 1997; Markham 2013). Classic studies, such as that conducted by the British social research organization Mass Observation (1943), have recorded the role played by pubs in encouraging and enhancing social connectivity and community belonging. More recently, organizations such as *The Campaign for Real Ale* (CAMRA) and *Pub is the Hub*, have sought to protect pubs and to promote recognition of them being of special value to communities. A persistent feature of both public and academic understandings of the distinctiveness of pubs is, therefore, their function as social spaces that foster and facilitate social interactions which are pleasurable to individuals and beneficial to the wider community (Cabras et al. 2016). However, within this there remains a lack of detailed knowledge of what this sociability involves, how it is accessed and perceived by different individuals and groups, and to what extent the reality of contemporary pub going lives up to the lasting and highly romanticized images of them as ‘cultural icons’ (Markham 2013).

In recent years, the term ‘community pub’ has come into common usage to describe venues that continue to play an important social role for the local area, in contrast to more commercially minded venues in town and city centres. Such pubs are widely valued as ‘offering a space where local people can meet and socialise’ and ‘are perceived by the public to be an important place where people from different backgrounds can meet and interact’ (Muir 2009: 54). In rural areas in particular, therefore, the village pub can play a significant role in the economic, social and cultural life of the village (Markham and Bosworth 2016; Mount and Cabras 2016). Such spaces are said to foster community interaction and cohesion at a time when many communities are increasingly fragmented, leaving some individuals vulnerable to social isolation and disconnection (Cabras and Mount 2017). As Markham (2013: 270–271) observes, the planned and spontaneous social interactions that take place in pubs ‘helps to create, expand and strengthen social networks’ and means that informal sociability ‘ranging from simple greetings through to in-depth social and conversational engagement with others... lends itself well to the creation, expansion and strengthening of social networks’. It has therefore been suggested that the sociability that pubs offer can continue to play an important role in maintaining social connections within local communities in order to combat social isolation and loneliness (See All-Party Parliamentary Beer Group 2020).

In spite of ongoing changes in drinking patterns (Meng et al. 2014), pub going appears to remain a popular leisure activity for many sections of the British population (Le Roux et al. 2008). Alcohol consumption has featured regularly in academic studies of contemporary leisure (Hubbard 2013), especially when it is associated with overt drunkenness and hedonistic excess in the urban Night Time Economy (Hadfield and Measham 2015). There is also a tendency for alcohol to be positioned as an adjunct or as complementary to other sociable activities such as playing or watching sports and making pleasure trips or taking holidays (Burns and Gallant 2018). In such cases alcohol consumption is often positioned as a requisite supplement to engagement in another leisure activity which further enhances the sociable nature of that activity. In each case the consumption of alcohol is used to enhance feelings of belonging and togetherness and, in some cases, reinforce lines of inclusion or exclusion based on age, gender and ethnicity.

Pubs therefore continue to be of sociological interest precisely because they are complex and contested social spaces (Maye et al. 2005) where ‘different forms of

sociality' are played out (Miller 2019: 796). However, with a few exceptions (Goode and Anderson 2015; Watson and Watson 2012), there is a persistent lack of empirical and conceptual insight into the forms of sociability taking place in pubs. Because this research focuses largely on older drinkers, it elicits insights which are not solely associated with hedonistic 'determined drunkenness' (Measham and Brain 2005) nor overtly focused on the hedonistic drinking spaces of the Night Time Economy which have dominated the attention of alcohol scholars in recent year (Chatterton and Hollands 2002; Hayward and Hobbs 2007). Rather, the analysis allows social interaction to be foregrounded in a more multifaceted reading of the different expressions of sociability taking place in British pubs. As such, the article proceeds as follows. The next section further outlines the ways in which existing academic scholarship on pub based leisure has accounted for the dynamics of social interaction taking place within licenced venues and other related drinking spaces. Then, following a section outlining the research methods and context, the findings are divided into three thematic section, each accounting for a particular form of sociability identified in the research data. This division allows the similarities and differences between different forms of sociability central to the participants' experiences of pub based leisure to be examined and, in the closing discussion, related to wider understandings of leisure, sociability and the role of alcohol and drinking spaces in shaping the social value of leisure.

2 Getting Social Down the Local?

The role played by alcohol consumption in facilitating sociability and the formation and maintenance of friendships and other intimate social relationships is well established in academic literature (See Thurnell-Read 2016). Pub based drinking has long been the central leisure activity in many communities (Mass Observation 1943) and pubs remain widely recognized as unique social spaces that draw people together in public settings (Markham 2013; Thurnell-Read et al. 2018). Pubs are seen as places where informal social interaction is encouraged (Dunbar 2016) and where at other times strictly maintained codes of conduct and comportment can be relaxed, making conversation between strangers and casual acquaintances possible (Fox 2005). Pubs have been shown to play an important role in providing spaces in which local individuals and group can meet, interact and forge and maintain social bonds (Cabras and Mount 2017). For example, recent research by Sforzi and Bianchi (2020) examines community owned pubs in three areas of London to show that such venues help create bonding social capital, between those involved in the pub ownership, and bridging social capital, between those directly involved in the pub and the wider community of local residents.

While many pubs are shown to form communities of regular patrons who know each other and interact in socially meaningful, yet often complex, ways (Goode and Anderson 2015; Watson and Watson 2012), this does not mean that pubs are egalitarian spaces, equally accessible to all. As Cabras and Lau (2019: 253) warn, while rural pubs are important spaces for the construction and maintenance of social connections and belonging, residents may have quite different perceptions and experiences meaning that 'village pubs and the activities within those spaces could serve to both include and marginalise particular groups'. Indeed, pubs can be places of gossip and exclusion where social divisions are reasserted (Markham 2013). For example, research shows

that rural pubs are spaces in which people learn to perform culturally endorsed and gender specific identities as part of their enactment of local belonging (Leysshon 2008) and in many drinking spaces women face both a perceived and real higher risk of personal danger (Brooks 2014).

Miller's (2019) recent contribution to these discussions proposes the idea of 'genres of association' and urges caution against assuming a one-size-fits-all model of pub sociability. Rather, pubs cater to different clientele at different times of the day whilst hoping to foster loyalty of certain types of patron and to reduce that of others (Goode and Anderson 2015). Further still, venues selling alcohol are set out in a way that facilitates social interaction in order to maximize their appeal to customers. Thus, both Shaw (2017) and Booth (2018) analyse the role of traditional pub architecture and furnishings in facilitating certain kinds of social interactions and creating specific atmospheres in which such an appropriate sociability can flourish. It is important, therefore, to avoid a generalized description of pubs as social spaces when in fact pubs are themselves diverse and offer different expressions of sociability that will appeal to some but not other patrons.

Over recent decades, traditional English pubs have been increasingly marginalized by larger city centre commercial venues focused on offering hedonistic night time drinking heavily associated with disorder and requiring intensive regulation and policing to maintain order (Hadfield et al. 2009). Such drinking spaces have become focused on the youthful hedonism of students and other groups of young adults (Chatterton and Hollands 2002; Hubbard 2013) but have been shown to exclude others, with older drinkers feeling marginalized from youth orientated venues (Smith 2013). Although the quiet night in the local pubs retains its appeal, even amongst younger drinkers (Eldridge and Roberts 2008), the 'big night out' featuring a series of pubs, bars and eventually a night club in a central urban location has become the dominant image of alcohol based leisure in the United Kingdom (Roberts 2015). However, in a countervailing trend, forms of traditional pub going are being retained or, in some cases, reconfigured in new ways. For example, real ale drinkers may ascribe to a more traditional form of pub based drinking with a focus on quality local beer and a rejection of contemporary forms of alcohol fuelled hedonism typical of the Night Time Economy (Spracklen et al. 2013; Thurnell-Read 2017). Similarly, the new trend for 'micropubs', small venues often occupying former retail units and offering a narrow range of higher quality local beers, limited food offerings and prioritizing conversation and traditional entertainment such as games and live music (Hubbard 2019; Robinson and Spracklen 2019) indicate a renewed interest in a 'back to basics' pub experience (Hubbard 2017).

Beyond the changing forms and fortunes of public drinking venues, the most significant shift in alcohol consumption as a wide-spread leisure activity in the UK has been the sustained increase in home drinking (Foster et al. 2010). Facilitated in no small part by the expansion of off-trade alcohol sales in supermarkets and other retail spaces, domestic alcohol consumption takes place in isolated private spaces and research shows that the motivations of public and home based drinking are distinct. Thus, studies by both Holloway et al. (2009) and Brierley-Jones et al. (2014) shows that drinking at home in the domestic setting is often motivated by a desire to relax and unwind whereas public drinking is invariably in the context of seeking social

interaction and sociability and is framed by ideas of fun and freedom. The significant feature of pub based leisure is, therefore, that it offers a social context which cannot easily be replicated in the domestic home.

Emerging from this review of the extant literature is a complex picture where the social meaning and value of alcohol consumption as a leisure activity has been well explored yet liable to focus on the 'spectacle' of urban excess of youth drinking (Jayne et al. 2006; Hayward and Hobbs 2007). While pub based alcohol consumption is a still popular leisure activity, with a few exceptions (e.g. Markham and Bosworth 2016; Thompson et al. 2018) it has rarely been studied directly and in specific detail. Although sociability remains one of the key motivations in many forms of public drinking, it is in the traditional pub that such retains the most purchase. Following a brief outline of the research methods and context, the remainder of the article will explore how different expressions of sociability emerged as central to the narratives of the social function of pubs and pub based leisure offered by research participants.

3 Research Methods and Context

The following analysis is based on data collected as part of a larger research project examining the social role of pubs in contemporary British society. The central component of this is a series of ten focus groups involving a total of 86 participants. In order to capture insights across a range of geographical locations and socioeconomic contexts, these were carried out in out in various urban, suburban and rural locations in the England during July and August 2019 and facilitated in person by the author. The majority of groups involved participants accessed through existing community networks and local community groups where there was a focus on older residents who were seen as particularly at risk of social isolation. Focus groups in London and Coventry were specifically organized to involve members of the British Caribbean community and one focus group took place in a West Yorkshire town with a small group of young adults with various learning difficulties. Supplementing this, a series of ten semi-structured interviews with pub trade workers with a range of roles and levels of experience focused on the personal experiences of pub staff and drew out both their general observations about the ways in which people interact in pubs and, more specifically, the ways in which pubs facilitate and encourage different expressions of sociability. Eight of these interviewees were based in England and two in Scotland.

During focus groups, participants were asked to introduce themselves and asked to describe the last time they had visited a pub. Discussion then explored both positive and negative experience of pub going and how these may have changed over time or been shaped by other life events such as retirement, divorce or bereavement. The latter stages focused more pragmatically on discussion of things that pubs do, or could do, that either encourage or inhibit sociability and social interaction. Questions during interviews with pub staff began with a focus on the background and experience of the interviewee to understand how they came to work in the pub trade and to establish their views in relation to the social, cultural and economic roles of pubs. Interviewees were then asked to reflect on how pubs they currently or previously work in may facilitate social interaction and sociability. Much of this latter discussion also drew out concerns about the challenges facing the pub sector given wider socioeconomic changes. All

interviews and focus groups were recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service provider. Extracts from focus group and interview transcripts are included here without reference to locations or organization roles and titles that could undermine the anonymity and confidentiality of research participants. Where specific names are mentioned pseudonyms are used. Ethical approval for the research was received through the ethics committee of the author's university.

The resulting transcripts were analysed by the researcher using thematic analysis (Clarke et al. 2015). This involved an processes of manual coding (Tracy 2019), whereby the data was read and coded by the author through several iterations, with the initial coding focusing on description and identification of codes and the later, selective, phase connecting codes together as themes (Charmaz 2006). Drawing inspiration from Miller's (2019) concept of 'genres of association', the code relating to sociability was subdivided so as to examining, in turn, three different forms of pub going, and their associated social value, identified during the research. These relate to, first, 'regular' and habitual pub going, second, to 'occasional' pub going associated with special events or occasions and, third, 'active' pub going associated with a specific structured leisure activity such as a craft group. The following findings section addresses each of these in turn. In each case, an opening vignette will be used to give a detail example of one form of pub sociability. Following this, a discussion section evaluates the similarities and differences found across these three forms of pub sociability and goes on to explore how these findings can better inform our understanding of the form and meaning of pub sociability.

4 Findings

Across both the focus groups and the interviews, there was a widespread recognition that pubs provided a place for social interaction and opportunities to make new or maintain existing friendships. Within this, the qualitative research undertaken was able to draw out detailed reflections on the social role of pubs and the ways in which sociability takes place in pubs in varied ways for different groups and individuals. Importantly, sociability in pubs took on a range of forms and included low level, but still highly valued, regular visits as well as a more intense engagement where the pub serves as both a primary site of social interaction and also a space in which people forge new friendships and learn new skills and hobbies. It is important to analyse the different forms of sociality that take place in pubs (Miller 2019) and, therefore, the following three sections each address a different expression of pub based sociability identified in the research data.

"One of the Regulars": Regular Routines

Bill is in his late 50s and, having taken early retirement three years ago, manages to get to one of his local pubs once or twice a week. He usually 'pops by' for a pint or two of cask ale during a weekday afternoon when he takes the bus or walks the mile and a half to the high street of the suburb where he lives. Depending on his mood, he either stands at the bar or sits at the long counter near the door so he can see the world pass by outside. Bill brings a newspaper with him to read but he also usually takes the time to chat with the bar staff and is

recognised by some other customers who know he likes cricket and takes a passing interest in the rugby.

For many participants, such as Bill, pub sociability took the form of short but regular visits as part of wider daily routines like undertaking errands. For older participants in particular, such pub visits were described as a chance to leave the house and feel part of a social atmosphere where conversations with friends and other pub patrons was possible. For one participant of a focus group in Greater Manchester, her regular visits to the pub were described as follows:

'You know, getting into a social situation that makes you feel less lonely, makes you feel happier...It fills your life, you know, and you get to know people, talk to people and you go home feeling a lot better than you did before you went out'.

Pub staff interviewees also confirmed that this form of regular but low level social interaction remains a common practice amongst their pub customers and that it rarely involved excessive consumption, instead being limited to one or two drinks. For example, a pub owner and manager in a rural area of the East Midlands explained that, for the 'swift pint crowd', social interaction appeared to be the main motivation for their pub visit, saying that:

'People don't visit a pub just for the alcohol, it's the social interaction quite often...If they sit near the bar, then usually they want a bit of social interaction, you know, they want to be spoken to'.

Across the data a recurring theme was the ability of staff to welcome customers and to initiate and facilitate social interaction. Typically, this involved conversation between staff and customers and, as one pub manager interviewed explained, an emphasis was placed on 'making sure everyone in my team knows the regulars and takes that moment to show they're acknowledged, that we know them as individuals'. This often involved eliciting specific yet low-key information about customers such as first names, beverage preferences or opinions on local sports teams and community issues and would provide the basis for further social interaction on subsequent visits. In many instances, the value of the regularity of this social interaction was emphasized by participants. For the elderly participants, in particular, there was a sense that retirement and possibly geographical isolation from family and friends meant that regular pub trips provided social interactions to fill otherwise lengthy gaps in social contact and in so doing to provide the week with a structure and routine it might otherwise lack. Participants gave examples of the benefit of 'popping to the local' and some spoke with pride about being known by name and having a regular order which staff knew and anticipated. One barman with over 15 years of experience interviewed in the West Midlands described how, at the suburban pub he worked in:

'There's a bloke that comes in every Sunday dinner time. He has a couple of pints of mild. He doesn't interact much but like I say, he benefits in getting out the house. Even if he just comes out for a couple of milds on a Sunday, that might be the only time apart from a bit of shopping, he actually gets out the house and sees other people.'

How such routines became established varied between participants. Some spoke of having a long established routine whilst others explained that they had recently tried to make more time for such occasions given retirement, bereavement and stopping other social activities such as sports participation. As such, particularly for older male participants, such routine pub going was seen as an appealing way to access sociable situation and spend time in the company of others.

Whilst some pub visits are planned, many are spontaneous when ‘passing’ and feeling the need for relaxed sociability and companionship. In focus groups, this was commonly contrasted with ‘sitting at home feeling sorry for oneself’. In contrast to home drinking, for many older participants the sociable atmosphere and relaxed pace made the pub an appealing place to socialize even whilst acknowledging that drinking supermarket alcohol at home was, financially at least, far more appealing. However, such comments often lacked a specific reference to consuming alcohol and achieving a state of drunkenness, but instead foregrounded a liking for fun and pleasant social interaction. For instance, one focus group participant in a suburban town in the West Midlands said that he loved ‘being with people’ and explained that ‘there’s nothing I like better than being able to talk to people and, you know, just about silly things but having a good laugh’.

While this account of pubs as a site for valued routine social interaction may most closely align with an image of the traditional local pictured at the heart of the rural village (e.g. Markham 2013), these accounts ranged across contexts and were surprisingly pronounced in urban and suburban areas. As such, the manager of a pub in an urban area on the edge of Birmingham explained how many of his customers were single men, often in middle or older age, who lived alone in the surrounding blocks of flats yet met and interacted in his pub. He explained that ‘the pub plays a main sort of role for them to get together, you know’ and went as far as to state that ‘if they weren’t in the pub, they probably wouldn’t even know each other’. Similarly, a pub owner in a town in the Southwest of Scotland explained that although the town was busy and well connected to the wider urban area and nearby major city he felt the pub gave a chance for residents to ‘get that social interaction that they don’t get anywhere else’ given how much social activity, such as shopping and dining out, took place in the city centre rather than along its periphery.

“A Nice Day Out”: Special Occasions and Outings

Anne and Ruth are in their late 60s. They live on the same street and have been friends for over 30 years. They both live alone but have adult children. Anne’s daughter lives nearby but Ruth’s two sons have moved to London yet still make regular visits home. About once a month, Anne and Ruth arrange an outing that involves a trip to the city centre shopping precinct and, if there’s something good on, watching a film at the local cinema. On their outings they nearly always make time for a visit to a pub or café for lunch or an afternoon drink.

While a regular visit to a pub close to one’s home was the most common form of sociality raised by research participants, a lot of time in interviews and focus groups was given over to discussing pubs as locations for outings and occasions involving pre-existing social groupings, typically combining family, friends and work colleagues.

This meant that pub visits featured as elements of a wider itinerary of leisure pursuits such as shopping trips and visits to a museum or other cultural events both in the local area and further afield as a day trip to another town or city. Such pub going was specifically not tied to a specific 'local' venue. Instead, an emphasis was placed on exploring new venues, often following recommendations from family and peers or promotional features in local news stories.

A number of focus groups conversation segued into detailed discussions of outings and events where group participants appeared to take great joy in telling others of fun and enjoyable days out. Whilst pubs were not the primary reasons for a social outing, and again specific reference to alcohol and drunkenness were rare, they were often a much appreciated element of the day out. For example, one older woman participating in a focus group in the suburb of a large city in the Midlands explained that:

'We went to the garden centre first and then we went to the [local pub] and it was really nice because it was a nice day. We just went in and ordered our meal. We didn't have any problems. The meal was nice. We all had a good time and then [the pub] was by the canal so you could see all the ducks and everything and then afterwards, you could sit outside in the gardens and we had a drink and a chat and that was lovely.'

Such examples positioned pub going as the actions of active consumers looking for good service and a friendly welcoming atmosphere. In such cases, pubs were spaces in which quality time could be spent with family and friends in a way that helps to create a sense of leisured wellbeing. In this extract, the repeated use of 'we' demonstrates that this was a collective experience for this individual and that she felt part of a group of likeminded individuals. Further still, the language used by the participant includes words like 'nice' and 'lovely' and descriptions of a pleasant environment and relaxed atmosphere as opposed to atmospheres of excess and transgression foregrounded in much literature on drinking spaces (e.g. Hadfield et al. 2009).

Such outings to pubs were often seen as the highlight of an otherwise possibly uneventful social life. Amongst older participants, it was felt that a good day out would give them a 'story to tell' and something both to look forward to and to recount later to others. Being able to make or follow up on recommendations from friends and family and tell others stories of having eaten out at agreeable venues allowed these participants to project a pleasurable sense of them having an active social life and discerning consumer tastes (Warde and Martens 2000). In a different way to the regular pub going of the previous section, these occasional visits were less about regularity and routines and more about marking occasions and giving one's social life a rhythm which meant both having things to 'look forward to' and gathering pleasurable memories and stories to tell others about. When participants recounted such outings, they typically focused more on food or hot beverages such as tea and coffee than on alcoholic drinks and this reflects both the now long-established sector trend which sees many pubs shifting towards a primarily food-led business focus (Lane 2018) and transitions to a more 'hybrid' module involving some features of traditional pubs within an atmosphere more akin to the cafes which have become increasingly popular in recent years (Thompson et al. 2018; Ferreira 2017).

While the analysis has focused on largely positive examples of pub sociability, many participants offered lengthy anecdotes about high prices, poor service, inhospitable interiors and unwelcoming staff. Notably, busy city centre pubs and pubs associated with drunkenness and poor behaviour were a cause for concern and many participants spoke of avoiding such spaces either physically, by never visiting such venues, or temporally, by ensuring visits to urban areas took place in the daytime before the onset of a more rowdy atmosphere associated with the Night Time Economy of bars, pubs and hedonistic and youth-orientated drinking (McGregor 2012). For example, during one of the two focus groups conducted in the Greater Manchester area, a female participant in her 60s explained how she enjoyed a trip into the city centre and liked the ‘lovely atmosphere’ where ‘you can see them all enjoying themselves’. However, she went on to reflect that ‘after a certain time in Manchester, then it’s not, you know, and people are more likely to be violent than they were then’ meaning ‘once you’ve gone past that [time], you know, you have to get out again’. Thus, participants suggested that there is a point where the convivial atmosphere around pubs and bars is enjoyable but can quickly turn. Notably, across most focus groups there was a similar pattern of especially older participants saying they preferred visiting pubs during the afternoon or early evening but usually would try to leave for home before the latter part of the evening when behaviour of others might become unruly or unpredictable. In several focus groups, the issue of swearing and poor language was identified as creating a hostile environment in which many felt unwelcome or unwilling to participate. Such comments clearly echo wider concerns about youth drinking and disorder in city centres identified in previous academic studies of pubs, bars and clubs (Chatterton and Hollands 2002). This echoes research that shows the welcoming atmosphere of pubs is easily threatened through misuse and misappropriation of space. Where conflict arises between different users of the pub there may be disagreements about accepted conduct, levels of drunkenness, noise and cordiality of social interactions (Goode and Anderson 2015).

While a lot of discussion in focus groups appeared to account for an age-based distinction between pleasant drinking space favoured by older patrons and ‘rowdy’ venues catering to younger drinkers, many participants spoke of some pubs as having a cross-generational appeal that made them suitable for family gatherings. For example, a participant in a South London focus group explained that:

‘I take family to pub as well sometimes, I bring my son and take him. We meet up and then we have a drink and they have something to eat. They’re doing it for me because I don’t want to go to McDonald’s so they come to the pub. I take all the time, take the family.’

A further key theme in several focus groups in this regard was that pubs which felt inclusive and suitable for families and children were preferred venues for family special events. In one East Midlands suburb, a focus group participant explained that:

‘The upstairs room can be used for private hire as well. Diane had her birthday party here lately. We’ve had family – not a party upstairs, but like twenty of the family would come and we used here, because it’s child friendly and there’s children in the family’

The manager of this pub, also interviewed as part of the pub staff interview data collection, corroborated this by suggesting that he'd worked hard to build this side of the trade. Speaking of a well-known regular customer, he said that:

'So he first came in and they had their 50th wedding anniversary when we first opened, and it turns out that they'd got married here, that all their kids had birthdays here, and then, sadly, he had his 80th birthday here, which was two years ago, and then he suddenly passed away a week after. But he literally hung on for his 80th here.'

The research showed that pubs retain considerable appeal as places to be around others, especially on special occasions or events. Easter, major Bank Holidays, birthdays, anniversaries and, most of all, Christmas, therefore remain associated with traditions of family togetherness where atmospheres of cosiness, conviviality and belonging take on specific meanings in terms of connecting individuals to families (Mason and Muir 2013). Such an emphasis placed on life course events like birthdays, anniversaries, weddings and funerals was invoked by many participants as being an important indication of the unique social function of pubs and the role they can play in both local community but also as settings for significant moments in the lives and biographies of individuals.

"Joining In": Pubs as Spaces for Engaging in Leisure Activities

Geoff and Sarah are regulars at their local pub for a little over a year now. At first they only visited the pub for an early evening drink together, but then Sarah saw a poster for a new yoga class taking place in the pub function room and decided to give the classes a try. After the class she goes through to the bar with the group and they usually have coffee and sometimes cake. A community notice board in the pub entrance hallway is cluttered with flyers for local businesses and posters for other activities in the pub and other local venues. Having seen a poster about the monthly folk club, Geoff has started attending to listen to live music.

In addition to forms of sociability primarily focused on the traditional pub offerings of drink, food and conversation, the research brought to the fore many examples of pubs hosting events, classes and activities. For example, the pub manager of a popular Southwest London pub described an impressive range of activities and events including a bridge club on Monday and Tuesday mornings and 'Babble Talks' which, she explained, 'is like Ted Talks but for people with babies, so it's grown up conversations, but you can bring a screaming child with you'. Indeed, most pub trade interviewees acknowledged that pubs have had to increasingly offer a more varied social experience than simply serving drinks and food as they compete with the expansion of the wider experience economy (Lorentzen 2009), and Sarah spoke at length about how the urban location of her pub meant they had to compete hard for customers' attention and engagement. While there is a long history of card games, dominoes, darts and pool or billiards in British pubs (Jennings 2007), many examples of pub based leisure activities related to hobbies or undertakings traditionally based within the domestic home, such as knitting and other crafts (Pöllänen 2015). Importantly, both focus groups and pub staff interviewees spoke of pubs needing to 'offer more' and this in particular

related to encouraging a wider patronage to shift the pub away from a traditionally male dominated atmosphere (Markham 2013). Craft groups and fitness classes were amongst the most commonly cited developments in terms of how pubs are widening their remit through an expansion of activities which, perhaps, cater more to female customers than to the heavy drinking of the typically masculinised atmosphere of traditional pubs (Leyshon 2008).

In rural areas, where it was felt that particular residents might be at risk of social isolation, pub staff are a resource that can be used, providing a venue for activities but also staff who are well integrated into communities and can help to identify at risk individuals and groups and to promote intervention initiatives. For example, the landlady of a rural village pub in the East Midlands explained that the varied activities taking place in her pub were ‘filling a gap’ in the village which otherwise lacked options for residents to interact and bond. She explained that:

‘We run a craft group, sort of a ‘stitch and natter’...So, people just bring their own little projects and that’s been lovely, that’s only been going a couple of months. And we’ve got people that come along there and they are ‘well, I don’t know how to knit or crochet.’ And someone else is, ‘oh that doesn’t matter, come and I’ll teach you how to do it. I’ll bring you the stuff.’ So, we’ve got a couple of ladies that have never done any crafting before and [they are] learning off people. And you’ve got others that it’s just a real sharing of knowledge as well as just again nice conversation about things that are going on.’

While several interviewees also attested to the difficulty of getting new clubs, events or activities started, not least because of financial and staffing implications for an already hard-pressed sector, the pubs offering varied activities tended to build on an already well established atmosphere of inclusivity and involvement at the pub.

The above extract also shows that an important element of involvement with pub based leisure activities was that they were socially based and that they were seen as self-improving and part of a sustained commitment to personal wellbeing. For example, in a suburban focus group one participant, Geraldine, recounted beginning to attend a wellbeing class hosted at her local pub soon after she retired when a friend who leads the group encouraged her to ‘try something new’. Geraldine then encouraged another friend, Roopa, to attend the group following her early retirement as she was ‘looking for things to do’. Now, as a routine, Geraldine and Roopa attend the class each week and then walk together around the neighbourhood or along the path by the nearby river before returning to the pub for a coffee and a chat with the rest of the group in what Roopa described as a pleasurable routine that was ‘really about staying healthy and just keeping in touch with people’. These and other examples in the research data illustrate how more traditional forms of pub sociability, based around alcohol consumption and a narrower range of activities such as games, music and conversation, are increasingly interwoven with newer leisure practices. In such cases, sociability appears to go beyond pleasurable interpersonal interaction by involving a sense of working towards a happier, healthy self. For instance, one participant in a wellbeing group in a suburban pub captured a sense of the pub being a place in which positive activity takes place by observing that ‘you’ve got the sports facilities outside, tennis and the bowling’ and that ‘people cycle here, don’t they? There’s all sorts of things, it’s just got that nice feel

about it'. This, coupled with the pub design whereby large windows allowed light to flow into the venue in the daytime making it 'so light, it's not dark and dingy', meant the focus group all agreed that the pub fostered a pleasant environment in which people felt able to get involved in new activities. Interestingly, given understandings of pub interiors as being designed in a way that propagates specific forms of sociability (Shaw 2017; Booth 2018), here the positive response of focus group participants to this particular venue related to it being less like a pub than traditional venues solely focused on the consumption of alcohol.

5 Discussion

The findings examined above show the varied ways in which pubs and pub going provide participants with opportunities for social interaction. Thus, while the findings attest to the widely accepted notion that pubs are 'places where people can spend leisure time and increase their social interaction' (Sforzi and Bianchi 2020: 6), the research findings presented here have helped further understand the varied nature of pub sociability. Importantly, pub sociability appears to mean different things to different people and while the image of the traditional pub retains a high degree of cultural visibility (Markham 2013), pubs are evidently host to meaningful, varied and evolving forms of sociability. In this regard, the article follows the lead of Maye et al. (2005: 844) in attempting an analysis that aims 'to move beyond viewing village pubs (and pubs more generally) as straightforward symbols of folk or popular culture' by understanding and exploring pubs 'as amorphous cultural formations'. Importantly, the accounts examined here did not feature drunkenness and, rarely involved specific reference to alcoholic beverages. Throughout the research it was clear that pubs are understood to provide more than just a space solely for the purchase and consumption of alcoholic drinks.

Pubs are therefore cast as important sites through which various forms of sociability are enacted and enabled. Whilst the heuristic division into three forms of sociability utilized above brings this to the fore it is also useful to consider the ways in which these forms of sociability interact. Importantly, then, one instance of sociability would often build on existing social connections but would also foster new ones or reconfigure existing social links in new ways. Critical here is the nature of pubs as public spaces and how this contrasts with other drinking spaces available to individuals and groups (Holloway et al. 2009). Given the continued rise of home-based drinking of supermarket-bought alcohol in domestic settings (Brierley-Jones et al. 2014) and against a backdrop of wider social change, where pubs are fighting to maintain their once central role in local communities (Cabras and Mount 2017), the findings indicate significant ways in which pubs offer public spaces for social interaction and sociability of various forms. The prevalence of home-based alcohol consumption means that pubs appear to struggle to retain a near monopoly on leisure time they once had (Valentine et al. 2010).

A contribution of this article is to show that the forms of sociability which take place in pubs and which are valued by pub goers are, as shown above, varied in terms of regularity, intensity and meaning. Including the voices of both pub goers and pub staff has been central to this activity. Thus, all three hinge on the involvement of pub staff to

facilitate smooth social interactions. In ‘regular’ pub going, proprietor-patron relationship is quite direct and sustained over time; in ‘occasional’ pub going it is mediated more by a framework of customer service, with participants not speaking of specific staff but a general sense of expecting friendly and efficient service; lastly, in the ‘active’ pub going, social involvement was facilitated by activity group leaders and fellow participants more than pub management or proprietors. It is important, therefore, that the study combined insights from both pub goers and pub staff and in doing so indicates a congruence where both groups placed similar values, albeit from different perspectives, as to how pubs foster beneficial social interactions of various kinds.

Rather than repeat an elegiac narrative of the decline of the traditional pub (Everitt and Bowler 1996), it is important to locate these findings against a wider context which has seen pubs diversify and expand their remit. While the position of the English pub as a ‘cultural icon’ is endearing and enduring (Markham 2013), and there is evidence in a resurgence of interest in the ‘back to basics’ offering of micropubs (Hubbard 2019; Robinson and Spracklen 2019), here we have seen many interviewees speak of pubs as places for coffee, lunches, leisure activities, fitness classes and social events. Further still, while the ‘criticality of pubs for sustaining rural life and wellbeing in the area in terms of community cohesion’ is well noted by studies such as Cabras and Lau (2019: 260), the findings indicate that pubs are playing an important yet changing role in suburbs and some urban areas too.

The findings therefore add to other recent work examining the importance of public and semi-public spaces that afford opportunities for sociability and social interaction. Thus, the cafés studied by Laurier and Philo (2006: 204) are, like many pubs, ‘a place where an individual can be left alone in relative comfort by others’. Similarly, in a study exploring how commercial cafés are used by diverse populations as a setting for social interaction, Jones et al. (2015) observe how daily routines are embedded in the use of semi-public spaces used by different people in the formation of what they term a form of ‘a small-scale localism’ (Jones et al. 2015: 652). Such studies highlight the importance of what Neal et al. (2015) have referred to as ‘quotidian engagements’, where the minutia of seemingly unimportant social interactions between those inhabiting and moving within public spaces in fact reveal important facets of the fabric of everyday social life. This resonates with the findings outlined above that show participants seeing their pub going as fostering opportunities for social interaction and, also, to access feelings of belonging, hospitality and self-improvement. Similar to how Jackson’s (2020) study of a London bowling alley shows that different social interactions and attachments interweave person and place, pub going brings the individual into contact with others and, as we see in particular from ‘occasional’ pub going involving trips to nearby locations, connects them to local geography. Within the venues, participants across the various focus groups all placed huge importance on the atmosphere of relaxed and pleasurable friendliness, with many drawing specific attention to the importance of being in contact with others who they would not otherwise meet. Thus, the ‘co-presence of different kinds of groups and practices feeds into producing a particular atmosphere’, and makes significant the moments of interaction that are more than just acts of alcohol consumption (Jackson 2020: 529). While considerable attention has been given to both academic and popular debates about the unique nature of pubs, it is therefore perhaps worth asserting that the social function of pubs has more in common with other commercial venues than this narrative acknowledges and, given

wider social changes, that pub going and pub goers will continue to be a more varied and diverse activity than previous thinking in both academic and popular debates has allowed.

6 Conclusions

The article has examined the accounts of social interactions that take place in pubs offered during qualitative research exploring the social value of pubs in contemporary Britain. Findings are presented here as a development of further understandings of pub going as a meaningful and nuanced leisure practice which plays an important role in the social lives of many individuals, groups and communities (Watson and Watson 2012). There have been two clear strands to this. First, the data shows that pubs offer particular social settings that serve local communities in ways that may establish, maintain and protect social connection and interaction. This first point was particularly important to many of the older participants in the research and contributes further understanding of the pub going experiences of a group rarely studied by wider academic research into alcohol consumption as a leisure practice. Second, and following this, the article has sought to draw on qualitative accounts of how people talk about the kinds of social contact they experience and enjoy in pubs and, from this, has indicated that pub sociability involves greater diversity in terms of frequency, intensity and significance than existing academic and public debates acknowledge. The findings clearly indicate that the benefits of pub sociability in terms of wellbeing and social connection are not solely found in heavy, regular pub going focused solely on the consumption of alcohol. Rather, occasional visits in various forms were praised by participants, as were opportunities to try new leisure activities. It also shows that many pubs are refashioning themselves to include a wider range of activities which draw on recent trends in café culture (Ferreira 2017) and an emergent interest in craft-based leisure (Harrison and Ogden 2019) and wellbeing activities (Mansfield et al. 2020).

The article has also highlighted some areas where there remains a lack of empirical and theoretical insight. Given the focus on older participants draw out accounts of pub going that either involved no alcohol consumption or minimal levels there is some scope for exploring the disconnections between drinking alcohol and achieving drunkenness, either intentionally or otherwise. Whilst the current state of the pub sector has been readily framed as one of decline and crisis (e.g. O'Hare 2019), there are also clear indications that the social space of the pub is evolving and adapting over time and a diversity of pub based sociability is apparent. With a great many licenced venues increasing their food offering in recent years, and some making food their primary source of income and business focus (Lane 2018), there is a clear indication that ongoing research is needed to trace and evaluate these developments and whether, as implied here, certain groups or individuals may be marginalized and excluded by such developments. The data primarily relate to England and further research is needed to explore the similarities and differences between the devolved administrations. Further, the accounts offered remind us of the importance of a greater diversity of time and intensity than the literature which remains preoccupied with the intense periods of alcohol consumption in weekend evenings focuses on.

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