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From initiation to apprenticeship in taste. A career-based approach to alcohol consumption in France

Relying on the (classic interactionist) notion of “career”, this paper attempts to explore the alcohol trajectories of a sample of young adults in France. To reconstruct each career, we conducted 30 in-depth interviews with young adults from 19 to 25 years of age. Three distinct stages were identified. The first consists of trying the product; the second involves experimenting with the physical and sensory effects of drinking; the third sets the person on a course toward diversifying consumption patterns.

Keywords: Alcohol; career; trajectory; France; young people; turning point; alcohol initiation

Alcohol consumption patterns vary depending on age. Statistically, people drink more regularly in France as they get older but less excessively in terms of drunkenness (Richard, Beck, 2013). Later in life, drinking behavior shifts toward more “sociable” and “moderate” consumption habits (in contrast to earlier conduct which is frequently described as “excessive”) (Emslie et al., 2012). This tendency is sometimes characterized as “maturing out” (Lindsay et al., 2009), and the way that people talk about alcohol consumption bears out these analyses to a certain extent: middle-aged individuals report a marked difference between their youthful and current drinking habits, seeing the latter as wiser and reflecting a greater interest in taste, enjoyment, and relaxation (Lyons, et al., 2014). A number of studies have identified stages in consumption habits that are related to life changes, such as leaving the parents’ home for university (Lindsay et al., 2009), becoming a parent, dealing with an aging body (Lyons et al., 2014), entering the workforce, and settling down with a partner (Lindsay et al, 2009; Seamana, Ikegwuonu, 2011). In a similar vein, more quantitative research has focused on causal variables to consider increases and decreases in intake and

incidents of inebriation (Schulenberg et al., 1996). These approaches generally favor interpretive frameworks based on age, sex or social position rather than life experiences. They therefore overlook not only the meanings of these life changes, and the radical shifts they can entail, but also the different forms of learning at work and the contexts in which this occurs—or at the very least, they rarely examine these factors concomitantly. The notion of “career” takes into account the meaning that individuals give both to their actions and to changes over time (Becker, 1952), thus allowing alcohol consumption to be understood in terms of a series of stages. We use this approach here to analyze the consumption trajectories of young French drinkers.

In this article, we examine the consumption career of young French people, focusing both on the different ways in which they learn to take pleasure in drinking—beyond just the pleasure of intoxication—and on negotiations and changes in norms.

Using “career” as an approach to examining alcohol consumption

Freysinnet-Dominjon and Wagner (2003) analyzed the consumption trajectories of young French people in the early 2000s. The first experience of drinking occurred during family gatherings around the age of 12. Between ages 12 and 14, they began “learning to drink with peers” before moving on to drinking with a view to testing their physical limits. Finally, between ages 20 and 25, “excessive” drinking was replaced by a mode of consumption in which inebriation played a less central role. The authors’ analysis focuses more on age than on experiences and therefore looks less at turning points or the processes allowing passage from one phase to the next than a career-based approach. The concept of the “career” has been used so widely and in such a range of ways that it is now more of a tool than a concept. This theoretical malleability is valuable in and of itself, as it allows emphasis to be placed on a variety of different aspects: identity construction (Davey, Zhao, 2020), non-entry into a

career (Scott et al., 2016), the weight of institutions (Goffman, 1961), learning processes (Becker, 1963), and so forth. This approach, which draws on the work of Goffman (1961), Becker (1963), and Strauss (1969), provides a sequential model for analyzing action. Becker (1963) uses the concept of “career” to understand what makes marijuana use possible. His sequential model considers habits and learning processes in an effort to elucidate transformations in users’ motivations. Curiosity and opportunity encourage experimentation, and the drug’s psychotropic effects are only a secondary motivation, once the sensorial association has been established.

The career approach has already been applied to alcohol consumption. Østergaard (2009) examined how Danish teenagers become recreational drinkers by learning to take pleasure in “controlled loss of control”. In this article, as well as focusing on a different country, we also draw on a slightly older population (19-25 years old). This allows us to look at the next phases in the career, after the phase leading up to recreational drunkenness, but also more broadly to consider careers leading to the full range of types of alcohol consumption. Our hypothesis is that there is not one unique road to becoming a person who consumes alcohol.

Turning points are an inextricable part of the notion of career in its interactionist applications (Davey, Zhao, 2020). They allow us to analyze more than just the evolving intensity of consumption by looking also at how it changes (Ebaugh, 1988) in terms of both behavior and identity. The career approach does not simply position within a narrative the meanings that individuals ascribe to their activities; it also encourages connecting “a patterned series of adjustments made by the individual” with their placement by and towards others (Becker 1952: 470). Consequently, it is a matter of considering both the choices made by individuals and the way in which they are made and slot into a set of interactions that bear upon career trajectories (Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1961). For individuals whose initiation into alcohol

begins when they are still minors, their consumption and its development are necessarily shaped by legal frameworks (it is illegal to sell alcohol to minors, although there are variations in how the law is applied) and above all by parental influence (Østergaard, 2018; Gaussot, Palierne, 2020). Thus, while from Becker's perspective it is a matter of learning to enjoy alcohol (Østergaard, 2009), for these young drinkers it is also a matter of information management.

Finally, while the career approach has been used in contrast to analyses more focused on the individual's social characteristics, recent studies have shown the value in drawing also on social categories in this kind of analysis. It seems all the more relevant given that social background is strongly reflected in modes of alcohol consumption in France as elsewhere (Brierley-Jones et al., 2014; Measham, Brain, 2005; Legleye, 2011). In her analysis of the anorexic career, Darmon (2016) suggests taking this line as a second step in the inquiry and thinking in terms of the "social conditions of possibility" for commitment to the career rather than in terms of causes.

Our aim here is therefore to use the notion of career to account for the different stages in initiation to alcohol consumption among young French people, considering two principles of variation. The first concerns the careers themselves, which we hypothesize will be diverse. The second concerns the relative importance of structural variables, which we will contextualize in terms of their effects on the career giving particular emphasis to social background.

Methods

Thirty interviews were conducted with young adults from 19 to 25 years of age. This age group was chosen because its members are particularly susceptible to modifications in

drinking behavior and demonstrate greater individual diversity in consumption patterns, at least in France (Freyssinet-Dominjon, Wagner, 2003; Gausso et al., 2015; Anonymous). Participants were recruited in two ways from three universities in western France. Some of the young adults were enlisted by word of mouth, and others responded to announcements posted in university buildings on campus. The interviews lasted from one hour to an hour and a half. They generally took place in bars, cafeterias or university facilities. There were three stages to each interview: the interviewee was first asked to describe the evolution of his/her alcohol consumption over time. He or she was then encouraged by the interviewer to identify specific periods of habits and to describe their specific contexts. Information on the participant's previous and current socio-demographic situation was then solicited when such information had not emerged during the interview.

Sixteen men and 14 women agreed to be interviewed. The participants were recruited from departments of Medicine (14) and Sport Studies (16), as data from the Observation de la Vie Étudiante (OVE, 2012) shows that there are significant socio-demographic differences between these two populations, students in the former having higher social backgrounds than the latter. While class background is one of the focuses of our analysis, it should be noted that our sample is not representative of the lower or the upper classes and that this is therefore an inherent limitation to our study.

Without strictly limiting our analysis to Becker's indicators, we used them to classify and examine the phases of drinking habits jointly identified by the interviewer and interviewee. To do so, we read the interviews several times; the first reading was to establish similarities in respondents' experiences by coding topics and subtopics. These themes were determined through constant comparison of interviews. These conceptual themes were then studied in

relation to experiences and determinants, such as social category. Once this first analysis was completed, we were able to consider how the concept of “career” might apply to our data.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent. The respondents’ first names have been changed to ensure their anonymity. In France, ethics approval was not legally required for social science research at the time of our study. We did, however, apply the code of ethics of the International Sociological Association.

Findings

The careers of these young people who consume alcohol can be subdivided into three main phases that we present sequentially here. The first is relatively common and constitutes a phase of initiation among peers. The second is more heterogeneous, insofar as a minority of our participants did not go through it, and is essentially based on experimenting with drunkenness. Finally, the third involves heterogeneous behaviors, with social categories shedding some light on their meaning.

“It didn’t count before”: first experiences with peers as the beginning of the career

When asked about their first drinking experiences, most of the interviewees immediately mentioned their peer groups, thereby diverting attention from any previous consumption within the family sphere¹. Moreover, while they could generally provide minute details about their drinking experiences among friends, respondents often recalled very little about consuming alcohol with their families. Most participants sidestepped inconsistencies in their accounts by systematically downplaying their alcohol consumption in the family setting, claiming, “It didn’t count before.” These experiences were described as rare and involving small amounts of alcohol. They often contrasted this low frequency and quantity of alcohol

intake with subsequent experiences of more intense drinking, which interviewees described as “real” consumption and the beginning of their career of alcohol use.

“When I was 12 years old I drank with my parents, but only a little and not often [...]. So, I consider my first drinking experience to be the first time I drank strong alcohol.” (Nicolas, Medicine, age 24, parents doctor and upper management)

“It was just one glass and not even a full one.” (Fanny, Sport Studies, age 21, parents laborers)

By defining the beginning of their career this way, participants drew a line between controlled alcohol consumption in a family setting and what they saw as their “first experience” which occurred among their peers and was a collective, transgressive and generational practice. These first encounters generally occur in a spirit of bravado or curiosity in situations where consumption is encouraged by the group. When pleasure is mentioned, it is not derived from drunkenness or the taste, but from the satisfaction of having passed the test. In this respect, the first incidents of inebriation have important symbolic value.

Our participants presented their first drinking experiences among peers as a genuine ordeal and referred a lot to “uncertainty”, which, for them, was an important aspect of what they called “real drinking”. This uncertainty produces apprehension about the possible effects of the alcohol; consumption within a family setting does not seem to prepare the adolescent for alcohol use among peers. As Fanny said, *“I didn’t have a lapse of memory, didn’t blackout, so I guess we can say that it was good. For the first time, it wasn’t bad.”* Moreover, she acknowledges that although she had already consumed alcohol with her parents on a few occasions, she had no idea of the effects that it could have on the body. The topic was never raised in the family, other than to indicate that it was a forbidden evil: *“It was for adults, but we could taste it sometimes.”*

Contrary to consumption within a family setting, drinking alcohol among peers is not necessarily gradual and moderate. Things may happen quickly, the body can struggle to keep up, and intoxication may become inevitable: “of course, you can’t handle it” (Morgane, Medicine, age 22, parents director of an import-export company and unemployed). Morgane’s dive into the unknown and poor control are reinforced by the fact that she (like most other interviewees) drinks in the company of others who also have poor mastery of drunkenness. When discussing this phase, interviewees often mention being surprised by how unpredictable the settings of their “first” drinking experiences were:

“The drinking was non-stop [...]. “We left on empty stomachs. We hadn’t eaten. And I had absolutely no idea about it at the time. I must have been tired. We were really excited because we had been waiting for the party for a very long time. We drank very quickly. We did tequila shots, and we must have downed 14 of them. And then we started to feel good...and after, we drank “TGVs” [tequila, gin and vodka] [...]. And I puked.”

(Gaëtan, Sport Studies, age 20, parents cook and low-level wage-worker)

Gaëtan had begun his career of alcohol use in the same context of experimentation and uncertainty, two years earlier at the age of 13: “*one or two beers, just to try*”. He often used the expression “*to see what it was like*” with questionable cocktail mixtures also testifying to a form of incompetence that he acknowledged after the event: “*when I think about it, it was really gross. To give you an example, we were supposed to drink vodka, with whisky, and curaçao. Loads of alcohol that we’d find. [...] No, it was really testing to see what it tasted like.*”

Experimentation takes the upper hand over learning about alcohol, with the participant’s anxiety and the irregularity of initial drinking episodes both preventing them from understanding it better. According to our participants’ accounts, drinking episodes may occur several months apart, and are furthermore characterized by a low degree of formalization, which hinders the establishment of regular drinking habits over time. The rare times that a

learning process was mentioned, it was largely described as focusing on technical issues, such as amount or pace of drinking, rather than on any sensations procured. Often it is an experienced drinker that passes this technical information on in the form of personal advice. The main obstacle for young people who drink alcohol appears to be hiding their consumption from authority figures (parents, family, friends, and education professionals), so it is crucial to find a place to drink. Relatively remote or secluded public spaces are popular locales. Gaetan's experimentation, for example, took place when he snuck out of home or made the most of camping weekends near home but without any adults present. As for Morgane, her drinking happened during the rare sleepovers she had at a friend's house. Additionally, interviewees were not strictly dependent on only one occasion or invitation to drink, or on other experienced drinkers, although their influence should not be underestimated if there are any in the peer drinking group. With further alcohol use and the transition to the next phase, alcohol is demystified. According to these accounts, increased frequency in consumption is accompanied by an acceleration in the demystification process, leading the individual to reevaluate the risks involved, along with his or her fears (Østergaard, 2009).

“Really starting to drink”: experimenting with the body and senses

After this initial experience, most of the interviewed young people seem to begin to drink more regularly and are increasingly interested in the psychotropic effects of alcohol. The preferred setting for this new activity is often someone's home while their parents are away, at night. This second phase is frequently marked by greater parental permissiveness and a widened social circle, circumstances often arising during high school, when they leave for university or when they enter the workforce.

It should be noted that although most of these interviewees described going through this second phase, some did not. In order to offer an account of these differences, we look first at the participants who did not go through a phase of taking pleasure in drunkenness, or only did so later, before then looking at those who did with particular focus on consumption techniques and the role played by the family.

“It wasn’t especially appealing to me”: A space for transforming norms

Becker (1963) believed that two factors were necessary for a person to start a career of marijuana use. The first was encountering the substance; the second was the existence or acquisition of a moral disposition to accept it. Although this second aspect was rarely mentioned when speaking about their first encounters with alcohol among peers, interviewees frequently evoked moral issues when describing their passage into the second phase, when they began drinking more intensely and regularly. “Really starting to drink” is not simply a continuation of the individual’s first experiences with alcohol; transitioning from the first to the second phase often requires a change in moral disposition. More regular exposure to alcohol or particular behaviors associated with alcohol consumption may push an individual to avoid or even to condemn the substance or those who drink it. Most young drinkers get past their initial reticence, while some never invest in this phase of experimentation with drunkenness, or keep it to a minimum. This was the case for Valérie (Sport Studies, age 22, parents skilled worker and nurse), who long lived in a sheltered environment with little exposure to drunkenness: in addition to her parents being strict about going out, she spent her years in Sport Studies with friends who drank little or not at all. She voices rejection of the few alcohol-soaked parties to which she was exposed:

“When I saw a guy completely wasted, on the ground puking, it shocked me. Even if people had already told me about things like that, I’d never seen it first hand before. I wasn’t completely naïve, but seeing it made me think a little, so I think that also played a part in me limiting myself.”

Being disposed to drinking is not enough; the individual must also be willing to adhere to the way the group drinks. Exposure to various modes of alcohol consumption can make young people uneasy and tense. For instance, Fanny and Emmanuelle swore they avoided certain parties attended by “wasted people” who would have made them feel “out of step.”

For others, the second phase can occur later than among the peer group. Ernest (Sport Studies, age 22, parents teachers) is an interesting example of this. Until high school he was part of a small group of friends that was, as he put it, “a little marginal,” and drank little to no alcohol. He too was critical of using alcohol for its psychotropic effects:

“Some started drinking in eighth grade, so I told them they were stupid. They actually reject it, because they say, ‘You’re a baby. You’re too strict and all. So you look like an idiot because you’re saying that alcohol isn’t cool at that age.’”

At the time, Ernest felt that he was excluded and for a long time he was “*the one who didn’t drink*”, testifying to labeling effects within groups of teenagers looking to identify true drinkers (Davey, Zhao, 2020). However, the label was swept away when his consumption habits changed as he started university and began drinking “*normally*”, as he now describes it.

Norms and customs are ever-changing. Some participants deemed it normal to drink heavily at university, even though they had decried similar behavior at a younger age. We can understand Fabien’s (Medicine, age 20, parents teachers) shift to using alcohol for its psychotropic effects as relating to changes in his peer group and more importantly his successful completion of the first year of medical school.

“During the first parties – I had two beers and a glass of wine, so it was okay. And then, of course, from one party to the next you increase your alcohol consumption, and we’re in an environment where alcohol is readily available. Lots of people drink more than us. Everyone is a little carefree. So naturally we start to drink a bit more – not necessarily more, but stronger alcohol.”

The use of alcohol for its psychotropic effects is highly valued by students in medical programs, which have institutionalized specific periods of the year for partying. Such consumption thus amounts to a membership badge and an established norm. In our participants’ discourse, the role played by peers therefore emerges as a key factor contributing to creating an environment in which drunkenness is acceptable or even established as a norm. Fabien’s trajectory of consuming more, and stronger, alcohol contributed to the demystification process; he describes having observed other group members and deliberately adopted similar consumption patterns. His case helps underscore the fact that there seem to be three elements necessary to forecasting a drinker’s career: exposure to drunken behavior, his or her moral dispositions, and his or her personal drinking experiences.

“Feeling good”: experiencing inebriation and sensory learning

This phase is characterized in our participants’ discourse by a break with the past on three different levels that we outline successively: first, in terms of the psychotropic effects now sought and the considerable control exercised over new learning; second, in terms of identity; and third, in terms of negotiating norms vis-à-vis parental authority.

Psychotropic effects and learning processes

This phase is characterized by language that is semantically tied to the concepts of separation and rupture; the interviewees described it as the period when they “really began to drink.”

This expression reveals the more excessive and routine nature of the new pattern of consumption; it places this phase in stark contrast with the previous one, which included more intermittent and unexpected opportunities to drink. The main transgression is no longer the act of drinking with peers, but the deliberate use of alcohol to induce physical and cognitive disturbances. The substance is used mainly for its psychoactive properties.

Although specific drinking times and locations have been established by this point, this phase also constitutes a period of learning through experimentation with alcohol’s effects on the body. Subjected to numerous stimuli during their first experiences, it takes drinkers time to be able to identify the range of physical sensations resulting from intoxication.

“You feel a little like...My head feels heavier. My vision is a bit...slower. I remember seeing the world more slowly. Everyone moves more slowly, so it’s pretty weird. After, sometimes it’s more difficult; physical coordination is harder – to grab someone, to grab a glass, to get up. It’s true that standing up suddenly, your blood pressure makes you feel weird.” (Aurélien, Sport Studies, age 18, parents tradesman and accountant).

For many, this experimentation phase comes with its own set of “rough patches,” moments of uncontrolled drunkenness that underscore how difficult it is for the neophyte to manage his or her alcohol intake. They are understood as inevitable incidents, socially acceptable vagaries.

In addition to the drinker’s inexperience, the nearly systematic occurrence of these “missteps” absolves them of any responsibility for their behavior; “Some will inevitably wind up puking in the bathroom” (Audrey, Medicine, age 25, parents business person and nurse).

Moreover, risk taking is apparently acceptable, even encouraged, among peers. Although drinkers may regret their “missteps,” they are seen as an important part of the trial-and-error learning process, mistakes not to be repeated (Østergaard, 2009). Drinkers thus claim that they improve their ability to anticipate these “slipups” according to their physical sensations. As

Audrey puts it: “*Well, you end up in a bad way once, twice, three times, after a while, you start asking yourself questions. And, well, it’s true that the next time, you take it a bit easier.*”

Such incidents of intoxication serve as points of reference, and some even view them as a necessary step toward determining their optimal level of alcohol intake, which the interviewees often identified as the point at which they “feel good” or “have a buzz.”

Although it is difficult to define, “feeling good” always appears to be a subtle and fleeting balance that flirts with the individual’s physical limits (memory loss, vomiting, unconsciousness, etc.).

“It means drinking until you feel the effects, being happy. Not being completely smashed and unable to walk straight, but being euphoric, giving everyone hugs.” (Hélène, Medicine, age 20, parents doctors).

“I try to stop myself before, and I am starting to know my limits now. So, I guess you could say that I drank a little more than usual, but every time I try to stop myself before, I go too far. So I was loaded, but I didn’t go as far as puking every time. There was a certain euphoria, your head spins, sometimes you lose your bearings, and then you know you’ve reached your limit and you need to stop.” (Thomas, Sport Studies, age 23, parents upper manager and secretary).

Being able to achieve the ideal state of intoxication becomes an essential ingredient for a good party. Nevertheless, “feeling good” meant different things to different interviewees. For Tristan, it meant being able to meet and speak to members of the opposite sex; for others, it included feeling euphoric or being able to start a conversation or fit in.

Identity

In addition to progressive changes in behavior, there also seems to be a break with past self-identity. Participants regularly used the expression “*really starting*” pointing to a shift but also a hierarchy in how they now view their identity compared to in the past. New modes of consumption allow a new perspective on prior drinking practices, which are now discredited:

“When I was in lower high school, we’d come back from a night out, we were so full of it with all our stories that obviously seemed completely crazy. Now, it seems like a bit of a joke to me, a bit pathetic. At the time, it seemed like it was all out of control but looking back on it, not so much. After, in upper high school, then, yeah, there were some major parties. Yeah, I’d never seen that many bottles of alcohol at parties with friends before.” (Antoine, Medicine, stay-at-home mother, father in upper management).

Beyond the comparisons with the past, positioning between groups emerges and produces both affinities and labeling effects referring to true drinkers, as mentioned already.

This process of attraction and rejection contributes to the construction of the peer group. Drinking alcohol serves to unite – and thus also exclude – by creating common experiences and memories. In certain groups with frequent parties, alcohol has a strong structuring effect and constitutes an important part of community life. In such settings, participants who consume differently than their closest peers acknowledge feeling somewhat uncomfortable, and most of them indicate how important it is for everyone at a party to be drunk to the same degree. These mechanisms resemble what Durkheim called “collective effervescence” (2001, 171), times when emotion takes the form of a feeling of intense closeness to others, where each participant “feels he is no longer himself [sic]” (Durkheim 2001, 164), and is caught up in a feeling of collective belonging. Interviewees valued this effervescence and saw the lesser drunkenness of others as a diversion and impediment to this communion.

Parents and regulated transgression

Finally, in our participants’ discourse this phase is characterized by changes in parental norms surrounding transgression that, for many of our participants, become increasingly blurred. Interestingly, it is not so much alcohol consumption in itself that is hidden from

parents, as Audrey (25 years old, Medicine, father company CEO, mother nurse) explains:

“It’s true that at a certain point, my parents knew that we drank alcohol. But, well, they didn’t know exactly what I was drinking. But sometimes, on a Sunday, I was obviously worse for wear and they could see that so they must have suspected.” At the time, Audrey had been drinking with her friends for four years, but she had rarely discussed this with her parents or only indirectly. This dissimulation is in fact a regulated transgression, as interviewees report that their parents are not entirely taken in by their stratagem; many of them have already been caught red-handed under the influence or in possession of alcohol. Additionally, numerous interviewees admitted that their parents had at least some suspicions about what was happening at the parties their children were attending. It is a sort of tacit agreement. In a manner of speaking, the parents are an unseen presence at parties, since young people seem to take their expectations into account, driving them to conceal and manage their alcohol consumption. According to the children, parents only tolerate the transgression when it is inconspicuous. Ultimately, it seems that the parents feign ignorance and that their children pretend that they are unaware. Consequently, our interviewees adhere to a framework that plays on the ambiguity of rules that are rarely made explicit, rules that are a matrix of that gray area called adolescence.

Consumption is highlighted when “things go too far” and require some measure of discussion, albeit yet again only minimal. This happened to Allan (Medicine, 23 years old, mother manager in a finance department; father IT engineer), but his punishment was limited as was any room for discussion. On the pretext that such experiences are unavoidable, ambiguous norms are perpetuated by what remains unsaid:

“At that point, my parents realized. [...] My father just let it go because he was young too once. He’s not going to tell me that he’s proud of me but he’s done his fair share of stupid

things. [...] I'd screwed up. It was OK. My mum was a bit scared, though, but I also think my father calmed things down a bit by saying to her: you know, there comes a time when it was just going to have to happen, at least we know [...] I can't remember exactly anymore, maybe I talked to them about it a bit, maybe not. But it's true that I didn't have any big talk, they didn't sit me down to tell me: listen, alcohol, right... They didn't chew me out, they didn't punish me or anything like that."

While this phase was broadly characterized by the search for psychotropic effects, the next, to which we will now turn, shows a shift towards more complicated and diversified modes of consumption.

Toward a diversification of consumption patterns: putting taste above drunkenness

If the individual claims that he/she continues drinking and reaches the next phase in his/her career, two tendencies generally emerge: the institution of particular drinking rituals and a diversification of consumption patterns. Just as drinking groups vary, drinking locations also diversify to include the street, bars, restaurants, etc., in addition to more private settings.

Drinking rules and patterns tend to change depending on the drinking group and location.

Frequenting bars (which generally begins in phase two) or routinely consuming alcohol in a family setting expedites this process, encouraging a distinction between consumption and inebriation, and between social drinking and using alcohol in a party atmosphere.

However, this diversification in ways of using alcohol, which we address first, must also be considered in light of the social background of our participants, which we analyze later.

"We've gone past the stage of getting wasted every weekend": towards diversified consumption patterns

In this new phase, three breaks with the past can be distinguished in our participants' discourse: first, changes in behavior testifying to diversified use of alcohol; second, distance taken from loss of control, revealing a break with past self-identity; finally, new rapports within the family.

The diversification of alcohol use

The "classic" week described by Charles (Medicine, age 23, father military officer) is revealing: Thursday night, "like before," he regularly attends student parties, gets drunk, and sometimes finishes the evening at a night club. He often spends Saturdays having "dinners" "with old people" (people his age), a recently added activity where the main types of alcohol are wine and champagne. The week might end with a meal at his parents' home on Sunday afternoon, during which they mainly drink wine. Additionally, he noted that he began cultivating an interest in whiskey after some friends introduced him to it, and he sometimes drinks it straight, which he could not imagine doing earlier. This development mirrors his new relationship with wine, which is more gustatory in nature and was fostered by another set of friends who regularly take oenology classes.

The diversification of drinking patterns is closely associated with a gustative approach to alcohol, in contrast to previous preferences based largely on a dynamic of repulsion and attraction. The choice is no longer made by default, consuming a specific product because it "goes down the easiest" (Pierre), but based on the drinker's interest in the attributes of a specific product; this is especially true if experiencing the beverage's psychotropic effects is not the main concern. This new style of consumption is frequently associated with more elaborate meals and the pleasure of conversation.

"We have more dinners where we try to pay more attention to quality. My friends and I have wine and cheese evenings where everyone brings a new wine and a cheese he likes and we all taste them. You

compare your opinions, it's really nice.” (Florian, Medicine, age 23, parents pediatrician and teacher).

This insistence on the quality of a “good” product that “absolutely must not be wasted” indicates a partial shift away from an exclusive focus on alcohol’s psychotropic properties. This new dimension is associated with a moment of initiation, which attests to the existence of a guided learning process begun by peers or family members, meaning that the learning process may be more or less structured. This desire to appreciate the taste of alcohol is tied to practices of distinction that drinkers stated to be a break with previous consumption patterns, or at least complementary to them.

Distancing oneself from loss of bodily control

This development is also related to the modification of values; the loss of bodily control, while not wholly rejected, is no longer of paramount importance. Although individuals set boundaries at each stage of their career, at this point they tend to move away from their previous habits, which revolved around the consumption of alcohol mainly for its psychotropic qualities. Some interviewees explicitly refer to a milestone in this regard. Cassandre, for example, considers that she has “gone past the stage of getting wasted every weekend”, even though she does still sometimes let herself go during a few highly alcohol-fuelled parties. In our participants’ discourse, breaking with past identities was sometimes about rejecting their previous immaturity:

“This year we no longer want to get sauced and throw up. I don’t know, it seems stupid to me. I consider it a good evening if you can communicate and are able to talk to people.” (Cassandre, Sport Studies, age 22, parents schoolteacher and upholsterer)

Interviewees with this posture reconsider or even discredit heavy consumption, since they value self-control. The meanings associated with the loss of control now depend on the context, since it is still quite widely accepted when it occurs as part of group momentum.

There is thus a diversification of drinking patterns in this phase, along with a diversification of meanings attributed to those patterns. Although drunkenness does not disappear completely, it is not the only end to which users consume alcohol during this stage. The individual claims to have understood the physical effects of alcohol and moves on to learning technical aspects of consumption, such as imitating the doxa of wine connoisseurship. This new learning process goes hand in hand with heightened sensory awareness. Trial-and-error learning is a thing of the past, as they no longer see excessive consumption as accidental.

New modes of consumption in the family

Finally, this phase is also characterized by new ways of drinking within the family setting. This situation is reflected in the fact that starting to drink like the adults is a drawn-out issue in families during the two first phases where the interviewees are only allowed to drink small amounts, as if they were unfamiliar with it. According to their accounts, household consumption gradually becomes more visible over time, however, as when the young person is increasingly invited to participate in family toasts. Indeed, alcohol may even be considered a symbolic declaration of adulthood (Seamana, Ikegwuonu, 2011). It is both the vehicle for a negotiable transformation, and evidence of it:

“We were at my grandmother’s house. My grandmother, who doesn’t really know where I’m at, asks me, ‘Do you want something?’ ‘Yeah, a pastis.’ My dad looked at me in disbelief, ‘All that?’ And I just said to my grandmother, ‘A little more.’ So, he knew something was up.” (Yannick, Sport Studies, parents secretary and truck driver)

This is how behavior that was previously considered deviant becomes normal, the very instant that the transgression is revealed effectively putting an end to all false pretenses. In our participants' discourse, the deviant dimension is therefore partially related to parents' familiarity with their child's alcohol consumption. This observation underscores the strong link between deviancy and social interactions. Once the young person's alcohol use is in the open, family members more freely discuss previously taboo subjects like various ways of getting drunk, although this is still uncommon in this setting because the topic is regarded as inappropriate in a family context. Many interviewees continue to seek experiences of disinhibition outside of the family setting: "I don't get plastered in front of them," explained Gäidig (Sport Studies, age 20, parents technician and educational psychologist)

Moreover, if the effect of social background was nearly indistinguishable in phases one and two, it emerges more clearly in phase three. Taking into account social background, which creates differences that are fully reactivated in the apprenticeship of taste, can therefore shed productive light on these diversified ways of using alcohol.

The diversification of consumption: a question of social class?

This transition, from the search for pleasure from the psychoactive properties of the substance to pleasure from its gustatory properties, is not unrelated to life experiences and social encounters (being close to someone who could initiate them, for example), but is also heavily influenced by interviewees' social backgrounds. Knowledge of wine was widely emphasized, and indeed appears in part to be a class attribute: although most interviewees claimed a gustatory approach to alcohol consumption, mastery of it is highly socially discriminating. A comparison of the careers of Stéphanie and Clovis, who both claim to have a gustatory interest in alcohol, is enlightening in this regard.

Stéphanie (age 24, Sport Studies) comes from a working class background (father technician, mother nurse) with limited alcohol consumption. Consequently, she rarely drinks with her family, and when she does, it is not associated with apprenticeship in taste. As she herself acknowledges, discussion of product quality is limited to “it’s good or not, no more.” She describes how she has changed as follows:

“Before I saw alcohol more as a way to party and laugh with friends. But now I might be a bit more mature. I’m starting to be like old people; I’m starting to appreciate it. I’m starting to appreciate certain types of alcohol.”

And yet the indicators she uses to describe this “appreciation” are limited, and have mainly developed in opposition to drunkenness and psychotropic effects:

“For example, I’m not going to guzzle a beer I’m going to enjoy it. And I can tell the difference between several different types of beer. Before, I drank to drink, whereas now I drink alcohol to savor and enjoy it.”

This new way of drinking appears to be a justification for the fact that she is drinking less. In fact, when Stéphanie dines with friends she does not accompany her meal with a glass of wine, something unthinkable for Clovis (age 21, Medicine), who revels in being able to match alcohols to specific meats or fish. He comes from a more privileged family (father architect, mother gallery owner). He is among the interviewees who most ostentatiously asserted gustatory pleasure, an inclination he moreover associates with his parents who “really like to drink fine wine,” and with some friends who introduced him to it:

“I went to Amsterdam with my parents – I was in middle school. And there, I tasted good beer, and I thought it was less disgusting than usual. And then later I began tasting wines with my father.”

If his apprenticeship began this way with his father, it was continued by other people close to him: “I’ve drunk some whacking good wines with [my godparents], Chateau Yquem and

stuff like that. That trained my palate a little.” Here drinking techniques play a key role in distinction, largely stage-crafted by this particular interviewee (*“I like the ceremony of it, tasting, smelling, all of that”*). Performance is a marker setting him apart from others.

The differences between Stéphanie and Clovis’ training in taste took shape while they were at university, where medical students seem more exposed to elaborate gustatory repertoires.

Although this association is not systematic, it should nonetheless be noted that they are, for example, more likely to attend tasting evenings than students in Sport Studies.

Gustatory consumption is not exclusive to the more privileged classes but does seem to be more easily activated in that social group. Thus, while similar discursive claims are made pointing to the gustatory dimension, it takes different forms in the behaviors then described.

Discussion

This article set out to offer an account of how alcohol consumption changes over time among young French people aged 19 to 25, using the notion of “career” to identify phases and milestones. More specifically, these careers have been pieced together based on accounts given by the young adults when invited to reflect upon their drinking lives. Their discourse about drinking may, of course, not be an entirely faithful reflection of the reality.

Our study first of all confirms that the notion of “career” is a productive lens through which to examine trajectories in alcohol consumption. In this case, the career could be divided into three stages: an initial phase characterized by experimentation; a second phase aimed at achieving drunkenness; and a third phase revealing the diversification of alcohol use. The concept of career offers a relevant way of analyzing changes in both behavior and identity processes. The three stages are reflected in key expressions used regularly by our

participants: “It didn’t count before”, “Really starting to drink”, and “We’d gone past that stage”.

The young drinkers also show that there is not one unique road to becoming a person who consumes alcohol and that the roads in question do not solely lead to pleasure in controlled intoxication (stage 2) but also to other forms of pleasure (stage 3). It is also necessary to retain some measure of caution, insofar as the third phase was viewed in very diverse terms by our participants. Some presented it as a future horizon whereas others claimed to be experiencing it fully and while diversification was openly avowed, it took very varied forms. In this phase, reversals are also possible, with some participants acknowledging that they went through periods when they were more interested in intoxication than in taste (Emslie et al., 2012) thus reminding us of the complexity of individual careers (Davey, Zhao, 2020). Another concern is that the concept of career suggests a misleading, almost evolutionary, linearity. In our study, we found that there were at least two roads to becoming a person who consumes alcohol: focusing on physical experiences and then on taste (which was the case for the majority of the interviewees), or concentrating on taste alone. Certain interviewees passed from the first to the third phase with few to no incidents of uncontrolled inebriation. It is important, in this context, to point out the main limitation to our research, namely the age of the interviewees. While this age group allows analysis of career entry and initiation, it only offers limited insight into the diversification of alcohol use that cannot yet be considered as an endpoint.

Analysis of these careers must therefore take into account contingencies, resources, and opportunities so as to shed light on the full range of career oscillations (Boylstein, Maggard, 2013). Traditionally such oscillations are linked to changes in social worlds (going to university, entering the professional world) (Lindsay et al., 2009; Seamana, Ikegwuonu,

2011) and can therefore present as turning points (Strauss, 1969). In these cases, the oscillations are linked to being faced with new forms of consumption that can take time to appropriate. However, oscillations can also be linked to micro-events, which lead to modes of consumption varying at specific moments, and these sorts of changes are more of the order of temporary disruptions (Strauss 1969). Our study also considered the shift towards what the literature describes as “older and wiser” mid-life consumption (Emslie et al., 2012). As we saw with our participants, this “maturing out” (Lindsay et al.; 2009) in reality occurs in a range of different ways (Emslie et al., 2012; Brieley et al., 2014). There is therefore not just one typically young way of drinking and another “older and wiser” way, including when looking at one individual’s career.

The concept of career has been widely used to account for the stakes of labeling processes (Becker, 1963). In the case of our study, these stakes relate to “Really starting to drink” (phase 2) or “We’d gone past that stage” (phase 3), and define the right way of drinking in each phase. Such definition struggles put into perspective the importance of determining “good” consumption by emphasizing instead how that definition changes according to social groups and moments in the life course. In this respect, it is noteworthy that, in France, despite drinking occasionally, many young people consider themselves to be non-drinkers mainly because they do not experiment with drunkenness (Gaussot et al., 2015). This self-labeling reveals the full weight of the categorization process distinguishing the real drinker from the non-drinker (Davey, Zhao, 2020), especially in a context of changing norms. Scott et al. (2016) talk about non-becoming—rather than being, a non-drinker in this instance—to describe “cases of unrealized, unwanted, or unsuccessfully claimed social identities”. The distinction made here resonates with the situation of our participants who did not enter the second phase, characterized by drunkenness. These labels relate to “identities based on

difference and otherness [...] [that are] defined relationally, by contrast to something-else that they are not” (Scott, 2016).

Our study shows the value of taking social background into account when analyzing trajectories in terms of the “social conditions of possibility” for “commitment” to a career (Darmon, 2016). While this has already been demonstrated in quantitative terms (Brierley-Jones et al., 2014; Measham, Brain, 2005; Legleye, 2011), our work reveals how social background is reactivated in gustatory techniques of consumption and over the timeframe of a career, thus reminding us that alcohol is a marker of social status (Beccaria, Rolando, 2016; Thurnell-Read, 2018).

While our article did not aim to contribute to the evolving debates about wet and dry drinking cultures (Braker, Soellner, 2016; Room, Mäkelä, 2000), it does call for future research to take place within this framework, particularly in terms of the complex, shifting role played by family and adult friends. Indeed, informal norms shared by relatives and friends traditionally have played a fundamental role in regulating the alcoholic consumption of wet cultures. Comparative studies focused on this topic would thus enable further examination of changing patterns of consumption in Europe.

Notes

1 - Although they were asked to “describe their alcohol consumption from the beginning until today,” most interviewees began their accounts with experiences among peers, and thereafter focused almost exclusively on similar events. Only after the interviewer returned to the subject of first experiences did the majority of the students acknowledge having consumed alcohol for the first time in a family setting.

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