ALCOHOL AND SERIOUS LEISURE: EXPLORING MEANINGS AND PRACTICES OF DRINKING IN THE HOME

Authors: Robyn Dwyer¹, Sarah Maclean¹,², Janette Mugavin¹, Sarah Callinan¹

¹Centre for Alcohol Policy Research, School of Psychology and Public Health, College of Science, Health and Engineering, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia, ²School of Social Work, College of Science, Health and Engineering, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia

Presenter’s email: r.dwyer@latrobe.edu.au

Introduction / Issues: Concern over alcohol consumption is widespread among health experts, academics, policy-makers, community groups and the media, with some suggesting the ‘safest level of drinking is none’¹. Yet population surveys find 80% of Australians have at least one alcoholic drink in a year, and much of this drinking occurs in the home. In this paper, we explore the meanings and practices of home drinking among Australian adults and consider tensions between these and public health efforts to reduce alcohol consumption.

Method / Approach: We draw on interview data from 40 participants in a study of home drinking among Australians aged 30 years or older. While the full dataset is considered, the analysis primarily uses a case-study approach to focus on the narrative of one participant, Karen. We use theoretical concepts of serious leisure and assemblages to explore Karen’s drinking practices.

Key Findings: Participant narratives illustrate the multiple ways alcoholic beverages figure in home life. For Karen, procuring and drinking wine is serious leisure which enriches her everyday life. Our analysis maps the ways in which wine and wine-drinking is entwined with Karen’s identity performances, her embodied experiences of place, time and social relationships, and how alcohol materialises her relationships with others.

Discussions and Conclusions: Not all drinkers engage with alcohol in the way Karen does with wine. However, her narrative serves as a reminder of the limitations of public health discourses that construct ‘alcohol’ as a simple object divorced from entanglements in everyday social life.

Implications for Practice or Policy: Health promotion campaigns aimed at reducing (if not stopping) alcohol consumption in the community risk being met with resistance or ignored as irrelevant if they fail to account for the complexities of alcohol and drinking practices.


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