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## **‘Everybody else does it’: Young British women, safety and risk**

### **Abstract**

In a society characterised by global threats as well as individualised risks, why would young British women apparently court personal risk and ignore their individual safety by drinking to excess? Young women in a town in the north of England explored their personal ideas of safety and risk with a youth worker with whom they were well acquainted. Their apparently careless behaviours around alcohol actually were undertaken with practical safety measures in place. Moreover, the young women’s notions of safety included the need for a sense of security at home, suggesting the need for a secure base from to support risk taking outside the home. It is argued that their precautions helped to transform apparently negative risk taking outside the home into a more positive activity, notwithstanding long-term health implications.

### **Key Words**

Young women, youth work, safety, risk, alcohol.

## **‘Everybody else does it’: Young British women, safety and risk**

Young British women’s binge drinking has been a popular topic for magazines and newspapers for several years. Concerns have been expressed about the apparently irresponsible behaviour and the dangers, both immediate and long-term, to which the young women might be exposing themselves. Over thirty years since women asserted, ‘whatever we wear, wherever we go, yes means yes and no means no’, Amnesty International (2005) found that 30% of people thought a woman was ‘partly or totally to blame’ for being raped if she was drunk and 37% thought the same applied if she had failed to say ‘no’ clearly. Moreover, girls are raised to protect themselves. Over a decade ago Lupton observed: ‘Women are acculturated from an early age to avoid situations of danger and are represented as particularly vulnerable to such risks as sexual assault and mugging because of their gender’ (1999, 161).

Media coverage, the Amnesty findings and Lupton’s assertion formed the starting point for the small-scale research project, originally undertaken for a university course, which is discussed in this article. A youth and community worker (D) practicing in a town in the north of England heard young women’s accounts of their drunken exploits and was concerned about their safety. She wanted to find out why, at a time when developed countries seem increasingly risk averse, young women would choose to put themselves at risk through the consumption of large amounts of alcohol, knowing that they could be blamed if they came to any harm. D designed her research with a wider focus on safety and risk since a preoccupation with alcohol might be interpreted as imposing her personal bias. It should be noted that D’s research concentrated on identifying young women’s understandings of immediate risk and safety, echoing young people’s own preoccupations: the longer-term consequences, such as the impact of heavy drinking on health, were not addressed directly.

To provide a framework for analysing the findings, literature concerning risk was studied. The development of an academic understanding of global risk has, to some extent, eclipsed the understanding of individual or personal risks which provide the context for this research. Global uncertainty and negative forms of risk provide the context for young people’s transition from dependence to independence. However, whilst there may be unanimity around whether certain forms of risk are essentially negative or positive, other personal forms of risk are open to interpretation and what appears negative to outsiders may be positive to participants.

### **Risk**

Risk became established as an area of academic study with the work of Giddens (e.g. 1990, 1991), Beck (e.g. 1992, 1994) and Lash (e.g. 1993). In *Risk Society*, Beck pointed out, ‘risks are not an invention of modernity’ but earlier generations faced ‘personal risks’ rather than ‘global dangers’ (1992, 21). However, in focusing on individual young women’s perception of risk, ‘personal risk’ remains central and has a generally negative interpretation. Discussing the UK, Furlong and Cartmel suggest that the breakdown in families and communities and the ‘weakening of class ties’ (1997, 9) mean that risk has become individualised and can only be dealt with on an individual level through personal action. Yet, as Beck points out, ‘like wealth, risks adhere to the class pattern, only inversely: wealth accumulates at the top and risks at the bottom’ (1992, 35). Young

people from disadvantaged backgrounds, whether in terms of income, power or education, will attract an 'unfortunate abundance of risks' whereas their wealthier counterparts 'can purchase safety and freedom from risk' (ibid) and engage with stage-managed forms of risk (see below). Disadvantage is more likely for young people brought up by single parents who are more likely to be living on very low incomes. Beck suggests that the breakdown of families and communities has resulted in a weakening of social identities, emphasising the role of the individual in the negotiation of risk (1992). In parallel to the reduction in the role of the family, friendship groups and gangs have assumed additional significance in the lives of many young people. Lupton speaks of 'the pleasures of risk-taking' and shows how 'risk-takers may find a communal spirit with other like-minded souls' (1999, 153): friendship groups and gangs may form around risky behaviours.

Meanwhile, British young people see their period of transition from school to college, training or employment as 'filled with risk and uncertainty': they may put off leaving the safety of the familiar educational setting for as long as they can (Furlong and Cartmel 1997, 38), remaining in a state of 'semi-dependency' (ibid: 9). Unfamiliarity, flexibility and ambiguity are not welcomed by young people planning their futures. The implications for less academically qualified young people of the flexible job market are that they 'become trapped on the labour market periphery' (ibid, 38). Furthermore the current economic downturn will have exacerbated implications for young people whose independence may be further delayed by difficulties in securing employment and housing. These unclear prospects characterise the world in which young people are reaching maturity. MacDonald and Marsh explain that the way in which transitions have become increasingly complex and individualised have a particular impact on those least able to cope (2005, 33) and the repercussions of the current recession have yet to be fully researched.

As indicated, theoretical discussion of risk is fraught with paradox. Natural and man-made risks proliferate on the global scale noted above yet individuals in the west can appear to be cocooned in a risk-assessed, health and safety aware environment designed to be accident-free. Lupton draws our attention to the literature of self-help (1999, 154) with its 'overcome the fear and seize the opportunity' ethos, encouraging the taking of opportunities perceived as risky on a psychological rather than physical basis as steps towards self actualisation and fulfilment. Young people have been raised with the idea of 'meeting their full potential' and encountering carefully managed 'risky' experiences as a way to develop self-confidence which can be transferred to different settings. Organised 'gap year' experiences often epitomise this approach to risk, providing opportunities to engage with a range of fear-inducing yet not actually dangerous situations - but gap years are not available to all young people. Extreme sports are managed with a similar ethos but also tend to be more accessible to wealthier people. Thus, whilst disadvantaged young people are facing essentially negative risks, as considered above, their richer counterparts may be paying to enjoy (in all senses) carefully designed forms of risk.

Hofstede provides an additional dimension by examining different cultures' approaches to risk and uncertainty. For him, risk and uncertainty are related but far from synchronous: 'uncertainty is to risk as anxiety is to fear' (1991, 116). British culture is highly risk-avoidant given Hofstede's definition of risk as linked to the 'probability that a particular event may happen': precautions such as speed limits demonstrate nationally implemented safety measures. Yet a risk-avoidant society is able to tolerate a high level of uncertainty. Uncertainty is associated with the ability to cope with unfamiliar and ambiguous situations and is exemplified by attitudes to innovative ideas (seen as good and exciting), educational approaches (the focus on student-centred learning) and even

deviant behaviour (some of which is tolerated rather than seen as dangerous). Many of the 'risks' discussed earlier could thus be seen as 'uncertainties' rather than 'risks'.

Adolescents' involvement in unmediated or unplanned hazardous behaviour has often been attributed both to their thinking of themselves as invulnerable, that bad consequences will never happen to them, and to their need to learn through experimentation. Their perception of invulnerability is evident in research particularly concerning possible long range health implications through unprotected sex. Moreover there is a clear association between drinking alcohol before sexual activity and not using contraception, which has implications for both teenage unwanted pregnancies and for sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV and chlamydia. For example, McMunn and Cann's research for the UK's Institute of Alcohol Studies indicates a clear correlation between increased risk of chlamydia and alcohol use. They suggest the reasons include 'reduced condom use, sex with strangers and exposure to coercive sex' (2007).

During adolescence alcohol may serve a number of functions: to boost confidence, to help gain acceptance amongst peers, as an attempt to look older, as a way of coping with pressure and also to enhance enjoyment. It could be argued that a cultural shift in drinking has taken place amongst young women who now drink with the expressed aim of getting drunk. This is not to suggest that young women did not drink in the past but, as Alcohol Concern points out, 'the mean consumption of those who drink has doubled from 5 units a week in the early 1990s to 10 units in 2004 (Alcohol Concern 2007). The coverage in the media of the issue arguably has created both a norm or expectation amongst young women and also a moral panic in wider (or older) society.

Lupton suggests that women who take part in activities which 'allow them to "let go" to some extent of the control that is expected of them' are both escaping 'cultural notions of femininity' and 'expressing their sexuality' (Lupton 1999, 161). She was not focusing on the use of alcohol or related sexual behaviours nor looking only at *young* women but Lupton's comments could be applied to these particular matters. However the examples she provides do not involve the loss of awareness associated with alcohol or drug use but actually involve conscious decision taking. The engagement in behaviour which could be regarded as illogical – the conscious decision to reduce awareness - was the starting point for talking to young women about their apparent disregard for their own safety.

### **Focus Groups**

In order to gather data, semi-structured focus groups took place with two groups of young women and parallel individual interviews were held with others, using youth clubs as the location. The interviews were conducted and the groups were facilitated by D, who is an experienced woman youth worker who not only was well acquainted with the young women but also had many years' experience of working with groups. It was felt that this would provide a safe atmosphere in which participants felt able to talk honestly: being previously acquainted encouraged participants to 'open up' (Denscombe 2007, 182) and provided a safe atmosphere in which participants felt able to talk honestly. It should be acknowledged that there could be a risk of young people being unwilling to be honest with an interviewer they saw regularly but, given the nature of the existing relationship, this was not identified as a potential problem. It could also be suggested that, given the youth work input they had experienced, the young women could have edited their accounts of their behaviour either to show the success or failure of the youth work sessions around alcohol but they did not appear to modify the habitual openness which had formed the original impetus for the research.

The first focus group included young women aged 14 - 16 whilst the second group was 17 - 19. The first group was still at school and not old enough to drink legally. The second group, most of whom were still in education, included those old enough to drink legally and go to night clubs. They all came from the same town in the north of England and had comparable backgrounds. Despite the original motivation for undertaking the research, the discussions did not focus exclusively on alcohol: it was felt that a focus on alcohol could be construed as being adults' preoccupation so the discussions focussed more generally on the young women's understanding of risk and personal safety.

Before the focus groups were held, each participant completed an individual anonymised questionnaire, giving background and demographic data together with a chance to identify things which made them feel unsafe. All of the young women were also assured of anonymity throughout the data gathering. When the data were analysed, a code was given to each participant. Subsequently, to humanise the quotes and reflect the informal nature of the interaction in the discussions, a range of names popular among girls born in the 1990s was used. It should be noted that this was not discussed with the young women themselves and names were allocated at random. Each name is preceded by '1' or '2' if she participated in one of the groups.

The discussants, interviewees and facilitator were all white and, as noted above, based in a northern town. Whilst located within commuting distance of several major cities, many young people's lives are conducted entirely within the town's environs. Indeed, D observed that many young people rarely visit the town centre, remaining in a limited area close to their homes. This was true particularly of Group 1.

## Going Out

The spaces populated by teenage girls and young women have changed dramatically over the last couple of decades. In the past, their leisure time was more likely to revolve around their homes whilst boys were more likely to go out. However, possibly due to the rise in computer games, boys are increasingly found in the home. For over a decade, the increased use of the home as a site of youth culture for boys has meant that girls' use of domestic space as a resistance to boys' domination of the streets has been eroded (McNamee 1998, 196). Reduced constraints on female behaviour have resulted in both greater social freedom and more equal opportunities but freedom and opportunities also bring some risks. Group 2 did not equate particular places with unsafe situations but for Group 1 it was different. Their discussion centred on issues such as personal safety in the places that were used by other teenage groups. This fear was not because of prior knowledge of the other groups but more a perception of risk from other groups, both of girls and lads and of the unknown or 'other'. In this case, this could include notions of threat from other teenage 'tribes'. The young women, as will be shown later, regarded themselves as 'chavs'[1] and saw goths[2] as 'other'.

(1 Chelsea) *Well you wouldn't hang round the bus station. Well, not during the day anyway that's when the goths are there.... and if you don't look right they might start on you.*

(1 Amy) *Or at night it's full of druggies and all sorts.*

(1 Lucy) *Yeah I had to get a bus there one night and there were loads of lads stood about drinking and kinda saying stuff to all the lasses when they passed.*

Safety for this group meant learning that they did not belong in many public spaces and that most

public spaces continued to be masculine (Skeggs 1999). This involves self-exclusion from 'dangerous' public spaces (Valentine 1989, 1992). Although they sometimes accessed spaces outside their locality to have a drink, they were aware that being in the 'wrong place at the wrong time' (Tulloch 2004) could be dangerous. They adopted risk management strategies such as going in the company of other girls. Research has shown that young people straying across into other young people's territory often results in the hostile and aggressive behaviour of one group towards another, as a way to control the places where they all 'hang out' (Nairn, McCormack and Liepins 2000; Percy-Smith and Matthews 2001).

There was a shared anxiety about being alone at night especially in the dark. Much of this concern centred on 'stranger danger' whether in the town centre or their own neighbourhood and they often felt the need to take precautions such as making special transport arrangements or going out with friends (Hough 1995).

(1 Katy) *There have been loads of... rapes and attacks in town after the nightclubs.*

(1 Danielle) *And getting kidnapped in cars. That happened to my sister's friend and that was near where she lived but we're sound you know 'cos like we know everybody round by us and anyway there's always a gang of us so that's ok.*

Group 2 showed awareness of bogus mini-cabs with drivers picking up young women and had made appropriate arrangements:

(2 Sophie) *We always keep taxi money when we go out and we stick to the same taxis because of the people who pretend to be taxis and aren't. They look after us and they said that even if one time we don't have any money still they will take us home and let us pay the next day.*

(2 Jenny) *Even so you're still sometimes a bit uneasy if you're the last out of the taxi and you sometimes you get out and walk part of the way but you always ring to let the others know you got home ok.*

The young women were fearful of unpredictable 'stranger danger', being frightened of sexual and physical abuse from men of all ages but they reflected on how they tried to manage or reduce the risks that they encountered on a daily basis. Their perception corresponded with research showing 'certain times and spaces as risky' and so 'their own position/place in time [was] continually under self-surveillance and negotiation' (Seabrook and Green 2004, 135).

## **Getting Drunk**

The ages of interviewees, and the resultant locations of their drinking, were associated with a marked difference between groups' comments about the risks associated with drinking. Group 1's particular concern was that their parents did not find out:

(1 Louise) *Don't get too pissed or they'll know and then they go off on one ... make sure you go in on time.*

Drinking on the streets would mean that they ran the risk of being spotted by the police or someone they knew and so they preferred to drink in places that were dark and secluded such as parks and playing fields. Research by Miller and Plant (1999) found that teenage drinkers were much more likely to have done their recent drinking outside their home in what might be regarded as potentially unsafe settings and that their parents did not know where they had gone. For Group 1, the greatest perceived risks were first being found out by adults and secondly the resultant reactions, punishments or restrictions.

Sometimes Group 1 drank with other young people they knew and occasionally there would be older young people present with whom they were not acquainted. They did not see this as a problem as they would assume that somebody in the group must have brought the 'strangers' so they must not present any danger. There is an inherent contradiction in the trust extended to strangers 'brought along' to groups drinking in parks and the assessment of risk presented by other strangers which reflects the assessment of the level of threat presented in familiar localities close to home. This may be explained as an aspect of the perception of 'the other': as Lupton shows (1999, 123), as 'the other' becomes more familiar, its potential as a source of risk is perceived to be reduced: there is a tendency to under-assess risk in familiar settings including both the spatial and personal which is in direct contrast and at odds with the 'stranger danger' that the young women talked about in other contexts. Nonetheless the young women said that they were more aware of the dangers when they were drinking and took it in turns to get drunk so that the sober members could look after the others. Those who were drinking seemed unconcerned about staying in control and admitted that they deliberately drank to get drunk. It appeared that the young women had taken on the view described by Vedhara: 'The message society sends out with happy hours, celebrations and work nights out is that drinking is the most fun when as much alcohol as possible is consumed in the shortest time' (Vedhara, 2005, 15) as the following exchange demonstrates:

(1 Danielle) *If you're not gonna get drunk there's no point in buying it is there? You get a buzz and chill with your mates.*

(1 Chelsea) *Well there's nowt else to do. Some of us can get in the clubs but some get ID'd[3] cos they look too young so you can't be tight and leave them can you?*

(1 Naomi) *Yeah that's right. I mean there's no pictures[4] or stuff to do so you have a laugh with your mates... everyone else does it.*

(1 Zoë) *It's better than taking drugs. I mean getting stoned on pot's ok not like class A.[5] We'd never take that crap. It really does your head in.*

Adams (1995) suggests that there is a mismatch between the 'subjective and objective dimensions of risk which is reflected in reactions to the use of illegal drugs by young people; socially accepted drugs like alcohol pose far greater health risks' (cited in Furlong and Cartmel, 1997, 8). In light of the comment "*There's nowt else to do*" (Chelsea 1) risk taking behaviours such as drug and alcohol use might be recognised as escapist diversion from mundane everyday life.

Naomi's comment that '*everyone else does it*' also reflects the 'wet' (Plant and Plant 1992) culture in which young people in Britain are raised. This means a social context in which drinking is both widely practised and generally regarded as a legitimate and enjoyable activity. Vedhara commented that 'Young people tend to apply the same approaches to alcohol use as adults. It is considered a requisite part of any good night out and is usually consumed in groups' (2005, 15). However drinking was not always a pleasurable experience for a couple of the young women who did not drink at all and who reported feeling vulnerable when the others were drunk. They were accused of being killjoys and felt excluded and isolated from the group. An example was given of one non-drinking young woman who was accused of being 'miserable' and was set upon by her intoxicated friend.

## **Telling Stories**

There is a strong social pull towards the consumption of alcohol. Sophisticated advertising and the appearance of drinks targeted at young drinkers adds to the allure. Young women appear mature, enabling them to purchase alcohol whilst still underage. However many risks stem from alcohol



such as anti-social behaviour and a tendency to engage in unprotected sex. The effect of alcohol is known to remove barriers to sexual behaviour and to reduce the care taken to take precautions against pregnancy or infection (McMunn, V. and Cann, W. 2007)

*(1 Amy) You don't give a fuck about safety if you're well drunk and you might let a lad have it but I don't always remember what happened so I don't know about safety [...] You think you remember condoms but you don't.... it's harder to say no and the lads know it and they get mad sometimes when they're drunk.*

The young women's stories of drinking, sexual behaviour and use of cannabis were quite explicit but were only disclosed within the confines of the group. D. was a trusted adult so accounts were graphic. Under age drinking and the telling of drinking stories form what Blackman terms 'crucial aspects of [young women's] promenade as a youth cultural group' (1998, 216). Research indicates that young women excel in risk taking and have overtaken young men at binge drinking: a few years ago, Plant (2004) suggested that 'ladette' culture, where girls take on 'laddish' behaviour was to blame. A few years later, 'ladette' culture has lost its stigma, popular terminology has moved on and women are happy to go out in groups and drink together. Moreover, as Bunton et al (2004) point out, the association of risk with 'laddish' behaviour may reflect a male bias in the study of youthful behaviour patterns.

D's questions did not focus on whether the young women drank in single sex or mixed groups and the descriptions suggested that both took place and where an evening started out with a single sex group, it would not necessarily remain so. In this context, the older young women in Group 2 realised that their judgement concerning encounters with men became cloudy when they had been drinking. This realisation was based on the fact that many of them had been in situations or had experiences, in the past, where they had put themselves at risk. Based on these experiences they believed that some men target women who are drunk and put them under pressure 'to have sex that they do not want or would not have had if they had been sober' (Donovan 1996, 31).

*(2 Emma) I was drinking with my mates in the streets when I was about 14 or 15 and in clubs if I could get in. I was always wrecked and did some stupid stuff... went with any guy I fancied without a condom... I went with this guy I just met and he hurt me but I were lucky I could have been dead.*

*(2 Rosie) Been there... done that - but you learn ... alright now I try [to] pace myself so I don't get hammered too early so I have water sometimes in between drinks.*

They talked about the precautions when they were drinking in the town centre clubs which centred on not doing things alone, such as going to the toilet, and leaving together at the end of the night. They made sure that if they were dancing, their drinks could not be spiked with drugs by making sure that they were always visible and never left unattended. They had learned to moderate their behaviour and take fewer careless risks, echoing findings cited by Watt and Stenson who noted that young women emphasised 'the need to take precautions to avoid danger, especially when moving around public space in the evening' (Watt and Stenson 1998, 261). For Group 2, the situation outlined by Lupton pertained: 'peers who took what they considered to be careless risks were not celebrated, but considered to be silly, the object of contempt' (1999, 158). They learned from their own experiences and from their friends' experiences. Their group norm was a form of preventative mutual policing, what Foucault (1982) described as 'self-surveillance'. One young woman talked about how she and her friends vetted one other's clothing before they went out in order to avoid looking 'tarty'. She said that when drunk, they weren't always as careful about their clothing and ran the risk of falling out of low cut tops. Men saw this as a 'come on' and it

had brought unwanted attention in the past. This approach shows the young women 'managing' their physicality with care (Foucault 1982) whilst acknowledging the resultant restrictions. (2 Vicky) *You should be able to dress how you want but you have to dress safe to stop the pervs.... It's like their eyes can't look above your boobs and if you show your thong well it's like saying I'm available....they think they can get away with touching you up.*[6]

(2 Sophie) *This is the scary bit: you see young girls ... school kids off their heads and they have like thongs on and belts for skirts and they bend down... and you see guys... and sometimes they're like 20 or something hanging round and you think 'I know what you're after'.*

As indicated earlier the young women felt that there was safety in numbers and often banded together for safety when they felt under threat from predatory men. They sometimes pretended to be gay and this often made men back off but not always.

(2 Sophie) *Sometimes you get dickheads who can't take the knock back and says things like... 'you won't be a lessie if you get a bit of this, luv' [gesture to crotch]... 'fancy a threesome... can I watch?'*

A decade ago, Blackman observed that this deliberately feigned lesbianism 'gave the women protection from heterosexual aggression and sexist harassment [whilst] their resistant play undermined the men's masculinity' (Blackman 1998, 225). It could also be suggested that young women find a means of exploring their sexuality in these behaviours: it is acceptable to *overtly pretend* to be a lesbian whilst it might be less acceptable to actually *be* one.

### **Taking Precautions**

As well as checking clothing, the young women were well aware of the precautionary role of condoms and phones. As Chelsea (1) said, *'You should always take a johnny with you'*. However, whilst knowing that condoms were a protection against pregnancy and HIV, they did not always use them. This showed a lack of ability to negotiate condom use and being pressured into having unprotected sex especially when they had been drinking, despite previous experience. For some, their own or friends' experience of *not* becoming pregnant when contraception was not used meant that unprotected sex was a risk that they were prepared to take. Although there was some disagreement, several of the members of Group 1 were concerned that they could be seen as 'slappers' or 'tarts' if they carried condoms. Given the frequency of the retrospective anecdotes concerning sexual activity, there is a paradox in terms of recounting tales of promiscuity when in a safe environment whilst expressing concern about the implications of carrying condoms.

Group 2 showed stronger aspirations for higher education and careers than Group 1 and felt that a pregnancy would be a disaster.

(2 Georgia) *Personal safety is about being in control whatever the situation, whatever comes up either about health, or sex, or physical safety.*

This view was endorsed by the other members of the group. Although they admitted that they did not always carry condoms, they were confident that they could resist being pressured into having sex. They were anxious to avoid pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections and used contraception and, when necessary, emergency contraception. All of the young women stated that they were sexually active and discussed their right to decide when they wanted sex, who they had sex with and whether they would have children. The existence of a range of reliable forms of contraception means that 'the sphere of reproduction no longer [belongs] irremediably in the arena of fate' (Giddens 1991, 219). The emergence of feminism coupled with scientific advances means

that 'gender roles no longer rigidly structure the life course [and] as a result there are greater possibilities for choices' (Lupton 1999, 71). However Beck (1992) suggests that as people are progressively freed from the constraints of the old order they are forced to negotiate a new set of hazards which impinge on all aspects of their day to day life. Young women today have more sexual freedom, career choices and control over their bodies than previous generations of women however as old restrictions are removed new risks emerge which have to be negotiated if this freedom is to continue.

Although Group 2 said that they were in control, their descriptions of accessing emergency contraception arguably contradicted this. They did see themselves as vulnerable to pregnancy or infection and their contraceptive behaviour reflected early sexual experiences and unplanned pregnancy scares. In spite of their assertions, in practice some young women found it problematic to say 'no' to sex and to negotiate the successful use of condoms. On the other hand, Group 1 had perceptions of low vulnerability to pregnancy: pregnancy happened to other people not to them or their friends. The importance of perceived vulnerability is pivotal to behaviour that is protective to health. The risk of disease through unprotected sex and the possible long range health implications was of less concern than what others might think of them for carrying condoms although catching a disease such as HIV was cited by all this age group as making them feel unsafe.

In addition to carrying condoms, the young women carried mobile phones which they rated as essential in terms of personal safety. However, all but two participants in Group 1 admitted that although they rarely had credit because they could not afford it, they still felt safer because they knew that even without credit they could call the police if necessary. Most of them had sophisticated phones which very rarely left their hands throughout the discussion. An up-to-date phone is a status symbol even if the lack of credit means it offers little in terms of safety other than in an emergency.

One of the participants in Group 2 talked about how, when she went into town with her friends in the evening, mobile phones formed an essential part of their safety precautions. If one of the group left with a male to go to another club, she would make sure that the others knew. She would then text frequently to let her friends know that she was all right. In the event that things were going badly, she would communicate this by text to the group who would go, as if by accident, to the club she had gone to. Then she would be able to leave with them. If one of them went home with a man, the other young women would leave their mobiles on when they get home just in case their friend needed them. It could be suggested that the development of the mobile phone has contributed to the safety of these young women or that the possession of a phone gives a false sense of safety leading to greater risks being taken.

Like Group 1, many of the participants in Group 2 had also gone through phases of having phones without credit when they were younger but now they had contract or regularly topped up phones which were maintained by their parents or through part time employment. They therefore generally had credit but said that many of their friends never had any.

*(2 Lauren) My mother got me a contract phone because then I could ring her if I was in trouble but I got a bill for £70 and she took the phone off me till I paid it.*

(2 Vicky) *Yeah that happened to me but then this girl got attacked in town and... my mom said I could have it back if I was careful... about another bill but I think it was cos she was scared in case I needed help.*

The young women who said that they often had little or no credit on their phones came from less well off or single parent families, providing a graphic illustration of Beck's point that people with money can buy safety (1992, 35).

### **Feeling Secure**

When asked about safety, the young women's interpretation was emotional as well as physical. The researcher had anticipated the identification of dangers outside the home but the young women had a different focus. They responded to discussion stimuli around 'safety' by referring to home life. Whilst their choice of leisure activity could be seen by outsiders as inherently risky, the existence of a sense of security in the home environment was significant. When the young women felt emotionally unsafe, their most common coping strategy was talking to others. For some this was their mothers but the majority of Group 2 said that they were more likely to talk to female friends. Generally both groups felt that they were safest when they were with people they trusted such as family or close relatives however in Group 1 some young women reported feeling very vulnerable when violence and tension were present in the family.

(1 Chelsea) *I get scared when my mom and dad fight. Sometimes they hit each other and once my mom had to go to hospital with a broken nose. I wanted them to stop and I screamed and screamed but I daren't do anything in case my dad hit me.*

(1 Zoë) *My parents fight a lot but not like hitting each other but my mom keeps crying and saying one day I'll come home and she won't be there...*

(1 Amy) *It's awful at home. Mom is always crying since my brother died... I want to ask her about it but she won't listen that's why I told my mates... they cuddle me.*

The negative aspects of home life add a further aspect of their lives characterised by uncertainty for Chelsea, Zoë and Amy. For them, safety at home is inextricably linked with emotional security. The young women in Group 2 adopted a different approach to family problems. They were older, more independent, and arguably more accepting about things that they would be unable to change. This was reflected in their comments:

(2 Ella) *When I was young I used to get upset when mom and dad fell out but now - well if they split up it's up to them... I mean don't get me wrong I don't want them to but if it happens... it happens.*

They tried not to get involved when arguments started by staying in their rooms, playing their music or going out. Having friends that they could talk to and trust not to tell was a way of coping with what was going on at home.

Friends, but not necessarily a 'best friend', were considered essential to both physical and emotional safety and both groups agreed that there was safety in numbers. Not having their friends around them made them more vulnerable. Falling out with their friends meant that they could be at risk physically from the rest of the group and they also felt at risk from outsiders without the protection of the group. Some reported feeling hurt by friends who betrayed their confidences but they recognised that this was a price that was paid when friends fell out.

Friendship was central in the lives of both groups but equally as important to Group 1 was their wider peer group. Through 'friendships young people find support and security, negotiate their emotional independence, exchange information, verbalise beliefs and feelings and develop a

new and different perspective of themselves verbalise beliefs' (Shucksmith et al 1993, 117) whereas peer group norms can set highly influential markers around acceptable and unacceptable behaviour for young people. The discussion revolved around appearance, being liked and 'fitting in' and because peers played such a big part in their lives, social acceptance was an urgent concern for these young women. The peer group gives out clear signals to its members both about style and fundamental values, and perspectives. Conformity to the group is the price that has to be paid for acceptance (Shucksmith et al 1993).

(1 Naomi) *I wear a Peter Storm coat[7] and usually tracksuit bottoms with trainers.*

(1 Danielle) *Duh we all wear that don't we... but being a chav is more than clothes. It's what music you like and jewellery and hating moshers and goths and skaters[8] and...*

Miles (1996) suggests that in late modernity, the visual styles adopted by young people through the consumption of clothing are regarded as having become increasingly central to the establishment of identity and to peer relations. Beck (1992) suggests that the breakdown in communities means that there is a weakening of social identities but Furlong & Cartmel (1997) argue that the influences of peer groups have become increasingly powerful in shaping young peoples' lives. "Who am I?" "Where do I belong?" (Giddens, 1991, 6) are focal questions which acceptance by the peer group answers. The peer group is their community and provides not only an identity but physical and emotional safety as well. The young women Group 2 valued friendship groups above peer groups and with maturity had developed a clearer sense of self-identity demonstrated by a high regard for each other's individuality and a greater ability to tolerate difference. However this had not always been true and they too had been desperate for acceptance by peer groups when younger.

## **Discussion**

A range of apparently paradoxical behaviours was identified through analysis of the focus group data. For example, the young women were aware of 'stranger danger' in some situations whilst elsewhere strangers were perceived as safe, having been introduced by existing group members. Safer sex messages had been learned in theory but the skills of assertiveness needed to put the theory into practice had not been fully honed, resulting on occasion in the need for emergency contraception. These contradictions could be seen as characteristic of stages on the journey towards adulthood with its attendant confidence to negotiate dangers with greater perception although researchers (see, for example, McMunn and Cann 2007) who investigated aspects of sexually transmitted diseases found adults' alcohol-related behaviours similarly illogical.

In fact, the young women's behaviour provides an example of the complex range of contradictions which epitomise the risk society. The thrill of being 'out of it' balances against the planned precautions and the excitement of the 'different' balances against the habitual or regularised nature of the behaviour. Given their appreciation of risk, its 'active courting' (Giddens 1991, 124), through the deliberate diminution of awareness brought on by the consumption of alcohol, could be seen as hard to explain. Yet, as Giddens shows, one feature of the 'risk climate' is the 'apparently irrational'. He focuses on 'institutionalised risk endeavours' such as funfair rides and outdoor pursuits (which, of course, are thoroughly risk assessed and provide an adrenalin-rush without any real danger) and also activities such as fast driving and smoking, where the facts are known to participants but the chance is seized.

One finding of particular interest concerns the range of precautions taken by the young women

when they intended to drink to excess. Arguably, these converted potentially negative risks into positive ones, where short-term risk had been assessed and precautions put into place. Indeed perceptions concerning the nature of 'risk' could be seen as age-related or class-related and also could be seen as forming a continuum where differences in detail or differences in precautions taken relocate the threat. Moreover, the role of the sense of security provided by the home environment was significant in terms of supplying a foundation for risk-taking outside the home. Disadvantaged young people do not have the financial resources to engage in managed forms of risk, designed to be as accident-free as possible and choose to find alternative ways to court danger. Although people outside the young women's circles might regard the dangers as unmitigated and risks as negative, the participants believed their precautions provided the necessary safety measures and saw the risks as positive.

Hofstede's (1991) differentiation of 'uncertainty' and 'risk' provides a further means of understanding the attitudes shown by the young women. British culture strongly avoids risk but is weak in terms of 'uncertainty avoidance'. If young women's use of alcohol is redefined as an aspect of deviance, its designation would become an aspect of uncertainty rather than risk. Curiosity and experimentation become an accepted feature of society and the young women's behaviour is thus explicable within terms of the framework.

## **Conclusion**

D's research provided her with a snapshot of the situation around the behaviour of the young women with whom she worked. Whilst explanations for the young women's attitudes were sought, D had not set out to research, nor had she ascertained, how a youth worker should work with young women navigating the contradictions of the risk society. The young women theoretically knew some of the risks of the over-consumption of alcohol and of unprotected sex, yet they engaged in both with a regularity which D found alarming. Was the fact that the young women were well-aware of the risks pertaining to alcohol and sexual activity testament to the input from youth workers? Should youth workers' focus be on facilitating behaviour change or on harm reduction? The Amnesty International findings (2005) provide a salutary warning against complacency. However, Hofstede's classification helps us to understand that stronger attitudes to ensuring health and safety will offset by a parallel extension in terms of weakened uncertainty avoidance. The concomitant growth in comfort when faced with 'ambiguous situations and unfamiliar risks' (Hofstede 1991, 125) suggests that 'harm reduction' and work around confidence raising and assertiveness would be potentially useful approaches for workers to consider.

The continuum which could be seen as running between negative and positive risk taking and the potential for different interpretations of behaviours is significant. In particular, the way in which the young women themselves transformed situations which D saw as fraught with danger into situations where they saw the level of risk as acceptable through the implementation of safety measures was noteworthy.

The identification of the role of relationships, particularly in the home, as an important facet in the creation of the young women's sense of safety provided a significant aspect of D's findings. The significance of friendship groups has been documented (see, for example, Furlong and Cartmel 1997, 9) but the young women showed the importance of the role of family in establishing a sense

of safety. Whereas adults may perceive young women as apparently courting risk through the combination of alcohol and sexual activity and careless of their own safety, the young women saw safety in a wider sense. Their behaviour was as much a part of their lives as their experience of family life. For them, threats to their security were encountered in their parents' relationships as well as through their own behaviour. The young women were also vocal about expressing the adverse effects of emotional harm that they suffered from being bullied, judged or not fitting in. When the media focus on alarming and alarmist accounts of young women's binge drinking, the wider context is inevitably absent and the voices of the young women themselves are lost.

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[1] 'Chav' was originally a derogatory term for some young working class people who wore distinctive clothing including track suits and who were often unemployed and not well educated. Subsequently the word was adopted by the young people themselves.

[2] Goths are a long established youth culture associated with black clothing and gloomy music. In some areas there are tensions between goths and chavs, often territorial.

[3] Asked to produce an identity card giving proof of age

[4] Cinemas

[5] 'Pot' is cannabis or marijuana. 'Class A' drugs are hard drugs such as heroin.

[6] A thong is a minimal form of underpant.

[7] A brand of waterproof rain jacket.

[8] Moshers and skaters, like goths, are youth cultures associated with particular clothing, music choices and lifestyle choices.