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Intoxication and bad behaviour: understanding cultural differences in the link

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Abstract

Research developments since the appearance of MacAndrew and Edgerton's landmark volume, *Drunken Comportment* (1969), are summarized. The challenge of moving beyond the book is to understand what lies behind cultural variations in drunken comportment. Four specific factors in variations in drunken comportment are discussed. (1) A common contrast is between "wet" societies, where drinking is banalized everyday, and "dry" societies, where alcohol is set apart as a special commodity. Problems with this contrast are discussed, and the need for cross-cultural studies comparing expectancies from intoxication. (2) There is a need to study variations in the definition of intoxication as a "time out" state. In some societies, intoxication is likened to possession by spirits; a rationalistic version of this can be found in Canadian court decisions viewing extreme intoxication as potentially "akin to automatism". (3) If bad behaviour is a foreseeable consequence of drinking, why do some societies nevertheless not hold the drinker responsible? In Anglo-American and similar societies, drunkenness has some excuse value, but it is not a very good excuse. Compromises like this seem to be found also in other cultures. (4) Pseudointoxication is fairly widespread, and seems to mark social situations where alcohol has enhanced excuse value. It appears to be a stratagem of the weaker side across cultural boundaries, and of the young where age-grading favours older groups. Concerning the possibility of cultural changes in drunken comportment, it is argued that there are historical examples, but such a shift requires a substantial social change. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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Introduction

In the three decades since MacAndrew and Edgerton's *Drunken Comportment* (1969) was published, it has had a substantial and continuing influence. Its thesis is arguably the best-recognized conceptual contribution from the ethnographic literature to alcohol studies in general.

Drunken Comportment's main argument is straightforward. While drunkenness everywhere makes people clumsy, its effects in terms of bad behaviour — what the authors term "drunken changes-for-the worse" — differ greatly from society to society, and

for that matter in a given society from one context to another, and sometimes from one era to another. In recent terminology, MacAndrew and Edgerton's argument is that drunken comportment is culturally constructed or determined, rather than pharmacologically determined.

Along with this main argument come some corollaries. Drunken comportment is conceptualized as a "time out" from normal sober behaviour, but there is always a "within limits" clause operating for drunken behaviour. The implication is that each society has a separate set of norms controlling drunken behaviour, existing alongside the norms controlling sober behaviour. In this circumstance, drunkenness can serve as an excuse for behaviour which would have been inexcusable if the person were sober.

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Developments since *Drunken Comportment*

In the intervening years since publication, there have been a few extensions of MacAndrew and Edgerton's arguments. For instance, *Drunken Comportment* made some reference to instances of feigning drunkenness among American Indians (pp. 152–156): where drunkenness excuses bad behaviour, it is argued, there is evidence in the ethnographic record of malefactors pretending to be drunk. Marshall (1983, pp. 190–198) gave a number of further instances of this from Oceania and elsewhere, and emphasized that where there are advantages in doing so, those who wish to invoke the excuse will often take special care to advertise that they are “drunk”.

But the arguments in *Drunken Comportment* have not often been critically scrutinized. In his review of theories of drinking and sociability, Partanen (1991, pp. 232) notes that, despite their disclaimers, MacAndrew and Edgerton's arguments come “perilously close” to a simplistic sociocultural functionalism. Partanen notes that *Drunken Comportment* neglects the significance of drinking as social interaction, taking “a rather shallow, individual-centred view of drinking”. While MacAndrew and Edgerton disavow a narrow instrumental interpretation of drunkenness — that people only get drunk to get away with otherwise inexcusable behaviour — they offer little other explanation for its occurrence.

In 1981, a conference was held which, it was remarked, “might be viewed as a *festschrift* for MacAndrew and Edgerton's book on *Drunken Comportment*” (Room & Collins, 1983, pp. 205). Those of us who organized the meeting had wanted to demonstrate the potential explanatory power of social science in alcohol studies — that the contributions of social science were not limited to description or demography. As we contemplated topics which might make this point, the most compelling choices were drinking and disinhibition, the terrain which MacAndrew and Edgerton's book had done so much to open up.

The conference brought together a number of converging lines of research which undercut a crude pharmacological interpretation of drunken comportment and favoured an interpretation in terms of cultural construction. Apart from an update on evidence from the ethnographic record (Marshall, 1983), participants brought together data and perspectives from a number of fields, including experimental psychology, historical studies, survey research, cultural studies, legal studies, philosophy and biology. Besides the evidence from ethnography, perhaps the strongest evidence came from experimental psychology, with the results of “balanced placebo” design studies showing a generally stronger effect on behaviour of expectancy than of actual alcohol ingestion (Lang, 1983), and from American history, with

the proposition that the attribution of bad behaviour to drunkenness was an invention of the 19th century rather than a permanent feature of the culture (Levine, 1983).

There have been a number of developments in our understanding of the link between drinking and bad behaviour in the 15 years since the conference was held (Graham et al., 1998). Evidence from time-series analyses and from studies of “natural experiments” in varying alcohol availability has shown clearly that, in populations as a whole, the level of drinking is often causally related to the rates of serious violence against others (Room, 1983; Lenke, 1990; Cook & Moore, 1993) and of suicide (Norström, 1995). Such findings are not in conflict with MacAndrew and Edgerton's propositions, of course, but they do underline that, while the link between drinking and bad behaviour may be culturally constructed, this does not make it any less lethal in its consequences. As the sociological dictum notes, things that are believed real are real in their consequences (Thomas & Thomas, 1928, p. 572).

In experimental psychology, the limits of the balanced placebo design have become more apparent — in particular, there has been recognition of the limitations imposed by the fact that it can only deal with relatively small amounts of drinking, because the deceptions it requires work only at that level. Expectancy is still recognized as an important factor, but other designs for studying the link between drinking and aggressive behaviour have come to the fore. Taylor (1996) summarizes these studies as showing that alcohol has been

observed to be a potent antecedent of physical aggression. The results demonstrated, furthermore, that aggressive responding was related to the quantity of alcohol ingested... that alcohol-induced aggression can be altered by cues which prompt self-reflection, that dispositional factors can modify the instigating effects of alcohol, and that other drugs [nicotine, amphetamine or a beta-blocker] can reduce the impact of alcohol on aggressive behaviour.

In tandem with the burgeoning experimental literature have come new conceptual formulations of the link between alcohol and aggression. The challenge has been to establish an effect of intoxication that only sometimes “kicks in”, that explains how the relation between intoxication and violence can be, as MacAndrew and Edgerton put it (p. 37), a matter of “now you see it, now you don't”. Steele and Josephs (1990) use the concept of “alcohol myopia” to describe experimentally established general effects of drinking on cognition: “alcohol intoxication consistently restricts the range of cues that we can perceive in a situation;... and reduces our ability to process and extract meaning from cues and information we do perceive”. In particular, intoxication tends

to restrict our attention to the most salient and immediate cues in the situation, at the expense of more distal ones.

As Steele and Josephs note, this does not always result in bad behaviour. Where it does matter, in their formulation, is when the distal cues conflict with the immediate ones.

As far as drunken comportment is concerned, alcohol need not be a direct cause, a releaser of special alcohol reactivities (the devil's potion), or an inconsequential concomitant of drinking expectancy effects, but can affect social behaviour by blocking inhibition conflict, that is, by freeing motivated responses from inhibiting cues.

Intoxication is thus likely to cause “drunken excess . . . whenever salient cues provoke a person to do something that[,] if he were sober, remoter cues and thoughts would pressure him to inhibit” (Steele & Josephs, 1990, p. 926).

Though this formulation arises from a psychological tradition, the end result resembles formulations from other disciplinary traditions, such as the social control tradition in sociology. The idea that drunkenness releases impulses by inhibiting attention to distal consequences, such as eventual penalties for bad behaviour, is close to a traditional conception of alcohol as disinhibiting in the presence of social controls. A formulation in such terms can be found, for instance, in Parker's (1995, p. 34–44) discussion of “selective disinhibition”.

Viewed from the perspective of MacAndrew and Edgerton's analysis, the experimental psychology literature has a notable Achilles' heel: its research subjects are overwhelmingly drawn from a very narrow band of the spectrum of human sociocultural variation — by and large, from the proverbial college sophomores of North America. MacAndrew and Edgerton's emphasis on the variability across cultures in drunken comportment poses the challenge to the psychological literature to demonstrate that the mechanisms that are illuminating are not specific to a particular culture, but operate more generally across cultures.

Drunken comportment and North America

Conversely, it may be asked where general North American culture would appear in MacAndrew and Edgerton's spectrum of drunken comportment. This turns out to be a question with no easy answer, even though the book in some ways belongs to the grand tradition of ethnographic volumes overtly about the far-away and strange but also implicitly arguing about matters much closer to home. While the authors talk of “a series of infinite gradations in the degree of

‘disinhibition’ that is manifested in drunken comportment” (p. 17), the basic argument of *Drunken Comportment* is made by contrast — a contrast between cultures where drunkenness is reported to produce great changes in behaviour and five cultures where it is reported that demeanour does not change much at all (pp. 19–36). For the cultures where there is a pattern of “drunken changes-for-the-worse”, the changes are described in terms of “time out” from the normal rules of behaviour. The term “time out” reflects the functionalist flavour, both at individual and collective levels, of the book's interpretations of rules of behaviour for drunkenness.

Little interpretation is offered for one of the five societies which serve as examples where “drunken changes-for-the-worse” do not occur — the Camba. [Permanen (1976, p. 417) later suggested the “very ritualized sequence of drinking” described for the Camba as a possible explanation for the absence of violence.] All the other four cultures are characterized by MacAndrew and Edgerton in terms of norms of heavy control of individual behaviour and suppression of interpersonal impulses, with the norms operating both for drunkenness and sobriety. The heavy social controls are characterized as functional for the society's situation, but little explanation is offered for the lack of differentiation between drunken and sober behaviour. In fact, the rhetoric of the argument, tilting contrary to the presumed expectations of the reader, is pitched against a psychodynamic functional explanation for drunken comportment: that one might have expected a “field day in releasing pent-up hostility” (p. 29).

MacAndrew and Edgerton thus leave the reader more with a dichotomy than with a gradation: there are some societies where drunken comportment does not differ from sober comportment, and these are contrasted with many societies where drunken and sober comportment does differ. Among the latter societies, the particular bad behaviours they report do appear to differ in their extremity, but little is offered in the way of a scale of gradation or theory of why this might be so.

At the very end of the text, MacAndrew and Edgerton do turn to the question of where societies like the United States fit into their picture. But whereas the normative and behavioural picture they have offered for “relatively small and homogenous societies” is sharp and clear, the picture now turns remarkably fuzzy:

Our society lacks a clear and consistent position regarding the scope of the excuse and is thus neither clear nor consistent in its teachings. . . . Thus, although we all know that in our society the state of drunkenness carries with it “an increased freedom to be one's other self”, the limits are vague and only sporadically enforced, and hence what (if anything) the plea of drunkenness will excuse in any specific

case is similarly indeterminant. In such a situation, . . . what people actually do when they are drunk will vary enormously. (p. 172)

This position seems somewhat problematic. The authors have previously spent a chapter arguing, under the subheading of “the sway of time and circumstance”, that what people actually do when they are drunk varies everywhere, even when the rules are clear. Their discussion of the excuse value of alcohol (pp. 149–162) makes clear that in relatively small and homogenous societies, too, there is often great variation in whether the drunkenness excuse is honoured. On the other hand, with all its limitations, the experimental psychological literature seems to produce fairly consistent findings among its subjects all over North America. It is in fact not at all certain whether the rules on drunken comportment and the drunkenness excuse are less clear in general American culture than in smaller and more homogenous societies.

Factors in variation in drunken comportment

MacAndrew and Edgerton are concerned to establish the fact and range of variation in drunken comportment, but their book offers little guidance on what features in a society are linked to particular patterns of drunken comportment. This paper offers some speculations and hypotheses in this direction.

Drunken comportment and “wet” and “dry” societies

Alcohol clearly holds a different cultural position in different societies. One dimension of this variation is between what have been described as “wet” and “dry” societies (Room, 1989). Although the distinction can be made more generally, it has often been stereotypically described in terms of the difference between northern European “beer or spirit cultures” and southern European “wine cultures”. At the “dry” end of this contrast, alcohol is held apart from everyday life as a special commodity for special contexts; drinking has traditionally been sporadic, often at festivals or weekends, with a high proportion of drinking occasions involving intoxication. At the “wet” end of the contrast, drinking is a part of everyday life (at least for men), and frequently accompanies meals. While an Italian farm labourer, for instance, may get a substantial share of his caloric intake from wine, overtly intoxicated behaviour is rare, in part because of the tolerance built up by a regular consumer, but also because daily familiarity tends to result in a cultural banalization of a drug’s psychopharmacological properties.

This contrast of “wet” and “dry” cultures is not without problems (Room & Mäkelä, 2000). Mäkelä

(1983) has suggested that behind such contrasts lie a range of different use-values of alcohol, including as a nutrient and as an intoxicant, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In recent years, too, there has been some convergence in levels of drinking in Europe; drinking has become a more regular activity in recent decades in the “dryer” countries north of the Baltic, and alcohol consumption levels have risen there while the levels in southern Europe have been falling. However, there has not been much apparent convergence in the cultural positioning of alcohol, though southern European cultures seem to worry these days about youthful beer-drinking in cafes in terms that resemble the concerns about drunken comportment of “dryer” societies.

In a more global perspective, it is clear that the northern European countries are by no means at the extreme in cultural “dryness”. Comparing what might be seen as the “dryer” sites in the recent WHO Cross-Cultural Applicability Research study, it seemed to the study team that the extremely restrictive norms surrounding drinking in Kannada-speaking Bangalore in India contrasted with the more Dionysiac connotations of intoxication in Seoul, South Korea or among Navajo in Arizona (Room et al., 1996).

There has long been a hypothesis latent in the alcohol literature that drinking plays a stronger causal role in violence in “dryer” than in “wetter” cultures (see, for example, Christie, 1965). Lenke (1990) set out to test this specifically, comparing time-series analyses of the influence of levels of consumption on rates of homicide in Sweden and France. He did find a lower influence in France, supporting the idea that drinking is more causally related to violence in “dryer” than in “wetter” cultures. Norström (1995) found a similar difference in time-series analyses of the influence on alcohol consumption levels on suicide. On the other hand, again, the results of such analyses do not always fit the hypothesis: for homicide, Norström (1988) did not find a significant effect in either “wetter” Denmark or “dryer” Finland, while for suicide similarly strong effects have been found for “wetter” Hungary and “dryer” Sweden (Norström, 1995).

There are only a few studies which compare expectancies that intoxication will lead to aggression in different cultures (Christiansen & Teahan, 1987; Teahan, 1987, 1988; Lindman & Lang, 1994). The broadest-ranging of these (Lindman & Lang, 1994) has limited generalizability, since data were collected from a convenience sample of about 100 university students in each participating society. The results of the study were equivocal with respect to the “wet”/“dry” distinction. Mean expectancies of aggression were higher in the Finnish and US students than in the French or Italian students. But, on the other hand, the highest mean expectancies of aggression were for the Spanish stu-

dents. On measures of expectancy of boisterousness and attention seeking, Spanish, Italian and US students scored higher than students from the five other societies. Students from Spain, Italy and Panama were less likely than students from the other societies to think that people should be held responsible for their behaviour while intoxicated.

Lindman and Lang's study points the way to a clear research opportunity. The kind of experimental psychological studies and expectancy studies of alcohol's role in aggression which have been undertaken primarily in North America need to be repeated in other cultures, strategically chosen. The results of Lindman and Lang's study suggest that we may have some surprises along the way.

Further questions for exploration in the context of the "wet"/"dry" contrast are the sociocultural mechanisms which support the cultural framing of drunken comportment, and how the framing becomes internalized for the individual drinker. Our attention will be directed to the one end of the spectrum or the other according to whether we are convinced by the arguments that the causal relation between drinking and violence is not solely a matter of cultural construction. If there is such a relation at a transcultural physiological or psychic level, it might be fruitful to focus attention on the mechanisms by which "wetter" cultures suppress the relation. To what extent, for instance, is it shameful for an Italian workman to show any effects of alcohol — either on physical coordination or on comportment — no matter how much he has had to drink? Is the suppression of the relation between drinking and violence in wine cultures specific to wine as the culturally banal form of alcohol, or does it apply also to beer and spirits? When and under what circumstances do criminal courts in wine-drinking southern Europe take intoxication into account as a defence against or mitigation of responsibility for criminal violence? (We know from William Taylor's study that Spanish crown courts in 18th-century Mexico were willing to accept drunkenness as an excuse for violence by Indian defendants — Taylor, 1979, pp. 104–105.)

Intoxication and possession

MacAndrew and Edgerton's description of the different cultural expectations of intoxicated comportment is in terms of the phrase, "time out". At about the same time, Sherri Cavan (1966) was using the same phrase to describe the cultural position of and rules of behaviour in American taverns. "Time out" is a phrase from the world of games and sports describing a period when normal play is suspended; the Opies (1959) point out that in children's but not in adult games in the English-speaking world, there is also a concept of a personal time out, while play for others continues.

MacAndrew and Edgerton use the "time out" concept primarily to refer to expectations about fiesta drinking and other occasions of collective intoxication. But their discussions of the drunkenness excuse suggest that they would extend the concept to cover also a personal time-out for the solitary drinker, such as the executioner whom the Iroquois used to get drunk so that he would not be blamed for causing a death (p. 151).

As MacAndrew and Edgerton use the term, in a drunken "time out" the same or a different game continues, but it follows a different set of rules — referred to by MacAndrew and Edgerton as the "within limits clause". In this, an intoxicated "time out" as they conceptualize it differs from the usual "time out" in games and sports. The book is evocative rather than specific about the nature of rules of drunken comportment, and about the circumstances in which they are accepted by the sober as well as the intoxicated.

Drawing on the experience of our own cultures (see Critchlow, 1985), we may suspect that there is in fact often a gradient of expectations about drunken behaviour, so that it may be misleading to think in terms of a culture having a single set of norms covering a single well-defined "time out" state (see Wild, Graham, & Rehm, 1998 for a first test of this). A few drinks may provide a license for taking small liberties with everyday norms, but would not be regarded as covering the eventuality of a vicious assault. On the other hand, if a vicious assault has occurred, extreme intoxication may be invoked causally as a way of understanding the otherwise inexplicable.

These comments reflect recent experience in Canada with the successful use of an intoxication defense for aggravated sexual and other assaults. The Canadian Supreme Court ruled that the defense could be used where the perpetrator was so drunk that he was in a state "akin to automatism", and accepted as evidence pointing to such a state that the perpetrator could not remember what had happened while he was intoxicated. The decision made no sense scientifically (Kalant, 1996) and proved to be culturally and politically unacceptable (Room, 1996), but it illuminates one aspect of what the "time out" state can mean.

European cultures have had a fascination since the Enlightenment with the idea of the automaton: the person behaving in ways detached from his or her will or control. It would be hard indeed to live through a childhood in North America without being steeped in the lore of zombies, vampires, and the like. Adults in the culture may not officially believe in spirit possession, and may have no relevant personal experience, but they are likely to know the rules for dealing with a vampire if they ever encounter one.

This fascination at the level of popular culture continues, at the level of myth and fantasy, pre-Enlightenment official beliefs in the reality of possession

by evil spirits. In the new rationalistic and secularized age, intoxication offered a naturalistic equivalent of spirit possession as an explanation of evildoing and tragic outcomes. Temperance-era language often made the equation explicitly, talking of the drink “taking” the drinker and of “Demon Rum”. In Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Stevenson offered the paradigm of a naturalistic model of possession, where a draught of a potion turns a normal human into a monster (see Roizen, 1977).

Faced with a conflict of legal principles in a case involving a sexual assault which was baffling and incomprehensible in normative terms (the victim was 65 years old and wheelchair-bound; the perpetrator was 72), courts like the Canadian Supreme Court have adopted a kind of possession model in ruling that extreme drunkenness could be a defense — if the defendant could show that his drunkenness had put him in a state “akin to automatism”.

It is clear from the ethnographic record that other cultures, too, have at least partially conflated concepts of drunken comportment with concepts of possession, as MacAndrew and Edgerton imply (p. 168). As Theodore Schwartz notes about possession beliefs, “classically, the body is possessed by an animate being other than the soul of the owner. In such cultures alcohol verges on being thought of as a powerful psychoactive substance that can assume control over the body. In this respect drunkenness may be akin to trance”. (Schwartz, 1982, p. 399) But while expectations about possession are used to interpret otherwise uninterpretable drunken comportment, the drunkenness is not necessarily seen as a literal case of spirit possession. “As an additive alcohol is like a generalized form of *mana* or power rather than a specific being as in animistic possession” (Schwartz, 1982, p. 399). Thus, discussing Mount Hagen in the Papua New Guinea highlands, Andrew Strathern notes that

in the case of ‘crazy’ behaviour, kinsfolk try to find out its reasons and to put it to right by corrective action, including almost invariably a sacrifice to the ghosts or a ritual to expel a wild spirit from the person’s *noman* [mind or will]... Drunken behaviour, by contrast, does not lead to such action. The reason is clear: it is the beer which is seen as the agency involved, not the ancestral spirits, and although a drunk person may express thoughts and perform actions which were in the *noman*, it is not the prompting of the spirits which ordinarily makes him do so. (Strathern, 1982, p. 145)

It would be interesting and illuminating to have a fuller explication from the ethnographic record of the relation between cultural models for possession and cultural models for drunken comportment. As the Canadian Supreme Court decision has shown, the discussion may well have some relevance to industria-

lized societies. It seems that a model of drunken comportment as akin to possession is usually a model for explaining extreme and otherwise uninterpretable drunken behaviour, viewed in isolation rather than as part of collective behaviour. Consider Strathern’s list of drunken behaviours by young men in Mount Hagen which were seen as ‘crazy’:

They lie on the ground, screaming and kicking; they reveal their genitals and roll in the mud; they attack their father; corner all their wives and beat them up; they attempt to throw each other into rivers while travelling across bridges in the back of a truck... (Strathern, 1982, p. 144)

While such behaviours may well be patterned, they probably exceed the “within-limits clause” for the culture, just as sexual assault on a 65-year-old partially paralyzed woman exceeds any “within-limits clause” in Canadian culture. Some behaviour is beyond any cultural normative limits. And often drunkenness is invoked as an explanation of such behaviour, although in most cultural situations it is at most a partial excuse for the essentially inexcusable.

There is a need, thus, to move beyond a model of norms for comportment which posits just two levels, sober and drunken. Behind the phrases about “time out” and the “within-limits clause” in each culture, it may be suspected, lie a complex series of nuances about expectations about drunkenness beforehand, and about interpretations of drunken events in hindsight. And drunkenness is also often invoked to interpret behaviour which lies outside any limits in the culture. It is time to begin a more detailed mapping of these normative contours, not only within cultures but comparatively between them.

The problem of responsibility for the foreseeable

If drunkenness is known to lead to bad behaviour, why is this not taken into account in cultural norms, so that the drunkenness is avoided or at least its harmful consequences are forestalled? This fundamental set of questions should be asked of the ethnographic record on each culture where there is evidence of drunken “changes-for-the-worse”.

The possible answers are multiple. Some societies — the United States among them — have followed through the logic of these questions in heroic fashion. The changes for the worse in the “drunkard’s progress” were the core teaching material of the early American temperance movement. When there was a decline in the numbers of drinkers reformed by such educational efforts, the movement turned to prohibition as a more radical effort to eliminate drunken “changes-for-the-worse”. With the repeal of prohibition, the US retreated

to a policy of what would today be called harm reduction: alcohol was made available, but with marketing restrictions intended to limit the harm from it.

There is likely to be considerable cultural variation in the causal logic which links drinking to bad events. Consider, for instance, the causal logic invoked by a Tlingit spokesman for a death from alcohol poisoning at a funeral. His clan, demanding damages from the clan giving the funeral,

reasoned that if [the dead person] had not attended the funeral he would not have been sad; and if he had not been sad he would not have drunk whiskey; and if he would not have drunk whisky he would not have died. (quoted in Lemert, 1954, p. 354)

There will also be cultural variation in whether and how much it is expected that the possibility of bad events will be foreseen and prevented.

Nevertheless, it is clear from the ethnographic record that small societies as well as large often foresee trouble around drinking, and that various efforts are made to prevent it. Concerning the Urubu of northern Brazil, MacAndrew and Edgerton note that

since the Urubu “know” that they lose their self-control when they are drunk, they seldom attend feasts with people with whom they have quarrelled. . . . Doing injury to one’s own tribesman is scarcely proper, and . . . since one “loses control” when he is drunk, the outcome might be tragic. (p. 58)

Similarly, at Tanna in Vanuatu, “men choose drinking partners carefully. The person they punch should be someone with whom they have no serious dispute. . . . If a previous and serious dispute separates two men, they usually are careful not to drink together” (Lindstrom, 1982, p. 432). In Chuave in the Papua New Guinea Highlands, “exhortations to drink peacefully and the presence of peace officers at ceremonies both indicate an acute awareness that when drinking occurs, the potential for quarrels, disputes and violence is great” (Warry, 1982, p. 97). And among the Tarahumaras of Mexico, people were “enjoined to keep their children away from the drinking area lest they ‘learn things beyond their stage of development’” (MacAndrew Edgerton, 1969, p. 93).

“Changes for the worse” with drunkenness are thus clearly foreseeable and often foreseen. It would seem a simple next step for a culture to hold those who drink and get drunk despite this knowledge accountable for the consequences.

But we may suspect that many societies find themselves caught in the fundamental dilemma that our own societies have. On the one hand, in the British

common law tradition, it is a fundamental principle that drunkenness is no excuse for bad behaviour. On the other hand, it is an even more fundamental principle that there must be not only a criminal act but also a criminal intent — a guilty mind — if a person is to be guilty of a crime. In British common-law countries, the courts have struggled for two centuries with how to reconcile these principles, once it is recognized that intoxication can affect the capacity to form a criminal intent.

One legal solution, developed originally for crimes involving homicide, has been to find the person guilty not of murder but of a “lesser included” offense with a lower level of punishment. There is evidence in MacAndrew and Edgerton (pp. 90, 156–159) and elsewhere in the ethnographic record that this has been a solution in many cultures: offenses committed while drunk are not completely excused; but there is, as Canadian feminists have put it, a “discount for drunkenness” (Room, 1996).

For other offenses, including assault and rape, courts in the British common-law tradition have tried to hold to the principle that drunkenness is no excuse. Until fairly recently, the settled solution to the dilemma concerning intent was to hold that the guilty intent is established by the choice to take the first drink. This solution may have seemed tenable at the highpoint of temperance influence, but modern courts have had increasing difficulty with it. As the prevailing opinion of the Canadian Supreme Court put it, “a person intending to drink cannot be said to be intending to commit a sexual assault” (Room, 1996). It was this reasoning which sent the Court off in search of a tightly restricted way around the dilemma, a search which ended with the concept of “drunken automatism”.

The public furor caused by the Court’s decision was remarkable. In the aftermath of the decision, it became crystal clear that the normative cultural position in Canada was that drunkenness should never excuse violence, and particularly sexual violence. All parties in Parliament supported a new law establishing a “standard of reasonable care that Canadians owe to each other” and declaring intoxicated violence to be a breach of this standard (Room, 1996). A recent law review article argues that the pendulum has also been swinging back in the US toward a “policy of accountability for acts while intoxicated” (Keiter, 1997).

Given the cultural foreknowledge about intoxication’s role in violence, it is likely that the argument will be made in many cultures that an experienced drinker should have known he was likely to be out of control when intoxicated, and should thus have taken precautions ahead of time. It seems, in fact, that in many societies and circumstances where drunkenness has some excuse value, it is not a very good excuse, and may be used only when no better excuse is available (Room,

1984; Paglia & Room, 1998). Even among heavy drinkers in the US, use of the excuse may lower the drinker's status and brand him as an "incompetent drinker" (Gusfield, 1996). As Strathern noted concerning Mount Hagen, "the drunken role does not enable a man to gain any public respect. Insofar as it advertises a kind of licence to behave, it also indicates a failure to behave centrally" (Strathern, 1982, p. 146).

The implications of pretended intoxication

Both MacAndrew and Edgerton (1969, p. 152–156) and Marshall (1983) have cited many instances from Oceania and North America of ostensive "pseudointoxication", where drunkenness is feigned to take advantage of the excuse thus offered. Evidence of pseudointoxication might be hypothesized as serving as a marker of cultures and cultural situations where drunkenness has particularly good value as an excuse.

If we examine the reported instances of pseudointoxication, they seem to arise particularly in two circumstances. One is at cultural boundaries, in the context of interactions between people from very different cultures. At such boundaries, the expectations and attributions about drunken behaviour take on an added dimension: each side in the interaction has expectations, whether well-founded or not, about drunken comportment in the alien culture. Further, each side builds up some knowledge of what is expected of them by the other in this regard, and drunken comportment becomes to some extent a performance for the benefit of the other culture (Stivers, 1976; Lurie, 1971). In this circumstance, the boundaries of drunken comportment may come to be set more by the expectations of the alien culture than by internal cultural dynamics. The pseudointoxication seems to have been reported more commonly for those on the less powerful side in the interaction.

The other circumstance in which ostensive pseudointoxication seems to arise is among young men in an age-graded hierarchical society. The contrast between young men's ostensive drunkenness, and often pseudointoxication, and middle-aged men's much quieter drinking has been made by Marshall (1979) for Chuuk in Micronesia and Walter (1982) for the Lau Islands in Fiji. Walter notes that the drinking parties in the Lau Islands, which get noisier as the night goes on, are mostly confined to young men and boys. He adds that "the status of young men of the village was never high", and that they still "occupy very minor roles in any regular ritual activities", while the role of warrior formerly available to them "with all its prestige accoutrements and excitements has gone" (Walter, 1982, p. 435).

In both these instances, pseudointoxication appears to be a recourse of the relatively powerless. While intoxication can be a tool for either the powerful or the powerless in situations of domination (Morgan,

1983), for the powerful it is perhaps most useful when exerting power would have questionable legitimacy (Room, 1980), while for the powerless it offers the opportunity for ambiguous challenges to the status quo, challenges which can always be nullified in case of a strong reaction by falling back on the drunkenness excuse.

Can drunken comportment in a culture be changed?

How readily can cultural expectations about drunken comportment be changed? The answer is likely to be "not readily", that expectations about the effects of drinking are tied to relatively impervious cultural features. From this perspective, experiments by clinical psychologists in changing heavy drinker's expectancies about the effects of drinking are probably taking on a more difficult task than simply getting them to stop or cut down their drinking.

Yet there are clearly historical instances in which a culture's expectations about drunken comportment have changed. MacAndrew and Edgerton (1969, p. 37–53) discuss in some detail three such instances of change: the Papago in Arizona, the Tahitian islands, and the Bantu in South Africa. It is notable that all three instances concern cultures which underwent major social transition, including subordination to a dominant European culture. On this evidence, a change in cultural understandings about drunken comportment is possible, but it may require circumstances of far-reaching social change.

A few years ago, I looked at the related question of whether examples could be found in recent decades of a "dry" society — one with a history of disruptive behaviour while drinking — becoming "wetter" in the sense both of drinking becoming more a part of everyday life and of disruptive behaviour while drinking declining (Room, 1992). While there are many societies where consumption levels have risen and drinking has become more a part of everyday life, it is hard to find an example where problem rates had declined at the same time, though there are a couple of examples of such societies where the rate of problems *per litre of alcohol* appears to have declined. From this, it seems unlikely that we will find good evidence in a European-style society in modern times of the kind of shift in cultural expectations about drunken comportment reported historically for the Papago, Tahitians, and the Bantu. Nor is there clear evidence from anywhere of how such a shift might be made by intention, rather than as a byproduct of intensive social change.

Perhaps the North American experience in recent decades with drinking and driving offers some relevant clues on what might be involved. There is little doubt that the last half century has seen a substantial redefinition of drinking-driving from a minor "folk

crime” (Gusfield, 1981) to a serious matter; being caught drinking-driving is probably now more likely to elicit scorn than sympathy. A variety of strategies and decades of effort went into this change. The mix of strategies included moral advocacy campaigns by such groups as Mothers Against Drunk Driving, changes in criminal laws and driving regulations, public education campaigns, and mandatory treatment or reeducation of drinking-drivers. At least as broad and intense a range of efforts would presumably be required to make a substantial change in cultural expectations about drunken comportment.

There are, indeed, some signs of change in North American cultural expectations about intoxication and violence. As we have noted, recent legal and legislative decisions both in the US (Keiter, 1997) and Canada (Room, 1996) have tended to follow popular sentiment that intoxication is no excuse for bad behaviour. Canadian feminist groups in particular insisted on the unacceptability of any legal formula which allowed for a “discount for drunkenness” in criminal sentencing. The cultural latitude for drunken “time-out” behaviour may well be narrowing.

Conclusion

Drunken Comportment is a landmark study, which has been instrumental in changing our ideas about the nature of the relation between intoxication and bad behaviour. Its influence has been wide; its primary message, that drunken comportment varies from one culture to another, is well recognized even by researchers who usually worry little about cultural matters. But there has been relatively little development in thinking beyond the message that variation exists. We need a better understanding of the dimensions of cultural variation in drunken comportment, and of what factors underlie and affect the variations. From a practical perspective, the most crucial issue is the conditions under which a culture’s expectations about drunken comportment may change. Addressing such issues will help to fulfill the promise of MacAndrew and Edgerton’s work.

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