

*Social Science & Bad Behaviours: Causes,
Consequences, Solutions*

The Watershed, Bristol; Wednesday 17 March, 2-4 pm

Confirmed speakers

Dr Matteo Galizzi is an economist based at Queen Mary, University of London, and the University of Brescia, Italy.

We know that smoking, heavy drinking and obesity cause a number of chronic health conditions. Economists are interested in this problem because poor health reduces labour productivity and economic growth. One popular hypothesis is that people who enjoy risk-taking will care less about their future and so eat poorly, drink more and smoke. Matteo will talk about his real-life experiment in which participants' risk preferences were measured to examine if "risk-lovers" do actually care less about their health.

Dr Marcus Munafò is an experimental psychologist based at the University of Bristol. His research is on the biological basis of drug use; in particular, tobacco and alcohol, and their effects on social cognition and mood.

There has been considerable recent debate regarding the harm associated with drug use. This is a controversial subject. Some drugs are illegal, but appear to be only moderately harmful (nothing is entirely harmless: even drinking too much water can be fatal), while other legal drugs are extremely harmful to the individual (e.g., tobacco) or society (e.g., alcohol). So it is important to understand the different risks that come from using different drugs. Unfortunately this is very difficult to do: harms may be to the individual or to society, may be related to physical health or psychiatric health, or are indirect if, for example, use of one drug associated with relatively low harms increases the likelihood of later using other drugs associated with greater harms (called the "gateway hypothesis"). We will discuss what constitutes harm, how we might measure these harms objectively, and how different drugs compare with respect to these harms.

Dr Marianne van den Bree is an epidemiologist working at Cardiff University School of Medicine. She studies health-related behaviours and has a particular interest in understanding the reasons why young people make unhealthy life choices.

Are heavy alcohol use and frequent drunkenness low risk behaviours which are a normal part of growing up, or are there groups of adolescents for whom these behaviours pose a high risk of alcoholism and other alcohol-related problems? If the latter is true, which factors increase these risks in some adolescents compared to others? Researchers are looking to answer these questions by conducting large epidemiological studies in which young people explain about their alcohol use and related behaviours and life choices. In some studies, young people explain about their health-related behaviours on a number of occasions (maybe every 6 months for several years in a row) so that it is possible to look at changes in these behaviours over time. Thus, it is possible to see some of the reasons why young people change their drinking behaviour (e.g., start to drink much more or lower their intake). Dr van den Bree has been conducting such studies in the UK and will talk about some of her findings.

