Alcohol, Violent Crime and Social Power

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A causal link between the consumption of alcohol and acts of violence has long been depicted in western folklore, drama and literature. An old support for this notion can also be found in the common law plea of 'diminished responsibility' whereby defendants charged with murder, rape and various assaults, have been able to claim a lack of interest due to their drunkenness (Howard 1970). But a scientific interest in this alcohol-violence link emerged far more recently with the rise of medical, psychiatric and criminological discourse on the subject (Lombroso 1985).

The number of relevant empirical studies of violent crime and the effects of drinking upon human behaviour have increased considerably since the 1950s, but these have mostly been limited in three key ways.

Firstly, these studies have been fragmented across a wide range of disciplines, including physiology, pharmacology, epidemiology, psychiatry and psychology, as well as others held loosely together under the rubric of 'alcohol studies'. Only a minority of studies have overcome disciplinary narrowness and chauvinism and suggest a useful combination of different perspectives.

Secondly, much of the alcohol-violence literature reflects an empiricist outlook. Not 'empiricist' in the sense of the use of certain research methods and not others, but in its 'commonsense' view of social problems.1 This takes only the most obvious features of a social phenomenon to be 'facts', and often overlooks or dismisses the more hidden effects of important social structures.

In this view, oppressive social structures built on social difference appear only at the level of social roles, norms and conventions. 'Empiricist' studies tend to focus upon the observed behaviour of the individual subject(s) of research. From this, dubious generalised claims about entire social groups, social systems, or even 'human nature' might be made. Criminals, violent 'types' of alcoholics, are often the individuals of immediate interest to professionals in the field. But they may also be misleading categories to start with in general research on the social meaning of drinking or aggression and violence. The third major flaw underlying this literature is a form of false objectivism which researchers confuse with 'objectivity'. A constant problem of social research which studies 'down' (particularly deviance studies), is the danger of an elitist response to those who

are studied. In wishing to condemn the violent acts which appear to be related to alcohol use, researchers may fail to attach any rationality or meaning to the beliefs or behaviour of the researched.

These acts can be dismissed too quickly as deviant, anti-social, pathological, and so on. Considering the possible importance of the subjective understanding of their own actions which these people hold is a legitimate course of scientific inquiry, which need not slip into the extremes of cultural relativism. The different symbolic meanings of drinking and much violence in different cultures are relevant to any wide-ranging objective analysis of these social phenomena.

The above imbalances in the alcohol-violence field are not the 'fault' of any individual researcher. They appear to have resulted from neglect of this area by some disciplines, especially until recently by sociologists. They also reflect the work conditions of social researchers - often separated by a wide social gulf from the researched.

There have been some studies of the relationship between alcohol use and property crime (Cordilia 1985). But most research has focused upon what is thought to be a stronger link with violent assaults, especially spontaneous violent crimes. Despite the researchers' confidence in the strength of this link, the issue of causation remains central.

Studies of alcohol, drinking, aggression and violence can be classified without too much distortion into four major categories. (For more categories see Pernanen 1982).

These are as follows:

- Studies of individuals and groups who have been under some form of surveillance, treatment, incarceration or punishment from state agencies. These include convicted juveniles, adult criminals and prisoners, alcoholics and problem drinkers.
- Studies of violent incidents recorded by state agencies, including records of criminal assaults.
- Clinical studies of aggression and alcohol use conducted by psychologists, usually in an experimental university setting.
- Studies of drinking in natural settings.

Studies of Convicted Criminals and Alcoholics

These (mostly American) studies have found a positive correlation between high alcohol use or 'alcohol problems' and a personal history of involvement in arguments, fights and criminal assaults. For example, in Mayfield's study (Collins 1982) of violent assaults by prison inmates, 58 per cent of offenders claimed they were drinking just prior to, or at the time of, these attacks.

In a study of Californian inmates by Paterson and Braiker (Collins 1982), 24 per cent of subjects claimed they had attacked and injured someone while drinking in the three years before their imprisonment. Roslund and Larson's (1979) Swedish study of assaults over a four year period found alcohol use by 68 per cent of offenders just before or during attacks.

The general review of the literature by Greenberg (1982), suggests that in most studies between one-quarter and one-third of prisoners convicted of violent offences are found to have a history of chronic alcohol use. Other studies suggest this link with domestic violence. In these, excessive alcohol use by the assailant, victim, or both, has been found in as many as 67 per cent of 'troubled' families seeking counselling or divorce (Hamilton & Collins 1982).

Despite this evidence, it is difficult to claim a direct role for alcohol in these violent behaviour patterns or criminal careers. The problem of 'deviance disavowal' - the denial of responsibility for one's actions by citing alcohol as a determining cause - remains as a confounding factor. Furthermore, categories such as 'delinquent', 'problem drinkers' or 'problem families' are highly subjective. Some definitions of the 'alcoholic' or 'criminal' could be agreed upon. But the charge of 'biased samples' could be levelled if these groups, which are subject to high police and official scrutiny and over-represented in official statistics, are taken as being representative of some general social pattern.

The supposed relationship between excessive alcohol use and violence in these groups may also be misleading if both phenomena are just common features of the poor or deprived social conditions from which the researched groups mostly originate. Some other feature of this sort of social background - such as slum housing - could also be statistically linked with violent patterns of behaviours. The problem of causation would still remain unresolved.

Studies of Criminal Acts and Violent Incidents

These studies look at reported violent crimes and incidents and have found high levels of alcohol use by assailants, and frequently, the victim as well. Drinking appears to help precipitate such incidents and increase the risk of victimisation.

Alcohol was found present in either the offender, victim, or both, in 64 per cent of cases in Wolfgang's Philadelphia homicide study, 53 per cent of cases in Voss and Hepburn's Chicago homicide study, 34 per cent of Amir's Philadelphia rape study and 36 per cent of cases in Gerson's Canadian study of domestic assaults (Collins 1982; Gerson 1978).

A study of homicides in New York by Abel and Zeidenberg (1985) found alcohol in 45 per cent of victims. Two New South Wales reports (New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research 1974 and 1977a/b) showed alcohol to be a factor in 48 per cent of gun and knife attacks, and in 60 per cent of recorded

domestic assaults.

More recent studies (New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research 1986 and 1988) in that state have found alcohol present in 42 per cent of homicides committed between 1968 and 1981, and in 40 per cent of a sample of serious assaults from the years 1971 to 1986, many of which took place in or near licensed hotels or clubs. In an overview of the international literature, Pernanen notes that alcohol is usually found present in about 50 per cent of violent assaults and rapes and between 50 per cent and 60 per cent of homicides.

As impressive as these figures are in suggesting a link between alcohol use and acts of violence, these studies are also affected by confounding variables. Again, the social status of the parties involved may offset the likelihood of both the reporting of an incident and the presence of heavy drinking. The times at which these incidents commonly occur, holidays, weekends and evenings, are times at which many people are intoxicated. An increased number of arguments, brawls and violence at these times would be a partial consequence of the much higher levels of social interaction as people attempt to socialise and enjoy themselves. Furthermore, most of these 'acts' are in fact interactive disputes - a process involving both (or more) parties which may escalate into violence. Studies of official records usually cannot find many clues as to what aspects of social interaction, when combined with drinking, can lead to violence.

Studies of Aggression

Another major source of knowledge of the alcohol and violence connection is the increasing number of studies of aggression conducted by clinical and social psychologists since the 1960s. These researchers observe the behaviour of people who have consumed alcohol, and note a general link between alcohol intake and a rise in aggressive feelings and gestures, particularly among men.

However, these studies have been moving away from the simple notion that it is just the pharmacological effects of alcohol that are the sole or direct cause of aggressive behaviour in the form of a 'disinhibition' of some innate destructive instinct or drive (Pernanen 1982; Carpenter & Armenti 1972; Taylor 1983; and Brain 1986). This disinhibition model would suggest that a lack of regulation or repression in poorly socialised or pathological individuals leads to aggressive and violent actions, not the social encouragement and reinforcement of this behaviour. But situational factors are now considered to be of major importance.

Researchers argue that such factors as an all-male setting, group drinking, and threatening or stressful surroundings, will all result in observable increases in levels of aggression (Carpenter & Armenti 1972; Taylor 1983; Boyatzis 1974; Levinson 1983). As Carpenter and Armenti (Evans 1986) put it, 'the circumstances of drinking produce greater changes in behaviour than the alcohol

does'. Despite these insights, the critical question still remains as to how, when and why aggression actually becomes expressed as violent behaviour during drinking?

The growing interest in situational and environmental factors has led some researchers to theorise the form of drinking situations in natural conditions (Pernanen 1982; Zeichner & Pihl 1980; Hull & Van Treuben 1986). The resulting 'interactionist' perspective has stressed the importance of patterns of social relations in the context of drinking, and the drinking behaviour that is learnt from the example of others.

The aggression and violence that can be associated with drinking is here linked to the effects of intoxication upon social competence. Social interaction for the heavy drinker becomes a confused and fumbled process (Pernanen 1982; Zeichner & Pihl 1980; Hull & Van Treuben 1986). There is a frequent misunderstanding of social cues and the intentions of other people. This is worsened by the often crowded and uncomfortable settings in drinking establishments (Pernanen 1982).

Studies of Public Drinking

The relationship between alcohol use, tax revenue, and the cost of the public health system, have led to the increased interest of many governments in general drinking surveys. These outline the amounts and type of alcohol consumed by different socio-demographic groups, and sometimes detail locations (Single & Storm 1985). But it is the slower growing number of observational studies of drinking, bar rooms and pubs which can provide greater detail on the effects of situational variables on drinking.

These have particularly focused upon drinking rates and their relationship to such variables as sex, age, social status, solo and group drinking, time, length of stay, interaction with bar staff, and so on (see Single & Storm 1985). The most typical heavy drinkers in the public bar setting are characterised as young, unmarried males in groups (Clarke 1985). The group setting and other features of the environment have been related to length of stay and amounts consumed (Single & Storm 1985). Only a small number of observational studies have focused on the relationship of these to levels of aggression.

The most important of these is Graham's study (1980) of aggression in different types of bars in Vancouver. This concluded that some bar room environments can encourage and signal the appropriateness of aggressive behaviour through their general atmosphere, physical appearance and staff relations, independent of the particular rough and tumble clientele they attract (Graham 1980).

These findings suggest the interesting possibility of minimising the levels of aggression and violent incidents within public drinking contexts by encouraging

practical changes to the drinking environment. These would include improving the design and appearance of bar rooms, as well as staff training, behaviour and attitudes to customers.

These drinking studies have considerably extended the existing knowledge of the social context of drinking, but if read in isolation, they create a danger of falling to the limited 'empiricist' perspective criticised above. Their particular methodologies lead to a focus upon the short-term observable features of the drinking environment and a search for the meaning of behaviour and the level of everyday social interaction.

If we cannot see the forest for the trees, this may neglect the importance of the historically evolving meanings of drinking in different cultures, and the impact of various beliefs and ideologies on drinking behaviour. This behaviour, particularly violent drinking behaviour, is not simply due to the social roles that attach to certain socio-demographic variables. It does reflect the form and force of social structures which are not so obvious at the level of social interaction, but which still compel much human behaviour and shape its meaning.

Drinking, Culture and Social Power

History and comparative sociology can provide some further clues as to how the apparent link between drinking, aggression and violence arises, and the sort of social systems and social changes which encourage it. In most cultures, alcohol is drunk for its anxiety-reducing effects. But there is a great diversity in drinking behaviour, or what writers including Heath (1976), MacAndrew and Edgerton (1969) term 'drunken comportment' - behaviour tied to the different attitudes, and beliefs that attach to drunkenness in different cultures.

The level of violence expressed when drinking is an important feature of this varied comportment. Cinquemani's famous study of two central American Indian tribes, contrasted the violent behaviour of one people from the relative peacefulness of another nearby tribe, when either tribe engaged in heavy drinking (Blum 1982). Other contrasts could be drawn, for example, between the placid behaviour of the Bolivian Camba during drinking festivals (Heath 1982) and the frequently fatal violence of the Finns when drinking (Collins 1983).

Why then do some cultures so closely associate drinking with aggression and violence, while others do not? Several of the psychological and observational studies discussed above have noted the link between heavy drinking, aggressive behaviour and the assertion of a strong masculine identity among many groups of drinkers (Collins 1983). McLelland maintains that intoxication reduces an individual's sense of self-identity and can provide a feeling of strength and power over the surrounding environment and people that is valued by many men (Boyatzis 1974).

These elements of a masculine identity can be experienced in a drunken state through fantasies of social control and sexual potency. A sense of mastery is acted out in what one observer has called the 'power displays' in drinking settings (Boyatzis 1974). With boisterous and aggressive behaviour the male drinker is presenting a rather crude view of himself as a 'man'. Where this sense of power may be challenged or undermined, violent behaviour may be the only means to re-establish it.

Threats and challenges to this identity may come from the immediate environment through, for example, another male who wants to feel more powerful or a wife who wants to feel equal. But the greatest threats of all come from the whole surrounding society and the real position of the individual within it. Where indigenous cultures have been smashed by colonialism and imperialism, the resulting more diffuse social structures and undermined traditional system of ascribing status, are linked to higher rates of drunkenness and violent drinking among males seeking to recover their self-esteem (Levinson 1983).2 As Boyatzis (1976) puts it,

> . . . consumption of alcohol can be useful to males in certain cultures. If a person is continually faced with the tension of self-assertion in a situation containing few organised supports towards maintaining a position of prestige once acquired, then alcohol can help the individual by making him feel more powerful. He can fantasise encounters in which his prowess is great and undaunted. Alcohol also helps him by reducing inhibitions and releasing more aggressive behaviour. Bolstered by alcohol, the individual can continue to face the day-to-day struggles of living in such a society.

In our own liberal-capitalist system the structures of social inequality assume a more hidden form as class achieved rather than ascribed. A masculine adult status is not conferred by formal and specific means attainable by all males. For most men, a respected status has to be struggled for. Here, the association between alcohol, aggression and violence and the attainment of a masculine status, overlaps with class divisions and class cultures.

Drunkenness and rowdy behaviour have become a form of symbolic protest against ruling groups and their world-view. The disorderly 'time-out' periods of hard drinking, express a rebellion against the bourgeois work ethic of sobriety, saving and useful leisure activity. Debates about drinking have become tied to attitudes to social inequality and working or lower class culture. For the bourgeois social reformers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, drunkenness represented much of what they opposed in the lifestyles of the working or 'dangerous classes'.

These different forces have been evident throughout Australian history. In the convict era, drunkenness, indolence and rowdy or destructive behaviour by both men and women marked a form of rebellion against transportation, forced labour and the values of the colonial officials and a developing bourgeoisie (Sturma

1983). As the punishments for these vices were frequently brutal, this further reinforced the cultural association between drink and violence.

By the end of the nineteenth century, rowdy drinking became a common feature and expression of the 'larrikin' tradition. This involved a particular stereotype of the Australian working class male as strong, anti-intellectual, egalitarian among peers, and opposed to petty authority and the 'effete' restrained qualities of the ruling class (Ward 1978).

With the ideological strength of this tradition and stereotype, all-male drinking contexts become a forum for the rejection of bourgeois values and social order in favour of a constructed working class masculine identity. Due to an apparent lack of status and class differences, the Australian pub full of equal mates can reinforce a sense of male group identity, territoriality and cultural resistance. Here, a heightened pride in a shared masculine identity may compensate for a low position in the society's class structure.

This sense of status may also be secured by the harsh treatment of such social inferiors as women, blacks, gays or young and weak males. But the cultural denial of class inferiority is always just a fiction. Class identity is also formed around the experience of an hierarchical and undemocratic workplace, and obvious inequalities in wealth, privilege and lifestyle. Because of this, group mateship cannot always regulate the 'power displays' during drinking which express the ideology of classless masculinity.

The external threats to this ideology from an obviously unequal society, may push its adherents to the protection and expression of their masculinity and sense of social power through the widely available means of physical destruction and violence. A constant tension between the egalitarian ideology and the reality of our society appears to underlie much of this violence.

The social structures which limit the attainment of a respected adult status in our society afflict both working class men and women. But reactions to this differ between the sexes, and in groups within this class. Many men are excluded from the above ideologies which confer a masculine identity. But the largest group who feel an allegiance to these ideologies and who, at the same time are excluded by or are marginal to them, are working class youth.

Studies of crime which emphasise the 'deviance' of youth behaviour, and regard the common high levels of crime and drinking problems among young working class men as a generational problem which they mostly 'grow out of', have been improved upon by recent accounts of working class youth subcultures (Cohen 1972; Willis 1977; and Hall et al. 1976). These analyse the relationship of subcultures to structures of inequality and social power, and note the important, but ambivalent, relationship of many youths to their 'parent' working class culture (Dorn 1983).

It may be helpful to reflect on these accounts of youth subcultures in responding to the questions as to whether and why Australian society is becoming more violent? Media sensationalism shapes much of the public perception of crime. But there is empirical evidence that some important categories of violent crime have been growing, and that alcohol use has a possible relationship to many incidents of violence. The reported number of rapes in Australia have more than doubled between 1973 and 1987, and reported rates of serious assaults have increased four times over in the same period (National Committee on Violence 1989).

A 1988 report on serious assaults by the New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (op. cit.) found a similar growth in the period between 1971 to 1986-87, with 40.12 per cent of incidents marked by police as alcohol related. Police reports also show a major increase in the number of common assaults recorded in New South Wales in recent years. These grew 17.66 per cent from 13,739 to 16,165 in the 12 months between 1986-87 and 1987-88 (Police Department of New South Wales 1988).

There is evidence that a large proportion of this growing number of attacks occur during drinking situations or follow alcohol use, and that the majority of assailants and a large proportion of the victims are young, working class males (New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, op.ÿcit.).

If there has been a long tradition of rowdy drinking among Australian working class men, and there has been no recent major change in drinking levels, some explanation is needed as to this increase in the amount of aggressive drinking behaviour which apparently leads to violent acts.

As noted above, the larrikin tradition and rowdy drinking gives a compensatory masculine identity to working class men. But the attainment of this identity also has some real material basis. A possible advancement in working life (for example, by promotion or self-employment), some trappings of affluence acquired over time, and the often contested but still substantial authority of married men within the family, may all enhance the personal status of these men. But these reinforcements of status are far less available to younger, single men in the social and economic climate of Australia in the 1980s.

The contemporary 'yobbo' culture of working class youth has evolved out of the larrikin tradition, but it may have to meet more threats to its meaning. Some of this may be due to progressive moves to social equality. In what some writers have termed a 'crisis of masculinity', the advances of the women's movement, increased female employment, and possibly greater assertiveness in sexual and social relations, have undermined some areas of male privilege (Komarovsky 1976; Connell 1987). Reported increases in domestic violence may be one result of this (National Committee on Violence 1989).

These changes are least disturbing to men with social position and power, but they more directly threaten the status of males who have neither. The attainment of a respected masculine status is now more difficult for other reasons which are not tied to any moves for greater social equality, but to their opposite. During the relative affluence of the long-boom in the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s, job advancement and promotion to supervisory and management positions was not uncommon for working class men. Since the downturn in the mid 1970s structural unemployment, particularly among the young, has become a permanent feature of our economy. The collapse of the manufacturing sector has reduced job prospects within the working class. Apprenticeships in skilled trades - occupations which although working class have been a source of masculine pride and identity - are less available.

Economic restructuring in favour of a technocratic economy, and the drift to a 'credential society' with an expanded middle class of professionals and experts, has meant a choice for young Australians between the continuing childhood of formal study or a lifetime in dead-end jobs. The failure of current economic policy to bring on a general recovery has heightened the competition for credentials and better jobs. Economic changes have been of benefit for some sectors (for example banking and speculative capital), but class differences and inequality have become far more marked in Australia in the 1980s (Raskall 1987).

Despite the official corporatist imagery of the shared economic struggle of a nation of 'mates' a sense of hopelessness has become more widespread among many of the poor and working class, particularly the young. The increased violence during this period of history, that is tied to the experience of powerlessness and reduced status by this social group, is certainly a serious problem for its victims (most of who are also working class or socially disadvantaged). However, it is not an entirely irrational or meaningless reaction by the powerless to an increasingly unequal society.

Footnotes

[1]Of course, an empiricist viewpoint will usually lead to a preference for certain methods. But this is not a necessary connection.

[2]An example of this would be the high rates of violence in many Australian Aboriginal communities. See P. Wilson (1981).

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