

Alcohol Consumption & Alcohol-Related Problems in Irish Society

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The World Health Organization View of Alcohol-Related Problems

- The prevalence of alcohol-related problems in any society is primarily determined by the average *volume* consumed and the *pattern* of consumption (with the 'binge' pattern identified as being especially risky)
- The problematic properties of alcohol are: 1) it is toxic; 2) it intoxicates (i.e. makes people drunk); 3) creates dependence or addiction
- Alcohol causes or contributes to a spectrum of acute and chronic health and social problems

Sociological Perspectives on Alcohol Consumption

- Social scientists typically reject what they see as 'reductionist' biomedical explanations of drinking experiences and argue for the use of multidisciplinary explanatory frameworks
- A popular framework is that known as: Drug (pharmacological), Set (psychological) and Setting (sociological)
- What this means is that the drug/alcohol experience is not explicable solely in pharmacological terms, but must explore the expectations of individual consumers and the social & cultural context in which consumption occurs

Ireland as a Drinking Society

- Levine (1992) distinguishes between 'temperance cultures' and 'non-temperance cultures'
- Temperance cultures are found in those societies which in late-19th and early-20th centuries developed large & enduring religious temperance movements based on the idea that alcohol is inherently evil
- Temperance cultures are found in predominantly Protestant societies where a large proportion of alcohol consumed is in spirits form
- Ireland has not, and never had, a temperance culture – the Fr Mathew movement (1830s) did not last long, and the Pioneer Association (founded 1898) is ideologically moderate
- The stereotype of the Irish as heavy drinkers would seem to be broadly valid – with disposable income being a key factor in determining consumption volumes

The Bachelor Drinking Group

- Historians and social scientists (e.g. Stivers, 1976) have explored the meaning of alcohol consumption within Irish society from the early-19th century onwards
- This concept describes and explains how men drank with other men in public houses – in a situation where a single inheritance farm economy left many men unable to marry, and because of the sexual mores of the time, untitled to a sex life
- The bachelor drinking group valued male bonding and heavy communal drinking more than marriage or the company of women
- Married men often rejoined the group
- For those concerned with present-day alcohol consumption and its relationship with sexual assaults on women, it is salutary to remember that the bachelor drinking group provided a safety valve in a society with large numbers of compulsorily celibate men
- Where heavy drinking was an acceptable substitute for heterosexual intercourse, the teetotaler was the person suspected of sexual deviance

Changes in Irish Drinking – from the 1960s

- The Pioneer Association began to lose numbers and to become unsure of its role and function in Irish society (Ferriter, 1999)
- Women began to drink in increasing numbers, and traditional male-oriented pubs were adapted or replaced by 'lounge bars'
- The drinks industry began to market products aimed at women
- The disease concept of alcoholism was regarded as being scientifically authoritative, and it was widely assumed that drinkers could be categorically divided into *social drinkers* (allegedly 90% of all drinkers) and *alcoholics*
- Those who were social drinkers were regarded as largely capable of drinking with impunity and with little or no risk of developing serious problems

Alcohol Consumption in Celtic Tiger Ireland

- Huge increases were recorded in consumption volumes (41% increase in adult consumption between 1989 and 1999)
- Risky binge patterns were confirmed in international comparisons
- Particular concerns emerged in relation to the 'night-time' economy – the phrase used to describe the drinking patterns of young people, sometimes in 'superpubs'
- In line with increased binge drinking, Ireland experienced an associated increase in public order offences
- Policy attempts to respond to alcohol-related problems tended to be reactive and to shy away from the WHO recommendations on alcohol control strategies
- Alcohol-related sexual offences may be seen as a subset of the broader public order problem

Explaining Alcohol-Related Aggression

- Few, if any, researchers –regardless of their scientific background - believe that there is a simple causal relationship between alcohol and violence
- Nonetheless, the idea of 'disinhibition' (that alcohol impairs higher brain functioning, wipes out internalised moral imperatives and induce people to act on their lower impulses) continues to have some popular currency
- The best-known alternative explanation from a social science perspective is MacAndrew and Edgerton's (1969) *Drunken Comportment* concept

Drunken Comportment

- Based largely on anthropological studies of drunken behaviour
- Argues that people use alcohol to structure their 'Time Out' – a period in which the more serious and dutiful aspects of behaviour are replaced by a wilder and more fun-filled approach to life
- It is not so much that alcohol pharmacologically causes different behaviour as that people use alcohol as a licence to be different
- While usual norms don't apply in drinking situations, drunken comportment does have its own norms

Drunken Comportment and Sexual Violence

- Applying this concept to the night-time scene, it may be argued that heavy drinking often includes sexualised behaviour which in another setting would be deemed inappropriate
- For those concerned with allegations of assault and rape (Gardai, DPP, courts), the difficulty is in trying retrospectively to apply 'straight' moral and legal principles to situations which have been constructed as 'time out' – where the social and behavioural boundaries are fluid and where the normative guidelines are grey
- Where both parties have been drinking heavily (often drinking together), the task of the criminal justice system is particularly difficult

Conclusions

- The relationship between alcohol and sexual violence is complex: alcohol does not *cause* men to sexually attack women
- Most people agree that drunkenness does not excuse sexual assault or rape
- The findings of *Rape and Justice in Ireland* confirm the complexity of the relationship between alcohol and sexual violence and the difficulties faced by all societal agencies involved in dealing with this phenomenon

Prevention

- At the legal level: better enforcement of licensing legislation aimed at reducing binge drinking (e.g. not serving alcohol to people already intoxicated)
- At the level of drinking institutions: creation of a more 'welfare-oriented' ethos
- At informal level: harm reduction through friendship groups and variants of designated driver custom