Social drinking problems can be viewed as deviations from behavior norms which are "noticed" and defined as alcohol-related. Drinking norms can enforce heavy drinking as well as restrain it. Many drinking norms are directed at behavior during or after drinking rather than at the amount of drinking. U.S. drinking norms are highly differentiated by social situation and social category of the drinker. But there is no common situation in which it is "OK to be high." Nevertheless, heavy drinking is not rare in the U.S. We may speak of a loose social world of heavy drinking whose norms are at odds with general norms. This world coexists with the culture by an implicit policy of enclaving. Besides individual deviant acts, drinking problems can result from transitional problems between drinking and nondrinking situations; from boundary problems where the enclaving breaks down; and from conflicts over norms. In "dryer" locales, the heavy drinking world becomes an outlawed "contraculture" and social problems with drinking change character and may increase, although consumption and physiological problems decrease. A normative analysis points to the role of social reaction as well as individual behavior in defining social problems with drinking.

NORMATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON ALCOHOL USE AND PROBLEMS

*Robin Room**

Though there are by now detailed empirical descriptions of drinking practices among the general population in the United States (Cahalan, Cisin and Crossley, 1969) there are no equivalent undertakings for drinking norms. This paper attempts to draw together materials for a normative perspective on alcohol use and problems in the United States.

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The normative structure of drinking, in fact, has had remarkably little discussion and even less research. As so often in alcohol social research, the earliest studies are from Finland, with perceptive empirical studies in the late '50s by Allardt (1957) of drinking norms in a general-population sample and by Bruun (1959) of drinking norms in small groups of heavy drinkers. There has been a small North American tradition of research drawing on an article by Mizruchi and Perrucci (1962; 1970) which distinguished three cultural styles or norms of drinking: proscriptive norms, which disallow drinking altogether; prescriptive norms, which prescribe light drinking but proscribe heavy drinking; and permissive or "nonscriptive" (Larsen and Abu-Laban, 1968) norms, which do not offer guidance on permissible drinking behavior. The empirical work in this tradition so far seems equivocal (Larsen and Abu-Laban, 1968; Abu-Laban and Larsen, 1968; Hansen, 1973; 1974) and in my view the tradition overlooks some crucial issues: it does not contemplate the possibility of positive norms towards drunkenness; the notion of norms that do not offer rules for behavior is somewhat self-contradictory and their empirical existence for drinking has been cogently argued against (MacAndrew and Edgerton, 1969); and perhaps the normative structure of drinking cannot usefully be reduced to the very generalized characterizations used in the tradition.

Besides this tradition, empirical and theoretical work on drinking norms is mostly scattered. Selden Bacon's (1943) framework for a normative analysis of drinking practices remains thought-provoking. Warriner (1958) remarked on the distinction between "official morality" and private morality in the norms on drinking in a midwestern U.S. town, and along analogous lines Genevieve Knupfer (forthcoming) has remarked on the existence of covert norms of approval for heavy drinking alongside overt disapproval. Walter Clark (1964) has analyzed sex roles and drinking behavior in terms of the different norms for those in different social categories. MacAndrew and Edgerton (1969) emphasized the existence of normative constraints and incentives on drinking in all cultural situations, no matter how apparently outlandish. Some empirical work has been done on mapping the norms of behavior in taverns (see Cavan, 1966; Mass Observations, 1943; Room, 1972) and on Skid Row (see Rubington, 1968).

Perhaps the best-known discussions of the normative structure of drinking are those in what might be called the "ambivalence" tradition, a tradition which was first fully expressed by Ullman (1958), but which has antecedents at least as far back as Myerson's classic article (1940). This tradition has since been taken up and expanded by officials in the U.S. government's alcoholism agency (Chafetz, 1971). Basically, the tradition imputes a particularly high rate of drinking problems to the U.S. and ascribes this to a "cultural ambivalence" over drinking. I have written elsewhere in some detail about the conceptual problems with this argument (Room, 1973b); perhaps it will suffice to say here that the sole direct evidence Ullman and his successors offered for this argument is a perceptive but undocumented characterization by Selden Bacon, which is as Bacon notes "clearly oversimplified and often without sufficient data," of a small segment of American society—as Bacon described it, "the United States American of the northeast quarter of the nation—Protestant, middle-class, urban, white, from Anglo-Saxon background of three or more generations in this county" (Bacon, 1957).

Without getting into an abstruse semantic discussion, it is perhaps worthwhile to spell out what is meant by a norm. Here we are drawing on the common currency of sociological thought, and it should not be imagined that anything very original is being stated. A norm is a cultural rule or understanding affecting behavior, which is to a greater or lesser degree enforced by sanctions. A law is a norm, but so is a pronunciation convention, and so is the unthinking understanding when a group of men are drinking about who is to drain their glass first (Mass Observation, 1943, p. 176). A sanction can be formal and severe, or can be as informal and transitory as a lifted eyebrow. By "cultural," I mean that a norm is not a property of an individual

or a private understanding between people interacting with one another, but is a relatively permanent rule shared by a class of individuals who may not ever have met each other. The class of individuals may be a whole culture, or a well-defined subculture, or a less well-defined "social world" of persons with common interests or status (Shibutani, 1961: 127-136). In fact, a subculture or social world may be defined empirically, as linguistic geographers do with isoglosses and dialects (Gleason, 1955: 293-294), by the existence of a bundle of norms with a common boundary of adherents. Norms are in fact the building blocks of cultural entities, the units of momentum which together compose what has been described as the flywheel of culture.

Norms are conceptually distinguishable from the actual distribution of behavior; although most behavior conforms to norms, it is quite common for behavior to deviate from an applicable norm. Deviation from a norm can occur because of a mistake, or because of ignorance, or can occur involuntarily or when the individual is excused from compliance, for instance by illness. Each of these interpretations of the deviation does not threaten the norm, and is likely to be viewed as mitigating. Or deviation can be a voluntary act, either in simple defiance or disregard of the norm or, perhaps more commonly, in obedience to a conflicting norm. "Double-bind" situations are only the most dramatic instances of our small everyday dilemmas of complying with competing but incompatible norms.

What are commonly termed the social problems of drinking can be viewed in this light as deviations from norms of individual behavior which someone else has decided to "notice" rather than to overlook and which are seen as alcohol-related. The concept of norms, then, directs our attention at the sociocultural factors, not only in drinking behavior but also in the social problems of drinking. Too often, we forget that most drinking, including most heavy drinking, is social drinking in the sense that it is carried on with others and is heavily influenced by their expectations. Too often, we think of social problems with drinking as opaque properties of the individual—"he has a job problem with his drinking" or "she has had problems with the police," we will say—rather than as arising out of the interaction between the drinker's behavior and the various responses of others. Concepts like alcohol dependence or addiction tend to direct our attention at the individual and the drug to the exclusion of elements of the social context when we are considering the "glue" holding the individual to a drug-using behavior (Room, 1973a). Clinical terminology for social problems with drinking—socio-pathology, behavioral disorder, etc.—or unthinking inclusions of such problems under rubrics like "public health problems," focus our attention on the individual without equal attention to the social reactions to the behavior which are literally a part of the problem (Room, 1974).

The concept of norms, then is simply a tool for focussing our attention on the details of sociocultural forces—the social incentives and constraints—which bear upon our individual drinking behaviors. Yet this tool offers a useful perspective for understanding drinking practices and problems, a perspective which is in many ways alternative to conventional understandings and which has some novel implications for policymaking designed to minimize alcohol problems.

Before considering the relation between drinking norms and the occurrence of social problems with drinking, it is worth mentioning some features of drinking norms that are often overlooked. In the first place, while it is obvious that norms are instruments of social control, constraining the individual to behavior irrespective of personal impulses or biological forces, it is sometimes forgotten that norms can encourage behavior as well as inhibit it, and indeed can force behavior which seems excessive or even repugnant both to the participant and to the analytical observer. George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" is but one example of the

numerous morality tales and plays which remind us of this phenomenon. In the alcohol literature, as we have mentioned, it is often assumed that norms act only to constrain, so that in several sociological discussions the set of norms most positive toward heavy drinking is variously described as "permissive" or "nonscriptive" or "over-permissive"—that is, the absence of prohibitions rather than the presence of prescriptions for drunkenness—and the set of norms labeled "prescriptive" are those which include a prohibition on drunkenness. Similarly, discussions of "reasons for drinking" in general population surveys over the last three decades have conventionally assumed that "personal-effects" reasons for drinking were implicative of drinking problems, while "social reasons" held no such implication of association with drinking problems.

Yet it is clear from empirical studies that there are norms enforcing heavy drinking in some particular circumstances. For instance, the institution of "standing rounds" exerts a strong pressure on participants to drink a number of drinks at least equal to the number of males in the group (Cavan, 1966: 114-117). Those who would spend some time with friends in a bar must pay their rent to the landlord by buying a drink (Room, 1972). Bruun (1959) recorded in his small drinking groups a number of comments encouraging laggards to drink up, but never a word suggesting that anyone slow down. These and other examples make it clear that there are occasions when social pressures operate to enforce heavy drinking irrespective of the participant's desire.

In the second place, while some norms directly control the amount of drinking—as in the institution of standing rounds, and in the total proscriptions of drinking in many situations—many drinking norms are instead directed at behavior while or after drinking, irrespective of the amount consumed. Knupfer (forthcoming) has argued that while the amount of drinking is important in many of the problems associated with drinking, it is less regulated by norms than other aspects of drinking behavior, in part because it is often difficult for others to determine how much an individual has drunk. In popular myth, there is considerable celebration of the man who "can hold his liquor," that is, drink a lot without engaging in unacceptable behavior; and people are "86ed"—barred from particular taverns—not for how much they drink but for how they behave while drinking.

In the third place, norms on drinking and associated behavior are highly differentiated in the United States, both according to the social situation—the time, place and occasion—and according to individual status on various social differentiations. For instance, most of us would be shocked at the sight of a drunken six-year-old. Women have traditionally been expected to do less drinking than men, and the old to do less heavy drinking than young adults (Clark, 1964). Roizen (1972) showed very strong differences in the acceptance of drinking in a list of different social situations. Thus, in a recent U.S. national sample of men, he found 85% saying at least some drinking would be all right for themselves "at a party, at someone else's house,""for a husband having dinner out with his wife,""when out at a bar with some friends," or "when friends come over to your house or you go to theirs"; but only 6% saying it would be all right "for an employee on the job," and 31% "as a parent, spending time with small kids."

Roizen (1972) furthermore found that frequent and infrequent drinkers showed the same ordering of situations in terms of the percentages approving drinking—and that the variation in approval across situations in each drinking class was greater than the variation in approval across drinking classes for each situation. Thus while there is by no means full normative agreement on when drinking is permissible, there is at least substantial agreement on an ordering of situations in terms of the relative permissibility of drinking.

The same kind of variation by situation and social role can be seen in data even

for France, the "wettest" country in terms of per-capita consumption, and often thought of as a country where alcohol is omnipresent in daily life. Even among the lightest-drinking groups in a survey (Sadoun et al., 1965: 63), 61% considered wine indispensible or useful for a heavy laborer, while only 14% of these lightest drinkers (as against 52% of the heaviest) considered it indispensible or useful for an athlete. Likewise, both manual and office workers gave as a mean maximum daily quantity which a manual worker could safely drink an amount which was over twice that given for an office worker, while there were much smaller differences between manual and office workers in the mean values they gave for each status. Similarly, both men and women agreed on a mean maximum daily quantity for women which was lower than the quantities given for office workers, while the differences in response between men and women were less than each sex's differentiation between statuses (Sadoun et al., 1965: 52).

There is also a very clear differentiation of situations in the U.S. data in terms of where it would be all right to get high or drunk. Less than 2% of the national sample of adult males agreed that it would be OK for themselves to be high or get drunk "as a parent, spending time with small kids,""for an employee on the job,""for a person about to drive his car," or "for a couple of fellowworkers out to lunch," while about 35% agreed it would be OK "at a party, at someone else's house" or "when out at a bar with some friends."

It must be noted that normative agreement is far from complete in the U.S. even for whether any drinking is permissible: responses for eight other situations lay between the 31% and 85% boundaries for the six situations we have already cited as instances of normative agreement on acceptance or non-acceptance of drinking. For situational norms on getting high or drunk, as we have just shown, there is substantial normative agreement on some situations when it is impermissible, but no commonly occurring situation for which even a majority of adult males agree that it is OK for them "to be high," and no situation in which as many as 4%

respond that "getting drunk is sometimes all right." It may well be, of course, that some respondents would countenance behavior in others that they would not in themselves; and it is likely that these questions tend to measure "official morality" (Warriner, 1958) and not "covert norms" of approval for heavy drinking (Knupfer, forthcoming). Nevertheless, it must be noted that we have not so far identified a general normative consensus in the U.S. supporting heavy drinking in any particular common life-situation.

Despite this, heavy drinking is by no means a rare and isolated occurrence in American society. Eight percent of adult males report drinking 12 or more drinks at a sitting at least once a month during the last three years, and a total of 22% report drinking that quantity at least once a year. In view of the apparent normative consensus against heavy drinking, why is it so relatively common in the U.S.?

There are several ways of answering this question, each with a part but not all of the truth. One answer, certainly, is that heavy drinking is merely the ill-defined upper end of a continuum, and once any drinking is viewed as acceptable some heavy drinking is inevitable. Another answer is in terms of individual proclivities and susceptibilities for alcohol, that individuals are made immune to general normative social control by an illness-like dependence on alcohol, which controls their behavior irrespective of social norms on appropriate behavior. A third answer is in terms of a subcultural explanation of heavy drinking: that the general norms are ineffective because of countervailing norms held in coherent subgroups of the total culture. It is this last answer which we will here spell out in a tentative fashion.

There is, of course, one subculture of heavy drinkers which as been well-recognized and discussed in the literature—the subculture of "urban nomads," in Spradley's phrase (1970), on Skid Row. This very special subculture, which researchers have suggested is in any case more centrally defined by other characteristics than by heavy drinking, has been copiously studied precisely because it is so visible and is so explicitly at odds with general American norms: it is, in Yinger's term, an example of the special sort of subculture which he calls a "contraculture" (Yinger, 1960). Much analysis in terms of subcultures has in fact been done on such contracultures—for instance, on subcultures of heroin users, of professional thieves, of fighting juvenile gangs—since these are the most obvious cases of a subcultural analysis. But most heavy drinking in North American society is not done in such explicitly contracultural milieux. Rather, we may speak of a much looser subcultural entity we may call, using Shibutani's terminology (1961), a "social world" of heavy drinking. For heavy drinkers tend to share a quite extensive set of norms which set them apart from others in the population. Many of these norms are a matter of special skills and understandings, and a special jargon, just as participants in the world of baseball or the world of the theatre or the world of medicine have special understandings and jargons. Serious drinkers can quickly pick out a non-initiate by what he orders in a bar, or how he orders it, or how he interacts with others. Often they will stay away from their favorite drinking place when they expect it to be overrun with "amateurs," as on New Years's Eve. Conversely, those who are not a part of the world of heavy drinking will often feel ill at ease in a place like a bar which is clearly the social world's territory.

The world of heavy drinkers and its subworlds have norms which support or indeed require heavy drinking in particular situations. These norms are implicitly at odds with norms of the surrounding culture. Nevertheless, in our era the social world and the culture tend to coexist more or less peacefully. The means of this coexistence is an implicit compromise policy of *enclaving* the world of heavy drinking—an agreement that the world will be tolerated so long as it conducts itself only within certain boundaries. The boundaries are maintained by both sides: for

instance, bars and their patrons like to keep what goes on inside from being too visible to those in the street outside, while local option and zoning ordinances tend to result in concentrating bars in particular areas.

These characteristics of drinking norms that we have discussed—that they can encourage as well as discourage not only drinking but also heavy drinking; that norms on behavior while drinking are stronger than norms on the drinking itself; that norms are highly differentiated by status and occasion; and that there is considerable dissensus over drinking norms which is routinely handled by an enclaving policy—help us to appreciate that many of the visible social problems of drinking arise from one or another variety of conflict of norms, rather than from simple individual transgressions of norms. Of course, numerous individual transgressions occur, but these are perhaps more likely to be handled by the informal social reactions of everyday life, as Griffith Edwards puts it, "through the actions of varieties of important noninstitutionalized persons such as his family, his neighbors, his employers, and the man at the bus stop" (Edwards, 1973: 133).

The conflicts of norms which can result in drinking problems are of several types. Some such conflicts might be called *sequence problems* or *problems of transition*. One of the properties of alcohol is that it is metabolized rather slowly. Thus we may easily find ourselves intoxicated in a situation where it is no longer appropriate. It should be noted that the state of intoxication itself is socially as well as pharmacologically defined (MacAndrew and Edgerton, 1969); and that we can be shocked into a kind of "sobriety" by an alarming event. But alcohol appears to affect our judgments of risks and dangers, our sense of time, and our sensitivity to the social and physical environment, all of which can contribute to the drunk's finding himself in the wrong place at the wrong time.

A problem of transition, then, occurs when a behavior or condition that was appropriate when embarked upon becomes inappropriate in a following situation. Many of these problems are built into the structure of our daily lives, in the sense that we are chronically posed with these problems of conflicting sequential norms, as when the drunk finds himself on the street when the bar closes, or the partygoer finds himself responsible for driving home. Such problems can of course be solved by changing the normative structure of one or other of the sequenced situations; but they can often more simply be solved by arranging for a greater buffer of time between the two situations.

Another kind of normative conflict over drinking is the *boundary problems* which are associated with the enclaving of heavy drinking behavior. For one reason or another, whether accidentally or deliberately, and whether at the initiative of those "outside" or those "inside," the boundary of the zone in which heavy drinking is normative behavior is breached. The policy of accommodation implied in enclaving behavior is inherently unstable, and those in the social world of heavy drinking may try fitfully to extend its reach, while moral entrepreneurs, whether acting under a rubric of law and order, morality or public health, may seek to hem the world in. For instance, there may be running skirmishes between groups of heavy drinkers and the police (often as agents of neighborhood merchants) over whether drinking or drunkenness is to be allowed in a particular territory.

Boundary problems, like transition problems, are amenable to solution by strengthening the insulation surrounding the enclaves, as well as by changing normative structures on one side or the other of the conflict. For instance, if a spouse barely tolerates heavy drinking among a group of friends, a common personal accommodation is to do the drinking outside the house. I have suggested elsewhere (Room, 1974) that insulative measures are often both the most politically feasible and the least ethically objectionable means of diminishing the social problems of drinking.

There is, of course, a serious problem with insulative strategies. We have concerned ourselves totally with the *social* problems of drinking, and of course there are also *physiological* and *psychiatric* problems with drinking. Some of these physiological and psychiatric problems certainly vary fairly directly with amount of drinking, so that measures directed at reducing social reactions to heavy drinking or at insulating the drinking from reactions will tend to *increase* these problems by removing constraints on heavy drinking. Policies aimed at minimizing social problems with drinking will thus in some cases be in conflict with policies aimed at minimizing health problems with drinking.

So far we have considered two fundamental types of deviance from norms which underlie the social problems of drinking in the United States: the simple case of deviance by the individual from the expected norms of his status, and of the time and place; and the kinds of normative conflicts—which we have called transition problems and boundary problems—which are inherent in the enclaving of drinking, and particularly of heavy drinking, in our societies. The third type of social problem with drinking which we shall consider is norm conflicts which arise from outright differences between different segments of the population in the norms considered appropriate for a given time, place and status.

As we have stated, these conflicts are often defused by an informal or sometimes formal policy of enclaving. But the defusing is a relative matter, and the extent of open conflict varies greatly by place and over time. To some extent, we still live in the shadow of a more polarized past. As Gusfield (1966) and others have noted, the battle over Prohibition was an open and protracted conflict over whose norms would prevail.

The surrounding society has a variety of weapons open to it in an attempt to suppress a subculture: to attempt to deny it its cultural artifacts, its cultural styles, its territories, its recruits. Yet, as the contracultures of heroin users, of professional thieves, and of political dissenters in a dictatorship show, subcultures are very tenacious social groupings that are unlikely to be totally extirpated short of genocide.

The attempt to actively suppress or discourage a subculture will nevertheless tend to affect the subculture and its normative structure in a number of ways. Many of the more compliant potential recruits will not join it, so that the subculture's membership will be smaller but will include a higher proportion of those in search of dangerous "action" or kicks, and of what the dominant culture is likely to describe variously as psychopaths, disturbed individuals, anti-social personalities, or kooks.

The larger culture can usually quite effectively enforce a meanness and tawdriness on the circumstances in which the subculture must operate. The subculture's outlaw status tends to push it into contact and some overlapping of membership with other contracultures, including notably the criminal underworld, both as an informal alliance structure and because the criminal underworld is likely to be the prime source of subcultural artifacts officially denied by the culture at large. The subculture will have quite definite boundaries of membership and a normative structure to preserve the secrecy and privacy of its transactions and occasions. Both because of selective factors weeding out the less committed and because of the reinforcements of the "secondary deviance" process (Lemert, 1967: 40-64), its members will be strongly committed to it. In its attempts to defend itself, and again for both selective and reactive reasons, the subculture will acquire a reputation for unpredictability and unreliability and perhaps for violent proclivities.

The sketch I have offered you provides an obvious interpretation of the change in the social position and image of the social world of opiate users from the respectable middle-aged woman of the 19th century to the young ghetto "dope fiends" of the last 30 years. But the sketch can also be applied to the social world of heavy drinking which we have been discussing. If we compare traditionally wetter and dryer areas of the U.S., or if we compare traditionally wetter Denmark and dryer Finland, the mix of social problems associated with heavy drinking in the dryer areas seems in general more lurid and explosive; not only the ratio of social problems to heavy drinking (Cahalan and Room, 1974), but also the absolute

prevalence of some social problems, is higher in the dryer areas. Part of this higher prevalence of alcohol problems is undoubtedly due to the greater sensitivity and reaction to problematic drinking behaviors in dryer areas, but part may also be due to higher rates of problematic behaviors. Thus, although there are only half as many heavier drinkers in dryer regions of the United States (Cahalan and Room, 1974), a national roadside breathtesting survey found high blood-alcohol levels to be somewhat more common among drivers in dryer than in wetter regions of the country (Wolfe, 1974). Nils Christie has commented on this that "a strict system of legal and organizational control of accessibility to alcohol seems to be related to low alcohol consumption, but also to a high degree of public nuisance. The causal chain probably goes like this: A drinking culture with a large degree of highly visible, non-beneficial effects of alcohol consumption leads to a strict system of control which somewhat reduces total consumption, which again influences and most often reduces the visible problems. But also, the system of control influences visible problems—sometimes probably in the direction of increasing them" (Christie, 1965: 107).

The existence of a highly differentiated structure of norms concerning drinking in American society is hardly a new discovery. As Bacon noted in 1943 (418-419), "there are right and wrong places to drink, times to drink, people to drink with, types and amounts of alcoholic beverages to imbibe, subjects to talk about and activities to pursue while drinking, ways of mixing drinks, methods of imbibing, . . . clothing to wear at drinking parties, ritual phrases and body movements, and so forth. These rules vary with different groups. In any given group they may vary in time." Systematic study and mapping of these rules is however still in its infancy. The rules are of considerable interest in their own right; and study of them will also illuminate our understanding of the social problems of drinking from a deviance perspective, by focussing attention on the interaction between the individual's behavior and social rules for and reactions to the behavior.

Beyond such analyses at the level of the individual, we have tried to show that normative perspectives on alcohol problems point to the existence of longstanding and pervasive normative conflicts underlying many drinking problems—clashes of norms between temporally adjacent situations, clashes at the spatial and other boundaries of differentially normed situations, and clashes between social groups with different norms. From this perspective, many American drinking problems, although attached to individuals, are usefully viewed as properties of the situations and structures within which the "deviants" find themselves (Roizen, 1973). To a considerable extent, social problems related to drinking are built-in points of friction in a relatively stable cultural system.

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