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# **A Sociological Look at Alcohol-Related Problems: A Talk Prepared for High School Students\***

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**This paper is the text of a talk prepared for high school students.**

Topics such as alcohol or drug abuse are usually reserved a place in high school health or civics classes because these substances are thought to present serious threats to the health and safety of young people, and young people are presumed to be ill informed or ignorant of those threats. For my part, I don't think that either of these assertions is true in the way that they are usually understood. In fact, one might make a credible case for the conclusion that alcohol occupies the role it does for some young people precisely because it presents risks to them and therefore allows them to demonstrate that they are not without courage or not any longer solely puppets to their parents or other authority figures. These demonstrations, in turn, may play a role in cementing peer group relations or act as marking points in the transformation from child to adult self-conceptions.

In any case, I don't want to confine this discussion to the threats of alcohol, but rather take up some of the cultural and historical factors that have combined to make alcohol a problematic substance for Americans. Perhaps the most important thing I want to leave with you is some sense of how the "alcohol problem" has changed in the U.S. in recent history. These changes have forced some scholars to broaden their conception of how alcohol and society are linked to each other and how that linkage can at different times create different conceptions of where the alcohol problem lies. As a sociologist, it would be remiss for me to not stress the ways in which alcohol is a cultural problem. And in order to illustrate some of the ways that the problem is cultural I'd like to talk for a moment about France, about a community in the Western Uttar Pradesh region of India, and about long hair.

In the 1970's the people of France consumed about 24 liters of absolute alcohol per person; in the U.S. per capita consumption was a little less than 10 liters. Among industrialized countries in the western world France

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\*George Shoenberger, whose students provided the audience, prompted the writing of this talk.

ranked first in per capita consumption and the U.S. ranked in about the middle of the distribution. Oddly enough, although France consumes well more than twice the amount of alcohol per capita of the U.S., if one asks Frenchmen in a survey to indicate which countries are the hardest drinking, in general the U.S. is regarded as a heavier drinking country than France (Sadoun et al., 1965, p. 57). This result is not merely a reflection of the ignorance of French people regarding national consumption rates, but suggests that the consumption patterns of a country are a rather different matter from the "worrying" patterns of a country. And the U.S. has a domestic and international image of concern over alcohol that exceeds its consumption rate. This is not an unusual circumstance—it has often been pointed out that relatively "wet" countries define alcohol differently as a cultural object than relatively "dry" countries. Thus, for example, while the Danes in Copenhagen get intoxicated about as often as the Finns in Helsinki, the arrest rate for intoxication in Helsinki is seven to thirteen times greater than that of Copenhagen (Ahlstrom-Laakso, 1975). Arrest rate, in this case, is taken as a crude measure of worry, or put more in sociological jargon, a measure of the degree to which alcohol has come to be defined as a social problem.

Among the Hindi-speaking population of Western Uttar Pradesh in India persons who consume excessive quantities of sweets or salty-spicy snacks are considered deviant, and labeled as sweets addicts or *chatora*. The addiction is called *chatorpan* (Vatuk and Vatuk, 1967). The sweets involved are usually an integral part of ritual and secular feasts or celebrations, and the ability to provide them in great quantity is an index of wealth and social status. Sweets play an important part in marriage negotiations as well as in the wedding ceremony itself; they accompany the birth of a child; and the ceremony attending death. And it is in this territory that the excessive consumption of sweets is seen as both a symptom and a cause of progressive moral, economic, and social decline. The people of Western Uttar Pradesh have a wide variety of folk theories concerning the causes of *chatorpan*, including the idea that parents were too liberal about sweets in the *chatora*'s childhood, that *chatoras* live under a curse, or that they are simply subject to an irresistible craving borne of excessive use of these substances. The biography of a typical *chatora* is described as follows: First, a young man's parents give him money for sweets on demand. Soon his craving outstrips even his parents' willingness to indulge him, for even if they were wealthy their values concerning the evils of *chatorpan* eventually overcome their affectionate instincts. At this point two processes take over. The young man deals with his economic problem by taking money surreptitiously from home and lying when the loss is discovered. He buys sweets on credit and fails to pay the bill, or finds ways of cheating the confectioner. He may even be shameless enough to steal the sweets outright. Simultaneously, the *chatora* begins to branch out into other forbidden fields. He is truant from

school and goes instead to the movies, or, in the stories of the traditional-minded, he spends his time at the folk-opera performances and at the circus. This causes him to fall into bad company.

It is believed that chatoras become weak, thin, and ill; they are, as a result, lazy, indolent, and ill-tempered. Moreover he is no longer a man to be trusted and may lose the respect of the community and thereby lower the status of his entire family.

The point of this anthropological case is that a substance or a behavior may take on a problematic status when it is invested with meaning by the culture at hand. Thus, part of the source of the alcohol problem in the U.S. (and the chatorpan problem in Western Uttar Pradesh) is the symbolic character of the substance in question. And, by extension, it might be suggested that everything that a culture happens to invest with special symbolic meaning or value is a likely candidate to be used by some as an expression of alienation or challenge. The case of Western Uttar Pradesh also suggests that the particular vehicle for such expressions is given to some arbitrariness from culture to culture.

This brings up the subject of long hair, which, I think, is a nice example of a "social problem" whose definition lies more in the symbolic realm than in the practical. Although school officials and concerned parents have occasionally paused to elaborate carefully reasoned arguments against long hair for men, including hygienic, "appearance", and disciplinary factors, the fundamental seat of the conflict is probably symbolic. Long hair, it should be pointed out, has been hanging from the heads of American girls and women for some time without noticeable impairments to their moral or intellectual development or conduct. The concern over masculine hairiness, then, would seem to arise because it is linked to attacks, or perceived attacks, on cherished values such as the separation of sex roles and sex-typing of appearance, the penalties on masculine vanity which is expressed in terms of coiffure as opposed to scholastic or occupational achievement, and broader links to other countercultural values. Hair is a good example of a social problem with strong symbolic roots simply because the practical drawbacks of it are marginal at best. And the urge expressed by some authorities to limit hair length is an attack on the symbolic problem through clipping off the symptom. There are strong symbolic components to alcohol too, although with time (as in the case of hair) these components have tended to dissipate or to take new forms.

The time when the symbolic character of the alcohol problem was most influential in American history is that just prior to the passage of National Prohibition, say the opening two decades of the twentieth century. An excellent sociological history of the American Temperance movement is available in Joseph Gusfield's *Symbolic Crusade* (1963); in this work Gusfield has persuasively argued that the movement for outlawing alcohol grew out of certain cultural strains which were being felt by a nation

which was being swelled by immigrants from wine-drinking countries, by a shift in the locus of political power from the farms to the cities, and by other significant threats to what was then perceived to be the “American Way of Life” as defined by the dominantly Protestant, rural, native, and abstaining American middle class. In Gusfield’s view, the drive for prohibition became the focus of this group’s efforts to establish and protect the norms of the American middle-class against the threats posed by new Americans and alien styles of life. It was an effort to win formal recognition of that dominance in a constitutional amendment which, if nothing else, showed to all that the native middle-class retained the prestige and the power to define appropriate behavior if not the might to enforce it. During the heyday of the temperance movement alcohol itself was seen as the social evil; indeed, some temperance advocates traced virtually every problem or ill known to man to that agent. Thus, the mechanism for control was centered on the substance alcohol. Alcohol was viewed in all-or-nothing moralistic terms, and the prime vehicle for defining it thusly was the fundamentalist protestant church—wherein Calvinist notions of total self-control and asceticism could provide the ideological mantle for viewing any drinking as evil.

Prohibition was in effect from 1919 to 1933. And although it is likely that the consumption of alcohol for the nation as a whole dipped during its reign, the 18th Amendment brought in its wake many unforeseen and damaging consequences: many people died from bad booze, the development of large bootlegging operations brought heightened violence to the cities, and in general it was feared that respect for law was threatened. There were other sorts of problems as well: the illegality of alcohol had put a premium on importing or distributing alcohol in concentrated form, thus substituting the use of light beers and wines with more intoxicating spirits. The pervasive feeling that prohibition was not worth abiding tended to make law enforcement officials ambivalent about it and good targets for bribes and corruption. Supporters of prohibition who had more zeal for its enforcement sometimes resorted to spying and sneaking and keyhole-peeping, as William Hearst called it, to bring violators to justice. These sorts of activities turned citizen against citizen and smacked of police state or totalitarian methods. Outside the boundaries of legal controls, drinking was equally available to women and to children, so that the prohibition or drinking in some ways actually lessened government control on consumption rather than increased it.

The nation was, however, on the horns of a dilemma: it had only evils to choose from. The Eighteenth Amendment seemed to be bringing more havoc than had drink in the first place, but that fact did not make drink any the less objectionable. In the late twenties and early thirties the alcohol question was, therefore, on the lips of most of the population. In 1929 William Randolph Hearst offered a \$25,000 prize to the best plan that would free the country from its dilemma. Entries poured in from all over

the country and were later compiled into a delightful book titled *Temperance—Or Prohibition?* (The Hearst Temperance Contest Committee, 1929).

By this time it was not alcohol but law and order that was the highest national priority. The villains on the drama were the bootleggers, mobsters, speakeasy operators, rum runners, and other outlaws who had turned prohibition into a thriving criminal business. Thus, with the repeal of prohibition, the States of the Union enacted alcohol control legislation that was primarily concerned with the control of the *business* of producing, distributing, selling, advertising, and buying alcohol. This orientation remains to this day in the ABC (or Alcoholic Beverage Control) acts that were written at that time. A wide variety of methods were used to insure that the liquor industry would not regain the power that organized crime had gathered together during prohibition. In some states along the Canadian border and in the South, State monopolies were established in which the sales of alcohol was a business reserved for state run stores. In other states elaborate licensing procedures were established and a terrific variety of regulations imposed to keep things legitimate and to hold down consumption. In some places, for example, taverns had to be shaded from the view of passers-by on the street so that public sensibilities would not be offended; in others the law required that bars were clearly visible from the street so that what went on within would be kept in line. Some states enacted high fees for getting a liquor license so that the fear of losing the license would cause bar owners to keep their bars orderly and sober; other states created low fees so that bar owning would not be restricted to the rich and powerful and so that the bar owner would not be forced to encourage alcohol consumption in order to make back his original investment. This sort of crazy quilt of legal strictures is characteristic of the legislation of the thirties and forties, and for all of its confusion it shared the central concern for making alcohol sales and selling return to the law.

In the early part of the century the alcohol problem was expressed in a drive to get rid of the liquid alcohol; in the prohibition period the problem associated with alcohol became the social disruption of a large and strong outlaw industry; in the period that followed Repeal the alcohol problem again changed form, which we turn to now.

The return of law to the sales of liquor did not end the country's concern about drinking. But a new sort of theory arose in the early forties that ultimately transformed that concern from one over alcohol or alcohol selling to one over people who could not drink moderately. With the birth of Alcoholics Anonymous and a group of scholars interested in alcohol as a medical problem at Yale University, the prevailing conception of alcohol problems shifted to one in which not drink but persons were the root of the problem. These persons were to be known as alcoholics, and their affliction was to be known as a disease or illness.

This shift in emphasis was perhaps inevitable in a political context in which drink was legal but the problems of drink still persisted. By shifting the burden of the alcohol issue to special persons who were alcoholics, the sale of alcohol could be condoned and the problems of alcohol could be subjected to a different sort of attack. In part, this shift reflected the growing capacity of scientists and doctors to define the public reality, and the declining power of moralist definers. It also grew out of impatience with the vicious cycle of arrest, re-arrest, and re-arrest that had come to characterize the treatment of skid row residents. This broad shift has only recently come to maturity—as reflected in a national agency which was created in 1970 and whose mission is to transform the conception and treatment of alcoholics.

Even today, however, not all institutions or scholars are enthusiastic about the disease concept of alcoholism. Some insurance companies for example don't want to have to pay medical benefits to alcoholics, and have fought several court cases on that account. Even the Supreme Court of the United States in 1968, in the case of *Powell v. Texas* (U.S. Supreme Court Reports, 1968), chose to deny that alcoholism was an illness and therefore that punishments for it were cruel and unusual.

Notwithstanding the often-heard urgings to the contrary, the evidence that alcoholism is a disease like chicken pox is not altogether compelling. Simple as it may sound, the fundamental case for alcoholism-as-a-disease has been that the drinking of some persons just doesn't make rational sense, and if it does not make sense then it must be the result of a factor that is outside their control, such as a disease. The same sort of reasoning is at the base of differentiations between people who are called "thieves" and people who are called "kleptomaniacs". If somebody steals to feed themselves when they have no money for food, they are thieves; when a rich person is caught stealing items that he or she could easily afford, it is called kleptomania. The underlying criterion for the distinction is whether or not the act makes sense to the common man or the common jury and judge. The same goes for heavy drinking.

For many years the standing example of the senselessness of excessive drinking was the skid row bum. Drinking was thought to cause his bad circumstances, and the "fact" that he would endure these circumstances in order to drink was taken as a kind of proof that alcoholism was a disease. It is interesting that many anthropologists and sociologists have made studies of skid row and their findings have been contrary to some of the assumptions of the alcoholism argument. First of all, the number of men living in skid rows has been very much a function of economic factors in the nation, rather than solely a result of the number of alcoholics. Secondly, some students have reported that drinking on skid row is not always very heavy, and other sorts of factors such as being without family or without occupational skills or without political power tend to

account for the problems of skid rowers better than excessive drinking. There are several good books on skid row available, and among them my favorite is James Spradley's *You Owe Yourself a Drunk* (1970).

In any case, the general argument that drinking to excess was a disease because it otherwise did not make sense has been subject to criticism precisely because drinking may be subject to different sensibilities. The case for the disease concept got a big boost in the late forties and early fifties when a man named E. M. Jellinek at Yale published his conclusions that persons who were alcoholic went through a common series of symptoms: these are the symptoms such as blackouts, or hiding drinks, or "the shakes" that you have heard of (Jellinek, 1952). This was a very important assertion because the existence of a common series of symptoms, or a syndrome, which occurred even if the person suffering them did not know about them was a strong argument in favor of the control of the alcoholic's drinking behavior by something other than his own will, hence a disease. Unfortunately, the study was done on Alcoholics Anonymous members, and it was never clear whether these members were reporting their own experiences or these experiences in the light of AA ideas on alcoholism. More recent studies of alcoholic symptoms have failed to reveal a strictly predictable syndrome.

Let me wrap up this brief discussion by saying that alcohol presents problems to American society, and these problems have been subject to several sorts of interpretation. Three sorts of focusses have been mentioned: one on the *substance* alcohol, a second on the *business* of alcohol production and sale, and a third focussing on *persons* regarded as excessive drinkers. Alcohol problems remain a substantial—although perhaps declining—worry to many Americans. The character of that worry is subject to change, and none of the changes so far seems to have brought the "final solution." While each orthodoxy may present its case as true and valid, the lesson of history seems to be that no truly adequate understanding of alcohol problems has as yet arrived.

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