

SOME NOTES ON THE STUDY OF DRINKING
CONTEXTS

A. The Importance of Context

Most drinking is social, in that it is carried on in company. Much drinking is more a property of the situation than of the individual drinker, in that the occasion calls for a drink irrespective of personal preferences. Almost all drinking, even at its most apparently uninhibited, obeys what MacAndrew and Edgerton (1969) call the "within-limits" clause, remaining within socially- and situationally-defined boundaries.

Drinking is thus a socially formed behavior which is highly responsive to variables such as time, place, occasion, co-present parties, etc. Indeed, the term "social drinker"--by which most American drinkers describe their own drinking practices--has the implication that "alcohol consumption is regarded as a property of social contexts rather than a property of individuals" (Roizen, 1972). The choice to drink or not drink; what to drink (Fink, 1965), and in what quantities are conditioned by the immediate situation and by up-coming ones. We have found in our recent survey of San Francisco males, for example, that rather discriminating estimates of how much should be drunk will be made by respondents once time, place, and actors are specified. Moreover, 1) there is a great deal of variance in willingness to drink by contexts; and 2) the "willingness" variance across contexts is larger than the variance across drinker groups (defined by high, mid-range, and low frequency drinkers--see Table 1).

Findings such as these have helped to reinforce in our recent thought a focus on the context of drinking as an important determinant of drinking patterns and problems. In many ways this focus is not new: the pioneer Finnish sociological studies of drinking in the '50's (Kuusi, 1957; Allardt, 1957; Bruun, 1959) paid explicit attention to the context of drinking, and some data in this area has consistently been presented in our previous reports. As we now see it, however, the focussing of attention on contexts of drinking carries with it a new perspective on a number of

traditional lines of analysis of drinking patterns and problems in general populations.

The departure-point for an explicitly contextual study is the recognition that all sociocultural influences must ultimately be funneled through the drinking behavior of social actors located in social contexts. Only twenty-five years ago, indeed, most alcohol consumption in the United States happened in taverns (Kluge, 1971). Although this proportion has dramatically declined, the social patterning of drinking is nevertheless strong. As we have noted, for most adult males in the 1971 San Francisco sample, the appropriateness of drinking is largely dependent on the context (Table 1). This sociocultural enclaving of drinking which includes dimensions of time, place, occasion, co-present actors, and so forth, allows us heuristically to view American culture as a system into which alcohol is poured at an array of discernible points. Accordingly, these points or "drinking contexts" deserve considerable attention in their own right.

Besides its value per se as a descriptive enterprise, then, mapping the positioning of social contexts in the sociocultural system of institutions, statuses, roles and other social differentiations (for which "demographic variables" are a conventional shorthand) also transforms and infuses with social meanings our understanding of the patterns of association between social differentiations and individual drinking patterns and problems. Many contexts of drinking are in fact ongoing "social worlds," in Shibutani's phrase (1961, pp. 127-136) with more or less diffuse boundaries and membership attributes including the possession of a stock of arcane lore and subcultural norms. Much repetitive behavior involving drinking can be seen as seated in allegiances to such social worlds, rather than in an individual psychological dependence on drinking (Room, 1973a).

A contextual approach lends itself well both to social contexts of great stability

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TABLE 1: PRO-DRINKING RESPONSES TO EACH OF EIGHT SITUATIONS . . .

. . . . BY FREQUENCY OF DRINKING

How much drinking is all right for you yourself as . . .	Percent indicating that at least some drinking would be "all right" among . . .	
	Respondents who drink at least as often as "usually once a day, sometimes twice" (N = 97)	Respondents who drink less often than once a month (N = 121)
a man out at a bar with some of his male friends	95%	83%
the host of a small party or get-together	95%	79%
a husband having dinner out with his wife	94%	81%
a man visiting his parents	74%	50%
a couple of fellow-workers out to lunch	67%	47%
a father playing with his small kids	37%	14%
a man about to drive his car	33%	11%
an employee on the job	18%	15%

SOURCE: Roizen, 1972. Based on 1971 re-interviews with 615 San Francisco white males aged 25-63.

and predictable recurrence and to contexts of an ephemeral and sporadic nature. Some of the social problems of drinking--e.g. fighting and violence associated with drinking--may be seen partly as rooted in sub-cultural and situational norms more than in individual behavioral propensities. Access to these relatively permanent social worlds with an identifiable membership and "home terrains" such as the tavern is differentially available to and expected of individuals according to their position on a number of social differentiations. The social contexts of drinking can be seen therefore, both as an intermediate variable interpreting with the realities of social interaction the relationship between demographic characteristics and drinking behavior and problems, and also as an independent variable with its own inherent contribution to the explanation of drinking behavior and problems: once the individual is "admitted" to a social context of drinking, by whatever route, his behavior is partly conditioned by the expectations and sanctions which are properties of that context.

The social contexts of drinking can also play a crucial role in interpreting the relation between social differentiations and drinking behaviors and problems even in the absence of the persisting cultural phenomena of "social worlds." The status of male, for instance, tends to carry with it expectations both of considerable drinking in a party context and of driving home in the traveling context which immediately follows the party. The problems of drunk driving thus can be illuminated by a study of the expectations of the individual in different contexts and of the succession of those contexts in his daily biography. As Roizen (1973) has noted, such a study of drinking contexts often has a high potentiality of suggesting minimum-cost measures in the prevention of drinking problems.

B. Problems in the Survey Measurement of Drinking Contexts

(1) The unit of analysis, the meaning of "context," and the importance of non-drinking contexts: There are some conceptual difficulties in a survey study of drinking occasions that are especially worth

noting. First of all in a descriptive study of drinking contexts the unit of analysis is implicitly the contexts themselves rather than the individuals who people those contexts. But a sampling of people, of course, gives one a sampling of person-occasions rather than of occasions. If our implicit model is a true sampling of occasions, then each person-observation of an occasion should be weighted inversely to the number of participants in the occasion; e.g. an observation of a solitary drinking occasion should be weighted at 25 times the representation in the "sample" of an observation of a party at which 25 people were present. For many analytical purposes, of course, such a weighting scheme would not make much sense, but it serves to bring out the point that in a sample survey of persons it is persons-in-contexts and not contexts that are being sampled.

Secondly, where one "context" ends and another "context" begins may not be altogether clear. By "a context" is implied a sociophysical setting, a roster of participants, and a social definition of the situation--a party, a waiting period, a meeting, etc. We might then in theory break up social life into a series of episodes marked by a common setting, a common set of participants, and a common focus of interaction (or non-focus--cf. Goffman). Such a procedure was attempted by Watson, Riesman *et al.* in their analysis of sociable interaction at parties (Watson and Potter, 1962). Each such episode could then be characterized and coded in terms of its constituents, situation, and inherent qualities. But in such an analysis, the typical party becomes the scene of some hundreds of sociable episodes--clearly an unmanageably large number for the kind of analysis which here concerns us. Barker (1968) has developed an operationalized method for identifying and distinguishing behavior settings from one another, but the complexity and rigor required in his method is far beyond that which could be adapted to a survey of persons. For these purposes, a party of some other occasion must be considered as a single episode or "occasion" as it has

usually been termed in the alcohol literature. We would, then, expect an analysis of drinking contexts to be in terms of drinking occasions, although it must be recognized that the concept of "drinking occasion" when looked at closely is often not describing a unit with internal homogeneity and well-defined boundaries. (In addition, the word "occasion" carries the unfortunate secondary meaning associated with "special occasion".)

third difficulty is that a sampling of drinking occasions does not offer comparative data on the nature and occurrence of non-drinking occasions. This is a serious difficulty if a true social mapping of drinking contexts is desired, since the method will yield a map without boundaries. It also greatly hampers multivariate analysis, since the social contingencies of drinking contexts would remain unknown. This difficulty is one that is especially important in a consideration of drinking, given that one of the characteristics of alcohol is that its effects on practices and problems behavior change over time. Social occasions as we have been describing them have to a greater or lesser extent a boundary in time; for an individual, the party ends and he returns to the social occasion of driving home. Social contexts, then, themselves exist in a social context of preceding and succeeding contexts. One of the strongest aspects of a contextual analysis is its power in explaining many "drinking problems" as a disjunction between adjacent contexts, where the alcohol consumption appropriate in one context exerts its influence on behavior in the succeeding inappropriate situation.

As we have mentioned, the first difficulty is partly solved by a weighting scheme, the second partly by reconceptualizing the unit of analysis. The second is solved by approximation, and the third difficulty would be solved by collecting a listing and description of all "occasions" passed through by a respondent in a given period of time--say a week--i.e., an enumeration of the respondent's complete place rounds, both those involving drinking and those

A study of contexts in terms of occasions fits right into a well-established tradition in empirical research on drinking patterns, and we will turn next to the major methods of drinking occasion measurement in that tradition.

(2) Methods of asking about drinking occasions: In much of the preceding empirical work on drinking occasions, the "occasion" approach has been viewed essentially as a memory-aid to the respondent in establishing his volume and patterning of drinking: "occasions" were naturally occurring and intuitively recognizable units, while ounces-per-month were not. Methodological evaluation of different ways of asking about drinking occasions, then, has tended to revolve around the question of which method yielded the least underestimation of overall consumption. The results are, then, applicable to studies of occasions in their own right only to the (probably considerable) extent that forgetting and lying about amount of drinking are related to forgetting and lying about other characteristics of drinking occasions.

Three major methods of asking about drinking occasions have been used in the literature: the drinking diary; retrospective recall and listing of specific occasions; and summary judgment by the respondent concerning drinking behavior.

a. The drinking diary and the Finnish "Drinking Rhythm" methods.

Data on drinking along with other aspects of diet or consumption have been collected as part of general consumer expenditure surveys using diary methods since the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, there have been relatively few studies specifically of drinking using the diary method. One major problem is clearly obtaining the cooperation of the respondent in an onerous task, yet the few studies do not give detailed information on refusals or dropouts. Two of the studies (Williams and Straus, 1950; Lolli, Serianni and Golder, 1958) utilize a special population (Italians

and Italian-Americans) in which alcohol is viewed more as a foodstuff than as a moral issue, where there is thus less likely to be "a substantial 'Puritan' element" in the reporting, as has been noted for the U.S. in general (Houthakker and Taylor, 1970, p. 252). Two of the studies (Lolli, Serianni and Golder, 1958; Fuller *et al.*, 1972) collected the data in the context of a total diet diary, an approach unlikely to be easily adaptable to a study of the contexts of drinking occasions. In the only study comparing a diary with other methods of obtaining alcohol data (Lamale, 1959, pp. 137-141), the week's diary showed a lower reported consumption than any of the other three methods used--date-of-last purchase, recall of a week's consumption, and estimate of a year's consumption (see Room, 1971).

Diary studies of drinking, then, have been used to measure amounts but not contexts of drinking, and do not seem to yield especially valid data on amount of drinking. A method which might be regarded as a half-way point between diary and recall-of-occasions methods was used in a study of drinking rhythm among Finnish males (Ekholm, 1968; Poysa and Niiranen, 1966). This study involved repeated interviews--an average of 20 in the course of a year--in which 94 respondents were asked a short series of questions about each drinking occasion in the period since the previous interview. This study did collect significant data about drinking contexts.

"We registered... data and hour of the drinking occasion. We asked about the locus of drinking and the company [,] making a difference between the place where the drinking was started and where the main part of it took place... When the company was a small informal group the names of the participants were recorded to make it possible to identify the existence of coherent drinking groups. The type and amount of alcohol consumed were registered as exactly as the subject could recall them. We asked about the reason for the drinking by an open-end question, ... who paid for the drinks and, ... whether the drinking-day was a payday for the subject,

for his wife or for the one who bought the drinks. Finally we asked whether the subject had sexual intercourse while he still felt the alcohol." (Ekholm, 1968, p. 1.)

Unfortunately the only data yet reported from this study is an analysis of the time-pattern of drinking occasions. Nevertheless, the report does contain important information on the practicalities of such an intensive panel study--information which is also relevant to a diary study. Of the 81 white-collar men who were contacted for the study and met the minimum-frequency criterion of drinking at least twice a month, only 59% finally consented to the study. Although all respondents lived in Helsinki, a medium-sized city, the study "found that an interviewer using a car could, at his very best, follow the behavior of 40-50 subjects" (Ekholm, 1968, p. 2). Furthermore, the issue of Heisenbergian effects, equally applicable to diary methods and to such a panel study, was explicitly faced:

"It was pointed out to the interviewees that they should not let the observation influence their drinking behavior, but it is hard to say whether this worked. In discussions after the end of the year some subjects noted that they had come to reflect upon their drinking behavior in a much more thorough way than before and some were rather surprised by their own frequency. Still, the observation effect was hardly very important and certainly not present for all subjects" (Ekholm, 1968, p. 2).

Before moving to a consideration of the other major methods of asking respondents about their drinking occasions, it is worth noting that there are alternative methodologies worth considering for getting the kind of fine-grained detail contained in diary and the Finnish drinking rhythm studies. There is by now a considerable collection of observational studies of drinking behavior in taverns (collated in

om, 1973b). The dominant style of analysis in this tradition has been in terms of typical patterns supported by particular instances, but in two reports (Mass Observation, 1970, pp. 170-175; 191-195; Mäkelä, 1965) quantified studies of person-occasions including some contextual data (e.g., type of bar, time of day, duration of occasion, size and age of drinking groups) were carried out and reported. Both studies leave the impression that such a study is "very difficult laborious work" (Mass Observation, 1970, p. 170), chiefly because of the necessity for subterfuge by the observers, but it is clear that such quantified studies of drinking in public contexts are feasible and potentially useful. As alternatives to a conventional diary study then, it might be well to consider such quantified observational studies of drinking occasions as well as the diary of place-rounds mentioned earlier.

3. Retrospective recall-listing of specific occasions, and summary judgments by respondents.

As we have already noted, the two primary methods of gathering information about drinking occasions in a survey interview have been the retrospective recall and listing of specific occasions and the obtaining of summary judgments by the respondent concerning his drinking behavior. As two major research groups with continuing traditions of general-population studies of drinking behavior, the Finnish Foundation for Alcohol Studies and the Social Research Group, have each used both methods in their studies, although the Finnish group has tended to emphasize the recall of specific occasions and the U.S. group the use of overall judgments (Room, 1970a). A number of reports on the relative yield of the two methods in measuring amount of drinking have appeared (Sargent, 1970; Rouse, 1970; Room 1970b; Mäkelä, 1971, pp. 12-14; Lamale, 1959, pp. 137-141), although unfortunately the reports have all been based on comparisons of relatively sophisticated and incomplete sets of questions for both methods--e.g., "usual behavior" for the summary judgment method and only the last one or two occasions for the listing of occasions method.

The interpretation of these reports is confused by a number of issues--e.g., by the issue of the theoretical and empirical relation between time-between-occasions and time-from-last-occasion-to-interview--but the general direction of results seems to be that summary methods yield a higher estimate than last-occasions methods, except among infrequent drinkers. Thus Mäkelä comments, "the answers to the questions concerning the average frequency of drinking can be asserted to provide a better picture of the subjects' drinking frequency as compared with the mapping-out of particular drinking occasions. This is noteworthy, considering that one argument initially advanced in favor of the 'when last?' type of questions was that they supposedly provided a more reliable picture of the respondents' drinking frequency" (Mäkelä, 1971, pp. 13-14).

As we have noted, these comparisons are based on relatively unsophisticated versions of the two methods, and are not necessarily very revealing for comparisons of methods of eliciting data on drinking context. Both methods have been extensively used in recent studies involving contexts of drinking, but the results for contexts have mostly not yet been published. In the Finnish 1968-1969 consumption study directed by Mäkelä data was collected for all drinking occasions in a period determined by the respondents' reported frequency of drinking, a period which on this basis should have included at least four drinking occasions. For each occasion, in addition to the day, time, duration and interval from the proximate occasions, and the types and quantities of alcoholic beverages, information was collected on the place of drinking, eating while drinking, the presence of children (and parents for those under 20), and the number and characteristics of the drinking companions (Mäkelä, 1971, p. 10).

In recent interviews of the Social Research Group--one conducted in San Francisco in 1971 and one for a national sample currently in the field--a number

of questions relevant to drinking contexts were included. One series, analyzed by Ronald Roizen in a working paper on "'Social Drinking': A Partial Test of a Drinking Practices Folk Theory" (1972), deals with differential norming in different social situations--"how much drinking is all right" in each of a number of situations. Another series deals with characteristics of drinking groups and their members in which the respondent participates. Further series deal with changes in the amount of time respondents spend in a series of social situations, frequency of drinking, and changes in quantities of drinking in those situations, while further series explore the constraints and pressures on their drinking behavior experienced by respondents from particular classes of significant others in particular situations.

The literature on the validity of the various major methods of eliciting information on drinking behavior does not offer much guidance on the comparative validity of sophisticated and detailed inquiries in each of the methods. It is likely that each method has its special strengths or weaknesses. A listing-of-occasions method allows for a more naturalistic description of particular occasions, and is particularly useful if occasions rather than persons are to be the unit of analysis. On the other hand, summary judgment questions profit from the respondents' ability to contribute more to the data than a rock can contribute to its measurement, and allow more easily for questioning about relatively rare but crucial occurrences (e.g., problem occurrences consequent upon a particular class of drinking situations). In short, there does not thus appear to be a single method of measuring drinking contexts to be preferred in all situations.

C. Accounting for Consumption in Terms of Context

Assessing the explanatory power of context requires the disconfounding of the influences of context on individual consumption and the influences of individual consumers on the selection of contexts.

The attempt to disconfound, in turn, poses a series of analytical tasks for the researcher. What is the degree of voluntarism connected with drinking contexts? To what extent are they integral or separable from socio-cultural worlds or locations of the subject? What is the availability of activity alternatives to drinking contexts and what is their relevant ledger of perceived benefits and costs? To what degree are particular contexts perceived to leave the matter of drinking behavior open to individual variations? And, what are the variations in the "situation rounds" within and among individuals? Each question implies relevant data to be collected.

Our previous experiences with contextual analyses suggest that an adequate supply of variables and data would include week-day/weekend, monthly, seasonal, and yearly variations in "situation" rounds. Also collected should be data regarding the number, durations, drinking norms, co-present parties, insulations, sequence and salience of the sample's situational array. The sequence of contexts in respondents' situation rounds, for example, appears to have a significant influence on drinking practices within specific contexts, since the effects of alcohol may linger beyond the situation in which drinking was done. We have found, for example, that drinking norms at lunch are significantly different depending upon the drinking norms in the workplaces of employed respondents. The difference, moreover, holds up when characterological factors are approximately controlled. The variation of perceived drinking norms for similar situations is also an important variable. With regard to contexts in which there is a high degree of consensus surrounding drinking norms, variations in consumption will be most influenced by differential exposure to and duration time in that context. The consensus concerning drinking norms, however, varies a great deal from situation to situation. Thus the analysis of dissensual situations requires data on normative variations as well as exposure.

The dominant strategy in United States alcohol problems research has been addressed to the question: What causes some people to drink in a manner that causes troubles for them? This emphasis on the determinants of drinking behavior whether expressed in research done in the laboratory, in clinical groups, or in general population samples--has broad-ranging influences on both conceptualization and public policy. Deviant drinking behavior, however, cannot be defined without reference to the norms of social context--it involves at least two planes of variation, behavior and context. Thus, a preoccupation with behavioral variation risks the exclusion of fully half of the puzzles necessary to an adequate theoretical picture of alcohol problems. This emphasis, for example, has all too often fostered the tacit deduction that alcohol problems in this country are due to a special and exotic (if hard to define) group of persons who are alcoholics, problem drinkers, or otherwise peculiarly disposed toward alcohol. It is hoped that the awakening of research on contextual issues will balance with alternative and complementary insights and possibilities the conceptual and public policy dilemmas associated with alcohol and American society.

--Robin Room and Ron Roizen

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WHO WORKING GROUPS ON COLLABORATIVE CROSS-NATIONAL REPORTING

During August, the Office of Mental Health of the World Health Organization convened two working groups in Geneva concerned with collaborative cross-national reporting on the non-medical use of dependence-producing drugs. Dr. Dale Cameron, the WHO Chief Medical Officer for Drug Dependence, served as secretary for both groups. The first group, working on the basis of a detailed review document prepared by Dr. Griffith Edwards and other staff of the Addiction Research Unit of the Institute of Psychiatry, London, was concerned with a set of guidelines for the reporting of already-existing data on the use of, problems with, and national responses to alcohol and other drugs. It is envisioned that a regular review of the available data would be undertaken on the basis of the guidelines, initially on a pilot basis, in a number of countries and regions. The second group was concerned with planning for the initiation of new data-collecting centres in countries or regions without substantial existing centres, to operate in cooperation with already existing centres elsewhere.

NIAAA ALCOHOLISM CONFERENCE

The third annual alcoholism conference of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism was held in Washington on June 20-22, 1973. The emphasis this year was on treatment approaches--particularly community-based treatment programs. The thirty or so papers and addresses also included studies on psychological and sociocultural aspects of alcoholism, although only a few papers were directly concerned with patterns in general populations. It is expected that the proceedings will eventually be published. So far, only the proceedings of the 1970 Symposium, which foreshadowed the current conference series, have appeared (Recent Advances in Studies of Alcoholism: An Interdisciplinary Symposium, Publication (HSM) 71-9045, 920 pages, available from the Government Printing Office, \$3.75 paperbound).