Social and Cultural Aspects of Drinking

A report to the Amsterdam Group
## Contents

**Foreword by Desmond Morris**

**Introduction**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key findings</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioural effects</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol-related problems</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rules and regulation</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic functions</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drinking-places</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitional rituals</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Festive rituals</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European research</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Culture, chemistry and consequences**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Culture, chemistry and consequences</th>
<th>14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The ‘natural experiment’</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drunken comportment</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learned effects of alcohol</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations and excuses</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing expectations</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Rules and regulation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rules and regulation</th>
<th>21</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Variations</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant constants</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proscription of solitary drinking</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prescription of sociability</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reciprocity</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social control</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restrictions on female and ‘underage’ drinking</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Social and cultural roles of alcohol**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social and cultural roles of alcohol</th>
<th>31</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic roles</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situation definer</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status indicator</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of affiliation</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender differentiator</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for further research</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roles of drinking-places</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drinking-places and drinking cultures</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social functions of drinking-places</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A separate world</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social integration</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social bonding</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ritual roles</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitional rituals</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life-cycle transitions</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifestyle transitions</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habitual transitions</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why alcohol?</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic functions</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological functions</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social functions</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Festive rituals</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why alcohol?</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic convenience?</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural chemistry</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative reality</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balancing role</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for further research</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe: future directions</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selected bibliography</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Foreword by Desmond Morris

Next to breathing, drinking is the most essential of all human activities. It is even more important than feeding, for a man deprived of sustenance will die of thirst long before he will succumb to starvation. This need for liquid refreshment has been a major influence on our evolution. For our ancient ancestors as they spread across the globe it meant following the routes of rivers and lakes. Today the legacy of this dependence takes many forms – rites and rituals, customs and ceremonies all focused on the simple yet vital act of taking a drink.

In times of severe drought, the discovery of liquid to drink must have been a moment for high rejoicing. Celebrating the end of drought must have been one of the earliest of mankind’s major drinking events. And there can be little doubt that another intensely emotional moment occurred when primeval explorers, their drinking supplies long since exhausted, came at last upon a new supply of life-giving liquid. On such occasions as these our first social drinking rituals were born.

Because the act of drinking was so significant at times like that, a need arose for a new kind of drink. For special celebrations, water was not enough. If the moment was exceptional, then the drink too had to be exceptional. And if rituals had to be performed to encourage the gods to provide more for us to drink, then the gods must also be offered a special drink.

At first there were only four options – milk, water, plant-juices, or blood. All four were undoubtedly used during social ceremonies and festivities. Even water, the most common form of liquid, could be made special by incantations that converted it into a sacred liquid. But apart from bringing relief from thirst, none of these ancient drinks had any unusual impact on the mood of the drinkers. What was needed was a libation that transformed the drinkers and elevated them onto a higher plane of celebratory euphoria.

We will never know the name of the inventive genius who first conceived the idea of swallowing the juice of fermented fruit. It is possible that he made his discovery by watching the strange reactions of other kinds of animals when consuming large quantities of this potent kind of food. Wild elephants often get drunk on fermented fruit and can be seen swaying along on huge unsteady feet, their great ears flapping like giants fans to cool their dizzy heads. In the elephantine hangovers that followed, the pink men they saw were no hallucination, they were our ancestors trying to fathom out what was going on. Once the connection was made between abandoned behaviour and fermented fruit-juice, the inventors’ race was on – the birth of the booze was on the horizon.
The oldest kinds of alcoholic drink known to us, the remains of which have been found in tombs and settlements of early civilizations, are wine and beer. The Egyptians made wine from pomegranates and labelled it as such by pouring it into pomegranate-shaped flasks. Figs, dates and grapes were also used to make other kinds of wine in that ancient civilization. The technology of advanced drinking progressed at such a pace that, as early as the First Dynasty, about 5000 years ago, it was possible for hosts to ask their dinner guests whether they would prefer a red or a white wine, and even whether they would like a sweet or a dry wine, to accompany their meal. Already there were named vintages, and the cult of good drinking was well under way.

Beer was even more common than wine in ancient times and many varieties are mentioned in the earliest texts known to us. Travellers remarked that these primal brews were ‘not much inferior to wine’. Like the wine, beer was downed in large quantities at all great occasions and the rich pantheon of gods of those far-off days appeared to require a great deal of sacred swallowing on the part of their devoted followers, to keep them happy in their various heavens.

It is usually argued that it was the introduction of cereal agriculture that made it possible to invent beer, but an intriguing counter-argument has been put forward to the effect that it was the need for beer that made agriculture possible.

The secret of the success of this improved form of drinking, using wine and beer, was twofold. First, the liquids involved were difficult to produce, requiring a lengthy process of growing, collection, preparation, fermentation, straining and bottling. This alone made the act of drinking seem more significant.

Even more importantly, the consumption of these beverages created a shared sense of heightened well-being and release from tension. This new style of social drinking may have harked back to the primeval joy of parched, aching throats finding cool, clear water, but it now went much further. It carried men off into a world of harmless pleasure where the pressures of their newly adopted urban way of life could be eased, if only for a while. It was a marvellous invention of the first great civilizations – a form of shared, chemical day-dreaming that provided vital opportunities for social bonding. Those that drank together stayed together.

It was important that early drinking was most commonly associated with great celebrations and other festive occasions. These are times when those present are in a mood to enjoy themselves. This is essential if alcohol is to play its best role. For it is not a stimulant, but an inhibitor of inhibitions. And there is a subtle difference. Whatever the dominant mood of the drinker, alcohol will exaggerate it by removing the usual social restraints. If the drinker
is happy he becomes happier; if he is sad he becomes sadder. There is absolutely no truth in the idea that alcohol helps to ‘drown your sorrows’. If you are sorrowful to start with you will only sink deeper into despair as the night wears on. For this reason, the happy social occasion is the ideal environment for the human ritual of ‘taking a drink’. As such it has always had – and will always have – great social significance.

Desmond Morris,
Oxford 1998
The aim of this report is to provide an overview of the research on social and cultural aspects of alcohol, and the significant conclusions that can be drawn from this literature, in a form that will be helpful to decision-makers.

The findings and conclusions presented here are based mainly on extensive bibliographic research conducted by the Social Issues Research Centre for the Amsterdam Group. This work involved a literature search of over 5000 books, journal articles, conference proceedings, abstracts and research papers (a Selected Bibliography of over 2000 references is provided with this report). The research was aided by on-line computer links to university and government libraries and databases around the world, as well as some direct contact with key researchers. We have also drawn to some extent on our own cross-cultural field research on specific social aspects of drinking.

Although no review of this nature can ever be exhaustive or definitive, we are confident that the material on which this summary is based provides the foundation for an accurate and balanced overview of the social roles of alcohol in human societies. In the interests of such balance and accuracy, we have adopted the largely ‘phenomenological’ approach advocated by social scientists concerned with the objective study of drinking behaviour *per se*, rather the problem-oriented approach of those concerned primarily with the prevention and treatment of deviant or dysfunctional drinking. Heath (1987) includes among the “significant generalisations that derive from cross-cultural study of the subject” the fact that:

> “The association of drinking with any kind of specifically associated problems – physical, economic, psychological, social relational or other – is rare among cultures throughout both history and the contemporary world.”

This statement is now uncontroversial and commonplace among anthropologists engaged in cross-cultural research on alcohol, who recognise that non-problematic drinking is ‘normal’ in both statistical and sociological terms. We are aware, however, that such factual statements about the use of alcohol are often confused with moral judgements about its merits. In this context, we must emphasise that recognition of the scientifically ‘abnormal’ status of alcohol-related problems in no way denies or belittles the suffering of those who are affected by such problems.

It is now widely acknowledged, however, that the dominance of problem-oriented perspectives has led to a serious imbalance in the study of alcohol, whereby problems affecting only a small minority of drinkers have received disproportionate attention, while the
study of ‘normal’ drinking has been neglected. Our own profession must accept much of the blame for this imbalance, as Selden Bacon (1943) noted over half a century ago, when he complained that dysfunctional drinking:

“... has attracted all of the attention, just as the comet or shooting star elicits more comment than do the millions of ‘ordinary’ stars. In the average citizen this imbalance is not blameworthy: in the scientifically trained student, however, it is blameworthy ... The entire field of social science may be freely criticised in this way; in many instances it may still be found gazing in starry-eyed wonder at the occasional volcanoes, emeralds and icebergs ... when it has a gigantic earth crust as its field of enquiry.”

His warning was clearly not heeded, as some thirty years later, M.K. Bacon (1973) indicated that not much had changed, and suggested some reasons for the continuing imbalance in alcohol studies:

“In spite of their prevalence, through time and across societies, drinking customs per se have received relatively little attention from research workers. Instead, research in this field has been dominated by a social problem orientation and has focused mainly on deviant aspects of drinking... This differential emphasis... undoubtedly reflects multiple origins: the negative image of drinking bequeathed by the Temperance Movement, the disease concept of alcoholism associated with the medical profession, and the realistic and urgent need to control drug-induced incompetence in an increasingly mechanised world.”

It is also perhaps no coincidence that nations with a strong Temperance tradition and ambivalent attitudes towards alcohol have entirely dominated the field of alcohol studies, while cultures in which drinking is not perceived as a problem have seen little need to conduct extensive research on the subject. Mäkelä (1975) observed, with a degree of wry humour, that “alcohol research as a behavioural science is particularly active in ambivalent societies.”

As we approach the end of the century, the imbalance still persists, leading Paul Roman (1991) to register yet another plea for more objective research:

“Alcohol studies must be liberated from justifying our existence in the political arena. Accepting the primacy of the social-problem significance of a phenomenon directs research primarily toward the political-problem issues rather than toward good quality science.”

By this time, however, the increasing involvement of anthropologists in the study of alcohol had already introduced a
more phenomenological approach, although their perspective was still at odds with ‘mainstream’ alcohol research, as noted by Heath (1987):

“... whereas most anthropologists who study alcohol tend to focus on belief and behaviour, paying at least as much attention to ‘normal’ as to ‘deviant’ patterns, most others who study alcohol tend to focus on ‘alcoholism’, variously defined, by implying that habitual drinking is invariably associated with some kind of problem or kinds of problems.”

Although their focus on non-problematic drinking led Room (1983) to accuse some ethnographers of ‘problem deflation’, it is clear that the phenomenological approach in itself does not by any means deny or minimise the fact that alcohol can be a social problem in certain cultures. On the contrary, the study of drinking as a complex sociocultural phenomenon has led to a better understanding of the specific cultural factors associated with problematic, anti-social drinking patterns, as well as identifying the characteristic features of drinking-cultures which do not exhibit these tendencies. Perhaps the most valuable contribution of this approach has been, as Heath (1987) points out:

“... the fundamental realisation that many of the outcomes of [alcohol] use are mediated by cultural factors rather than chemical, biological or other pharmaco-physiological factors.”

Having stressed the importance of the anthropological approach in understanding the influence of cultural factors on drinking ‘outcomes’, we also recognise that this perspective has in some cases been taken to extremes, leading to a ‘cultural reductionism’ which is no more helpful than the ‘biochemical reductionism’ of purely medical models. The cultural-reductionist tendency which leads otherwise intelligent anthropologists to make ludicrous statements such as “sex differences do not exist external to cultural perceptions of them” (McDonald, 1994) can also cloud their judgement on alcohol issues. Just as there are certain features of male and female anatomy which clearly exist independently of cultural perceptions, there are equally obvious biochemical effects of ethanol (on psycho-motor functions, for example, and on the liver) which are independent of social and cultural factors.

Both comparative studies and controlled experiments have demonstrated, however, that while ethanol produces well-understood neurochemical changes, the wide variations in social and behavioural outcomes of drinking can only be explained with reference to cultural factors, and to culturally determined beliefs about the effects of drinking (MacAndrew and Edgerton, 1969; Marshall, 1979; Marlatt and Rohsenow, 1980; Holyfield et
al, 1995; Peele, 1997). Yet despite the obvious centrality of cultural factors in, for example, the association (or lack of it) between alcohol and violence, where drinking produces quite opposite behavioural effects in different cultures, otherwise intelligent scientists still attempt to explain the ‘link’ purely in terms of ethanol-induced decreases of 5-hydroxy tryptamine in the brain, without any reference whatsoever to well-documented cross-cultural variation (e.g. D.G. Grahame-Smith, 1993).

Somewhere between these extremes must lie a sensible balance, in which the mind-numbing effects of theoretical or political biases are minimised, and both biochemical and cultural evidence can be assessed in a rational manner. Levin’s (1990) characterisation of alcohol use as a complex ‘biopsychosocial’ phenomenon may provide a useful conceptual meeting-point for the various competing approaches, and the work of Dwight Heath provides an excellent model of even-handedness and clear thinking in this field.

Such qualities are not only desirable, but essential, in a field where academic findings can have significant implications for policy and legislation – and may be used as ammunition in battles between moral crusaders, lobbyists and others with ideological, political or commercial vested interests. Our own purpose in this summary is not to add fuel to already overheated debates about the virtues or evils of drink. We intend neither to praise alcohol nor to ‘bury’ it, but to provide a calm and balanced overview of the available information on the role of alcohol in human cultures, the conclusions that may reasonably be drawn from the existing literature and the important questions that still remain.
Key findings

One of the problems facing those concerned with the development of policies and legislation on alcohol issues is the sheer volume of research and publications on this subject. In addition, these works span a variety of disciplines, and are often couched in academic jargon which may be incomprehensible to non-specialists.

In this section, we therefore provide a brief, bullet-point summary of the key findings and significant generalisations that can be drawn from our survey of the literature on social and cultural aspects of alcohol. Subsequent sections provide more detailed examination of some of these findings, but the generalisations presented in this summary can be regarded as relatively uncontroversial ‘sociocultural facts’ about drinking, many of which have been consistent features of similar literature-reviews and summaries for over a decade (Douglas, 1987; Pittman and White, 1991; Heath, 1998).

History

- Alcohol has played a central role in almost all human cultures since Neolithic times (about 4000 BC). All societies, without exception, make use of intoxicating substances, alcohol being by far the most common.

- There is convincing evidence that the development of agriculture – regarded as the foundation of civilisation – was based on the cultivation of grain for beer, as much as for bread.

- The persistence of alcohol use, on a near-universal scale, throughout human evolution, suggests that drinking must have had some significant adaptive benefits, although this does not imply that the practice is invariably beneficial.

- From the earliest recorded use of alcohol, drinking has been a social activity, and both consumption and behaviour have been subject to self-imposed social controls.

- Attempts at prohibition have never been successful except when couched in terms of sacred rules in highly religious cultures.

Behavioural effects

- There is enormous cross-cultural variation in the way people behave when they drink. In some societies (such as the UK, Scandinavia, US and Australia), alcohol is associated with violent and anti-social behaviour, while in others (such as Mediterranean and some South American cultures) drinking behaviour is largely peaceful and harmonious.

- This variation cannot be attributed to different levels of consumption or genetic differences, but is clearly related to
different cultural beliefs about alcohol, expectancies regarding the effects of alcohol and social norms regarding drunken comportment.

- The findings of both cross-cultural research and controlled experiments indicate that the effects of alcohol on behaviour are primarily determined by social and cultural factors, rather than the chemical actions of ethanol.

Alcohol-related problems

- In global statistical terms, physical, psychological and social problems associated with alcohol affect only a small minority of consumers, even in the more ‘problematic’ drinking-cultures.

- The prevalence of alcohol-related problems is not directly related to average per capita consumption: countries with low average consumption (such as Ireland and Iceland) often register relatively high rates of alcohol-related social and psychiatric problems, while countries with much higher levels of consumption (such as France and Italy) score low on most indices of problem drinking.

- Alcohol-related problems are associated with specific cultural factors, relating to beliefs, attitudes, norms and expectancies about drinking.

- Societies with generally positive beliefs and expectancies about alcohol (variously defined as ‘non-Temperance’, ‘wet’, ‘Mediterranean’ or ‘integrated’ drinking-cultures) experience significantly fewer alcohol-related problems; negative or inconsistent beliefs and expectancies (found mainly in ‘Temperance’, ‘dry’, ‘Nordic’ or ‘ambivalent’ drinking-cultures) are associated with higher levels of alcohol-related problems.

- The beliefs and expectancies of a given culture can change. In many countries, particularly in Europe, there are early signs of a shift towards more negative/ambivalent beliefs in previously positive/integrated drinking-cultures, which may result in an increase in alcohol-related problems (see ‘Symbolic functions’, below).

- Although some cultures experience more alcohol-related problems than others, moderate, unproblematic drinking is the norm in most cultures, while both excessive drinking and abstention are abnormal behaviours.

- Most of the problems commonly ‘linked’ with drinking – crime, violence, disorder, accidents, spousal abuse, disease, etc. – are correlated with excessive (abnormal) drinking rather than with moderate (normal) drinking.
Rules and regulation

- In all cultures, drinking is a rule-governed activity, hedged about with self-imposed norms and regulations concerning who may drink how much of what, when, how, in what contexts, with what effects, etc. – rules which are often the focus of strong emotions.

- Although variations in these rules and norms reflect the characteristic values, attitudes and beliefs of different cultures, there are significant cross-cultural similarities or ‘constants’ in the unwritten rules governing alcohol use.

- Analysis of cross-cultural research reveals four near-universal ‘constants’:
  1. Proscription of solitary drinking
  2. Prescription of sociability
  3. Social control of consumption and behaviour
  4. Restrictions on female and ‘underage’ drinking.

- Research findings indicate that these unofficial rules, and the self-imposed protocols of drinking rituals, have more influence on both levels of consumption and drinking behaviour than ‘external’ or legal controls.

- The literature to date offers no satisfactory explanation for the near-universality of restrictions on female drinking, as all researchers have attempted to explain this in purely cultural terms. We suggest that the prevalence of such restrictions may be due to non-cultural factors such as differences in male and female physiology resulting in more pronounced effects of alcohol on females.

- While all contemporary cultures impose some restrictions on ‘underage’ drinking, both the definitions of ‘underage’ and the nature of the restrictions vary widely (despite increasing uniformity in official, legal controls) with more rigid restrictions in ‘ambivalent’ drinking-cultures and more permissive approaches in ‘integrated’ drinking-cultures.

Symbolic functions

- In all societies, alcoholic beverages are used as powerful and versatile symbolic tools, to construct and manipulate the social world.

- Cross-cultural research reveals four main symbolic uses of alcoholic beverages:
  1. As labels defining the nature of social situations or events
  2. As indicators of social status
3. As statements of affiliation

4. As gender differentiators.

- There is convincing historical and contemporary evidence to show that the adoption of ‘foreign’ drinks often involves the adoption of the drinking patterns, attitudes and behaviours of the alien culture. This has nothing to do with any intrinsic properties of the beverages themselves – beer, for example, may be associated with disorderly behaviour in some cultures or sub-cultures and with benign sociability in others.

- In Europe, the influence of some ‘ambivalent’, northern, beer-drinking cultures on ‘integrated’, southern, wine-drinking cultures is increasing, and is associated with potentially detrimental changes in attitudes and behaviour (e.g. the adoption of British ‘lager-lout’ behaviour among young males in Spain, and see *Transitional Rituals* below).

- Historical evidence suggests that attempts to curb the anti-social excesses associated with an ‘alien’ beverage through Draconian restrictions on alcohol *per se* may result in the association of such behaviour with the formerly ‘benign’ native beverage, and an overall increase in alcohol-related problems.

- Some societies appear less susceptible to the cultural influence of alien beverages than others. Although the current ‘convergence’ of drinking patterns also involves increasing consumption of wine in formerly beer- or spirits-dominated cultures, this has so far not been accompanied by an adoption of the more harmonious behaviour and attitudes associated with wine-drinking cultures. (This may in part reflect the generally higher social status of those adopting wine-drinking.)

**Drinking-places**

- Drinking is, in all cultures, essentially a social activity, and most societies have specific, designated environments for communal drinking.

- Cross-cultural differences in the physical nature of public drinking-places reflect different attitudes towards alcohol. Positive, integrated, non-Temperance cultures tend to favour more ‘open’ drinking environments, while negative, ambivalent, Temperance cultures are associated with ‘closed’, insular designs.

- Research also reveals significant cross-cultural similarities or ‘constants’:

  1. In all cultures, the drinking-place is a special environment, a separate social world with its own customs and values
2. Drinking-places tend to be socially integrative, egalitarian environments.

3. The primary function of drinking-places is the facilitation of social bonding.

**Transitional rituals**

- In all societies, alcohol plays a central role in transitional rituals – both major life-cycle events and minor, everyday transitions.
- In terms of everyday transitions, cultures (such as the US and UK) in which alcohol is only used to mark the transition from work to play – where drinking is associated with recreation and irresponsibility, and regarded as antithetical to working – tend to have higher levels of alcohol-related problems.
- Cultures in which drinking is an integral part of the normal working day, and alcohol may be used to mark the transition to work (e.g. France, Spain, Peru), tend to have lower levels of alcohol-related problems.
- Shifts away from traditional pre-work or lunchtime drinking in these cultures could be a cause for concern, as these changes can indicate a trend towards drinking patterns and attitudes associated with higher levels of alcohol-related problems.

**Festive rituals**

- Alcohol is universally associated with celebration, and drinking is, in all cultures, an essential element of festivity.
- In societies with an ambivalent, morally charged relationship with alcohol (such as the UK, US, Scandinavia, Australia), ‘celebration’ is used as an excuse for drinking. In societies in which alcohol is a morally neutral element of normal life (such as Italy, Spain and France), alcohol is strongly associated with celebration, but celebration is not invoked as a justification for every drinking occasion.
- In cultures with a tradition of casual, everyday drinking in addition to celebratory drinking, any shifts towards the more episodic celebratory drinking of ‘ambivalent’ cultures should be viewed with concern, as these patterns are associated with higher levels of alcohol-related problems.

**European research**

- Although European countries are among the world’s highest consumers of alcohol, the literature review showed that very little research has focused on social and cultural aspects of drinking in Europe.
- Most national and cross-cultural studies of drinking in Europe have been of a purely quantitative, epidemiological nature and...
provide little or no insight into the social contexts and cultural roles of drinking.

- The majority of such studies have also been explicitly ‘problem-oriented’ – sometimes to the extent that ‘non-problematic’ countries such as Italy have been deliberately excluded from the samples. This has led to an unbalanced perspective.

- Of the very few genuinely ‘sociocultural’ studies, most have involved small-scale ethnographic research in remote regions or unrepresentative sub-cultures, rather than mainstream cultural contexts.

- The only up-to-date, sociocultural work focusing on mainstream drinking-cultures in different European societies is Heath’s (1995) *International Handbook on Alcohol and Culture*. Although by far the most informative source currently available, this is a global survey with only 10-12 pages on each country.

- There is a clear and urgent need for large-scale systematic research on social and cultural aspects of drinking in Europe, and for continuous monitoring of shifts and changes in mainstream European drinking-cultures, particularly in terms of the effects of cultural ‘convergence’.

- Although written for a mainly European audience, this SIRC report is based on a global literature-review and draws on evidence and examples from a wide range of drinking-cultures around the world. This broader perspective in part reflects the limited relevant research material available on European drinking-cultures, but is also a deliberate attempt to avoid the parochialism which often characterises research on alcohol.
The cross-cultural study of alcohol represents a classic natural experiment: a single species (Homo Sapiens), a single drug substance (ethanol) and a great diversity of behavioural outcomes.” Marshall 1979

It would be inappropriate to present a detailed account of the biochemical and physiological effects of alcohol in this report, or to dwell on health issues, as these are covered in separate reports. We have, however, criticised some of our colleagues for ignoring ‘non-cultural’ aspects of alcohol, and in the context of considering the roles of culture and chemistry in the behavioural outcomes of drinking it is important to note the relevant biochemical effects.

Independent of cultural context, it is clear that ethanol produces dose-related changes in central nervous system (CNS) functioning which in turn affect basic physiological processes. In layman’s terms, after ingestion of moderate to high doses of alcohol: reaction times are generally slower; short-term and intermediate memory may be affected; performance on problem solving tasks decreases and muscle control, dexterity and eye-hand co-ordination may be impaired.

While these physiological and psychological correlates of alcohol consumption are not disputed, the effect of alcohol on affective or emotional processes is far more variable and complex, and results of experiments have proved inconclusive and unreliable. Effects on emotional states and specific forms of behaviour are clearly extremely hard to demonstrate, as to prove that alcohol produces, by way of action on the CNS, psychological changes which lead to particular behaviours, one must control for the influence of social and cultural factors and individual expectations regarding the effects of alcohol.

The ‘natural experiment’

This necessitates the use of cross-cultural methods which allow measurement of the extent of variation attributable to sociocultural influences. For alcohol to be seen as a causal variable, in any meaningful sense, with regard to emotional states and behaviour, we would expect it to produce an invariant pattern of responses across all cultures. If, however, alcohol evokes only diffuse psychological states which have no direct prescriptions for behaviour, then we would expect to see responses varying according to different social and cultural mores. In other words, beyond consistency in the straightforward physiological, psycho-motor and cognitive effects outlined above, we would expect high levels of emotional and behavioural variance around the world following drinking. Such variance would not mean that alcohol plays no role at all in the generation of, say, promiscuous or
aggressive behaviour; rather, it would indicate a strong alcohol-culture interaction, with cultural variables modifying, directing or even overriding the physiological and psychological effects of alcohol.

The ‘natural experiment’ of cross-cultural study finds levels of variance which rule out any direct causal effects of alcohol on behaviour. We have already noted that in some societies drunken aggression and belligerence are commonplace, while in others the same doses of ethanol result in quite opposite behaviour, characterised by calmness, passivity and good humour. Even within a single culture, the diversity of behavioural effects is often striking: the Aztec name for their alcoholic beverage *pulque* was *centzontzototchiti* or ‘four hundred rabbits’, in recognition of its almost infinite variety of effects on those who drank it (Marshall, 1983).

**Drunken comportment**

One of the earliest attempts to make use of Marshall’s ‘natural experiment’ to test commonly accepted hypotheses regarding the effects of alcohol, MacAndrew and Edgerton’s *Drunken Comportment* (1969), is still the most widely quoted in the anthropological literature. The authors saw their task as:

“A reconsideration of the conventional understanding of one aspect of man’s relationship to alcohol – the proposition that alcohol, by virtue of its toxic assault upon the central nervous system, causes the drinker to lose control of himself and do things he would not otherwise do.”

MacAndrew and Edgerton note the general reluctance of scientists to admit empirical evidence that is at odds with accepted theory, pointing out that in the history of every scientific discipline, the discrepancy between conventional explanations and observable fact has frequently had to become “downright scandalous” before such explanations are abandoned. In the case of the ‘alcohol as disinhibitor’ theory, they argue that:

“The disjunction between the conventionally accepted formulation of alcohol’s effects upon man’s comportment, and presently available fact concerning what people actually do when they are drunk is even now so scandalous as to exceed the limits of reasonable toleration.”

The empirical evidence presented in *Drunken Comportment* includes detailed accounts of:

- societies in which drunkenness does not result in any ‘disinhibited’ behaviour at all
- societies in which the type of behaviour associated with drunkenness has undergone radical changes over time
• societies in which drunken behaviour varies dramatically according to the circumstances in which alcohol is consumed
• societies in which apparently ‘disinhibited’ drunken behaviour remains within well-defined, culturally sanctioned limits.

Almost 30 years on, despite the ever-increasing weight of conflicting evidence, the ‘conventional formulation’ still has its supporters, and the ‘reconsideration’ is still in progress.

Drunken Comportment remains, however, the only global-scale, systematic analysis of empirical evidence relating specifically to drunken behaviour. Although individual studies and ethnographies have contributed further examples of variation in alcohol’s effects on human behaviour, descriptions of drunken behaviour are often incidental to the main focus or argument of the work, and therefore may not provide a reliable indication of the predominant behaviours associated with drunkenness in a particular culture.

An ethnographer’s account of a drunken event at which, for example, aggressive or sexually promiscuous behaviour was exhibited does not indicate that these behaviours are invariably, or even typically, associated with drinking in the society concerned. Nor can we draw any such general conclusions from ‘isolated’ accounts of drunken occasions at which no aggressive or promiscuous behaviours were evident. To bring MacAndrew and Edgerton’s work up to date – with any degree of scientific rigour – would therefore require more than a review of the more recent anthropological literature.

Despite this caveat, the cross-cultural evidence of wide variation in drunken behaviour is extensive, and must cast doubt on any purely biochemical explanations. The problem-oriented approach of recent years has led to a disproportionate focus on just two of the many possible behavioural outcomes of drinking, aggression and sexual promiscuity, at the expense of what the Aztecs might call ‘the other 398 rabbits’.

Some people, in some societies, may indeed behave in an aggressive or promiscuous manner when drunk, but the range of behavioural outcomes also includes calmness, joviality, passivity, indolence, affability, tolerance, sociability, generosity, volubility, confidence, loquaciousness, sentimentality, gaiety, euphoria, animation, tenderness, tranquillity, boastfulness, jocularity, silliness, laziness, effusiveness, vivacity, cheerfulness, relaxation, drowsiness, peacefulness, etc. In global terms, the most frequently emphasised outcomes are relaxation and sociability.

Learned effects of alcohol

It is not enough, of course, simply to demonstrate that the biochemical disinhibitor theory cannot explain the observable facts of drunken behaviour. To use Marhsall’s ‘natural experiment’ merely to test and reject an untenable hypothesis, without
attempting to provide a more satisfactory explanation of the variance in behavioural outcomes of drinking, would be, at the very least, a waste of good ethnography.

The wide variations in responses to alcohol across cultures and within cultures led MacAndrew and Edgerton not only to reject simplistic pharmacological disinhibition models, but to consider the specific aspects of culture which lead to the learning of alcohol-related behaviour. The notion that the behavioural outcomes of drinking are determined by cultural norms had already been proposed in a seminal paper by Mandelbaum (1965):

“When a man lifts a cup, it is not only the kind of drink that is in it, the amount he is likely to take and the circumstances under which he will do the drinking that are specified in advance for him, but also whether the contents of the cup will cheer or stupefy; whether they will induce affection or aggression, quiet or unalloyed pleasure. These and many other cultural definitions attach to the drink even before it reaches his lips”

MacAndrew and Edgerton, and subsequent researchers (Marshall, 1976; Douglas, 1987; McDonald, 1994; etc.), have provided overwhelming evidence to support Mandelbaum’s statement, and to illustrate the learning process summarised in Drunken Comportment:

“Over the course of socialisation, people learn about drunkenness what their society ‘knows’ about drunkenness; and, accepting and acting upon the understandings thus imparted to them, they become the living confirmation of their society’s teachings.”

The anthropological literature shows how central aspects of culture can radically shape the ways in which people learn to drink and the patterns of behaviour which are associated with alcohol consumption. It is also clear that the process of ‘acculturation’, whether induced by colonial domination, tourism or economic and cultural ‘convergence’ such as that currently occurring in parts of Europe, can introduce styles of drinking with which previously existing cultural frameworks are unable to cope (Cottino, 1995; Gamella, 1995; Heath, 1995; McDonald, 1994).

To understand why, in some societies, drinking leads to problematic behaviours, we therefore need to be concerned with aspects of culture and cultural change, rather than with the pharmacology of alcohol. The different patterns of learning fostered by different cultures, and the novel modes of learning that acculturation can present, do not only provide models of appropriate and inappropriate drinking habits, they also create sets of expectancies regarding the behavioural effects of alcohol.
Reviews of both ethnographic and psychological literature show that the behavioural consequences of drinking are always in accord with what people in a given culture expect to happen, and that individuals internalise such expectations during the learning process of socialisation.

Critchlow (1986) convincingly argues that if we are to change problematic drinking behaviours we must tackle beliefs about the effects of alcohol. Recent psychological studies confirm her view by showing that the responses of experimental subjects vary widely in line with their previous expectations of the effects of alcohol. Similarly, manipulation of expectancies in the experimental setting, while maintaining dosage of alcohol at the same level, also produces significant changes in responses (Gustafson, 1987; Christiansen, 1982; Rohsenow, 1984; Vogel-Sprott, 1992; Neff, 1991; Milgram, 1993, etc). Heath (1998) provides the following clear summary of the ethnographic and psychological findings:

“There is overwhelming historical and cross-cultural evidence that people learn not only how to drink but how to be affected by drink through a process of socialisation...Numerous experiments conducted under strictly controlled conditions (double-blind, with placebos) on a wide range of subjects and in different cultures have demonstrated that both mood and actions are affected far more by what people think they have drunk than by what they have actually drunk...In simple terms, this means that people who expect drinking to result in violence become aggressive; those who expect it to make them feel sexy become amorous; those who view it as disinhibiting are demonstrative. If behaviour reflects expectations, then a society gets the drunks it deserves.”

**Expectations and excuses**

Expectations not only shape drunken behaviour, they also enable subsequent rationalisation, justification and excuses (MacAndrew and Edgerton, 1969; Gusfield, 1987). In cultures where there is an expectation that alcohol will lead to aggression, for example, people appeal to the fact that they were drunk in order to excuse their belligerent conduct. This is particularly evident in Britain, where defendants in court often plead for mitigation on the basis that they were intoxicated at the time of the offence. Perhaps surprisingly, British courts often accept such pleading, arguing that the behaviour was ‘out of character’ – a standard metaphor for disinhibition. In more informal social contexts, excuses such as “it was the drink talking” are even more likely to be accepted.

In cultures where learned expectations about the effects of alcohol are very different from the British, appeals to drunkenness as an excuse for aggressive behaviour would not only fail to be persuasive, they might actually compound the severity of the
offence. Among Italian youth, for example, attempts to excuse violent or anti-social behaviour on the grounds that the person was drunk would meet with incredulity (Marsh and Fox, 1992).

Room (1983, 1984b) argues that negative expectations about the effects of alcohol may derive from current ‘amplification’ or exaggeration of alcohol problems, particularly in the US and UK. This may seem surprising given Room’s suggestion, noted earlier, that some anthropologists have been guilty of ‘problem deflation’ in their studies of alcohol. Nonetheless, he points out that drinking is more likely to serve as an excuse for anti-social behaviour if we increasingly attribute strong powers to alcohol. If we believe that the powers are ‘real’, they become real. Following Room’s argument directly, Critchlow (1986) summarises:

“On a cultural level it seems to be the negative consequences of alcohol that hold most powerful sway over our thinking. Because alcohol is seen as a cause of negative behaviour, alcohol-related norm violations are explained with reference to drinking rather than the individual. Thus, by believing that alcohol makes people act badly, we give it a great deal of power. Drinking becomes a tool that legitimates irrationality and excuses violence without permanently destroying an individual’s moral standing or the society’s system of rules and ethics.”

Gusfield (1987) also argues that current ‘problem inflation’ and warnings about the disinhibiting effects of alcohol provide drinkers with a convenient excuse for anti-social behaviour:

“The very derogation of drinking among large segments of American society creates its meaning as quasi-subterranean behaviour...by shifting the burden of explaining embarrassing moments from a reflection of the self to the effects of alcohol, drinking provides an excuse for lapses of responsibility, for unmannering; for gaucheries, for immoral or improper actions. ‘I was not myself’ is the plea of the morning after.”

Changing expectations Changing people’s expectations about the behavioural effects of alcohol may seem to be a daunting task, especially as dire warnings about the links between drinking and problem behaviours are currently a standard feature of both sensationalist media coverage of alcohol issues and supposedly ‘responsible’ alcohol-education programmes.

Engineering a shift in beliefs might, however, be one of the most effective strategic approaches to reducing alcohol-related problems. The historical and cross-cultural evidence shows that such changes in beliefs regularly occur, suggesting that attempts to promote a shift in expectations would not be ‘going against nature’ in any
sense. Presenting a basis for alternative beliefs about the effects of alcohol, stressing social harmony and relaxation rather than aggression, promiscuity or anti-social conduct, should, according to the evidence available, result in corresponding changes in alcohol-related behaviour.

Studies comparing the wider consequences of drinking in different cultures – such as Levine’s (1992) influential paper on ‘Temperance’ and ‘Non-temperance’ cultures – suggest that a shift toward more positive beliefs about alcohol could affect not only immediate behavioural outcomes but also longer-term social and even health consequences of drinking (Harburg et al, 1993). Consistently positive beliefs are associated not just with good behaviour when actually ‘under the influence’, but more healthful, less physically damaging patterns and modes of drinking. As Heath (1998) points out:

“... the impact of two drinks on each of seven days is very different from that of fourteen drinks on a Saturday night ... Similarly, five drinks gulped down fast with no food will have an impact markedly different from five drinks spaced throughout a six-hour dinner party.”

The episodic, binge-drinking patterns of ‘ambivalent’, ‘Temperance’ cultures are associated with a wider range and higher frequency of alcohol-related problems – including alcoholism, accidents, drink-driving, hangovers and hypertension – than the more harmonious drinking styles of ‘non-Temperance’ cultures, although the latter almost always have significantly higher per-capita consumption (Peele, 1997). Indeed, it is now a ‘cross-cultural commonplace’ to observe that alcohol-related problems (with the exception of liver cirrhosis) often occur in inverse proportion to consumption levels (Heath, 1998). The cumulative evidence on culture, chemistry and consequences seems to indicate that alcohol policies designed to change beliefs and expectations are likely to be more beneficial than attempts to reduce overall consumption.
Rules and regulation

“Where alcohol is known, patterns for its use and for abstention are prescribed, usually in fine detail. There have been very few, if any, societies whose people knew the use of alcohol and yet paid little attention to it. Alcohol may be tabooed; it is not ignored.”

David G. Mandelbaum, Alcohol and Culture, 1965

There is no such thing as random drinking. Drinking, in every culture, is a rule-governed activity, hedged about with prescriptions and norms concerning who may drink how much of what, when, where, with whom, in what manner and with what effects.

This is to be expected. One of the distinguishing characteristics of *homo sapiens* is our passion for regulation – our tendency to surround even the most basic, necessary activities such as eating and mating with elaborate rules and rituals, and to attach immense social significance to every aspect of the process. The nature of these rules may vary dramatically from one culture to another, but rule-making itself is in our nature.

Even more than with sex and food, however, the specific unwritten rules and norms governing the use of alcohol in individual cultures invariably reflect the characteristic values, beliefs and attitudes of those cultures. Heath (1991) points out that:

“... just as drinking and its effects are imbedded in other aspects of culture, so are many other aspects of culture imbedded in the act of drinking.”

The fact that drinking is regulated in accordance with the fundamental themes of a given culture may account for the increasing popularity of ‘alcohology’ among anthropologists and other social scientists concerned with discovering and explaining these themes. Equally, ethnographic material on drinking practices and their relation to significant cultural themes is of value to those whose interest in alcohol is primarily commercial or political.

Variations

Cross-cultural variation in drinking practices ranges from the total prohibition of some Moslems, Mormons and other religious groups to what Mandelbaum (1965) describes as ‘avid immersion’ – exemplified by the Kofyar of Nigeria and the Bolivian Camba – and includes almost every possible degree and combination of abstinence and indulgence in between these two extremes (Ahlstrom-Laasko, 1976, 1984; Alder, 1991; Allamani et al, 1988; Alvarez, 1993; Badri, 1976; Cottino, 1995; Douglas, 1987; Dragadze, 1994; Eriksen, 1993; Gamela, 1995; Glassner, 1991; Hanna, 1976; Levin, 1990; Levine, 1992; MacAndrew and
In complex modern societies, the rules and practices of different sub-groups, sub-cultures, classes and castes may also be at variance with the dominant drinking-culture. Nor are the drinking norms of any culture static and immutable: a variety of factors may result in significant changes in drinking practices, from the acculturation of a minority into the dominant culture to the (numerically) disproportionate influence of a minority – such as foreign tourists or colonial occupiers – on the mainstream culture (Cottino, 1995; Eriksen, 1993; Freund, 1985; Gefou-Madianou, 1992; Gamella, 1995; Kideckel, 1985; Marin et al, 1993; MacAndrew and Edgerton, 1969; McDonald, 1994; Pyorala, 1988b; Sulkunen, 1988).

**Significant constants**

Cultural differences, variations and changes in the norms governing drinking practices are described and discussed in some detail in the following sections on symbolism, drinking-places and rituals. In this section, we are therefore primarily concerned with the identification of significant cross-cultural similarities, which can provide greater insight into the role of alcohol in human society as a whole – and perhaps help to explain the persistence of drinking as a near-universal feature of human behaviour.

**Proscription of solitary drinking**

The most important of these cross-cultural constants in the social norms governing alcohol use is the near-universal taboo on solitary drinking. The fact that drinking is, in almost all cultures, essentially a social act, is recognised throughout the anthropological literature, and ethnographic data from a wide range of cultures indicate that solitary drinking is at the very least ‘negatively evaluated’, and often specifically proscribed.

This rule appears to be largely consistent across both ‘integrated drinking-cultures’ (societies in which alcohol is an accepted, morally neutral element of normal life) and ‘ambivalent drinking-cultures’ (societies with a more ambiguous, uneasy, morally charged and problematic relationship with alcohol). In Sweden, an extreme example of the latter type, Bjerén (1992) finds that:

> “Drinking alone should not be done. To drink alone is to be anti-social (by not wanting to share); it is commonly thought to be an indication of alcoholism. And alcoholism is shameful: to be labelled an alcoholic is a condemnation beyond words…”

The Vlach Gypsies of Hungary, who enjoy a far more relaxed and untroubled relationship with alcohol, have a similar aversion to solitary drinking. Stewart (1992) reports:
“At home on the settlement neither men nor women normally drink alone. If they have alcohol at home one or two others will be invited to share ... to drink alone when there are other Gypsies around would be a particularly poignant denial of commitment to links with significant others...away from the settlement [they] may drop into a bar for a solitary drink, but even there if they see a Gypsy they are more or less bound to try to treat their fellow Gypsy.”

It is interesting to note that such solitary drinking as does occur among the Gypsies is done in bars. In both ‘integrated’ and ‘ambivalent’ drinking-cultures, apparently ‘solitary’ drinking in bars is regarded as significantly different from solitary drinking at home. The bar is by definition a social environment, and choosing to drink in this public setting, even if unaccompanied, conveys a tacit message of sociability.

In some cultures, however, the taboo on solitary drinking is rigidly enforced. In the Hmong villages of northern Laos, for example, a drinking-culture more strictly regulated than the Hungarian Gypsies’, but still harmonious, Westermeyer (1985) observes that:

“All alcohol consumption occurred in groups, and only at times approved by the community and by tradition. There was no individual use of alcohol as a medicinal, a food or a recreational intoxicant. Alcohol abuse and alcohol dependence did not occur.”

Among the Bolivian Camba, whose frequent and extreme drunkenness places them firmly at the ‘avid immersion’ end of Mandelbaum’s spectrum, drinking alone is equally inconceivable. The Camba drink only in social contexts, in the majority of which all participants drink in turn from the same glass. Despite their extensive inebriety, alcoholism and alcohol-related problems are unknown among the Camba (Heath, 1991).

Societies vary in terms of the degree to which solitary drinking is tolerated, and, as we have seen, there may be special circumstances in which drinking alone is acceptable or somehow does not really count as ‘solitary’. There may be greater tolerance of some solitary drinking, but not solitary drunkenness, in highly industrialised societies where increasing numbers of people live alone. There are no cultures, however, in which drinking alone is actively approved or encouraged.

The fact that solitary drinking is proscribed even in the most heavy-drinking and ‘integrated’ drinking-cultures indicates that this rule is not connected with moral ambivalence about alcohol. The proscription of solitary drinking is, rather, a corollary of the prescription of sociable drinking.
Prescription of sociability

Since the earliest use of alcohol, drinking has been a social act. Like the Camba, our ancestors not only drank together, but often drank from the same vessel: Ancient Egyptian pictures, for example, show a single pot with long straws for communal drinking. (It may be impossible to determine from the archaeological evidence whether the very earliest hunter-gatherer consumption of alcohol – probably of naturally fermented fruits – was conducted in a social context, yet as zoologist Desmond Morris points out, even elephants do not get drunk alone, but have been observed to gather in noisy, inebriated groups around over-ripe fruit trees.) In the contemporary world, alcohol remains a quintessentially social substance.

Mandelbaum’s (1965) brief inventory of cross-cultural similarities in drinking practices includes the significant generalisation: “Drinking together generally symbolizes durable social solidarity – or at least amity – among those who share a drink”. Thirty years on, the accumulated ethnographic evidence gives us no cause to revise this statement. If any of the rules governing drinking can be said to be truly universal, in that it is found in some form in all cultures where alcohol is used, this would be the prescription of sociability. Virtually all of the known ritual practices and etiquettes associated with drinking are specifically designed to promote social interaction and social bonding.

Sharing

At the simplest level, alcohol is a substance that is shared: almost all drinking rituals and etiquettes involve sharing. The Camba practice of drinking from the same glass, for example, is found throughout the world. In the Republic of Georgia, the custom of drinking from the same cup is called ‘megobarebi’, which is translated as ‘close friends’ (Mars and Altman, 1987). Even where separate cups are used, sharing is prescribed. Among the Lele of Zaire, for example, Ngokwey notes that drunkenness is socially disapproved of primarily because it shows an egoistic lack of sharing; it indicates that one has drunk alone and too much, without sharing.

In many cultures, alcohol is shared not only with fellow drinkers, but also with the Gods and with the dead. At Navajo house-parties, drinking begins when one of the older men produces a bottle of wine and pours the first drop as a libation to Mother Earth, before taking a drink and passing the bottle on, and is brought to a close when the last drop is again offered to Mother Earth (Topper, 1985). Hispanic youth-gangs in New York pour a drop from their bottles of ‘Thunderbird’ on the ground before drinking, as a libation to their dead ‘Brothers’, while Hungarian gypsies gather round family graves on All Souls’ Day to ‘share’ drinks with the departed (Stewart, 1992).
In most cultures, we find that the rules governing drinking stipulate not only that alcohol should be consumed in a social context and shared but that this sharing should be conducted in a friendly manner, with frequent expressions of goodwill and amity between participants. The practice of ‘toasting’, for example, has been observed in some form in almost every culture, from the simple, generic ‘Cheers!’ (Santé, Slainte, Salud, C’ in C’in, Prost, Skol, Salute, L’chaim, etc.) to the elaborate and inventive toasts of Georgia and other societies in which all drinking is ‘done by toasting’ (Mars and Altman, 1987; Thornton, 1987).

Reciprocity

In most cultures, the sociability prescription dictates that alcohol must not only be shared, and shared in a friendly, integrative manner, but that it must be exchanged: drinking almost invariably involves some form of reciprocal giving. The concept of reciprocal exchange as the foundation of social relations has long been a central feature of anthropological enquiry. We often exchange – gifts, food, brides, hospitality, etc. – with those with whom we might otherwise fight: reciprocal giving creates and maintains vital social bonds.

Throughout the ethnographic literature on drinking, we find that the reciprocal giving of alcohol, both in specific drinking rituals and in the wider social context, serves to establish and maintain interpersonal and social bonds. In many societies, reciprocal giving of alcohol is at the heart of the process by which essential social, economic and political networks are constructed and maintained (Netting, 1964; Rehfisch, 1987; Hivon, 1994).

The principles and socially integrative functions of reciprocal exchange of alcohol in the wider social context are also inherent in the rules governing the act of drinking itself: almost all drinking rituals involve some form of reciprocal giving: the practices of ‘round-buying’, la tournée, keraismata, etc. are found, in some form, in most societies. In their account of drinking in a Swiss Alpine village, Gibson and Weinberg (1980) provide an excellent illustration of the symbolic equivalence between wider exchanges of alcohol and specific drinking rituals:

“Household autonomy ... depends on maintaining an equal, debt-free standing with other households in the village. Even in this small community where by their own admission, people are all related, any service rendered or favor granted must be compensated in order to restore any possible imbalance between households. One ‘pays’ for a favor, a minor service or an honor by ‘offering’ wine. For the same reason, each man carefully takes a turn at paying for a round of drinks in the cafe. And, as a higher-level expression of this constant search for balance, drinking parties move back and forth between the two village cafés.
as the evening progresses. Perhaps seeking divine approbation for their reciprocity system, villagers playfully refer to ‘the three chapels of Bruson’ – the chapel itself and the two cafés.”

Social control

These near-universal rules – the proscription of solitary drinking, and the prescription of sociability, sharing and reciprocity – perform a further social function in providing the conceptual basis for the highly effective informal ‘regulation’ of drinking, in terms of both consumption and behaviour. These self-imposed protocols have a far greater effect on levels of consumption and drinking behaviour than any ‘external’ controls imposed by legislators and policy-makers. It is interesting to note that these informal etiquettes tend, even where they appear to encourage higher consumption, to reduce the potential for harmful consequences.

The Bolivian Camba, for example, regularly drink immense quantities of almost pure alcohol, invariably drink to the point of extreme drunkenness, and have no conception whatsoever of ‘moderate’ or ‘responsible’ drinking. Yet alcoholism and other drink-related problems such as anti-social or violent behaviour are completely unknown among the Camba. We have already noted that Camba drinking takes place only in social contexts, and that drinking events are highly ritualised, involving all of the key elements of sociable sharing and reciprocity detailed above, and as Heath (1991) observes:

“The Camba data supplement those from other primitive societies indicating that alcoholism is not a function of the alcohol concentration of beverages used or of the quantities imbibed ... Furthermore, the Camba convincingly demonstrate that extensive inebriety does not necessarily result in manifest troubles.”

Heath also makes the important observation that a Camba drinker will almost never leave the “permissive” context of the drinking group while intoxicated. This ‘containment’ of drunkenness, its restriction to the safety of specific, highly regulated social contexts is practised in many heavy-drinking societies. In Georgia, for example, alcohol is consumed mainly in the context of (admittedly frequent) ritual feasts, at even the most informal of which all drinking is regulated by a designated toastmaster (Dragadze, 1994).

Even the ‘compulsory’ drinking often associated with round-buying, la tournée, and other reciprocal sharing practices does not necessarily result in problematic drunkenness. In the Hmong villages of Laos, the etiquette governing drinking events dictates that guests must ‘match’ the host glass for glass, a form of drinking contest in which the host sets a moderate to heavy drinking rate. Drinkers attempting to pass up on a round are teased and laughed at. Yet as Westermeyer (1985) observes:
“Seemingly opposed to this cultural imperative for mandatory drinking was a norm against loss of control while drinking. Actors in the drinking event were expected to be able to walk without staggering, talk without slurring, and converse in a skilled, even intellectual fashion.”

Similar behavioural restrictions have been observed in other heavy-drinking cultures, even those towards the ‘avid immersion’ end of Mandelbaum’s scale. In Cuba, Bryan Page et al (1985) note that traditional standards of behaviour also required an ability to drink without exhibiting the characteristic impairments:

“Slurred speech or speech more slurred than one’s drinking mates’ and loss of muscle motor control endangered a man’s ability to assert himself in the heated debates and fast-flowing conversations and interactions characteristic of Cuban settings for public drinking. The need for control of one’s physical and mental capacities did not prevent all Cuban men from drinking past the point of control, but it set behavioural limits within which most Cuban men remained when drinking.”

Peace (1992) provides a similar example of drunken self-control, and its social benefits, among Irish fishermen:

“It is of real consequence to the self-esteem of the fishermen to be present in bars and to demonstrate their capacity to hold their liquor well in the company of their peers ... As the fishermen imbibe heavily and become somewhat inebriated ... they do not thereby lose control over their immediate circumstances or indeed abandon their sense of judgement.”

In Nigeria, Oshodin (1995) observes that:

“... the more a man consumes alcohol and remains sober, the more respect he gains...among Nigerian students, being able to drink and remain sober makes one a hero.”

Schieler (1995) notes that although Danish dinner parties involve considerable consumption of alcohol:

“... you are expected to take part in the conversation, but not too loudly and only when it is your turn. You are allowed to show a natural interest in your companion at the dinner table ... However, the limits of propriety are not relaxed using alcohol as an excuse. You are likely to be remembered and frowned upon for stupid remarks or untoward behaviour...”

Thus, the unwritten, self-imposed rules governing drinking practices, and the specific rituals and protocols involved in the act of drinking itself, have the power to control consumption, degree of
inebriation and even behaviour when intoxicated – with an effectiveness which must inspire respect among legislators and policy-makers who attempt to achieve these goals through ‘external’ controls.

Restrictions on female and ‘underage’ drinking

Most ethnographers and other writers on drinking have observed that in the majority of societies alcohol is considered more suitable for men than for women, and that at least some restrictions on female drinking are found in most cultures (Gefou-Medianou, 1992). Having been largely ignored for many years (Pittman and Snyder, 1991) these issues have recently become a popular field of enquiry, with many journal articles and at least two full-length edited volumes devoted specifically to ‘alcohol and gender’ in the early 1990s (Gefou-Madianou, 1992; McDonald, 1994).

In the introduction to one of these volumes, Gefou-Medianou asks:

“Why is it that in the majority of the societies studied men may in certain contexts drink alcohol even in large quantities with cultural impunity whereas women for the greater part either do not drink or drink less and very rarely in homosocial gatherings?”

The cross-cultural evidence suggests that in terms of gender roles, as elsewhere, the rules governing the use of alcohol in a given culture reflect the values, attitudes and norms of that culture. Drinking is ‘imbedded’ in culture, and most aspects of culture are ‘imbedded in the act of drinking’, therefore we should expect to find relations between males and females, and perceptions of masculinity and femininity mirrored and reinforced in drinking practices. Just as norms regarding male and female roles, and definitions of masculinity and femininity, may vary widely from one culture to another, so will the rules governing men’s and women’s use of alcohol.

It is therefore not surprising that in the rapidly increasing literature on this subject we find as many explanations of gender-differentiated drinking practices as there are cultures to be studied. Some focus on male insecurity, and the need to reinforce a “vulnerable dominance” over women by excluding them from drinking rituals (Driessen, 1983) or on the separation of drinking from the female-dominated domestic arena as a means of ‘constructing’ masculinity (Loizos and Papataxiarchis, 1991; Ngokwey, 1987) while others focus on female drinking within the domestic context as part of the construction of feminine social roles, or indeed on the unity between men and women that may be achieved through household or family-based drinking (Gefou-Madianou, 1992; Bjerén, 1992; Peace, 1992). Researchers have noted the role of women as guardians of morality and social propriety or models of self-control (McDonald, 1994; Cottino, 1995) and, by contrast, the use of drinking by women to challenge
established norms (Papagaroufali, 1992; Fox, 1994). McDonald (1994) emphasises that the anthropological evidence does not support a simplistic equation of gender-differentiated drinking practices with the subordination or oppression of women.

While providing valuable insights into the construction of male and female roles in different cultures, and into the use of alcohol in defining, maintaining or subverting these norms, these studies have not yet, either individually or collectively, provided an explanation of the cross-cultural prevalence of restrictions on female drinking, as opposed to other possible forms of differentiation. Although in some societies female drinking could be described as ‘segregated’ – either by types of beverage or context of drinking – rather than ‘restricted’ in terms of quantity, the fact remains that in the majority of societies women either do not drink or drink less than men, and Gefou-Madianou’s question remains unanswered.

It may be that a purely cultural explanation of widespread restrictions on female drinking is not possible. We have already noted, in the introduction to this review, that the ‘cultural-reductionism’ of some anthropological approaches can limit their explanatory power – and pointed out that the purely pharmacological properties of alcohol may also be of importance in understanding the role that it plays in human cultures. In this context, McDonald’s comments about the “danger” of treating ethanol as a “culture-free substance”, or her assertion that “sex differences do not exist external to cultural perceptions of them” may be unhelpful. It could be that the predominance of restrictions on female drinking, across such a wide range of very different cultures, requires an explanation along the lines of those proposed by Marvin Harris for other taboos and prohibitions, where he argues that even apparently outlandish or arbitrary proscriptions often have a sound, pragmatic, non-cultural basis.

It could be, quite simply, that women universally drink less than men because physiological differences between the sexes mean that the same amount of alcohol produces higher blood alcohol concentrations in women than in men, such that women need less alcohol to experience the same effects.

To explain the higher proportion of female abstainers (as well as lighter drinkers) it might also be relevant to note that alcohol has known detrimental effects on the human foetus if consumed in large quantities. Throughout history, and currently in many societies, many women would be pregnant much of the time, and abstinence and restrictions on women’s drinking may have originated as a purely pragmatic means of protecting the health of offspring. It is interesting to note that the cultures in which female abstinence is significantly decreasing, and restrictions on female drinking are currently being challenged or eroded, are those in
which women have the greatest control over their reproductive functions.

This second possible explanation may be more controversial than the first, as it could be argued that the damaging effects of alcohol on the foetus were not known or even suspected until very recently (Abel, 1997). The physiological effects of drinking, however, can be directly experienced without medical knowledge of BAC levels – and the fact that women choose to drink less than men, even in cultures where they are deliberately challenging traditional mores, suggests that BAC levels are more important in this context than actual amounts of alcohol consumed.

In the debate on gender-differentiation in drinking practices, it seems that while the differences between cultures can largely be explained in ‘cultural’ terms, the significant cross-cultural constants require an alternative approach. Perhaps the next survey on drinking should measure or calculate the BACs of male and female customers in bars, rather than just finding out how many drinks they have had. The results might show that, in these terms, female drinking is not as restricted as it seems.

All contemporary cultures, however, impose some restrictions on what we may call ‘underage’ drinking, although both the definitions of ‘underage’ and the nature of the restrictions vary widely – from cultures in which it is socially acceptable to give small children diluted wine or sugar cubes dipped in liquor (Nahoum-Grappe, 1995; Cottino, 1995) to those in which even drinking in the presence of children is frowned upon (Asmundsson, 1995). Such dramatic variations in informal, social norms regarding ‘underage’ drinking occur despite increasing uniformity in external, legal definitions and controls – and generally reflect different cultural beliefs about alcohol (with more rigid restrictions in ‘ambivalent’ drinking-cultures and more permissive practices in ‘integrated’ drinking-cultures) rather than different approaches to child-rearing.
Given overwhelming evidence for the primacy of sociocultural factors in determining both drinking patterns and their consequences, it is clear that ethnographic research findings on the social and cultural roles of alcohol may have important implications for policy-makers – particularly in areas such as Europe where economic and political ‘convergence’ could have significant impact on drinking-cultures and their associated lifestyles.

In this context, it is essential for those concerned with policy and legislation on alcohol to have a clear understanding of the sociocultural functions and meanings of drinking. This section outlines the principal conclusions that can be drawn from the available cross-cultural material regarding the symbolic uses of alcoholic beverages, the social functions of drinking-places and the roles of alcohol in transitional and celebratory rituals.

### Symbolic roles

From the ethnographic material available, it is clear that in all cultures where more than one type of alcoholic beverage is available, drinks are classified in terms of their social meaning, and the classification of drinks is used to define the social world. Few, if any, alcoholic beverages are ‘socially neutral’: every drink is loaded with symbolic meaning, every drink conveys a message. Alcohol is a symbolic vehicle for identifying, describing, constructing and manipulating cultural systems, values, interpersonal relationships, behavioural norms and expectations. Choice of beverage is rarely a matter of personal taste.

### Situation definer

At the simplest level, drinks are used to define the nature of the occasion. In many Western cultures, for example, champagne is synonymous with celebration, such that if champagne is ordered or served at an otherwise ‘ordinary’ occasion, someone will invariably ask “What are we celebrating?”.

In the Weiner Becken in Austria, sekt is drunk on formal occasions, while schnapps is reserved for more intimate, convivial gatherings – the type of drink served defining both the nature of the event and the social relationship between the drinkers. The choice of drink also dictates behaviour, to the extent that the appearance of a bottle of schnapps can prompt a switch from the ‘polite’ form of address, sie, to the highly intimate du (Thornton, 1987).

Even in societies less bound by long-standing traditions and customs, where one might expect to find a more individualistic, subjective approach to the choice of drinks, the social meanings of different beverages are clearly defined and clearly understood. A US survey (Klein, 1991) examined perceptions of the situational appropriateness of various types of alcoholic drink, finding that wine, but not spirits or beer, is considered an appropriate
accompaniment to a meal; wine and spirits, but not beer, are appropriate drinks for celebratory events, while beer is the most appropriate drink for informal, relaxation-oriented occasions.

In cultures with a more established heritage of traditional practices, perceptions of situational appropriateness may, however, involve more complex and subtle distinctions, and rules governing the uses of certain classes of drink are likely to be more rigidly observed. In France, for example, the aperitif is drunk before the meal, white wine is served before red, brandy and digestifs are served only at the end of the meal and so on (Clarisse, 1986; Nahoum-Grappe, 1995). In traditional circles, any alteration to this ‘liquid punctuation’ of a meal is akin to a serious grammatical error, and greeted with similar horror or contempt. Among Hungarian Gypsies, equally strict rules apply to brandy: brandy may only be consumed first thing in the morning, during the middle of the night at a wake, or by women prior to a rubbish-scavenging trip. It would be regarded as highly inappropriate to serve or drink brandy outside these specific situational contexts (Stewart, 1992).

**Status indicator**

Choice of beverage is also a significant indicator of social status. In general terms, imported or ‘foreign’ drinks have a higher status than ‘local’ beverages. Thus in Poland, for example, wine is regarded as a high-status, middle-class drink, while native beers and vodkas are ‘ordinary’ or working-class. In a comparative study, Polish university students were found to drink eight times as much wine as their American counterparts, reinforcing their status and specialness as the ‘nation’s elite’ through their beverage preference (Engs et al., 1991). In France, by contrast, where wine-drinking is commonplace and confers no special status, the young elite are turning to (often imported) beers (McDonald, 1994; Nahoum-Grappe, 1995).

Preference for high-status beverages may be an expression of aspirations, rather than a reflection of actual position in the social hierarchy. Drinking practices, as Douglas (1987) reminds us, are often used to “construct an ideal world” or, in Myerhoff’s terms, as ‘definitional ceremonies’ through which people enact not only “what they think they are” but also “what they should have been or may yet be” (Papagaroufali, 1992).

There may also be a high degree of social differentiation within a single category of beverage. Purcell (1994) notes that in Ancient Rome, wine was not simply the drink of the elite: its variety and calibrability allowed its use as a differentiator “even within exclusive, high-ranking circles”. Wine was, and is today in many cultures, “a focus of eloquent choices”.

**Statement of affiliation**

Choice of beverage may also be a statement of affiliation, a declaration of membership in a particular group, generation, class,
‘tribe’, sub-culture or nation and its associated values, attitudes and beliefs.

Certain drinks, for example, have become symbols of national identity: Guinness for the Irish, tequila for Mexicans, whisky for Scots, ouzo for Greeks etc.; and to choose, serve – or indeed refuse – one’s national beverage can be a powerful expression of one’s loyalties and cultural identity. The ‘national drink’ is often the symbolic locus for positive, sometimes idealised or romanticised, images of the national character, culture and way of life. For Scottish Highlanders, for example, whisky represents traditional values of egalitarianism, generosity and virility, and to refuse a ‘dram’ may be seen as a rejection of these values (Macdonald, 1994).

The consumption or rejection of a national, local or traditional beverage is often an emotive issue, particularly in areas undergoing significant cultural change or upheaval, where ‘new’ drinks are associated with ‘modern’ lifestyles and values. Some surveys indicate that the general pattern across Europe is for people of higher educational level to consume the ‘new’ beverage type for their region (usually wine in the North, beer in the South) more often than the less-educated, who tend to favour traditional beverages (Hupkens et al., 1993).

These factors can also overlap with the symbolic use of alcohol as a ‘generation differentiator’. In contemporary Brittany, for example, Maryon McDonald (1994) observes that:

“... in the domain of drinks, there is generally an increasing sophistication when one moves from cider to wine to beer, correlating with decreasing age and with a move from agriculture to occupations outside it. In other words, the older peasant drinks cider; the younger person outside agriculture opts for beer.”

In Spain, the adoption of non-traditional drinks and drinking styles by the younger generation has been more problematic (Alvira-Martin, 1986; Pyörälä, 1986, 1991; Rooney, 1991, Gamella, 1995). Many young Spaniards appear to have adopted, along with beer-drinking, patterns of binge drinking previously unheard-of in Spain and more commonly associated with British ‘lager-louts’. It is, however, too soon to tell whether their current habits will persist into maturity (Gamella, 1995). There are currently very early signs of a similar adoption of ‘alien’ drinking patterns along with foreign beverages among Italian youth, although so far this has been limited mainly to the context of consumption, with the traditional beverage (wine) being consumed in the traditional context of meals with the family, while the new beverages are drunk in other social contexts, with peers, outside the family (Cottino, 1995).
These current trends and changes deserve more detailed investigation, not only because the symbolic functions of drinks are of interest in their own right, but because, as Mandelbaum pointed out in his highly influential 1965 paper ‘Alcohol and Culture’, “changes in drinking customs may offer clues to fundamental social changes”. In Europe, current changes in drinking customs may offer a new perspective on cultural ‘convergence’.

A classic illustration of ‘fundamental social changes’ associated with the adoption of imported beverages – and one which may prove something of a cautionary tale for legislators – is provided by MacAndrew and Edgerton (1969): During their traditional cactus-wine ceremonies, the Papago of Mexico frequently became “falling-down drunk” – indeed, it was common practice among the more dandyish young men of the tribe to paint the soles of their feet with red dye, so that when they fell down drunk the attractive colour would show. Yet the drunken behaviour of the Papago on these occasions was invariably peaceful, harmonious and good-tempered. With the ‘white man’, however, came whiskey, which became associated with an entirely different type of drunken comportment involving aggression, fighting and other anti-social behaviours. These “two types of drinking” co-existed until the white man, in his wisdom, attempted to curb the ill-effects of alcohol on the Papago by banning all drinking, including the still-peaceful wine ceremonies. Prohibition failed, and the wine ceremonies eventually became indistinguishable, in terms of behaviour, from the secular whiskey-drinking.

Gender differentiator

While differences in age, class, status, aspirations and affiliations are frequently expressed through beverage choice, the most consistent and widespread use of alcohol as a social ‘differentiator’ is in the gender-based classification of drinks. Almost all societies make some distinction between ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ beverages: even where no other differentiation is found, this primary division is likely to be evident, and, often, to be rigidly observed.

Even in societies where only one alcoholic beverage is available, such as palm wine among the Lele of Zaire, a weaker, sweeter version, Mana ma piya, is considered suitable for women, while Mana ma kobo, described as ‘strong’ and ‘fierce’, is a man’s drink (Ngokwey, 1987). This literal association of the qualities of men’s and women’s beverages with ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ attributes is also a near-universal phenomenon. ‘Feminine’ drinks are often weaker, sweeter, softer or less ‘pure’ than their ‘masculine’ counterparts (Freund, 1986; Gefou-Madianou’s, 1992; Papagaroufali, 1992; Purcell, 1994; Macdonald, 1994; Nahoum-Grappe, 1995).
Where female drinking is particularly deplored but nonetheless occurs, alcoholic beverages consumed by women are often conveniently granted a sort of honorary ‘non-alcoholic’ status, such that their consumption does not count as ‘drinking’ (McDonald, 1994; Purcell, 1994). Among Scottish Highlanders, the classification of ‘ladies’ drinks’ as ‘not really alcohol’ may occasionally be taken too literally: Macdonald (1994) recalls an incident in which a drunken man who drove his car off the road one night, miraculously escaping serious injury, “insisted that he had not been ‘drinking’ - he had only had Bacardi and Coke!”

Even in societies where there is less disapprobation attached to female drinking per se, we find that certain drinks are considered unfeminine, while others are regarded as too feminine for male consumption (Engs et al, 1991). The symbolic potency of alcohol is such that the appropriation of ‘male’ drinks by women may act as a more effective feminist statement than conventional political approaches such as demonstrations or pamphlets (Papagaroufali, 1992; Fox, 1994).

Need for further research

As with many other areas covered in this review, information on the symbolic meanings of different types of alcoholic drink is scattered, disjointed and incomplete, usually buried in research focused on other issues. Again, there has been no significant cross-cultural study of this phenomenon, beyond the occasional two-country comparison. The anthropological bias towards ‘traditional’ societies or small communities is also evident, with very little material on the complex symbolic meanings and functions of alcoholic drinks in modern, mainstream Western cultures – a fascinating field of enquiry, with wide-ranging implications for policy and education, which deserves further exploration.

In particular, more attention should be directed to the changes currently occurring in some European cultures. In some cases, it appears that the adoption of foreign drinks also involves the adoption of the drinking patterns, attitudes and behaviour associated with the alien culture, while other societies imbibe foreign drinks without ‘taking in’ any of the associated cultural approaches.

When the British, for example, an ambivalent, episodic, beer-drinking culture, go to France, an integrated, wine-drinking culture, they exhibit a tendency to drink wine in beer quantities and display all of the behavioural excesses associated with their native drinking patterns, with the result that young British tourists “are now renowned in France and elsewhere in Europe for their drinking and drunkenness” (McDonald, 1994). In Spain, by contrast, the young males appear more sensitive to alien cultural
influences, and have adopted, along with beer-drinking, the anti-social behaviour patterns of their beer-drinking guests.

This is not to suggest that a Papago-like disastrous transformation (see above) is imminent in contemporary Spain, but we would be foolish to ignore such real-life cautionary tales – in particular the fact that, in the Papago case, attempts to curb the anti-social excesses associated with an alien beverage by imposing ‘blanket’ restrictions on all alcohol resulted in the association of such behaviour with the formerly ‘benign’ native beverage, and an overall increase in drunkenness and alcohol-related disorder.

The need for further and more precise research on the symbolic functions of alcoholic beverages has been recognised even outside the culturally-minded field of anthropology. The historian Thomas Brennan argues that:

"... the emphasis on quantifying consumption suffers from mistaken assumptions and leads to an inadequate understanding of the social role of alcohol. The problems with quantification illustrate the need for a greater awareness and investigation into the cultural aspects of alcohol."

Roles of drinking-places

Drinking, as we have already noted, is essentially a social act, subject to a variety of rules and norms regarding who may drink what, when, where, with whom and so on. Drinking does not, in any society, take place ‘just anywhere’, and most cultures have specific, designated environments for communal drinking.

From the glitz and chrome of an American cocktail lounge, or the scruffy charm of a French provincial bar-tabac, to the mapalu in Zaire – merely a small clearing in the forest, dedicated to the consumption of palm wine – the ‘drinking-place’ appears to be an essential feature of almost all alcohol-using cultures. The nature and role of the public drinking-place may be seen as an extension, or even a physical expression or embodiment, of the role of drinking itself.

There has been no systematic cross-cultural research on public drinking contexts, and the available material is scattered and incomplete. Anthropologists’ concern with studying drinking in ‘natural settings’ (Prus, 1983) has, however, prompted an increase in recent years in the number of ‘ethnographies’ of public drinking-places, although these studies tend to be restricted to a single country, town or community – or even a single drinking establishment. These small-scale studies of public drinking-places in various societies indicate that, in terms of insight into the social and cultural roles of alcohol, this is one of the most fertile and rewarding fields of enquiry and that more extensive cross-cultural
comparison would significantly improve our understanding of these roles.

Despite the inevitable lack of coherence in the available literature, some significant general conclusions can be drawn from the existing research in this area. First, as noted above, it is clear that where there is alcohol, there is almost always a dedicated environment in which to drink it, and that every culture creates its own, highly distinctive, public drinking-places. Second, the drinking-place is usually a special environment: it represents a separate sphere of existence, a discrete social world with its own laws, customs and values. Third, drinking-places tend to be socially integrative, classless environments, or at least environments in which status distinctions are based on different criteria from those operating in the outside world. Finally, the primary function of drinking-places, in almost all cultures, appears to be the facilitation of social interaction and social bonding.

Drinking-places and drinking cultures

The surface contrasts between different societies’ drinking-places are striking, and although the research indicates that these contrasts mask fundamental functional similarities, the differences are nonetheless important, as they often reflect different cultural perceptions of the role of alcohol.

Societies in which alcohol is traditionally an accepted, unremarkable and morally neutral element of everyday life – such as the Southern European cultures of Italy, Spain, France and Greece – tend to favour ‘uninhibited’, highly visible drinking-places, with large windows and open spaces, such that customers and facilities are clearly displayed. Even where the climate does not allow permanent outdoor tables, a glassed-in pavement section is common. The drinking-place extends physically into the environment, overlaps and merges with the everyday world, just as “the consumption of alcohol is [as] integrated into common behaviours as sleeping or eating” (Martinez & Martin, 1987).

In societies with a more ambiguous and uneasy relationship with alcohol, where drinking is a moral ‘issue’ – such as Scandinavia, Australia, Britain and North America – drinking-places are more likely to be enclosed, insular, even secretive environments, with solid walls and doors, frosted windows and substantial screens or partitions, ensuring that the activities of customers are concealed and contained (Page et al, 1985). These physical features reflect the equivocal status of drinking-places in societies with what Campbell (1991) calls “an ambivalent drinking culture, characterised by conflict between or among coexisting value structures.”

The characteristics outlined above are, of course, broad generalisations, and in any modern, complex culture there will be a wide variety of drinking-places. Indeed, cataloguing, classifying
and comparing the different types of drinking-place in a given society, their decor, clientele and other distinguishing features, has become a favourite pastime among social scientists (Campbell, 1991; Fox, 1993, 1996; Gilbert, 1985; Pujol, 1989). This variety will inevitably include some exceptions to the generic type – the introduction of the ‘café-bar concept’ by British pub-operators, for example, or imitations of cosy, insular ‘Irish pubs’ in France and Italy, or the Latin-style drinking-places established by Cubans and other Hispanics in Florida – but the majority of drinking-places still tend to exhibit at least some of the basic features dictated by cultural perceptions of alcohol.

Social functions of drinking-places

Despite this variation, anthropological research also reveals some significant cross-cultural similarities or ‘constants’ in the social functions of drinking-places.

A separate world

The function of the drinking-place as a separate sphere, a self-contained world set apart from everyday existence, is, as might be expected, more immediately obvious in ‘ambivalent’ drinking cultures than in those in which drinking is integrated into common behaviours.

In Norway, for example, the bar or café has been described by social scientists as a “third place” – a ‘liminal’ (i.e. borderline, marginal, in-between, ambiguous, threshold) stage somewhere between the public and private spheres of life (Oldenburg, 1989). In this separate world, Træen and Rossow (1994) found that “people who experienced lack of structure in their everyday lives because of their positional roles use the situational role of being a café guest to provide this structure” and that visits to cafés “offer the guests a possibility of reversing inferior everyday roles”. In other words, the ‘liminal’ status of the café allows patrons to ‘construct an ideal world’, an alternative reality in which they can assume a socially significant identity.

Public bars in New Zealand have been found to perform similar ‘time-out’, ‘transitional’ or ‘alternative reality’ functions (Graves et al, 1981; Park, 1995), and Campbell (1992) notes the marginal status of the tavern in North America, its representation as an “unserious behavior setting” whereby it “provides an accessible space for taking time out from the pressures of everyday work and home life.”

The liminality of the drinking-place is of social significance even in non-ambivalent, integrated drinking cultures. In Mediterranean societies, although the bar, café, birreria or taverna is firmly integrated into mainstream culture, it provides a setting which is qualitatively different from that of the home or the workplace (Wylie, 1974; Rooney, 1991; Gamella, 1995; Cottino, 1995) – and indeed often acts as a halfway house, a transitional, ‘time-out’ stage, easing the passage between these two environments. It is
common, in many Mediterranean societies, for men to stop off at the bar or café for a drink both on the way to work in the morning, and on the way home in the evening. The drinking-place provides a symbolic punctuation-mark differentiating one social context from another (Mandelbaum, 1965). In Rooney’s (1991) account of Spanish drinking behaviour, he notes that “in the hospitable orbit of the tavern, one can set aside one’s usual personality and construct another one to share with associates.”

These primary functions of the drinking-place – the provision of a ‘liminal sphere’, ‘time-out’, alternative constructions of reality, symbolic punctuation marks, etc. – are among those frequently attributed to drinking itself (Gusfield, 1987; Mandelbaum, 1965; Douglas, 1987). The drinking-place is the physical manifestation of the cultural meanings and roles of alcohol.

Social integration

Alcohol has long been regarded as a social leveller, and the act of communal drinking as a means of communication between those of different ranks and status in society. If, as we propose above, the drinking-place embodies the symbolic social functions of alcohol, we would therefore expect to find, in most cultures, that drinking-places tend to perform a socially integrative, equalising function. We would expect drinking-places to be, if not strictly egalitarian, at least environments in which the prevailing social order may be challenged.

This, throughout history and across cultures, is precisely what we do find. In his study of plebeian culture in Shakespearean drama, Leinwand (1989) notes that in the 15th century, alehouses, taverns and inns were:

“... sites ... where people of disparate status mixed...[which] brought men, high born and low, into relation, fostering a propinquity that might secure, adjust or threaten hierarchies.”

During the Prohibition years in America, the illicit ‘nightclub culture’ involved a double defiance of prevailing social norms in the mingling of “blacks and whites from all strata of society...in Harlem, Chicago and San Francisco” (Herd, 1985). In contemporary Norway, Træen and Rossow (1994) find that:

“In cafés, people come together for common purposes such as enjoyment, irrespective of social rank ... and are expected to behave in accordance with the accepted social and contextual norms of the establishment. For this reason, people may perceive themselves as being more equal in cafés than they do elsewhere.”

In an observation study of Maori, Pacific Islander and European drinkers in New Zealand bars, 40% of drinkers had drinking companions in their group from other ethnic groups, which, as the
authors comment, “suggests a rather high degree of social integration among drinkers” (Graves et al, 1982). In urban San Jose and Los Angeles, Chicanos, Mexican-Americans and Anglos mix freely in bars, cocktail lounges and clubs, and suburban night-clubs, where “dance partners are chosen across ethnic and racial lines” and “the mixing of young people from a wide range of class and ethnic backgrounds also results in...normative homogenisation” (Gilbert, 1985).

In Spain, drinking-places provide “...an atmosphere of openness and social access [in which] any adult male is free to participate in barroom activity. Everyone in the tavern is free to speak to anyone else.” (Rooney, 1991). Similarly, Gusfield (1987) comments that: “in the drinking arena first names are required and organisational placements tabooed.”

Social bonding These integrative qualities, along with its role as a special, liminal environment, contribute to the key function of the drinking-place as a facilitator of social bonding. This function is so clearly evident that even in ambivalent drinking cultures, where research tends to be problem-centred and overwhelmingly concerned with quantitative aspects of consumption, those conducting research on public drinking-places have been obliged to “focus on sociability, rather than the serving of beverage alcohol, as the main social fact to be examined” (Campbell, 1991).

The facilitation of social interaction and social bonding is, as noted elsewhere in this review, one of the main functions of drinking itself – the perception of the “value of alcohol for promoting relaxation and sociability” being one of the most significant generalisations to emerge from the cross-cultural study of drinking (Heath, 1987, 1995). It is not surprising therefore, that the drinking-place should be, in many cultures, an institution dedicated to sociability and convivial interaction.

The special features of a dedicated drinking-place – the layout, the decor, the music, the games, the etiquette and ritual practices, and, of course, the drinking – are all designed to promote positive social interaction, reciprocity and sharing (Gusfield, 1987; Rooney, 1991; Gamella, 1995; Park, 1995; Fox, 1996, etc.). In Austrian lokals, for example, Thornton (1987) observes that:

“...intimate social groups...come into being there, even if only to last the night. Benches surround the tables, forcing physical intimacy between customers. Small groups of twos or threes who find themselves at the same or adjoining tables often make friends with their neighbours and share wine, schnapps, jokes and game-playing the rest of the evening.”
In almost all drinking-places, in almost all cultures, the unwritten laws and customs involve some form of reciprocal drink-buying or sharing of drinks. This practice has been documented in drinking-places from modern, urban Japan and America and rural Spain and France to remote traditional societies in Africa and South America. (Doughty, 1971; Graves et al, 1982; Gilbert, 1982; Gordon, 1985; Westermeyer, 1985; Gusfield, 1987; Thornton, 1987; Ngokwey, 1987; Rooney, 1991; Hendry, 1994, etc.) The central role of exchange and reciprocal giving in the establishment and reaffirmation of social bonds has long been recognised by anthropologists, sociologists and even zoologists, so fundamental is this practice to the survival of any social species.

The combination of these factors, the special alchemy of design, ritual and alcohol that characterises the drinking-place and sets it apart from other public institutions and social environments, ensures that, in many cultures, the drinking-place is at the centre of community life. In Poland, for example, the Karczma is where contracts are sealed, village disputes settled, celebrations held and marriages arranged (Freund, 1985), while for Guatemalans in the US, the bar is a meeting-place where “one may seek out others, develop friendships, and if needed, find temporary assistance in a loan or lodging or obtain information about jobs.” (Gordon, 1985). In New Zealand, Graves et al (1982) observe that:

“... the pub is probably the most important working-man’s club. Men from all ethnic groups come there to be with their friends; their alcohol consumption is a by-product of this socialising. This does not mean that the consumption of alcohol is an unimportant part of pub activity. Otherwise a man might as well meet his friends in an ice-cream parlour or coffee shop. One of the major functions of moderate alcohol use is to promote social conviviality. But it is the conviviality, not the alcohol, which is of central importance.”

The striking degree of functional similarity between drinking-places, across such a wide variety of very different cultures, cannot be disregarded. Despite significant differences – and indeed diametric oppositions – in cultural perceptions of alcohol, the ethnographic evidence suggests that the drinking-place meets some deep-seated, universal human needs.

Ritual roles As a species, we are addicted to ritual. Almost every event of any significance in our lives is marked with some sort of ceremony or celebration – and almost all of these rituals, in most cultures, involve alcohol. In this section, we provide an overview of the cross-cultural literature on the roles of alcohol in both transitional and festive rituals, and the conclusions that may be drawn from this evidence.
Transitional rituals

Major life-cycle events such as birth, coming-of-age, marriage and death; important life-changes such as graduation or retirement – and even far less momentous shifts such as the daily transition from work to play – all require ritual endorsement. The concept of ‘rites de passage’ – the rituals marking transition from one status or stage in the life-cycle to another – has long been a staple of the anthropological diet. Rites of passage serve to construct, facilitate and enhance the difficult passage from one social, physical or economic state to the next. Alcohol, in most cultures, is a central element of such rituals.

As significant transitions are ritualised, in some form, in every society, and almost all of these rites of passage involve alcohol, an exhaustive catalogue of rituals and beverages would be repetitive and unenlightening: a few representative examples convey the range of transitions which are ceremonially marked, and illustrate the role of alcohol in this ritualisation.

Life-cycle transitions

Alcohol punctuates our lives from the cradle to the grave. A few drinks to ‘wet the baby’s head’ is a common practice in many cultures. In Poland, Christenings are celebrated in the local tavern, with the child’s godparent covering the cost of the liquor (Freund, 1985). Among Mexican-Americans in California, the padrino (godfather) is also obliged to supply liquor for the post-ceremonial party or dinner marking the new arrival’s entrance into the religious life, “thus cementing the compadrazgo (fictive kin) relationship between the padrino and the parents of the newborn.”

In his study of the Peruvian Mestizo community of Virú, Holmberg (1971) observes that the drinking of chicha (maize-beer) is an integral part of the ritual celebration of all major life-cycle events, which include: baptism, first hair-cutting ceremony (boys), ear-piercing ceremony (girls), confirmation, birthdays, marriage and funerals. He notes that:

“These ceremonial events, with their accompanying drinking patterns, undoubtedly provide relief from the daily boredom and frustrations of peasant agricultural life. They also provide a base for conviviality and the easing of social tensions in a society where human relations are not easy. Alcohol seems to do much, for example, to break down barriers between the sexes and social classes on ceremonial occasions.”

In most cultures, a marriage is a major transformation, conducted in stages, each of which requires a drinking-event. In France, for example, the engagement party is often a more protracted and boisterous event than the wedding itself, and the same may apply to the ‘stag’ and ‘hen’ parties that precede a wedding in many Western cultures. In Poland, Freund (1985) notes that “each stage
of the wedding, including the betrothal, the wedding ceremony and the reception is marked by alcohol.” The rites of passage associated with death, like those of birth and marriage, often involve several stages, each marked by drinking, and sometimes differentiated by different patterns of drinking (Stewart, 1992).

**Lifestyle transitions**

In many cultures, the ritualisation of transition is not restricted to the major life-cycle transitions of birth, coming-of-age, marriage and death, but extends to less portentous life-changing events such as graduation, job promotion, house-warming and retirement. The need to invest ‘lifestyle’ transitions with wider social and symbolic meaning – and particularly to do so by drinking – seems a near-universal feature of human cultures.

In the Republic of Georgia, for example, even the most minimal transitions such as the arrival or departure of a guest provide a legitimate excuse for a feast, always involving large amounts of both alcohol and ritual. Drinking is regulated by toasting, and in Mars and Altman’s (1987) account of Georgian feasting, a more important ‘lifestyle’ transition such as a young girl’s graduation necessitated a ‘feast of twenty toasts’.

The purchase or building of a first house, and subsequent house-moves, are, in many cultures, transitions of significance in terms of social and economic status, as well as potentially stressful events for those concerned – a combination which seems to demand ritual recognition. In some cultures, the rites of passage associated with house-transitions may involve only family and close friends; in others, the entire community may participate in the ritual, in which alcohol will usually play a central role. In Peru house-building “is often a festive occasion made merrier by the consumption of large quantities of chicha, cane alcohol or pisco” (Doughty, 1971). In Japan, as in many modern Western cultures, a ‘new’ house is not required: even renovations to one’s existing property can provide a rationale for a drinking-event (Hendry 1994).

**Habitual transitions**

Drinking-rituals are also used to define, facilitate and enhance far less momentous passages, such as the daily or weekly transitions from home to work and from work to leisure, or even the beginning and completion of a specific task. Mandelbaum (1965) observes that:

“... the act of drinking can serve as a symbolic punctuation mark differentiating one social context from the next. The cocktail prepared by the suburban housewife for her commuting husband when he returns in the evening helps separate the city and its work from the home and its relaxation.”
Gusfield (1987) also describes the ways in which alcohol ‘cues’ the transition from worktime to playtime in American culture. In this society, alcohol is a suitable symbolic vehicle for the ritual transition from work to play because “it is already segregated and separated from work, it is an index to the appearance of a night-time attitude”. Alcohol is associated with ‘time-out’, with recreation, festivity, fun, spontaneity and the dissolution of hierarchy: it “possesses a meaning in contrast to organized work.” Thus the stop off at a bar on the way home from work, institutionalised (and commercialised) as the ‘cocktail hour’ or ‘happy hour’, or the drink taken immediately on crossing the threshold of the home, “embodies the symbolism of a time period between work and leisure … the drinking situation enables us to provide liminal time; a way of passing from the ordered regulation of one form of social organization to the less-ordered, deregulated form of another.”

As we have seen, however, the symbolic meanings attributed to alcohol vary across different cultures, and the suitability of alcohol as a symbol of transition to playtime, the perception of drinking as antithetical to working, is by no means universal. In many cultures, the stop off at the drinking-place on the way to work, or to ‘re-fuel’ at lunchtime, is just as common as the after-work drinking session, and alcohol is used to generate ‘energy’ and enthusiasm for work, as well as to relax after work or to celebrate the completion of a task. The stop at the bar or café for a glass of wine (or, in Normandy, calvados) on the way to work is a long-standing tradition in France, also widely practised in Spain (Rooney, 1991). Driessen (1992) notes that in Andalucia “When a man gets up in the morning he immediately leaves his house to have a coffee, anisette or cognac”. The symbolic meaning of these pre-work and ‘re-fuel’ drinking-rituals, as opposed to the after-work drinking which is also common in these cultures, may be quite explicit: the Danes have a fryaftensbajer (‘knock-off-time’ beer) which they distinguish from the frokostbajer (lunch-time beer).

In Peru, alcohol is consumed before any work requiring strength or energy, such as roofing, sowing, the faena (communal work party) and other tasks which are seen to require particular collaboration and/or supernatural intervention and thus involve drinking to ‘liven up’ (Harvey, 1994). The belief that alcohol endows the user with the power and will to perform his duties is further exemplified in rituals designed to enhance the strength and fertility of domestic animals such as cattle and horses, in which libations are poured over models of these animals.

Similarly, in Brittany, McDonald finds that:

“At the time of any collective work – weeding, harvesting or silage-making, for example – bottles of red wine litter the
edges of the fields. Wine must be served regularly to each worker...without this drink, labour would be hard to get”

Mandelbaum (1965) contrasts his ‘transition to play’ example of the suburban-American cocktail (cited at the beginning of this chapter) with an example of a quite opposite use of alcohol, in which drinking marks the transition from ‘special’ time to ‘ordinary’ time:

“In a more formal ritual, but with similar distinguishing intent, an orthodox Jew recites the Havdola blessing over wine and drinks the wine at the end of the Sabbath to mark the division between the sacred day and the rest of the week.”

To compare abstemious orthodox Jews with heavy-drinking Bretons and Peruvians may seem odd, but in this context they share a perception of alcohol that is in contrast to the mainstream contemporary American symbolism described by Gusfield. For the Jew, the Peruvian and the Breton, alcohol is not a purely ‘recreational’ substance; it has other meanings which allow its use in the ritualisation of a wider range of significant transitions.

Why alcohol? Although Gusfield’s analysis applies – and is intended to apply – only to a particular culture, he poses perhaps the most important general question on the use of alcohol in transitional rituals: he asks “Why alcohol?” Gusfield’s concern is specifically to discover “What is the content of the message conveyed by drinking that makes it a fit object to symbolize and ritualize the transition from work to play?”, but one could equally expand his question to cover any of the transitions marked by rites of passage. Why is alcohol an essential element of these rituals in so many very different cultures?

The answer seems to lie in the natural affinity between alcohol and ritual: alcohol is an integral element of rites of passage because drinking ‘performs’ the symbolic, psychological and social functions of these rituals:

• Symbolic functions. Drinking, like ritual, is a medium for ‘constructing the world’. Drinks define significant transitions in our lives through their function as “brightly coloured material labels of events” (Douglas, 1987). As we have noted elsewhere, the type of drink served defines the nature of the event, and, in a more active sense, ‘constructs’ the social relationship between the drinkers, dictating the type of interaction appropriate to the occasion. In Douglas’s terms, drinks “give the actual structure of social life as surely as if their names were labels affixed upon expected forms of behaviour.”

Transitional rituals serve to delineate the boundaries between different stages of life, to mark the end of one phase and the
beginning of the next. It is also clear that drinking itself acts as a ‘symbolic punctuation mark’ differentiating one social context from another (Mandelbaum, 1965; Gusfield, 1987). The natural affinity, the symbolic equivalence between alcohol and ritual is nowhere more evident than in the context of rites of passage.

• Psychological functions. The qualitative consonance between drinking and transitional rites is not limited to the purely cultural, symbolic attributes of alcohol, but extends to its intrinsic pharmacological properties. The fact that alcohol is an intoxicating substance, capable of inducing ‘altered states of consciousness’ (Rudgley, 1994) is the foundation of its association with ‘liminal’ states, settings and events. The segregation of one phase of life from another makes the passage between them a liminal period – an in-between, ambiguous, indeterminate state (Van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1977; Gusfield, 1987; Stewart, 1992). That alcohol should be an integral element of the ritualisation of such liminal transitions is psychologically appropriate: the experience of intoxication mirrors the experience of rites of passage.

Liminality is also associated with tension and danger. The life-cycle events marked by rites of passage often involve major transformations, which may be a source of considerable anxiety and fear. Even events regarded as positive transitions, occasions for celebration – such as christenings, coming-of-age or graduation ceremonies, engagement-parties and weddings – can be highly stressful in many cultures. In this context, alcohol performs another of the key functions of ritual: the construction of an ideal world. In Mary Douglas’s words:

“[Drinks] make an intelligible, bearable world which is much more how an ideal world should be than the painful chaos threatening all the time.”

The chemical and symbolic properties of alcohol allow us to construct an alternative reality in which the potentially disturbing or frightening aspects of the transition are minimised, and the positive, celebratory aspects enhanced.

• Social functions. Rites of passage are not conducted in solitary splendour. They are, by definition, rituals in which personal transitions are imbued with wider social significance. The ritualisation of life-cycle transitions is a medium by which interpersonal links – and links between families, households and communities – are established, maintained and publicly affirmed. The importance of alcohol in this context is easily understood. In all cultures, drinking is an essentially social act, and one of the primary functions of alcohol is the facilitation of social bonding.

This perception of alcohol as a quintessentially ‘social’ substance is reinforced by the practices associated with its consumption at
rites of passage – the rituals of pouring, sharing, toasting, round-buying etc. – which serve to define and regulate social relationships, to promote conviviality and to build and strengthen interpersonal bonds.

Festive rituals From the Roman *Saturnalia* and the *Bacchanalia* of Ancient Greece to *Mardi Gras* in New Orleans, from Rio to Notting Hill, and every carnival, festival, jubilee or feast in between – in almost all cultures, and throughout history, alcohol has been associated with celebration. The connection between drinking and festivity is so strong that we find it hard to imagine one without the other. Their meanings are intertwined, and, in many cultures, interchangeable: to drink is to be festive, to be festive is to drink.

Although the interdependence of alcohol and festivity is evident in all societies where alcohol is used, the connection appears to be stronger in ‘ambivalent’ drinking cultures, where one needs a reason for drinking, than in ‘integrated’ drinking cultures, where drinking is a morally neutral element of normal life and requires no justification. McDonald (1994) provides an amusing illustration of the different perceptions of the drinking/festivity connection in different European cultures, and the misunderstandings that can result:

> “*Many modern visitors from Britain on a first visit to France have had experience of this for themselves. Drinks may be offered at ten o’clock in the morning, for example. This is obviously going to be one of those days. What are we celebrating? During the midday meal, wine is served. What fun! What are we celebrating? The bars are open all afternoon, and people seem to be drinking. What a riot! What are we celebrating? Pastis is served at six o’clock. Whooppee! These people certainly know how to celebrate. More wine is served with dinner. And so on. Wine has different meanings, different realities, in the two contexts, and a festive and episodic drinking culture meets a daily drinking culture, generating a tendency to celebrate all day. This has often happened to groups of young British tourists, now renowned in France and elsewhere in Europe for their drinking and drunkenness.*”

The significant feature of the ‘integrated’ drinking cultures of Europe (e.g. France, Spain and Italy) in this context is that there is little or no disapproval of drinking, and therefore no need to find *excuses* for drinking. Festivity is strongly associated with alcohol in these cultures, but is not invoked as a justification for every drinking occasion: a celebration most certainly requires alcohol, but every drink does not require a celebration.

Why alcohol? Despite cross-cultural variations, the central fact remains that in all cultures where alcohol is used, drinking is an essential element of...
celebration. This requires explanation: why should alcohol, rather than any other substance, be the universal symbol of festivity? The answer requires an understanding of the underlying social functions of celebration, and their relation to the symbolic and pharmacological properties of alcohol.

• Symbolic convenience? One might argue that there is no deeper significance in the choice of alcohol to symbolise festivity than that alcohol is the most flexible and convenient of symbolic vehicles. Indeed, the chameleon-like versatility of alcohol as a symbolic medium cannot be ignored in this context. Drinks, as we have found (see ‘Symbolic roles’) can be used to convey an infinite variety of different, and even contradictory messages. The same bottle of wine may, in different societies or situations, serve as a symbolic representation of tradition or novelty, masculinity or femininity, the working class or the elite, stability or transition, the sacred or the secular, integration or differentiation, age or youth, work-time or play-time, etc. – and in each case, its meaning will be readily understood. One might suggest, not unreasonably, that the use of such a powerful, ‘absorbent’ and adaptable symbolic tool to represent yet another aspect of life requires no further explanation. Were it not for the near-universality of the association between alcohol and festivity, the attractions of this simple answer might be irresistible. The multiplicity of culturally or situationally variable symbolic uses of alcohol cannot, however, be offered in explanation of its equation with festivity, which appears to transcend all cultural variation. The ‘helpfulness’ of alcohol as a symbolic medium cannot fully account for its global association with one particular human activity. We must ask more specifically what it is about alcohol that makes it an appropriate pan-cultural symbol, and essential element, of festivity, despite significant inter-cultural differences in symbolic uses of alcohol, and in attitudes and beliefs about drinking.

• Cultural chemistry This requires an awareness of the social meanings and functions – the ‘cultural chemistry’ – of festivity. Carnivals and festivals are more than just a bit of fun: in most cultures, these events involve a degree of ‘cultural remission’ – a conventionalised relaxation of social controls over behaviour (MacAndrew and Edgerton, 1969; Gusfield, 1987). Behaviour which would normally be frowned upon or even explicitly forbidden may, for the duration of the festivities, be actively encouraged.

The tesguina-drinking fiestas of the normally extremely puritanical Tarahumara, for example, involve “licensed promiscuity or wife-exchange” (MacAndrew and Edgerton, 1969), and the contrast between the wild excesses of the Bacchanalia and Saturnalia and the more regulated character of normal Ancient
Greek and Roman life is well documented. Among the Hide of Northern Cameroun, the wa čkadak (men’s area) is strictly forbidden to women: this prohibition is lifted only during the frenzied dancing and beer drinking of the annual Bovine Festival, which Eguchi (1975) describes as “an occasion for mate-selection en masse”. For the inhabitants of the Peruvian village of Virú, the traditional four-day festivals – at which large quantities of chicha (maize-beer) are consumed – also involve a breaking down of normal barriers between the sexes and between social classes.

Other carnival traditions include role-reversals, in which men dress in women’s clothes and prance about in an exaggerated caricature of femininity; or in which those normally at the top of the social hierarchy, commanding automatic deference and obedience, may become, for the duration of the event, the legitimate targets of insults, offensive behaviour and practical jokes - all conveniently forgotten the next day, when due courtesy and respect will again be expected (Barlett, 1980). Costume and disguise, the concealment of one’s normal identity and the temporary adoption of a different persona, are a feature of many festive traditions. For the Inuit of Northern Labrador, ‘janneying’ (disguising) is at the heart of the ‘symbolic inversion’ of the conventional during the ritual festivities of Christmas and Easter, and is equated with the chemical effects of drinking (Szala-Meneok, 1994).

The cultural remission and symbolic inversion that characterises many festivals and celebrations makes these events ‘liminal’ periods – equivocal, marginal, borderline intervals, segregated from everyday existence. We have already noted the natural affinity between alcohol and liminality, whereby the experience of intoxication – the ‘altered states of consciousness’ (Rudgley, 1994) induced by the action of ethanol – echo the experience of ritually induced liminality. The chemical effects of alcohol mirror the cultural chemistry of the festival. In this context, there is a clear psychological appropriateness to the universal conjunction of alcohol and festivity.

Alternative reality The cultural chemistry of ritual time, the remissions and inversions inherent to some degree in most festive rituals, involves the (temporary) construction of an alternative reality. Normal rules and social constructions are relaxed, suspended, or even reversed, allowing a brief exploration of alternative ways of being.

Douglas (1987) identifies one of the key functions of ritual, and of drinking, as “the construction of an ideal world.” The alternative worlds of festive remission and inversion are, however, rarely unequivocally ‘ideal’ – and indeed may often be in opposition to highly valued norms and categories. The contingent, twilight realm of the carnival, in which familiar, trusted boundaries become blurred, barriers dissolve and cherished values are challenged can
seem a dangerous and frightening place. Yet this state of fearful excitement, and even embarrassment, is often actively sought and encouraged, and seems to be intimately connected with the consumption of alcohol (Honigmann, 1963; Gusfield, 1987).

What Rudgley (1994) calls “the universal need for liberation from the restrictions of mundane existence” can only be satisfied by experiencing ‘altered states of consciousness’. He convincingly demonstrates that we have a natural predisposition to these altered states, and the characteristics of carnivals and festivals support his argument that we actively pursue this experience. Gusfield (1987) refers to the morning-after “I was not myself” plea of drinkers in ‘ambivalent’ cultures, and it could be said that during festive remissions and inversions, we experience a entire culture that, for the duration of the event, is ‘not itself’.

• Balancing role Yet the fact that we restrict our collective pursuit of altered states and alternative realities to specific, limited contexts suggests that our desire for this liberation is by no means unequivocal – that it is balanced by an equally powerful need for the stability and security of mundane existence. We may be enthralled by the liminal experience of the carnival, but we are also afraid of it: we like to visit alternative worlds, but we wouldn’t want to live there.

It seems, then, that drinking plays a double or ‘balancing’ role in the context of festive rituals: the altered states of consciousness induced by alcohol allow us to explore desired but potentially dangerous alternative realities, while the social meanings of drinking – the rules of convivial sociability invariably associated with the consumption of alcohol – provide a reassuring counterbalance. By ‘drinking with the Devil’, we experience his power, but through the familiar sociable rituals of pouring and sharing, we are also able to tame and control this power.

Peckham (1967) argued that ritual inversions are a “rehearsal for those real-life situations in which it is vital for our survival to endure cognitive disorientation.” Alcohol is an essential element of festive inversion rituals because the combination of its chemical and symbolic properties allows us not only to ‘rehearse’ the disruptive and disorienting aspects of life, but also to domesticate them.

More extensive, systematic and detailed cross-cultural examination of the use of alcohol in transitional and festive rituals would provide valuable insight into perceptions of drinking and beliefs about the powers and properties of alcohol in different societies. Such research would also shed light on any shifts or changes in these beliefs – changes which could have significant effects on levels and types of alcohol-related problems.
A move away from ‘transition-to-work’ drinking, for example, in a culture where this practice was commonplace, could be a cause for concern, as cultures with a purely recreational, festive representation of alcohol, where drinking is perceived as antithetical to working, tend to have a more difficult relationship with alcohol, associated with higher levels of alcohol-related harm. There are currently early signs of just such a shift in Italy and in Spain (Cottino, 1995; Gamella, 1995).

A more thorough understanding of the ritual roles of alcohol, and systematic monitoring of changes in these roles, will be essential to any attempt to manage problematic aspects of drinking – or indeed to promote normal, non-problematic enjoyment of alcohol.
Europe: future directions

As the main conclusions to be drawn from existing research have already been summarised under ‘Key findings’, and in many cases examined in detail in subsequent sections, we will focus in this concluding section on the significant questions and problems that still remain, particularly those of direct relevance to EC administrators.

We have mentioned in several contexts the need for further cross-cultural research on specific sociocultural aspects of drinking – and in particular for more systematic monitoring of shifts and changes in drinking-cultures. We have also noted, and lamented, the lack of significant anthropological research on drinking in mainstream, modern, Western societies. We have expressed concern about the continuing problem-oriented focus of ‘mainstream’ research on alcohol, and the resulting imbalances in perceptions of drinking. We have also complained about the lack of large-scale, systematic, cross-cultural comparison of drinking-cultures.

These gaps and imbalances in the literature are particularly evident in Europe, where there is an urgent need to clarify cultural differences and to identify and monitor current changes and cross-cultural influences. These cannot be regarded as matters of purely academic interest. It is clear that the current trends and shifts in drinking practices and associated beliefs about alcohol in Europe may have important implications for public policy and education, and that outdated distribution-of-consumption models can neither account for the existing cross-cultural variation nor provide any guidance on the new challenges posed by ‘convergence’.

Specifically, the evidence reviewed in this chapter indicates that, in terms of drinking-culture, some European societies and groups are more ‘susceptible’ to cross-cultural influence than others. The current trend providing cause for concern seems to be the adoption of ‘ambivalent’, problematic drinking practices and beliefs in formerly ‘integrated’, non-problematic drinking-cultures. The most striking example of this trend is in Spain (Rooney, 1991; Gamella, 1995), but early signs have also been observed in France (Nahoum-Grappe, 1995) and Italy (Cottino, 1995).

These shifts are occurring mainly among the young, and the problems may prove to be ‘age-specific’, as they are in the UK, where the vast majority of young binge-drinkers adopt more moderate habits in later life. There is, however, a danger that attempts to tackle these problems through the blanket restrictions and anti-alcohol messages typical of ‘ambivalent’ cultures will reinforce the negative beliefs associated with problem drinking, and that these behaviour patterns will become entrenched. There is also a danger that some of the shifts towards ‘ambivalent’ drinking
patterns among older sections of the population, such as the decline of traditional pre-work and lunchtime drinking, will not be seen as problematic, and may even be welcomed or encouraged by Temperance-minded authorities.

In addition to the challenges posed by adoption of problematic drinking patterns in formerly ‘integrated’ cultures, this review has also indicated that ‘ambivalent’ or ‘Temperance’ cultures such as the UK seem to exhibit a higher degree of immunity to cross-cultural influence than their ‘integrated’, ‘non-Temperance’ Mediterranean neighbours. Despite the increasing popularity of wine in formerly beer- and spirits-dominated ‘Temperance’ cultures, these societies have not adopted the more harmonious relationship with alcohol that is characteristic of wine-drinking cultures. While this may, in part, reflect the fact that the adoption of wine-drinking in ‘Temperance’ cultures has not extended to those most prone to troublesome drink-related behaviour, we must also note that morally ambivalent attitudes and beliefs about alcohol persist among those who have adopted wine-drinking.

Further research will be required to explain this apparent immunity to positive cross-cultural influence, and to determine the most appropriate means of promoting change in the more problematic drinking-cultures. Such research should, however, involve pan-European monitoring of drinking-cultures, including those in which there is some evidence of shifts towards more ‘integrated’ patterns, such as the Netherlands (Garretsen and van de Goor, 1995).

The Netherlands is classified as a ‘non-Temperance’ culture (Levine, 1992; Peele, 1997), but differs from its ‘non-Temperance’ Mediterranean neighbours in that it has experienced strong Temperance movements (although these movements were neither as sustained nor as influential as those in ‘Temperance’ cultures such as Britain or Sweden.) The legacy of these movements is still felt to some degree, reflected in a higher degree of ambivalence towards alcohol than is found in ‘integrated’ Mediterranean drinking-cultures.

In recent times, however, Garretsen and van de Goor (1995) observe that, along with increasing consumption levels, the Netherlands has seen “progressively stronger integration of alcohol use into everyday life” and other positive changes such as the “introduction of teenagers to alcohol within the nuclear family” rather than illicit drinking in groups of peers. While we would not wish to jump to optimistic conclusions on the basis of one report, any signs of positive shifts deserve careful verification and monitoring. If one culture is able to overcome, however gradually, the problems of a Temperance history, close study of this process could yield valuable lessons for those still experiencing ‘Temperance-related’ disorders.
These are just two examples of the many changes, some rapid and
dramatic, others gradual and barely perceptible, that are currently
occurring in European drinking-cultures. Increasing economic and
political ‘convergence’ among EC member states will almost
certainly result in further changes – the main danger, according to
current indicators, being a shift towards the negative beliefs and
expectations associated with problematic drinking.

In addition to a clear requirement for more systematic sociocultural
research and monitoring, this review of the available evidence
indicates an urgent need to revise current ‘received wisdoms’
guiding alcohol policy. The assertion by a former director general
of the WHO that “any reduction in per capita consumption will be
attended by a significant decrease in alcohol related problems”
(WHO, 1978) has, according to Heath (1995), “been treated like an
invariant scientific law linked with a moral imperative” in the face
of overwhelming evidence showing that “problems do not occur in
proportion to consumption” or indeed that “often, in fact, the
results are diametrically opposite to those that would be predicted
by the distribution-of-consumption model” (Heath, 1998).

The findings outlined in this review indicate that a new approach is
required, based on the recognition that different European cultures
have different levels and kinds of alcohol-related problems, that
these problems are directly related to specific patterns of beliefs
and expectations and that measures designed to preserve and
promote more positive beliefs are most likely to be effective.
Selected bibliography


Breeze, E. (1985a). Differences in Drinking Patterns Between Selected Regions, a comparison of drinking patterns in two regions with high levels and two regions with low levels of alcohol-related problems, an enquiry carried out on behalf of the Department of Health and Social Security. London: HMSO.


Casswell, S. (1997). Population level policies on alcohol: are they still appropriate given that ‘alcohol is good for the heart”? *Addiction*. 92(Supplement 1); S81-S90.


Erikson, P. (1992). The intoxication is not as important as the beverage: Fermentation, temperance and ritual among the Matis of the Brazilian Amazon. *Cahiers de Sociologie, Economique et Culturelle, Ethnopsychologie, 18:* 89-97.


Foster, E. (1888). *What is Gained by Moderate Drinking?*. Manchester.


Harvey, P. (1994). Gender, community and confrontation: Power relations in drunkenness in Ocongate (Southern Peru). In M. McDonald (ed.), *Gender, Drink and Drugs*. Oxford: Berg.


Heath, D.B. (1991a). Alcohol studies and anthropology. In D. J. Pittman and H. R. White (eds.), *Society, Culture and Drinking Patterns Reexamined: Alcohol, Culture and


Hunt, G.P. (1990b). The pub, the village and the people. *Dissertation Abstracts International: The Humanities and Social Sciences*, 50 (9): 3080-.


Jansen, G. H. (1976) *De Eeuwige Kroeg: hoofdstukken uit de geschiedenis van het openbaar lokaal*. Meppel: Boom


Johnston, H.F.H. (1866). *Drinking to the Glory of God. Is the Moderate Drinking of Alcoholic Liquors Consistent with the Command to ‘do all to the glory of God’?*. London.


Kennedy, B.P., et al. (1997). Young male drinkers and impaired driving intervention: results of a U.S. telephone survey. Accident Analysis and Prevention, 29(6); 707-713.


66: 344-54.

Report No. 6 of the National Symposium on Alcohol Misuse and Violence 1-3
December 1993. Canberra: Commonwealth Department of Health, Housing, Local
Government and Community Services.

social and environmental factors. British Journal of Social Psychology. 34(4):
395-407.

undergraduate students in the United States and Scotland. International Journal of the


Lehto, J. (1997). Alcohol and the future health of Europe. Addiction. 92(Supplement 1);
S91-S96.

issues. In J. Simpura and C. Tigerstedt (eds.), Social Problems around the Baltic Sea:
Report from the Baltica Study. Helsinki: Nordic Council for Alcohol and Drug
Research.

Leigh, B.C. (1989). In search of the seven dwarves: Issues of meaning in alcohol expectancy

Leinwand, T.B. (1989). Spongy plebs, mighty lords and the dynamics of the alehouse
159-184.

Addiction. New Brunswick: Rutgers Center of Alcohol Studies. Monograph No.11.

D. McDonald, Tulapai to Tokay: A Bibliography of Alcohol Use and Abuse among

Harford and L.S. Gaines (eds.), Social Drinking Contexts. NIAAA Research

Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Publications in Culture and Society, 2: 303-406.


Social and Cultural Aspects of Drinking

Selected bibliography


Moskalewicz, J. (1993a). Lessons to be learnt from Poland’s attempt at moderating its consumption of alcohol. *Addiction*, 88 (Supplement): 135S-142S.


Selected bibliography


Sherman, M.L. (1985). We can share the women, we can share the wine: The regulation of alcohol advertising on television. *Southern California Law Review*, 58(4): 1107-1145.


Selected bibliography


Toren, C. (1994). The drinker as chief or rebel: Kava and alcohol in Fiji. In M. McDonald (ed.), *Gender, Drink and Drugs*. Oxford: Berg.


