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**Studying alcohol in its societal context: The Finnish tradition of**

**analysis of population surveys**

Three papers in this issue [1–3] continue a strong 60-year tradition of Finnish social alcohol research. The tradition started from the conjunction of the strong Finnish temperance tradition, in response to which Finland established a far-reaching government alcohol monopoly which long controlled most of the alcohol market, and a Nordic commitment to evidence-based policy making [4], looking to social science to provide the evidence. Thus it was in Finland that the first fully evaluated experimental study of a change in alcohol policy was made, conducted by a sociologist who later headed the alcohol monopoly [5]. And Finland was among the first countries to establish a tradition of periodic national population surveys of drinking practices—originally initiated to study the effects of an alcohol policy change [6].

Such surveys have become a routine occurrence in many countries with problematic drinking patterns. They serve a monitoring purpose, as Edwards recommended some years ago [7]. To make effective interventions to reduce harmful alcohol consumption, one needs to know the characteristic features of the drinking culture as an entirety [8]. If one limits the study only to extreme forms of alcohol use, like problem use, dependency and alcohol-based diseases, it is easy to stigmatise it as a problem of specific kinds of individuals or groups. National population surveys make it possible to map the big picture of drinking phenomena, locating the problematic use of alcohol as part of the picture, and delineating how social and cultural factors contribute to the emergence of harmful ways of using alcohol and the development of alcohol problems.

The surveys have also offered opportunities for a myriad of specific analyses, which have taught us much about the determinants and correlates of problematic drinking. The analysis of reasons for drinking and for stopping on particular drinking occasions in this issue [1] is one example of such an analysis (the primary motivation for the survey, again, was policy evaluation [9]). When questions are repeated from one survey to another, as a second paper illustrates [2], it becomes possible to track patterns of change in a population.

One of the most extensive demonstrations of this point in the alcohol literature is the third paper of the set [3]. The regular collection of national samples every 8 years since 1968, keeping substantial comparability in the questions asked, allows a landmark analysis of the distribution of changes in drinking within subgroups of the population over a 40-year period.

During this period the population’s consumption level tripled, and the findings give substantial cause for concern. Many new drinking customs emerged in Finland, drinking culture became more wet and permissive, drinking in home settings increased more than in public drinking venues, and new subpopulations were recruited to drinking—notably the majority of women. But in absolute terms the largest growth in heavy drinking was among males. As the authors note, the Finnish experience can be regarded as a warning for many low- and middle-income societies whose current drinking practices resemble those of Finland in 1968. Without substantial controls on marketing and availability of alcohol to counter the effects increased prosperity and the promotional efforts of alcohol producers, this is how things can develop.

Along with the strong commitment to positivist social epidemiology and policy studies, Finnish alcohol sociology has also distinguished itself by a strong orientation to sociological theory, cultural analysis and qualitative studies (e.g. [10,11]): how do drinkers and those around them understand their behaviour? Finnish alcohol sociology has emphasised that alcohol use, as a socially constructed world, reflects people’s particular relationships to each other, gender ideals, leisure activities and work identities, as well as changes in these [12]. From this perspective alcohol use provides a window to study the ongoing state of, and changes in, wider societal structures and cultural traditions. On the other hand, the qualitative studies have also underlined the importance of analysing how drinkers and those around them make alcohol use meaningful in specific arenas, situations and contexts.

The papers in this set, although primarily positivist in orientation, also reflect these strong Finnish traditions, continuing a pattern exemplified by the book, *Finnish* *Drinking Habits. Results from Interview Surveys Held in* *1968, 1976 and 1984* [13].Thus Mäkelä *et al*. [3] situate their picture of Finnish drinking customs in the larger picture of dimensions of variation in the cultural position of drinking. Huhtanen and Raitasalo [1] reference analyses of sources of social control, while the third paper [2] refers to the growing tradition of studies of alcohol’s harm to others. They show that, with an informed sociological perspective, survey data can yield considerably more than the monitoring and evaluative purposes which often motivate its collection. The papers thus demonstrate that the Finnish tradition of social alcohol studies is alive and strong, and still has much to teach other national traditions of alcohol research.

Robin Room

*Centre for Alcohol Policy Research,*

*Turning Point Alcohol and Drug Centre*

*Melbourne, Victoria, Australia*

*School of Population Health, University of Melbourne*

*Melbourne, Victoria, Australia*

*Centre for Social Research on Alcohol and Drugs,*

*Stockholm University*

*Stockholm, Sweden*

*E-mail: robinr@turningpoint.org.au*

Jukka Tӧrrӧnen

*Centre for Social Research on Alcohol and Drugs,*

*Stockholm University*

*Stockholm, Sweden*

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