

## **Changing risky drinking practices in different types of social worlds: concepts and experiences**

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## **Abstract**

The ‘social worlds’ concept has been underutilized in alcohol research. This is surprising given that drinking is primarily a social activity, often a secondary part of a sociable occasion in a social world whose members come together around something they have in common, such as an occupation, a hobby, or an identity. Social worlds which include drinking in their practices often entail encouragements or pressures to drink more, though they may also try to impose some limits on drinking or related behavior. Heavy drinking social worlds may be a useful target for public health interventions aimed at supporting less harmful drinking practices, and this paper moves beyond a theoretical discussion of social worlds and their utility to suggest how the concept might be applied in practical terms. We discuss the various influences and actors that potentially impact on heavy drinking social worlds, and suggest a pragmatic typology of social worlds in terms of five features: activity-based, identification-based, settings-based, worldview-based and social position-based. Most social worlds will be characterized by more than one feature, although it is likely that one will predominate in a given social world. Examples are discussed of changes in drinking norms in heavy-drinking social worlds primarily characterised in terms of each of the five features. Implications are considered for public health programming to reduce risky drinking in such social worlds.

**Key words:** alcohol, drinking culture, public health, social worlds

## Introduction

Alcohol is a widely consumed psychoactive substance, and in many cultures and circumstances collective drinking is understood as a way to enjoy time with others, do things together and reciprocally, and create and maintain relationships (Emslie, Hunt & Lyons, 2012; MacLean, 2016). Drinking alcohol also carries risks of harm for the drinker and for others – risks of injury and chronic health harm, and of harm to social functioning and position (Babor et al. 2010; MacLean, Pennay & Room, 2018). Public policies and programs are often directed at reducing these risks and preventing harm. These policies may be directed at the population level – often categorized as ‘universal prevention’ (Foxcroft, 2014) – for instance, through controls on the price and availability of alcohol, through laws against combining drinking with circumstances requiring sobriety (as in measures against drink-driving), or through warning labels and other public information campaigns aiming to reduce risky drinking. Or they may be directed at the individual level, as in screening and intervention programs or provision of remedial treatment. There are also levels between the individual and a whole society – subdivisions which may be defined geographically, institutionally, or culturally. One category at the intermediate level on which public health agencies in Victoria, Australia have recently been focusing is the category of heavy drinking social worlds (VicHealth, 2019), which we define in more detail below. Drinking, and indeed relatively heavy drinking, is often expected and encouraged in such a social world, and a substantial proportion of a society’s problematic drinking occurs in the context of such heavy drinking social worlds (Clark, 1988). For example, in a 2007 survey of Victorian adults, 7.4% of drinkers were classed as risky drinkers involved in a social world of heavy drinking, but they accounted for 23.9% of the reported alcohol consumption (calculated from Table 2 of Room, Callinan & Dietze, 2016). Thus, finding effective ways to intervene in such worlds to discourage heavy or problematic drinking is a potentially fruitful way of reducing rates of problematic drinking in a society.

Despite significant whole-of-population efforts to reduce alcohol consumption over the past 30 years, research shows that subsections of the population continue to drink at more harmful levels than do others, indicating that segments of the population are not responsive, or are resistant, to population-wide efforts to address harmful drinking (Livingston, Callinan, Raninen, Pennay & Dietze, 2018; Roche et al., 2015). Moreover, prevention efforts that target individual drinkers ignore that most drinking occurs in the company of others, and that sociocultural norms and practices of drinking that may sustain or discourage harmful drinking are produced and reiterated through such units of social interaction or social collectivities (Savic, Room, Mugavin, Pennay & Livingston, 2016). A conceptualization in terms of social worlds provides a frame of analysis focusing attention not on the individual drinker, but rather on interpersonal influences which sustain drinking – a level of crucial importance for a largely social behavior which is often a medium for commensality and a sense of community (Gefou-Madianou, 1992; Orford et al., 2009). Elsewhere (MacLean et al., in press) we review the sociological literature on conceptualisations of subgroups below the level of society (e.g., subcultures, peer crowds, social worlds, [neo]tribes) and identify benefits of utilizing the concept of social world to describe subgroups of heavy drinkers in studies intended to support targeted health promotion interventions. We argue that this concept captures the complexity, multiplicity and fluidity of affiliations in the contemporary world. The contribution of the present paper is to consider features of social worlds which may be engaged to support changed drinking practice within different categories of social worlds. We start with a brief outline of what social worlds of heavy drinking entail and describe the various influences on such social worlds that might be drawn on in designing interventions. Next, we offer a typology to characterize, in a practical sense, the types of heavy drinking social worlds that

researchers and public health agencies may feasibly target, elaborating features which may be drawn on to support changed drinking practice within each. We conclude by noting considerations that should be borne in mind when working to change drinking cultures in social worlds, including anticipating potential counter reactions to efforts to alter their drinking practices.

### **Social worlds as a locus of heavy drinking**

Most drinking of alcoholic beverages is in the company of others. In unpublished results from a 2007 population survey in Victoria, Australia (Matthews, Dietze, Room, Chikritzhs & Jolley, 2013), 60% of current drinkers reported that they had never drunk alone in the last 12 months, and 10% that they had done it just once or twice. Whether and how much we drink when in company is customarily influenced by others. This influence may be explicit, in terms of pressure to drink either more or less – with heavier drinkers tending to receive more pressures in both directions (Room et al., 2016). Or it may be subtle and even unconscious – as when the level of the beer in each glass of a group of men drinking in a British pub goes down synchronously, without any conscious notice being taken (Mass Observation, 1987, p. 169), or when young people in Melbourne reflect that they match their friends' drinking pace to build a sense of connection (MacLean, 2016). Drinking together builds fellow-feeling and often, as with 'shouting' each other's drinks (standing rounds) in Australia, also involves reciprocity (Sargent, 1968).

The company with whom we drink may be family or friends around a dining table, it may be colleagues at an office Christmas party, or it may be a regular poker game among friends – that is, groups which are well defined and in regular face-to-face contact with each other. At the opposite extreme, it may be people at a bar whom we have not met before, and with whom we have little in common. But much drinking is in a social context between these poles – that is, within a rather loosely organized, amorphous social group, often not defined by a particular location – a category of association which sociologists have termed a 'social world' (Unruh, 1980). Those in a social world share some kind of focus in their lives, for instance an occupation, a hobby or other leisure activity, a lifestyle, religious or political views or an ethnocultural or other social identity, and may participate in shared events, organizations and practices.

The social world perspective emerged first in the sociological tradition of 'Chicago-style interactionism' (Strauss, 1978), and has since been applied intermittently in various traditions of sociological work, most commonly with respect to occupation-based social worlds, and particularly in the sociological tradition of Science and Technology Studies, concerning intellectual and technological worlds (Clarke & Star, 2008). Theoretically, the perspective privileges analytical attention on process, interaction and relationships (Unruh, 1980). Curiously, the social worlds concept has been underutilized in the alcohol and drug field, and also in the prevention arena more broadly (see MacLean et al., forthcoming). Summarising early sociological discussions of the 'social world perspective', Strauss (1978) included among characteristics of such a world that it is 'an arena in which there is a kind of organization' (Shibutani, 1955), with members sharing activities, often in particular sites.

We use the term 'social world' here to refer to social groupings above the level of friends, relatives and other personal linkages, where there is some form of routinised interaction and communication (MacLean et al., forthcoming). Indeed, scholars of social worlds (Shibutani, 1955; Unruh, 1980) have argued that the boundaries of social worlds are determined by meaningful 'interaction and communication that transcend and cross over the more formal

and traditional delineators of organization' (Unruh, 1980, p. 271). 'Social worlds' are cultural entities which are not at the level of a whole society or culture; a modern complex society includes within it a wide variety of social worlds.

At the level of the individual, most social worlds are not all-embracing or a master status for members. Thus, 'social world' is less specific than the term 'subculture', which often carries implications of boundedness and all-absorption for its members, particularly in the British sociological tradition (Moore, 2004). In complex societies, people belong to multiple social worlds – for example, for a particular person, one might be around their occupation, another around musical interests, and a third in following a particular sporting team. Sociologically, this has been discussed in terms of the 'intersection' of social worlds (Strauss, 1978). One social world may be a subworld within another – for instance, graphic artists in one city may be within the larger social world of all artists in the city, and also within another of graphic artists nationally. Sociologists have spoken of this in terms of 'segmentation' of social worlds and 'subworlds' within them (Strauss, 1978).

A social world has shared normative expectations and conventions about behavior that may be specific to it – including about drinking behavior (Room, 1975). In many social worlds, there is no expectation of drinking, and in some indeed it would be unacceptable. In other social worlds, drinking is potentially associated with the functioning of the world, but not intrinsic to it. For instance, some members of an adult community choir may regularly get together for a sociable drink down the street after choir practice. In some social worlds, drinking together is more intrinsic to the world's functioning: members of the world get together regularly in a bar, or they belong to a wine club that regularly makes tours to wineries. But even where the activity of the social world involves some drinking, there is substantial variation in expectations about the style and amount of drinking (Wilkinson et al., 2017).

Our concern here is with heavy drinking social worlds and their characteristics. By a 'heavy drinking social world' we mean a social world in which drinking together is a common part of the world's functioning, and that for at least some members the drinking on an occasion continues until they are noticeably affected by it. This does not necessarily mean that drinking is intrinsic to the social world's functioning, or that all members of the social world are heavy drinkers (some may not drink at all); but it does mean that heavy drinking is a common accompaniment of participating in the social world, and an activity that is accepted and may indeed be encouraged by group norms. In the terms used in the *Alcohol Cultures Framework* of VicHealth, a health promotion organization (VicHealth, 2019), the social world has an alcohol culture which includes risky drinking.

While social worlds may continue their existence through many generations, their characteristics and behavioral norms may change over time. For instance, the social world of newspaper reporters in north America – mostly male until recent decades – was traditionally a heavy drinking world (Fedler, 1997), with a well-patronized newspapermen's bar commonly around the corner from the newspaper offices. With the increasingly female composition of the newsroom, these reporter-dominated bars largely disappeared. By the 1980s, 'there were more women in the newsroom, and we didn't want to do that', as a key informant in Canada put it (Korah, 2001, p. 101); it was 'no life for a lady' (Dempsey, 1976). Although other factors were most likely also involved, the shift in the occupation's gender composition seems to have been an important determinant of the change in drinking norms in social worlds of news reporters.

In this paper we start by considering influences on heavy drinking social worlds, how such social worlds may react to the influences, and correspondingly, how public health practitioners may develop strategies to reduce heavy drinking. We are thus seeking to bring a largely sociological or historical literature on instances of change in heavy drinking social worlds to bear on the interest of public health agencies in intervening effectively to change problematic drinking practices in social worlds, as a complement to population- and individual-level alcohol programs and policies.

### **Influences on drinking in a heavy drinking social world, and the social world's reactions**

A variety of actors, both within and outside social worlds, can influence changes in heavy or problematic drinking practices in social worlds.

#### ***Influences within the social world***

As a cultural entity, a heavy drinking social world will have norms around drinking, both in terms of customs and rules encouraging drinking, invoked often by commonplace phrases ('can I buy you another round?'; 'won't you have another with me?'), and in terms of setting limits on the drinking ('thanks, but I have to drive home') or discouraging behavior which would be seen as unpleasant ('let's sit down and talk this through calmly'). In many heavy-drinking social worlds, norms concerning drinking and associated behavior are often enforced with 'banter' from other group members, which can be both derogatory and effective. For example, one participant in a male heavy-drinking world described drinking three pints of beer more than planned and then vomiting because his friends repeatedly discouraged him from stopping by calling him a 'pussy' (i.e. casting aspersions on his masculinity) (Roberts et al., 2019, p. 19). Heavy drinking social worlds may be resistant to exhortation or direction from outside (illustrated below). A promising route for a public health-oriented approach is thus to find potential allies with authenticity (Strauss, 1978) within the social world – members of the world who are themselves questioning of the level of drinking and the problems it can cause. Despite the ubiquity of heavy drinking, certain drunken behaviors may generate revulsion or disapproval even among heavy drinkers, with friends responding by active or more passive forms of censure (MacLean, Pennay & Room, 2018). As discussed below, instances can be found of heavy drinking social worlds reforming themselves from within (e.g. Hastings, 1982).

#### ***Influences from a drinking setting's controllers***

Social worlds usually operate in particular settings and circumstances: potential participants can look for or expect to find others in particular places at certain times. Members of many heavy drinking social worlds often get together in public or collective locations. Such locations may be bars or clubs, which have a staff and management who are controllers and regulators of the setting, or public places such as parks or footpaths, where the police are usually the controllers. The owners and managers of pubs and clubs often have an interest in encouraging drinking, as a source, or even the main source, of revenue for the establishment. While this can to some extent be restrained by effective alcohol control enforcement (Babor et al., 2010, pp. 149-156), the pub or club also has a strong interest in averting trouble, to keep other customers satisfied as well as because recurrent troubles may put its license to operate in jeopardy (Pennay, 2014).

Observational studies of bars have often found a tension between the desires and customs of the 'regulars' and the bar's management. Those who become 'regulars' at a bar are in essence affiliating with a small social world – often a heavy drinking social world. As Sulkunen and

colleagues (1997, p. 72) describe it for the Finnish suburban pub, the regulars ‘dominate its general outlook and atmosphere, they uphold its social relations, make the reputation that the pub holds in the eyes of outsiders, and also account for the largest part of its income’. As Cavan (1966) noted in her study of bars in San Francisco, regulars tend to regard the bar as their own territory, and may be hostile to strangers intruding on it. In the same vein, Solomon (2008) more recently described ‘that *look* from regulars. You know. The “who the fuck are you and what the hell are you doing in our bar?” look’. Such behavior is generally not in the bar owner’s interest, and the relationship between the regulars and the management may become fraught. The management’s control of the premises does not necessarily make it easy to control how a social world on the premises behaves.

Heavy drinking social worlds may also operate in public outdoor space or in the homes of members. Since off-premise sale prices for alcoholic beverages are usually considerably cheaper than on-premise prices, there is a long history of outdoor drinking in parks and other public spaces, particularly by less affluent drinkers, and of adverse reactions to it by local merchants and neighborhood organizations. A single person intoxicated in public may be thought unsightly, but a group of intoxicated persons interacting in public space tends to be seen as a threat and a neighborhood amenity problem, and the result in Anglophone and some other countries has been bans on street drinking – though often the bans are not particularly effective (Pennay & Room, 2012).

### ***Societal influences: alcohol industries and government control measures***

Customs and behavior in a heavy drinking social world are obviously affected on the one hand by promotional efforts of alcohol industries and sellers and on the other hand by government alcohol control policies. In general, heavier drinking is of critical importance to alcohol industry interests, with the heaviest drinking 20% of drinkers accounting for at least 70% of total alcohol consumption (Bhattacharya et al., 2018). Industry interests work in diverse ways to promote sales to this portion of the market – not only through direct advertising and promotion to consumers, but also through support for activities which are a focus for heavy drinking social worlds, such as professional sports (Jones, 2010). At the retail level, industry promotions such as of ready-to-drink alcopops and on-demand home delivery services (Goldring, 2019) – current Australian examples of the latter are *Jimmy Brings* (‘No more debating whether this house party should meet its untimely end because the booze has almost run out’; <https://jimmybrings.com.au/canberra-wine-delivery/>) and *Knock Knock Booze There* (<https://knockknockboozethere.com.au/>) – can not only change the structure and location of drinking but also affect in various ways the functioning of heavy drinking social worlds.

Government alcohol control policies such as taxes and limits on opening hours can also shape heavy drinking social worlds. For instance, when restrictions on the opening hours of bars and restaurants in Reykjavik, Iceland were removed in 1999, there were clear effects on the nature and length of a ‘night out’ drinking, and associated increases in admissions to hospital emergency wards (Ragnarsdóttir et al., 2002). Policy choices often interact with patterns in particular social worlds. Thus young drinkers, with limited resources, tend to look for the ‘biggest bang for the buck’, particularly where alcohol taxes are high. In this circumstance, social ‘pre-drinking’ events before attending licensed venues are popular among young people in many countries. This is, at least in part, because it is cheaper to drink alcohol purchased from off-premise outlets and arrive already ‘loaded’ at a bar than to do all one’s drinking in licensed venues (MacLean & Callinan, 2013).

Other government policies such as requirements to deny further service to the already intoxicated, and drink-driving prohibition and enforcement, also have effects. However, behavior and discussion in a heavy drinking social world often operate to counteract or undercut such policies to the extent possible, whether in the form of groups shifting to drinking takeaway alcohol in a home or park, or of more direct subversion of the rules (d'Abbs, 2015; Sumpter et al., 2020). For instance, Gusfield and his colleagues found that there was a good deal of discussion in bars in San Diego, California of where the police would be likely to be stopping motorists for breath-tests, and of alternate routes for driving home by which the police could be evaded (Gusfield, 1996).

### ***Other interest groups as external influencers***

Though it is relatively uncommon in the current Anglophone world, collective influences on heavy drinking social worlds in the interest of family members or of employers have been common historically and in diverse cultural settings. The temperance movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were in part the expression of women's interests against men's drinking (Tyrrell, 2014). In recent decades, women's movements against drinking have had substantial success, for instance, in India (Larsson, 2006), in some Pacific islands (Marshall & Marshall, 1990) and among Aboriginal women in some parts of rural Australia (Brady, 1994).

In the 1920s and following in Anglophone political histories, however, there were strong generational reactions against such temperance measures (Room, 1988), and these days influences from family members on those in heavy drinking social worlds are primarily expressed and responded to within the family rather than through a social movement or politically. Within individual families, influences on each other's drinking are relatively commonly applied, particularly for heavier drinkers. Among adults in Victoria in 2007 who regularly drank convivially and at risky levels (and thus were likely to be in a heavy drinking social world), while 44% reported pressure from a friend to drink more, 36% reported pressure from a family member to drink less (Room et al., 2016).

With respect to employers and the work environment, factory owners and managers played a large part in the temperance era in the removal of drinking from the workplace (e.g. Rosenzweig, 1983). It can be argued that the most lasting effect of the temperance era was the removal of alcohol from most workplaces (Room, 2011). In the present day in countries such as Australia and the U.S., the work of Employee Assistance Programs and equivalent employer initiatives to limit the impact of alcohol on work life is primarily defined in terms of individual-level counselling and therapy, but such programs can also endeavor to change employees' drinking cultures that impinge on the workplace (see 'activity-based social worlds' below).

### **Features and a typology of heavy drinking social worlds**

The development of typological constructs is a useful undertaking for empirical work where setting boundaries around social or other factors helps to focus analyses. Indeed, quantitative analyses rely on categories that often involve socially constructed groupings based on shared characteristics. In qualitative research, typologies typically involve combining a series of attributes to form a socially meaningful configuration for theoretical purposes. McKinney (1966, p. 3) defines typologies as 'purposive, planned selection, abstraction or combination, and (sometimes) accentuation of a set of criteria with empirical referents that serves as a basis for comparison of empirical cases'. He further suggests that typologies are heuristic devices for making sense of the empirical world; but both he and Becker (1940) stress the importance

of acknowledging the constructed nature of typologies: they are imperfect, subjective and exceptions can always be found. Nevertheless, typologies become a way of making sense of information for research purposes, and we suggest that it is useful to develop a typology of heavy drinking social worlds, to sharpen the focus for public health actors who wish to explore ways of intervening in the drinking in these worlds.

The typology offered here builds on previous work aiming to identify and study heavy drinking social worlds as potential targets for public health intervention (Wilkinson et al., 2017). Wilkinson and colleagues were seeking to identify heavy drinking social worlds in Australia and so undertook a literature search of social science data bases (including Medline, PubMed, EMBASE, CINAHL, SCOPUS, Web of Knowledge, Google Scholar, Anthropology Plus, Humanities and Social Sciences Collection, JSTOR, Proquest Social Sciences, Sociological Abstracts (ProQuest), Rural Health, and Sociology), using search terms including ‘alcohol and/or drinking’ and ‘qualitative’ or ‘ethnograph\*’. The search was not systematic, rather, it was a scoping exercise aiming to understand the types of social worlds that have been researched in Australia where drinking might be identified as an important aspect of the world’s activities (full details of the search process can be found in Wilkinson et al., 2017). The authors identified in Australian qualitative literature three major categories of relationship described as serving as a basis for a social world: those who shared a collective personal identity affiliation (e.g. same-sex attracted women), those who shared a collective interest, activity or occupation (e.g. construction workers) and those who shared a setting (e.g. sports bar attendees). They also identified the importance of ascribed characteristics on drinking practices, particularly of socio-economic status and religiosity, although recognizing that such socio-demographic characteristics were not necessarily sufficient to indicate member status of a social world. However, in considering the importance of these characteristics, we considered it appropriate to add two more categories of relationship: a social position basis and a worldview basis.

Thus, the five features or dimensions that we suggest may characterize, and usefully differentiate, social worlds are:

- an activity basis* – for instance, social worlds organized around an occupation, a hobby or a leisure activity;
- an identification basis* – that is, social worlds composed of members who actively affiliate on the basis of markers of a socially-recognized category that is personally meaningful – for example, sexuality, gender diversity or ethnocultural identity;
- a setting basis* – where the collectivity is organized around attendance at particular settings, such as music festivals or gay bars;
- a worldview basis* – that is, social worlds specifically constituted through religious, political or other philosophical ideas and commitments – for example, Catholics, American Libertarians (Coggeshall, 2017) or ‘bikies’ (Lorigan, Snell & Robertson, 2016); and
- a social position basis* – where a social world emerges through, or is produced by, shared lived experiences of socioeconomic conditions (e.g. structural disadvantage or advantage) – for instance, a localized group of people who share similar experiences of disadvantage, such as people without housing, as described in classic US skid-row studies (Baumohl & Huebner, 1991) and more recently in the Australian city of Adelaide (Zufferey & Kerr, 2004), or, in contrast, the social world of wealthy owners of super-yachts (Spence, 2016).



Keeping in mind that this typology is a heuristic device for conceptual (and intervention) purposes and that in lived experience these features always intersect and interact, often one of these bases will be primary in a particular social world, but with one or more other features also present. An example is the ‘Skinheads’ described by Moore (1994), who were a group of heavy drinking young men living in the city of Perth, Western Australia. These young men defined themselves by their English ethnicity (having emigrated from England) and their adoption of other attributes -- a particularly British subcultural ‘skinhead’ style (of music and clothing interests) and worldview (working class solidarity and social alienation). This constituted, then, a heavy drinking social world defined by *identification* (ethnocultural) and *worldview* (Skinheads), interacting in particular *settings* in Perth. A second example is that of construction workers in Australia. This is an *activity-based* social world, in this case occupational, but also constituted through *settings* (working collectively on building sites). Notably, in both these examples, the social worlds are also constituted by sociodemographic features – both are primarily male-dominated social worlds, and in the Skinhead’s case this is also a world of young adults.

### **Influencing the drinking culture in different types of social worlds**

In this section we briefly consider evidence from research studies on how interventions might work in practice within different types of social worlds, with examples of actors and influencers who might be drawn upon to support these interventions.

#### ***1. Activity-based social worlds***

Affiliation in activity-based social worlds is often strong, whether based on occupation, on a hobby, or on another avocation. This means that, on the one hand, changes in the social world’s practice are relatively unlikely to result in many disaffiliations; on the other hand, the changes may be strongly resisted. Pressures for change may come from within the membership of the social world, or may come from organizations around which the social world operates. An example of a transformation concerning heavy drinking primarily coming from within the world was studied in the 1970s-1990s by the American sociologist Sonnenstuhl (1996). The New York ‘sandhogs’ were a craft union of hard-rock miners constructing road and other tunnels under New York rivers and estuaries. They had a strong occupational identity, established through a set of circumstances: successful struggles to unionize and to control work conditions in a dangerous occupation. Their typical work pattern in the 1970s involved three hours of work in a compressed-air environment, followed by three hours above ground decompressing – and drinking communally – in the work-base or a tavern. Contractors found that the union would not allow them to discipline gang members for drinking, and ‘ended up making the best of the situation by rewarding the men with liquor and beer for a job well done’ (Sonnenstuhl, 1996, p. 70).

In a severe fiscal crisis in the 1970s, many sandhogs were laid off, and often increased their drinking in their enforced leisure time. Around that time, a well-respected sandhog had become an Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) member, and became the nucleus of a successful effort to set up treatment for and recruit to AA sandhogs whose drinking had become problematic, drawing in part on the model of a workplace program oriented to problematic drinking in a related industry. Apart from the visible change in attitudes these sandhogs represented, many also became more involved in the union and took on leadership roles. In these roles, they made sure that individuals who had sobered up or were making an effort to do so were given preference for hiring on the work-gangs. In this manner, as one sandhog put it in the early 1990s, ‘we went from a culture of drinking to a culture of sobriety’ (Sonnenstuhl, 1996, pp. 97, 106), with the change emerging from within the sandhogs

themselves, rather than being imposed from above, and with the change becoming institutionalized. Commenting on the history, Sonnestuhl notes (p. 119) that innovations often fail for lack of follow-through on initial change. In the sandhogs' case, the material circumstances, with the continuing viability of the occupational group at stake, also helped to push the change along. For a public health intervention in a heavy drinking social world to have lasting success, it is probably helpful for the intervention to orient itself to any ongoing changes which the larger social environment is imposing on the specific social world.

Particularly where one's work is the activity base for a social world, work organizations are likely to be important players in any effort to change the social world's drinking culture. For example, a multimethod study from the U.S. (Ames et al., 2000) compared drinking in the workplace cultures of two large automobile works, both unionized, but with very different organizational cultures. One plant, designated the 'Traditional', had the classic US corporate culture with 'visible symbols of status hierarchies, rigid division of job tasks, clear division between union and management, and rigidity in management responsibility for decision-making and performance' (p. 205). The other plant, the 'Transplant', jointly owned by a Japanese corporation, used aspects of Japanese management principles – despite three-quarters of its employees having previously worked for a plant with an organization culture like the Traditional's. In the Transplant, all employees were 'organized into teams [which] have responsibility for products, finding solutions for problems and improving production' (p. 205). Consensual decision-making was encouraged and there was closer union-management cooperation.

Workers at the two plants did not differ in their overall drinking practices, but did differ significantly in their drinking in relation to work. Traditional plant workers were significantly more likely to report drinking during work hours (23%) than Transplant workers (3%) and to drink 4 or more drinks before coming to work, and were less likely to expect disapproval from a friend, team-mate or supervisor of drinking at work. Implementation of workplace policies and procedures concerning workplace drinking was compromised in the Traditional plant by union-management conflicts and by labyrinthine procedures, while the Transplant had a history of agreements and compromises between union and management, including on the enforcement of alcohol policies. The Transplant management also successfully encouraged workers to stay on premises for the lunch break, paying them extra if they did so. The researchers concluded that their findings showed 'how political, economic and social processes of the two work environments affect social control mechanisms and, thereafter, drinking norms and drinking practices' (Ames et al., 2000, p. 218).

Drinking in privileged occupational social worlds is perhaps more difficult to influence, particularly from within. Health promotion policies rarely specifically target the privileged and wealthy; however, the ready access to alcohol in the diplomatic and intergovernmental world is currently receiving some attention, including unsuccessful attempts to pass a resolution at the February 2020 meeting of the Executive Board of the World Health Organization (WHO) to set an example by refraining from serving alcoholic beverages at WHO cafeterias and receptions. The following advice for negotiators for humanitarian organisations gives a sense of the lie of the land in the diplomatic world, as well as exemplifying internal persuasion in a worldview-based social world:

Alcohol is often served at diplomatic functions at the UN [and other intergovernmental organisations].... However, no one is going to force a delegate to drink or think less of the official for not drinking, except perhaps in Russia or Japan, where delegates are expected to drink or at least take the alcohol that is offered. Pretend to drink.

Depending on the circumstances, it is usually best to quietly avoid alcohol at social events;... an official event is work, not vacation, and the head must be kept clear.... The real rule is never to overindulge at an event. If someone does get drunk on delegations, they should be sent back. (Roeder & Simard, 2013, p. 283)

## ***2. Identification-based social worlds***

As with the preceding category, interventions in heavy drinking identification-based social worlds may occur from within. An example of such a shift was the change in the 1970s in the social world of lesbians in the San Francisco region away from bars as the customary setting for meeting and socializing with others in the world (Hastings, 1982). A pattern has been documented in a number of locations of sexual minority women consuming on average more alcohol than heterosexual women do, albeit less than men do (Hughes, Wilsnack, & Kantor, 2016). In research with sexual minority women who attended venues in Glasgow, drinking offered a means to establish connection with others in their community, as well as signifying a lesbian identity (Emslie, Lennox & Ireland, 2017). In the San Francisco region in the 1970s, unease about the association of socializing in the world with alcohol consumption led to successful efforts by members of the lesbian social world to set up and promote alternative activities and meeting-places. By 1982, the lesbian bar was ‘no longer the major setting for social and romantic interactions’; instead, most cities in the region offered ‘a range of alternatives such as women’s restaurants, bookstores, coffee houses and political organizations’ (Hastings, 1982, p. 4).

Given the focus on explicit and public identity, an identification basis for a social world also opens it for influence both from public policy measures and from alcohol industry interests. For instance, there has been considerable public policy focus on youth drinking in many societies, with particular alarm concerning young people who frequent large licensed commercial venues in the nighttime economy (Measham & Brain, 2005). On the other side of the ledger, alcohol industry advertising and social media appeals put considerable emphasis on identity appeals as industry aims to segment and develop new markets (McCreanor et al., 2005), appealing, for instance, to youth (McCreanor et al., 2005) or national or cultural identity (Morris, 2005). In identification-based social worlds, efforts might focus on redefining the role of alcohol in enacting recognized forms of selfhood and expressions of solidarity.

## ***3. Setting-based social worlds***

Setting-based social worlds might be particularly amenable to change by the setting’s controllers and through government policy. An interesting example from Australia is the Good Sports Program, which was developed by public health organizations and first implemented in 2000 (Duff & Munro, 2007). Australian sports clubs are often a community social centre, but many had found the easiest way to finance the club was by selling alcoholic drinks and providing electronic gambling machines. This came to mean that the clubhouse was not seen as family-friendly, so that fewer children were around to be recruited into junior sports teams. The Good Sports program persuaded club managements to institute rules and limits around drink sales and drunken comportment at sporting clubs, thereby making the clubhouse more attractive for community families.

At least one-quarter of Australian sporting clubs have had some connection with the Good Sports Program since its inception. A randomised controlled trial of its alcohol management intervention program in 43 clubs found a significant reduction in risky alcohol consumption (5+ drinks at least once a month) from 27% of members pre-intervention (in 2009) to 19%

post-intervention (in 2012), while the rate remained about the same among control-club members (25% to 24%; Kingsland et al., 2015). Members' AUDIT problematic drinking scores also dropped (54% to 38% with a score of 8+) at the Good Sports clubs, suggesting that the decline in their drinking at the club had not been compensated for by more drinking elsewhere.

As noted above concerning activity-based social worlds, jobs, hobbies and other avocations are often pursued in specific settings, such as a workplace, a clubhouse, or a community centre. Lessons for setting-based social worlds can thus be drawn from activity-based examples. As with Good Sports, those in charge of the setting – not necessarily themselves members of the setting-based social world – may prove to be valuable allies to public health-oriented efforts to influence the heavy drinking of the social world.

#### ***4. Worldview-based social worlds***

While the sociological tradition has noted that many social worlds may construct 'world views' (Unruh, 1980, p. 272), our concern here is with social worlds where a shared worldview is the world's primary basis. Less contemporary evidence is available as to how worldview-based social worlds might be influenced, although it is clear that, particularly among Protestant Christians, 19<sup>th</sup> Century temperance movements had enormous influence in changing drinking practices among churchgoers (Levine, 1993). For heavy-drinking worldview-based social worlds, an appeal from within the social world is most likely to be effective if it can be tied to values and beliefs important to the world. Appeals to drinking less alcohol as a means of furthering members' shared ideological ambitions or philosophical commitments might be effective here. Certainly this has been the approach historically in many religious groups (Belcher, 2006; Schwarz, 2010). An example from 1981 is the Christian revival among large sections of the Aboriginal Australian population at Yalata, South Australia, as a result of visits by Aboriginal evangelists. The site had been set up and run by Lutheran missionaries since 1954, but the Lutherans were not opposed to alcohol and, in fact, ran an on-site beer canteen. The turn against alcohol in the 1981 revival reflected that 'people generally considered Christians "loved", and [that they] did not harm one another. Fighting and arguments were condemned and because those activities were empirically the consequence of drinking alcohol, drinking was thought to be undesirable.... The two modes of existence – being a Christian and being a drinker – were entirely incompatible in the eyes of the adherents' (Brady & Palmer, 1988, p. 148). With the revival, the beer outlet closed for lack of support. As Brady and Palmer note, 'Aboriginal Christianity was a wholly Aboriginal affair.... The attitude of the new Christians to drinking was in sharp contrast to that of the Lutheran missionaries' (p. 148).

Changes to drinking cultures among worldview-based social worlds are not limited to religious social worlds. For instance, a series of newspaper articles reporting on the South Australian chapter of the Mongols 'bikie gang' in November 2013, illustrated changes in drinking culture reported as motivated and occurring from within the social world. One article quoted a senior member of the group stating: 'members had realized they must "change or die" and adopt a "zero tolerance" attitude toward drugs, alcohol and violence' (Fewster, 2013). A second article printed the newly developed 'Mongols Alcohol, Drugs and Criminal Conviction Policy' contained in the Mongols Motorcycle Club Charter, where the fourth regulation states: 'Officers in charge at a club function shall maintain a high degree of sobriety or face disciplinary action' (Fewster & Wuth, 2013).

#### ***5. Social position-based social worlds***

Social position-based social worlds are produced by, or emerge through, shared lived experiences of structural disadvantage or privilege. An example of an intervention in a social-position based heavy drinking social world comes from Yarrabah, a predominantly Aboriginal community in northern Queensland with a youthful population (a median age of 21). Although there are restrictions on alcohol availability, there is a good deal of drinking by Yarrabah youth. In the early 2000s, the situation of youths in Yarrabah noticeably worsened. Community activities for youth had been decreasing since 2006, and the end of the federal government Community Development Employment Program in 2009 left many youth at a loose end. In 2010 a two-year community project was funded to develop and evaluate a harm reduction program which would reduce 'binge drinking' (defined as 'drinking to intoxication by heavy consumption of alcohol over a short period of time') by 18-24 year olds (McCalman et al., 2013, p. 2). From the start, the project involved an alliance between eight local community organisations, several outside researchers, and youth in the community. The project developed and changed iteratively as its coordinators learned from their experiences. For instance, after a year of sponsoring a variety of music, sporting and cultural community events, at which promotional messages about binge drinking were distributed as a condition of sponsorship, the project coordinators decided to redirect efforts to events and activities controlled and organised by young people. The initial baseline survey of 18-24 year olds conducted for the evaluation had suggested that a major reason for youthful binge drinking was boredom and disengagement. The cross-sectional survey conducted two years after the project was implemented found a 10% reduction in the proportion of young people engaging in binge drinking and an 8% increase in occupational training (Jainullabudeen et al., 2015). While these findings are relatively weak evidence, qualitative evidence suggests that conducting the survey became itself an instrument of positive change. Young community members were hired and trained to conduct the interviews (McCalman et al., 2013, pp. 5-6), and this became a model for a further reframing of the project's approach, which became engaging young people in meaningful training and education. That members of the social world were recruited and trained as interviewers in the evaluation study thus turned out not only to facilitate the data collection but also to serve as a model for the project's change of direction towards facilitating meaningful training for employment, addressing the structural socioeconomic conditions which underlay binge drinking among community youth. The project's acceptability within the community and effectiveness in understanding and responding to the local situation points to the importance of involving members of the social world in a partnership for change.

In the case of socio-economic disadvantage, some of the solution to heavy drinking is likely to lie in alleviating deprivation, along with any efforts to target drinking directly. The 'Be a Brother' is an example of a campaign targeting newly arrived African young men in Melbourne, a social world defined by their circumstances that also entails settings, as well as age, ethnicity and experiences of disadvantage related to racism and adjustment to a new culture. The campaign involved using social media and direct text messaging to encourage young people to support their friends to drink less. This campaign was produced by a Sudanese film-maker working closely with a group of young men to develop collective solutions to problems. It thus entailed encouraging influence to reduce drinking from within the social world. The largely qualitative evaluation of the project found that it elicited some support for a change in the drinking culture, with some evidence of a reduction in alcohol consumption by participants (Clark, 2017).

As noted earlier, public health interventions rarely target the privileged and wealthy and we were unable to find examples of drinking culture interventions within such social worlds.

### **Considerations in intervening on drinking within heavy drinking social worlds**

The preceding discussion has outlined a range of influences on drinking within heavy drinking social worlds as well as potential responses to such influences by members of the social world. It has highlighted that influences on social worlds can come from diverse sources and levels (regulatory bodies, within settings, from gender and other interest groups, and within the social world itself). While regulatory, policy or corporate developments – enactment of laws against drink-driving, changes to alcohol taxation policies, or the introduction of late-night alcohol home delivery services – can and do effect shifts in drinking practices within heavy drinking social worlds, such changes, as our discussion shows, are not always in the direction desired by public health advocates. Similarly, actions directed by a drinking setting's controllers – in particular licensed venues – may also shift drinking practices within the setting. But again, these may have the effect of moving the social world away from that setting or splitting the social world and potentially generating new heavy drinking social worlds. The Good Sports Program, described above, provides an example of this. At one Australian Rules Football club, Hart (2016) observed that a group of club supporters congregated in a muddy corner of the car park, away from the club rooms, engaging in aggressive displays of masculinity and in heavy drinking. This newly emerging heavy drinking social world contrasted with the new 'official' Good Sports Program-influenced norms and responsible service of alcohol practices within the clubrooms, which had been particularly vigorously advocated by a new leader at the club. Societal-level and settings-based actions are taken up, accommodated and resisted differentially by different social worlds, with corresponding differential effects on the drinking cultures of those social worlds.

In seeking to generate shifts in drinking within heavy drinking social worlds towards less harmful drinking practices, interventions most likely to succeed are those that specifically target the cultural norms and practices of the social world that support or encourage heavy drinking, or that seek to strengthen harm-reducing reactions within the social world (see VicHealth, 2019, for an example of a guide to intervening in heavy drinking social worlds). As noted previously, however, messaging or directives to change that come from public health actors outside the social world run the risk of failing to resonate with social world members unless the particular cultural meanings and understandings of drinking within that social world are reflected in the messaging. As Roberts and colleagues (2019, p.4) observe, interventions should be 'grounded in the desires and realities of target populations'.

Importantly, in order to enhance the likelihood that messages will resonate, members of the social world should also 'be active participants in the design of public health interventions and campaigns that seek to target them'. This suggests further that interventions that seek allies or champions from within the social world may have a better chance of succeeding in supporting shifts away from problematic drinking practices. A first stage in any planned public health intervention in a heavy drinking social world should thus be a period of observation of and familiarization with the functioning of the world, including identification and interaction with members with authenticity in the world (Strauss, 1978) who question or critique its drinking culture. For heavy drinking social worlds constituted through more formal organizational or institutional structures (for example, workplaces or tertiary education settings), interventions can simultaneously target organizational policies and processes to further embed cultural change.

## **Conclusion**

Although alcohol is one of the most important risk factors for disease and disability, and contributes to a range of social and interpersonal harms, drinking is a common social behavior in many societies. Drinking together is a primary form of reciprocal socializing in the society, and serves often as an expression of fellowship and community among those drinking together.

In many of the diverse social worlds of everyday life, the collective aspects of drinking together, and often of drinking quite a lot, serve as a reaffirmation of connections through and in the social world. But from the perspective of public health and public interest, it would be better that the reaffirmation be made by other means. That reaffirmations are made differently in other social worlds is a strong argument that there are, indeed, alternatives to sustained drinking together to express connection.

But the nature of social worlds as social entities constructed through affiliation and action by the participants makes it difficult to change established collective practices. As we have argued, there are examples of change in the norms of social worlds from within, including changes in drinking practices, but factors or impulses from the outside have often also played a role. This paper has begun on the task of considering the various influences for change, how they bear on heavy drinking social worlds, how the characteristics of different social world suggest opportunities for intervention, and how the social world may respond.

While Australian experience has been a primary focus of this paper, some of the examples drawn on have been from elsewhere, and the conceptual frame we have presented of social worlds of heavy drinking would not seem to be at all culturally specific. Public health-oriented intervention in social worlds of heavy drinking is potentially a strategy of harm minimization with wide applicability. However, it is unlikely to show up on the World Health Organization's list of "best buys" for prevention of alcohol harms (WHO, 2017), since the listing emphasises not only effectiveness but also low cost. Effective efforts by public health interests to change risky drinking practices in a social world are likely to require preliminary work studying how the social world functions, and the place of drinking in it, as a basis for designing and implementing an approach which has a good chance of success. And, to be maintained or built upon, an initial success may require longer-term follow-up.

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