Changing a heavy drinking subculture: what can we learn from case studies?

ROBIN ROOM

Centre for Alcohol Policy Research, La Trobe University, Bundoora, Victoria 3065; Centre for Social Research on Alcohol and Drugs, Department of Public Health Sciences, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden

Presenter’s email: R.Room@latrobe.edu.au

Introduction/Issues: Most heavy drinking occasions involve social interaction in a situation and social world where drinking is allowed and often expected. In that social world, norms and customs expect and often promote drinking, despite pressures on participants to drink less from their significant others. Since heavy drinking may result in substantial health and social harms, there is a public health interest in changing drinking norms and behaviour in the social world. Examples of efforts to change and of actual changes in heavy drinking social worlds are reviewed to identify factors which appear to enhance or inhibit such change.

Method/Approach: The paper is a narrative review drawing on grey literature and journalistic accounts, journal articles and books.

Key findings: Sometimes change occurs from within, led by key members of the social world. Usually this is in closely-knit worlds, where members have some awareness of each other’s “outside” life. Often, disruptive problems from drinking have built up in the group. Efforts from outside to change the world’s drinking norms are often successfully resisted, and a strategy of identifying and allying with like-thinking insiders has a better chance of succeeding. There are also examples of heavy-drinking social worlds reforming or dwindling under pressure from groups closely connected to social world members – e.g., women’s movements against male heavy drinking social worlds.

Discussion and conclusions: The political demand to “change the drinking culture” is best approached at the level of specific subcultures of heavy drinking. But success will require a flexible and interactive approach.

Implications for policy: “Changing the drinking culture” is a difficult assignment at a societal level, but there are instructive examples of change at a subcultural level.

Implications for translational research: While controlled trials of subcultural changes are unlikely, much can be learned from documenting what happens with attempts at change.