FREE INQUIRY in Creative Sociology

DRINKING BEHAVIOR IN HIGH SCHOOL, COLLEGE AND ADULT GROUPS

Ibtihaj Arafat
City College, City University of New York

INTRODUCTION

The consumption of alcohol by American adults has long been accepted as normal social behavior. Possibly because of this, the emphasis in the recent past has been on the use and the abuse of other drugs, such as marijuana and heroin. However, the use of alcohol has not been replaced by the use of other drugs. According to Dr. Vernelle Fox, Chief of Alcoholism Services at Long Beach General Hospital in California, "The current trend in drug use by youth is shifting back toward alcohol as the drug of choice. It appears that we are passing the peak of drug experimentation, and are leveling out with a more chronic use pattern of mixed substance abuse, with alcohol quite prominent in the picture." (Saltman, 1973, 2)

The increasing use of alcohol has been recognized anew as the major drug problem confronting American society today. Casper Weinberger, as Secretary of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, stated that "...the proportion of American youth who drink has been increasing so that currently, it is almost universal." Several major studies in the past twenty-five years have illustrated the increase among high school and college students, and have provided possible reasons of the phenomenon. (Straus and Bacon, 1953; Maddox and McCall, 1964; Harrison et al, 1968; Kane and Patterson 1972; Wechsler and Thum, 1973; Pendergast and Schaffer, 1974) These studies centered on the implications of the parental model, the peer group, and religious values and norms on high school and college students' drinking habits.

One purpose of this research is to incorporate a broader perspective on these casual factors in a more diverse universe. This study was made to assess the effects of the habits of the two role models, parents, and peers, and the effect of prescribed values, and religion on the drinking habits of the individual. The sample was tested for the use and frequency of consumption of alcoholic beverages. Respondents indicated where and why they drink, and indicated the relative strength of their religious involvement.

RECENT LITERATURE ON ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION

In 1969 the National Center for Prevention and Control of Alcoholism reported that the average American had already taken his first taste of alcohol by age ten, and the first real drink was consumed between the ages of thirteen and fourteen. Thus, virtually every American had at least one drink before entering high school. (Alcohol and Alcoholism, 1969) Another study on Mississippi sixth grade students showed that one-third of the sample were already "regular users." (Harrison, Bennett and Globetti, 1968) These reports indicate the pervasiveness of alcohol use among the young in modern American society. Previous studies in the late 1940's and early 1950's found that 69 percent of college freshmen and 46 percent of first year college women had used alcohol. (Straus and Bacon, 1953) More recent studies demonstrate a higher rate of use among young people today. A study of 20,000 junior and senior high school students in Kentucky stated that only 27 percent of the respondents had never taken a drink. (Kane and Patterson, 1972) A more definitive statement of this increase was given in a 1974 U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare release. This indicated a rapid increase over just the past few years. A Toronto study noted that the proportion of students who had used alcohol within the previous six months increased from 46 percent in 1968 to 71 percent in 1972. A survey in San Mateo, California, reflected a similar increase, and stated that 84 percent of high school sophomore boys have had a drink of an alcoholic beverage (Weinberger, 1974). It has been seen that while the proportion of persons using alcohol has increased, the age of first use has descended to the pre-puberty age group. Earlier research has established the importance of certain role models and norm systems on individual drinking patterns which provide some explanation for this trend. An exploratory study indicates that differences in alcohol
use or abuse depends on differences in values and norms maintained by groups in the social environment. (Mizruchi and Perrucci, 1962) The Straus and Bacon study (1953) had shown that 92 percent of the male respondents used alcohol when both parents drank, while only 58 percent did so when their parents abstained. The corresponding percents for females was 83 percent and 23 percent respectively. This suggests that the influence of the parents is much stronger on girls than on boys, as regards drinking behavior.

In the study of Mississippi sixth graders, of the non-users, 80 percent of the parents were abstainers. (Harrison et al. 1968) Other studies confirm these results. Maddox stated: "...peer group drinking behavior among adolescents would tend to reflect that of the parental model." (Maddox and McCall, 1964, 8) In another study, Maddox (1970) found that adolescents who drink have at least one parent who drinks, while abstainers said that their parents are also abstainers. In an abstaining rural community in Mississippi, Globetti (1972) found that only 32 percent of the high school students had used alcohol during the previous year, as compared to much higher use levels among high school students elsewhere. In addition to the effect of the parental model, parental approval of drinking is likely to stimulate alcohol consumption by the young.

The influence of peer groups on alcohol use has been studied by several researchers, who have shown a correlation between the two factors. (Straus and Bacon, 1953; Slater, 1952) The Straus and Bacon study showed that 89 percent of males drank if their close friends did so, compared to 16 percent who drank when their close friends abstained. Among women, the figures were 79 percent and 5 percent, respectively. Most of the studies which we have cited agree on the effect of peer drinking. According to Maddox (1970, 107) 91 percent of the males and 82 percent of the females acknowledged strong peer pressure on their social drinking behavior. Of those who felt no peer pressure to drink, only 65 percent of the males and 40 percent of the females drank. Strong associations have also been shown between heavy drinking, illicit drug use, identification with the youth culture, and delinquent behavior. (Wechsler and Thum, 1973) A study by Kane and Patterson shows that drinkers perceived the majority of their classmates as drinkers, while the abstainers believed the majority of their age group to be abstainers. (Kane and Patterson, 1972) The recognition of peer pressure is echoed by the American Medical Association: "...drinking can be a status symbol for those who want to 'belong' to an influential group where alcohol is used freely." (Proceedings, 1973, 7)

Research on the relationship between acceptance of religious values and alcohol use is not as definitive. Snyder (1958) found an association between religious-ethnic affiliation and intoxication. He found that Jewish students directed by prescriptive norms, had a much lower rate of drunkenness than Protestants whose religious norms proscribed drinking. However, this study only considered Protestants who drank, and did not account for the large percentage who abstained. Maddox and McCall (1964) discovered that "...a positive relation was found between reported monthly attendance at organized religious activities and the probability of being a non-user." Generally, drinkers are not likely to define themselves as being either fairly religious or highly religious. (Wechsler and Thum, 1973, 1225) And users of illicit drugs tend to use alcohol more heavily than non-drug users. (Shafer, 1972)

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Several important social factors have been shown to affect drinking patterns: parental role model, peer group pressure, and religious beliefs. We are particularly interested in these factors, and their power to explain the climbing rate of alcohol use. It is also possible that the declining role of parental authority, and the declining influence of traditional norm system has permitted increased influence of social contacts in changing and directing the drinking behavior.

We wish to determine whether there is a difference in the effect of the parental model, the peer group, and religious convictions on drinking habits. The authority and norm system is defined as the parental role model and the religious belief system. The individual's social contacts are largely made up by the peer group. These function as independent variables to relate to the respondent's level and frequency of drinking. Controls for age and socioeconomic
status were included to provide evidence of the strength of these variables. If similar effects are found across three sub-groups incorporating different age levels and different social situations, this will tend to support the validity of the total study. The hypotheses is that drinking patterns are established by the parental model, peer group influence, and religious beliefs.

Questionnaires were answered by 1886 individuals in three sub-groups. The three groups were (1) 692 white male high school students, (2) 583 male college students, and (3) a wide ranging group of 611 white male independent adults. Discrete groups were randomly sampled to determine whether the factors in question had equal relevance in all groups. There were questions on whether the respondent used alcohol, and if so, how often, and why there was a need to drink. These questions were applied to develop a picture of the pressures which lay behind the drinking habit. There were also items to determine the extent of drinking among parents and peers. Questions did not concern the type of religion, but rather, how often the religious practices occurred, and how deep the respondent considered his religious conviction to be as an indication of the importance of religion for individual behavior.

An unknown bias was introduced by a tornado which shattered the windows of the office where the questionnaires were kept, in Stillwater, Oklahoma. Due to this event 309 questionnaires were lost, flooded, or disassembled. In addition to this loss, 97 questionnaires were incomplete, or incorrectly filled out. The analysis included 1480 analyzable questionnaires.

There are two major criticisms with the design of this research. First is the inherent difficulty of integrating different sub-groups, and particularly subgroups as discrete as these. This can be reduced by controlling the variables for each group separately. The second criticism is more serious. Considering the nature of the independent variables, peer group, parental model, and religious conviction, quantitative measures may not be possible. In the present case, we have accumulated scores from a minimum of five scaled questionnaire items for each variable which can be supported from the questionnaire items relevant to the variable in question. The possibility of personally biased interpretations of the role played by each respondent, and the long-term influence of these factors, which may change through time, make the statistical test in a static situation somewhat doubtful as a means of extracting reliable and useful information. Qualitative or interview methods may be better suited to acquiring reliable and viable results for this kind of research.

**FINDINGS**

Fairly frequent drinking of alcoholic beverages appears to be almost universal among high school students and college students. In both groups, the correlation of age with the extent of drinking behavior is zero within the limits of sampling error. Only 5 percent of both groups indicated that they never drink. The two groups together cover an impressive age span from 14 to 25 years. With 95 percent of the respondents in both groups indicating the more or less habitual use of alcohol, it is pointless to search for differences in drinking behavior attributable to the parental model, or to ethnic origin within the 5 percent statistical probability limit. The high school group indicated that liquor was kept in 94 percent of the homes. We can conclude that at least some regular drinking is started by the great majority of high school students at some time before they reach high school age. If most students began drinking after they entered high school there would be a positive correlation between age and extent of drinking involvement, at least in the high school sample. Only 3 percent indicated that they drink alone, and 76 percent indicated that they drink with others. More than half of the high school students said that they used marijuana, and 11 percent indicated the use of other drugs. A total of 34 percent stated that they mix alcohol and other drugs.

Only when we examine the data of adult respondents do we find an increased percentage of those who say that they do not drink. In the case of adult respondents 13 percent indicate that they never drink. Moreover only 11 percent of the adult respondents state that they mix drugs with alcohol consumption, which is less than one third of the proportion of high school students who mix drugs with drinking. Is it possible that some high school students are induced to drink and use drugs by strong peer pressures, against their personal pre-
ference? An answer to this question would be highly tentative, since future research may indicate a growing trend toward greater use of alcohol among non-student adults. In both groups there is some peer pressure toward drinking, because only about 2 percent of the respondents among high school students and among adults indicate that none of their friends drink.

The typical individual in modern society, in high school, college, and adult life, meets fairly frequent social occasions where alcoholic beverages are not only offered, but are to some degree required. One can refuse to join friends in drinking, but one tends to disappoint their expectations, and to be set somewhat apart from the drinkers. Neither the socially budding high school student, nor the college student can readily resist such social inducements.

The effect of social status on drinking behavior is vanishingly small. For high school students, whose social status in our account depends solely on family characteristics, such as family income and parental education and occupation levels, there is a negative correlation of $r = -.11$. Thus children from lower status families reflect slightly more drinking involvement. For college students, the correlation between social status and drinking involves reaching a value, $r = .20$, and $r^2 = .04$ (rounded) for the relation between the college student's social status, and his or her friends' and relatives' drinking involvement. The effect is slight, but perceptible. For adults, there is no apparent relation between social status and drinking.

Religious commitment has a very small negative effect on drinking involvement for high school students, with an $r^2$ value of about .02. For college students the correlation is also negative, but it is so small that the true correlation may be zero. Data on the religious commitment of adults is not sufficient to permit measurement and assessment. From these results, religious commitment does not materially affect involvement in drinking, and religious commitment is basically neutral to drinking behavior.

The highest correlation ($r = .231$) among factors related for high school students is between drinking involvement and drug involvement, indicating that one variable accounts for about 5 percent of the variance in the other. This low, but statistically significant relation indicates a basic sharing of the drug and drinking subcultures among high school students. Both are persistently conveyed through social pressures, primarily by the peer group, but also, in the same positive direction by the family. This is not to say that high school students' families exert deliberate positive pressure for drug involvement. In fact, the family experience has positive effects primarily on the students' drinking involvement, according to our data. But the secondary and indirect effect of family influence through drinking behavior has some positive effect on drug involvement, since drugs and alcohol go together in many of the high school students' peer group activities.

For college students, there is a strong positive relation between friends' drinking involvement and the respondent's own drinking involvement. ($r = .11$) However, it may be that the drinking patterns among college students merely perpetuate those previously maintained in high school. The majority of college students (64%) recognize no effects from their drinking, and only 4 percent recognize any harmful effects. Drinking involvement has become a habitual and accepted pattern of college life. The tavern is the regular gathering place, and the average college student takes drinking in stride.

Only among adult respondents is there a significant relation between age and social status. Career, income, and age have an opportunity to vary together, and the mutual effect ($r^2$) is about .17. The relation between drinking and the justification of drinking is the largest of all of the correlations (see Table A), with a shared variance of 32 percent ($r^2 = .32$). Those with more involvement in drinking show measurably more justification of their involvement. There is also a small negative relation ($r^2 = .02$) both between age and drinking involvement, and between age and justification of drinking. This slightly strengthens the impression that the social influences favoring both drug and drinking involvement are at a maximum in the high school and college years, and that these influences may tend to decline slightly with age. Once again, however, the evidence for this is weak, and merely suggestive. It is quite possible that the present youth cohorts may maintain their drinking and drug use patterns through their adult careers.
CONCLUSIONS

The primary elements which favor drinking involvement seem to be strong, pervasive, and persistent cultural factors. These include drinking in the family, keeping alcohol at home, and the incorporation of drinking, and to a less extent, drug use, in the powerful mechanisms of social life, during the long formative years of high school and college. The finding that this involvement is invariant by age, and the inference that it was deeply established prior to entry in high school is consistent with the findings of other studies. It should lead other researchers to seek the social roots of alcohol and drug involvement in the pre-high school years, and even in the entire life span of childhood experience. It is certainly possible that strong positive orientations both to drinking and to drug use may start in the child in early exposure to adult customs and values at home and in the graphic mass media. There, the cocktail glass is as familiar as the coffee cup, and although drugs are less prominently featured, the concept of self-dosage is widely and vividly advertised.

We are also intrigued by the modest evidence that the compulsion to drinking and drug involvement seem to be somewhat less in older age cohorts. For this reason we urge that others replicate the basic design of this research, comparing mathematically robust sample of high school, college, and adult respondents. The fact that this sample was confined to the New York area is not presumed to bias basic elements of the findings. The cultural pressures and social environments are so nearly identical that we believe other urban locales in the United States would show little difference. But it is worth asking whether high school, college and adult respondents in other countries, such as Germany, Brazil, Iraq, and Japan would reflect similar orientations and involvement with alcohol and drugs.

REFERENCES


Kane, Robert L. and Elizabeth Patterson, 1972. Drinking attitudes and behavior of high school students in Kentucky. Quarterly Jour. of Studies in Alcohol, 33, 3, 635-646.


(Concluded on P. 96)
(Continued from p. 91, ARAFAT)