Title: Drinking cultures and change – local, national and global

The series of papers in this issue of Drugs: Education Prevention and Policy is a collection of work emanating from the June 2015 meeting of the Kettil Bruun Society for Social and Epidemiological Research on Alcohol, held in Munich. The topic of “drinking cultures” was a consistently reflected-on theme throughout the conference; in part due to widespread reports of a reduction in levels of drinking across many western countries over the past ten years. In particular, significant decreases in the frequency and quantity of drinking among young people has been reported across more than 20 countries that have traditionally been conceptualised as both ‘wet’ and ‘dry’ societies (see also de Looze et al., 2015; Pennay, Livingston, & MacLean, 2015). Given the wide-ranging nature of declines in drinking across cultures, researchers are at a loss to explain what might be happening, with traditional explanations such as changes in policy, price and availability not being able to account for these shifts (Livingston, 2014; Pennay et al., 2015).

This selection of papers attempts to explore some of the factors that might be influencing changes in drinking patterns in Denmark, Italy, Finland and Australia. In the first paper of this issue, Savic et al. (2016) remind us of how fraught and difficult it is to define the notion of drinking culture, and how important it is to be clear about what is being referred to when the term is used. In reviewing public health-oriented alcohol research, Savic and colleagues set themselves the ambitious task of providing a working definition of what is meant by drinking culture, a definition which is of considerable complexity, with an emphasis on social norms and social controls around drinking and associated behaviours.

With this definition in mind, Bloomfield et al. (2016) explore changes in consumption trends in Denmark, while also exploring trends in several indicators that might be conceived as broadly relating to the Danish drinking culture including indicators of harm, morbidity and mortality rates, and the regulation of alcohol relating to price and availability, as well as important secondary influences such as consumer purchasing power, demographic and structural changes, drinking customs and attitudes, and advertising and health promotion. Despite a reduction in the rate of drinking at the national level in Denmark, Bloomfield et al. note a corresponding increase in alcohol-related harms (a divergent trend also identified in Australia - Livingston, 2008). Similarly also with Australia (Pennay et al., 2015), Bloomfield et al. note a general increase in the affordability and availability of alcohol in Denmark, but a decrease in the accessibility of alcohol to minors. Perhaps one of the strongest indicators for the national reductions in drinking is an increase in negative attitudes to alcohol, changes that have also been identified elsewhere (e.g. Callinan, Room, &
Livingston, 2014), with the authors suggesting evidence of the start of a shift in drinking practices and perceptions in Denmark.

Beccaria and Rolando (2016) report that along with decreasing alcohol consumption in Italy, mortality rates and alcohol-related hospitalisations are also decreasing in Italy – a trend that is not matched in many other western nations where increasing harms are still evident. This might be explained by the time lag factor, with decreasing drinking in Australia and Denmark being a relatively recent phenomenon (within the last ten years), but with decreasing drinking in Italy having been observed since the 1970s. Beccaria and Rolando posit many inter-related factors for these declines in drinking including industrialisation and urbanisation, a shift from wine to beer and spirit consumption among younger people, a shift in attitudes to drunkenness (priority placed on displays of drinker competence) and increased attention to physical health. The authors have found that decreases relating to mortality and hospitalisations in Italy are more pronounced in wine-producing areas. Their contribution to this special issue qualitatively explores what might be driving this finding, and suggest that increased education about and appreciation for wine among young people in wine-producing areas has contributed to more moderate and responsible drinking in these areas. They suggest this has led to “transformation of alcohol consumption into a cultural activity that requires specific knowledge and competences”, emphasising the importance of informal norms in regulating drinking at the local level.

The focus on the local level suggested by Beccaria and Rolando (2016) echoes the main thrust of the argument put forward by Savic and colleagues (2016): that, in a globalised world, attempting to pin down social practices and norms relating to drinking at a national or whole-of-society level is almost impossible, and there are likely to be multiple interconnected and overlapping drinking cultures in any given society. This means that traditional characterisations of societies into typologies such as wet and dry cultures are increasingly not useful and likely to overshadow important nuances in drinking practices at the micro and meso levels. Savic et al. remind us that important changes in cultural practices have occurred in particular settings or contexts (such as the de-normalisation of drinking driving), and that future work on drinking cultures should consider various subcultures or social worlds and how they interact and influence the broader cultural position of alcohol.

One example of a drinking culture that exists at the micro-level is explored by Hart (2016), who examines drinking practices and attitudes at a local community sporting club in a disadvantaged area of Melbourne, Australia. Community sporting clubs have been targeted for intervention in Australia for more than ten years, with a nationally funded ‘Good Sports Program’ rolled out across the country, involving the establishment of policies and practices in the club’s premises to regulate
alcohol purchasing and consumption in line with a broader aim of changing drinking customs (Duff & Munro, 2007). Hart uses a case-study approach to explore whether the implementation of the Good Sports Program at a particular local football club had indeed influenced drinking customs and practices in this context. Hart concludes that while some changes in drinking practices and attitudes were evident, particularly inside the clubrooms, the program had not managed to dislodge strong norms relating to an older-style hegemonic masculinity, although it now mostly manifests outside the clubhouse. Hart concludes that, while the club premises are now more hospitable to women, children and the growing local Moslem population, masculinity – though in a different mode – is still in charge, and the change may well be tenuous.

Mäkelä and Maunu (2016) also explore drinking among sub-populations, while broadening their analysis to investigate how their findings are influenced by social norms at a national level. They investigate the social pressure to drink alcohol – an element previously identified as an important aspect of drinking culture (Room, Callinan, & Dietze, 2015; Savic et al., 2016) – in a Finnish national sample, reporting that younger adults and heavier drinkers typically experience more social pressure to drink. They complement this with an analysis of qualitative interviews with young adult Finns, showing that pressures to drink are driven by strong expectations about social collectivity that operates at the level of the Finnish culture. However, on the other hand, in the Finnish culture drinking is considered a highly individual and autonomous activity and norms exist around the freedom for individuals to be able choose when to drink, how much, and with whom. The authors suggest that this results in a confusing double standard whereby participants struggled to find a satisfying balance between the “social symbolism of drinking and the individual regulation of drinking in their personal life”.

Taken together, the papers reflect a new round of attention to cultural aspects of drinking by social alcohol researchers, including stronger recognition that relevant cultural aspects are located not only at the level of a nation or whole culture, but also may pertain to such subentities as a district (Beccaria & Rolando, 2016) or gender (Hart, 2016). There is also increased recognition that, although cultural dimensions are often long-lasting, they can be subject to fluctuation or change. But the question still remains open about how best to measure cultural change in drinking – not changes up and down in the level of alcohol consumption in a population, but rather changes in the norms and informal social controls around drinking and associated behaviours. How well can such changes be captured by comparing population survey responses at different time-points, given that cross-sectional comparisons of survey responses do not necessarily find the differences that were predicted (e.g., Room & Bullock, 2002). A cultural change around drinking may involve changes in the threshold of noticing or defining a phenomenon – for instance, what qualifies as being drunk
(Midanik, 1999) — raising the possibility that part of the explanation of increases in drinking-related problems while consumption levels are falling may be in terms of changes in social attention and recording practices (Livingston, 2008; Pennay et al., 2015). Side-comments in Beccario and Rolando’s (2016) analysis suggest that cultural changes may only be evident across widely separated cohorts — as much as two generations apart. In this light, the 11-year span of most of the data in Bloomfield et al.’s (2016) analysis may be seen as offering only a hint of the potential changes in the longer term.

Measuring change in a particular culture is thus a complex goal, with many issues to be faced and solved. The complexities are multiplied if we try to understand and explain the current situation of an apparent generational change downward in drinking levels across a wide spectrum of societies, without obvious common structural or economic explanations. Researchers in several different countries are tackling this intellectual problem, with a network of collaborations. We await with interest the results of this new round of studies.

References


