Intervening in heavy drinking social worlds: Vic Health’s initiative

- Australian politicians are more willing than 20 years ago to talk about interventions to counter heavy drinking and alcohol problems.
- But alcohol producers and sellers are politically influential, strongly resisting effective policy interventions in the market, e.g., around closing hours or price.
- The political compromise has been to talk about “changing the drinking culture.”
- Vic Health took on the task of making the phrase a reality, working with researchers on a framework for such public health interventions.
- The focus shifted to “drinking cultures” — social worlds and settings in which heavy drinking occurs, and how they may be influenced.
Vic Health’s initial conceptual scheme:
Alcohol Cultures Framework
A FRAMEWORK TO GUIDE PUBLIC HEALTH ACTION ON DRINKING CULTURES

--- a focus on drinking cultures at intermediate levels, between the levels of family or friends & of the larger society

A task along the way: examples in the literature of changes in heavy drinking social worlds

- So what is a heavy drinking social world?
- Most drinking is social
  - Often drinking together is a medium of sociability
- Much drinking is in a context of shared interests or identity, e.g.:
  - Occupational group – lawyers, construction workers, nurses …
  - Shared-interest group – footy fans, choir group, regular poker game …
  - Shared social identity – ethnic identity, minority sexual orientation …
- Those with such a shared interest/identity often constitute a social world
  - Such social worlds may overlap
  - An individual can belong to several
Most drinking is governed by injunctive norms

... which may encourage or require the drinking
– e.g. shouting – buying rounds
... and also put limits on the drinking & on associated behaviours

• Social worlds are often a primary “seat” of such norms
  – Often in association with the particular setting/occasion in which the social world is functioning
  – The norms are also influenced by broader cultural expectations
    • e.g., general Australian expectations on shouting in a pub, or on a host offering a drink
• “heavy drinking” (let’s say): drinking ≥ 5 drinks on an occasion acceptable and may be expected

There is much ethnographic & historical literature on heavy drinking social worlds

• e.g.: Mass Observation, The Pub and the People – late 1930s working-class pubs in Bolton, England:

  Beers are being consumed steadily at the rate of 15 minutes per [drink]; at each fresh order an interval of five minutes invariably elapses before it is drunk, and then only a small sip. The three men all follow suit as any one reaches for his glass and show wonderful anticipation in drinking equal amounts, so that all three glasses register the same level after each drink. (Mass Observation, 1987, p. 169)

• This presentation discusses case studies we found in that literature of reduction of consumption in such heavy-drinking social worlds, in a paper prepared for VicHealth
Ethnographic & historical accounts include many cases of changes pushed from outside

- e.g.: women’s movements pushing for political or social change in men’s heavy drinking worlds
  - The women’s anti-liquor movement in the 1990s → prohibition in Andhra Pradesh state, India (Larsson, M. ‘When women unite!’ Stockholm University, 2006; http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A200764&dswid=5978)

Change can also come to heavy drinking social worlds from the inside:
- e.g. occupational drinking cultures

- **New York sandhogs** (hard rock miners), 1970s-90s
  … On-the-job drinking [was] regarded as normal behaviour and experienced as a ritual, a stereotyped set of behaviours that creates feelings of solidarity and bonds occupational members into a community of equals, distinguishing them from other workers.
  - Drinking in the work base or a tavern, decompressing after 3 hours working in compressed air
  - 1970s fiscal crisis in NYC: sandhogs laid off, drank more
  - Union successfully pushed for resuming construction, set up Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to aid in sobriety
• The social world stayed intact, but moved to a norm of abstinence, attained through EAP & Alcoholics Anonymous

Individual sandhogs were recruited to the AA network, where they eventually learned to live sober lives by helping other sandhogs to become and remain sober.

• Union leaders gave hiring preference to those in the AA network

[A sandhog’s comment:] ‘We went from a culture of drinking to a culture of sobriety. Now, if you are drunk on the job you stand out. At one time, if you were sober you stood out.’ Sonnenstuhl, W.J. (1996) Working Sober: The Transformation of an Occupational Drinking Culture. Ithaca: Cornell UP.

• US auto production-line workers, 1990s

• Traditional, hierarchical plant vs. Transplant, more consensual (Japanese corporation; workers in teams, “finding solutions for problems and improving production”)

• Both with locally-hired workers

• Workers at Traditional plant more likely to: drink during workhours (23% vs. 3%); drink greater amounts at work; drink 4 or more drinks before coming to work

• At the Traditional plant, bans on workplace drinking undercut by conflicts with union, drawn-out procedures, fear of slow-downs

• At the Transplant, worker teams worked as integral units, paid extra if stayed on premises for lunch break

Changing drinking in sporting clubs: Australian Drug Foundation’s Good Sports

• Clubs providing recreational sports facilities, sponsoring junior teams
  – with clubrooms providing food, and a bar. Sociable heavy drinking, particularly by males, has been a common feature. Heavy-drinking dominance of clubrooms is often seen as not “family-friendly”

• Good Sports implemented 2000+: to manage alcohol service, reducing consumption & problems
  – Randomised controlled trial: reduction in alcohol consumption at the club, & in alcohol problems score

• Ethnographic study of a Good Sports club, 2013
• Hegemonic male drinking culture had been dispossessed
  – Need seen to become more family-oriented, attract young players
  – New leadership, paying attention also to more Moslems locally

• But drinkers in the old style were still around
  – No longer dominant in clubrooms
  – Drinking packaged liquor, barracking at the club’s football games
  – Occasional “run-ins” between the disparate social worlds at the club
First reflections on the 3 cases

• The first two examples are of strongly-defined occupational social worlds.
  – In a society disapproving of drinking in the workplace
  – The work connection meant pressure to change could be brought to bear – not all from inside the world
• Also an economic dimension with Good Sports
  – Short-term gain from alcohol sales
  – vs. potential longer-term loss of base of families
• Shifting emphasis in Australian pubs to meals pushing in same direction?
  – But pricing structure means drinks more profitable than food

How about normative change from within, without economic coercion?

• Harder to find case studies of such change from within in heavy-drinking social worlds
• A possible case: social worlds of same-sex attracted women? ...
• Change in social worlds of same-sex attracted women
  – San Francisco area, 1970s: lesbian bars replaced by non-drinking community meeting places
    [by 1982 the lesbian bar was] no longer the major setting for social and romantic interactions; [there were] a range of alternatives such as women’s restaurants, bookstores, coffee houses and political organisations.
    (Hastings, P. Alcohol and the lesbian community, Drinking & Drug Practices Surveyor 18:3-7, 1982)
  – A parallel shift now in Melbourne?
    A 2016 commentary titled “the death of Australia’s lesbian party culture” noted the decline and closing of some lesbian clubs, though gay male bars and clubs continued to thrive. A promoter of queer clubs and parties noted that “she’s watched her crowds become increasingly male”. (Gooding, S. in i-D, 29 Jan. 2016, https://i-d.vice.com/en_au/article/ywve9b/the-death-of-australias-lesbian-party-culture)

Public health interventions and heavy drinking social worlds

• The drinking expectations and customs are collective, and enforced by mutual expectations
• Such social worlds are often used to fending off disapproval
• But there will be limits, not always adhered to;
• And there are likely to be some ambivalent members, not comfortable with the drinking;
• Forming alliances with these members to seek to change customs and expectations is a likely way forward
A checklist for scoping out the world

• How much drinking, in what settings and circumstances? What drives and constrains it?
• Functions of the drinking? Alternative ways to fulfil them? What problems from the drinking?
• Vested interests (economic and other) in the drinking – how to divert or neutralise them?
• Are there other social worlds overlapping, sharing settings? To be mobilised or neutralised?
• Regulatory agencies which might be mobilised?
• What should be the public health goals be, in the circumstances?

When a heavy drinking social world ripe for change is identified ...

• Assistance and prompting from public health workers may be possible
• But it needs to be low-key and indirect -- active resistance is always a possibility
• The aim is to reinforce those within the world who are interested in changing the expectations about how much drinking and with what behaviour
• Studying and documenting what happens has two benefits: suggesting next steps for those involved, and offering lessons for others similarly situated
Thanks for your attention.

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