

Alcohol and Culture Change: Current Challenges and Conundrums



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This paper is based on a presentation given at the Thinking Drinking 3 Conference in Brisbane in August 2009.

Alcohol has received increasing attention in recent times. Much of this attention has focused on the "risks" associated with use of alcohol, and the use of alcohol by young people.

Less attention has been given to the use and position of alcohol in the community at large.

To understand changes in the use of alcohol by young people, and the community in general, it is essential to examine the significant social and lifestyle changes that have occurred over the past two to three decades at the one level, while also being cognisant of the wider commercial and globalisation forces that drive the position of alcohol as a valued and powerful consumer product.

The confluence of major social changes, in concert with the repositioning of alcohol as a ubiquitous and benign consumer product, requires close examination. Simplistic targeting of young people will fail to address these more complex underpinning issues and will not lead to the fundamental culture change sought by many.

DEFINING CULTURE

Culture can be defined in various ways including the following:

- Culture refers to the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions.
- Culture is communication, communication is culture.
- Culture is symbolic communication. Some of its symbols include a group's skills, knowledge, attitudes, values, and motives. The meanings of the symbols are learned and deliberately perpetuated in a society through its institutions.

- Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, the essential core of culture consists of traditional ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other hand, as conditioning influences upon further action.
- Culture is a collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another.

The cultural norms that shape the use of alcohol by all members of the Australian community are being challenged, especially in light of the new National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) guidelines, and their implications for moving Australia forward in terms of achieving new cultural norms in regard to alcohol.

Some of the challenges to contemporary socio-cultural norms associated with alcohol are highlighted in the conundrums faced by parents, educators, law enforcement agents, policy makers and others. For some, the challenges may be conceptualised as intractable social evils or "wicked problems" (see Fleming 2008).

"Wicked problem" is a phrase used in social planning to describe a problem that is difficult or impossible to solve because of incomplete, contradictory, and changing requirements that are often difficult to recognise.

Moreover, because of complex interdependencies, the effort to solve one aspect of a wicked problem may reveal or create other problems. However, not least of the challenges involved with alcohol is moving the locus of responsibility away from an exclusive focus on the individual ie the "responsible" (young) consumer, to a broader focus on the more contested territory of the market place, policy and consumer values.

There is often despondency in regard to the potential for achieving change in cultural norms and values, at least in the short term. Recent research sheds light on successful strategies that have achieved attitudinal, knowledge and behaviour change, and that can inform similar shifts in relation to alcohol.

Such new research, together with recent work from the National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction (NCETA), can aid development of a comprehensive set of targeted and universal strategies to address legislative, community and individual factors.

WHAT'S CHANGED?

In recent decades, Australia has experienced a range of important social changes in families, lifestyles and women's roles.

10 KEY CHANGES

1. Young people stay in education longer
2. Sexual intercourse experienced earlier and earlier ages (42% years 10-12 had sexual intercourse, 2002)
3. More unsupervised time
4. Different experience of "family": one in six families in 2006 were single parent families versus one in 47 in the 1970s
5. Get married later (21-23 years in 1970 – 28-30 years in 2005)
6. Deferred marriage, mortgage, and maternity
7. Live at home longer
8. Have more expendable income
9. Different views about work/life balance
10. Leisure and recreation a greater priority, and we live in an increasingly individualised and socially disconnected world

In addition, the concept of "youth" has become a dominant cultural norm, characterised by the eternal pursuit of "youthfulness". We have also seen the commodification of leisure and substantially changed views about work/life balance, especially among younger people.

Added to this complex set of changes are shifts in our drinking patterns, that is **what** we drink, **how** we drink, and **where** we drink and with **whom**. Of relevance also is the significant decrease in the age at which young people start to drink – the average age of consumption is now 15 years for both males and females. All of these changes have important implications for "low risk" drinking and prevention.

LEISURE LIFESTYLE

One of the most important socio-cultural changes, impacting on young people especially, has been the relatively recent emergence of the leisure lifestyle.

Moreover, consumption, including alcohol consumption, has become central to the leisure experience. In contemporary society, leisure is central to one's image and integrally linked to one's aspirations, and often involves risk-taking.

Leisure time pursuits can be status-defining and image-enhancing. Consumption of alcohol in this social context has become a popular leisure activity in and of itself, an important element of socialisation, and a source of identity within and between friendship groups.

Excessive consumption, of various forms – extending well beyond just alcohol – has become normative in contemporary consumer society. We increasingly see this played out in Western culture which possess two defining features – materialism and individualism.

PLEASURE

As part of the leisure lifestyle in which alcohol is so firmly embedded, it is also important to examine the role played by pleasure.

It seems axiomatic that pleasure is one of the main motivators for alcohol use, but this is rarely mentioned or reflected in our policies, program or interventions.

Our policies suggest that alcohol use only ever emerges from or leads to misery, ill health, and social dysfunction. However, alcohol use and the leisure activities with which it is associated are inherently about pleasure.

It is now increasingly recognised that this has been a much neglected area, since the time of Plato, and largely overlooked in public health discourses. If we ignore, disparage, or relegate to the inconsequential this crucial motivating factor, we do so at our peril.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR SOCIO-CULTURAL CHANGE

Encouragingly, there are a number of areas where we have devoted less than optimal attention as pivot points for change. These include the:

1. workplace
2. schools (school to work transition)
3. parents
4. sport
5. provision of legitimate and valued non-drinking leisure options, and
6. redefining the Australian national identity.

It is readily acknowledged that alcohol issues are complex, often deceptively so, and involve leisure, food, town planning, free markets, and public order to mention but a few.

The anti-smoking analogy is of limited value as it cannot address the breadth of issues involved. However, a significant change in both culture change and policy shift can be achieved if both the venue and discourse allow new alliances to flourish (*Greenaway, 2008*).

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