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Finnish Drinking Habits. Results
from Interview Surveys Held
in 1968, 1976 and 1984

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3

Abstinence

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The first nation-wide interview study of Finnish drinking habits was conducted in 1946 under the leadership of Pekka Kuusi (Kuusi 1948). It paid special attention to abstinence; every subsequent study has followed suit.

Abstinence is a clear-cut variable and is interesting in a number of ways. Despite the fact that many people who describe themselves as teetotallers are actually in the habit of taking a drink every now and then (Kuusi 1948, 28), abstinence is a readily understood concept. The definition used by later studies was very clear-cut; they classified abstainers as people who reported drinking no alcohol whatsoever during the twelve months prior to the interview as abstainers.

Analyzing abstinence also sheds worthwhile light on the 1984 data, telling us about how people actually drink and their attitudes towards alcohol. Of course, it must be remembered that abstinence is not always a matter of choice — people may be ill, not have enough money to drink or find it difficult to obtain alcohol, say. Nevertheless, individuals who do not even drink half a bottle of beer or a drop of wine for a whole year have generally made a normative stand, deliberately decided not to drink. The prevalence of abstinence may be viewed as an indication of how favourably disposed towards drinking the public at large is. In Chapter 10, Klaus Mäkelä discusses public opinions on medium beer from a similar stance. Fluctuations in the prevalence of abstinence amongst different population groups may also be interpreted as indications of how norms change and the processes by which they spread (Sulkunen 1979). The present Chapter will discuss abstinence indicators in this light. We shall first look at how the prevalence of abstinence has changed in different population groups. The developments we find will reflect norms and may mirror a wide range of alcohol-related social significations and living conditions. In conclusion, we shall analyze how abstainers justify their behaviour by sketching their social profiles and comparing them with drinkers.

Figure 3.1 Percentages of men and women who were drinkers, 1968, 1969, 1976 and 1984

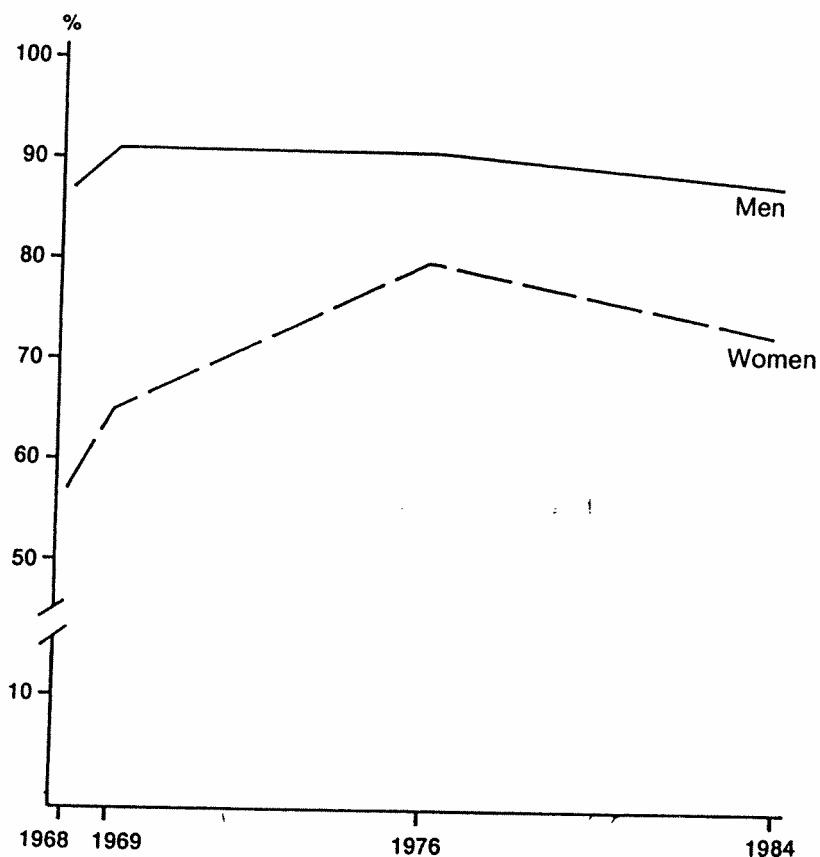


Figure 3.1 examines matters from the point of view of drinkers, inverting Table 3.1.

All in all, it would appear that 1976 constituted an exception. After that year, matters reverted to the point where they had stood in 1968. The changes which took place in the prevalence of abstinence amongst men tended to be minor and occurred in 1969. Fluctuations amongst women were more marked and took place over a longer period of time.

If we use other population variables besides gender, we find that the results obtained resemble Figure 3.1. Tables 3.2 and 3.3 set out the findings in terms of urban and rural areas.

The "Wet Generation"

An earlier analysis of drinking habits between 1946 and 1976 demonstrated that the renunciation of abstinence tends to be a generation-specific phenomenon (Sulkunen 1979). This was especially true of people born immediately before or after World War II — people born between 1916 and 1925 did not begin to drink appreciably more. Since we now have data on three points in time and two separate eight-year periods, we are in a position to conduct a detailed cohort analysis.

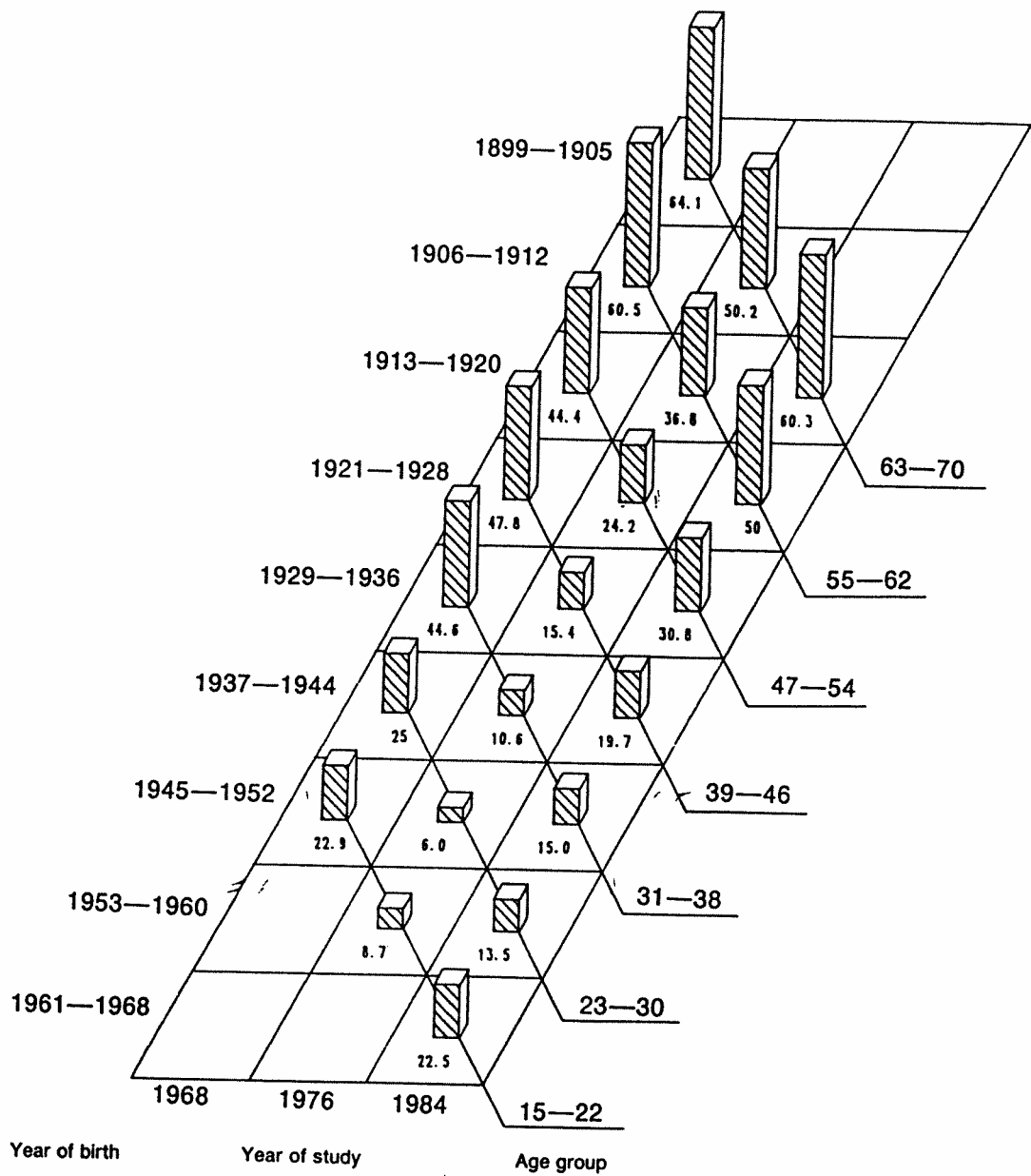
Our analysis will be based on age cohorts drawn up as specified in Figures 3.2 and 3.3. The Figures' horizontal lines describe how the drinking behaviour of each age cohort changed over the course of time; the vertical columns indicate which age group a particular cohort was part of in a given year.

As Figure 3.2 shows, men born between 1929 and 1952 first tended to drink but then became abstainers as they grew older. The later the cohort in question was born, the earlier its members gave up drinking. Men born between 1945 and 1952, for instance, were more likely to be abstainers in 1984 when they were 32–39 years old than they were eight years earlier at the age of 24–31. Some seven per cent of the cohort's members were abstainers in 1984; the corresponding 1976 figure had been five per cent. Men born between 1929 and 1936, on the other hand, did not become abstainers until they were 40–47 years old; they still drank at the age of 32–39. In general, Finnish men tend to drink less as they grow older; nowadays, furthermore, they are relatively young when they cut down on their drinking. Nevertheless, the overall reduction in alcohol consumption is small.

The diagonals of the two Figures connect the same ages in different years and therefore enable us to compare how the members of each cohort behaved at the same age. In 1976, abstinence was less prevalent in each cohort than had been the case with people of similar ages in 1968 and 1984. For 55–62 year-olds, abstinence was most widespread (22 %) amongst people born between 1905 and 1912 (measured in 1968). The lowest prevalence (15 %) was found amongst those born between 1913 and 1920 (measured in 1976); the 1984 data show that 55–62 year-olds born between 1921 and 1928 were more abstinent (16 %). The discrepancy between 1976 and 1984 is far from marked and is not even statistically significant. Nevertheless, it indicates the general trend. Since, in general, abstinence first fell in the years studied and then became more prevalent again, we may describe the overall trend as a periodic effect. This periodic effect was not very marked amongst men.

Figure 3.2 shows another interesting trend. The drinking habits of people born just before or after World War II were very different from the behaviour of the population as a whole. This is especially true of women born after the war. First of all, women born then were less likely than other groups to be abstainers in both 1968 and 1976. Secondly, looking at the 1968–1976 period and making age-adjustments, the prevalence of abstinence fell comparatively strongly — from eight to five per cent — amongst the two cohorts of 23–30 year-olds born in 1937

Figure 3.3 Prevalence of abstinence among women in given age cohorts, 1968, 1976 and 1984



the result of measurement errors, there is little likelihood of such a slowdown occurring in the future. Indeed, it is more probable that the trend will be an accelerating one.

The Uniformity of the "Wet Generation"

The young men and women who became adults in the late Sixties and early Seventies did so at a time when Finnish alcohol conditions were exceptional. First of all, almost all youngsters reported that they had used alcohol on at least one occasion — a historically unique finding. But matters did not stop there. The generation which reached maturity in the late Sixties and early Seventies completely "disregarded" the differing ways different groups had regarded alcohol. All youngsters renounced temperance — boys and girls, people who lived in towns and people who lived in the countryside, the upper and the lower class (Sulkunen 1979, Tables 8, 9 and 10). Older people, however, still held to the traditional patterns of behaviour.

We have already noted that 1976 was the year when the differences between the various population groups were least marked and that this was especially true for young people. Probably, this was due to the behaviour patterns adopted by the exceptionally large number of people born immediately before or after World War II, the "wet generation". Would it therefore be true to say that the uniformity of Finland's alcohol culture in 1976 was the result of a single specific generation's drinking habits? Has the "wet generation" retained its uniformity? And did the next generation prove to be similarly uniform, or did the traditional differences in drinking behaviour make themselves felt once more? We shall now delve into these questions using cohort analysis.

As Table 3.1 showed, the differences between the drinking habits of men and women grew less pronounced between 1968 and 1976 and then gradually became more marked once more. These trends held good for both older and younger people. Table 3.5, on the other hand, demonstrates that this narrowing and widening effect was especially strong in those cohorts where abstinence was least widespread in 1976.

Table 3.5 Prevalence of abstinence among men and women born in 1937–1944 and 1945–1952 (% of each group), 1968, 1976 and 1984

Year of birth	1968		1976		1984	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
1937–1944	25	8	11	7	20	11
1945–1952	23	14	6	5	15	7

of disappearing for good. It is especially noteworthy that this uniformity stems from a comparatively strong increase in abstinence amongst men living in towns and cities. Over the last eight years, abstinence has spread so much amongst urban men born between 1937 and 1944 that they are now equally as abstinent as their rural counterparts. In each group, eleven out of one hundred are abstainers. If we assume that cultural patterns originate in urban areas and then spread to the countryside rather than the reverse, it may be that this phenomenon manifests a new trend — neo-abstinence. We shall discuss whether this is actually the case in a moment.

It is more difficult to interpret what Table 3.6 says about women because the percentage figures are spread all over the scale. Comparing the percentages is all too likely to be an arbitrary process and this is especially true where the differences between them are concerned. Nevertheless, the Table clearly indicates one overall tendency. In both built-up areas and the countryside, women of all ages renounced abstinence. The trend was more pronounced in urban areas and amongst younger women. All in all, this diminished the disparity between urban and rural women. And whilst it is hard to judge whether the differences have since become more pronounced, it is evident that the disparity did not diminish to the same extent as it did amongst men.

In terms of cohorts, the smallest difference in 1976 was found amongst people born between 1937 and 1944; there is no doubt that the disparity became more marked by 1984. It is also worth pointing out that no more than three per cent of the women who had been born between 1945 and 1952 and lived in built-up areas were abstainers. It is difficult to form any impression of the relative prevalence of abstinence amongst urban and rural women by merely examining the figures since the percentages fluctuate widely and have different positions on the scale. In order to obtain a sharper-focussed picture, exact mathematical procedures would have to be employed. And it is debatable whether even they would be able to do very much to help bring sense to the confusion which is reality. At this stage of our investigation, we do not need great accuracy.

Neo-Abstinence

Our findings, until now, have all been comparatively unambiguous. In a manner of speaking, 1976 was a year of experimentation, one when population groups which would not normally use alcohol temporarily joined the drinking ranks. These same groups later stopped drinking altogether. The term used to describe the behaviour of people who were once confirmed drinkers and later gave up alcohol completely is *neo-abstinence*. Does the phenomenon actually exist? After all, mass interest in health ideology, nutrition and life styles might have encouraged such deliberate abstinence.

Table 3.8 Earlier drinking behaviour of male and female abstainers born in 1937–1952 (% of abstainers in each group who responded), 1976 and 1984

Drinking frequency	1976	1984
Men		
Once or twice a month or more frequently	22	39
Less often	22	20
Never	56	41
Total	100	100
Women		
Once or twice a month or more frequently	13	15
Less often	18	30
Never	68	55
Total	99	100

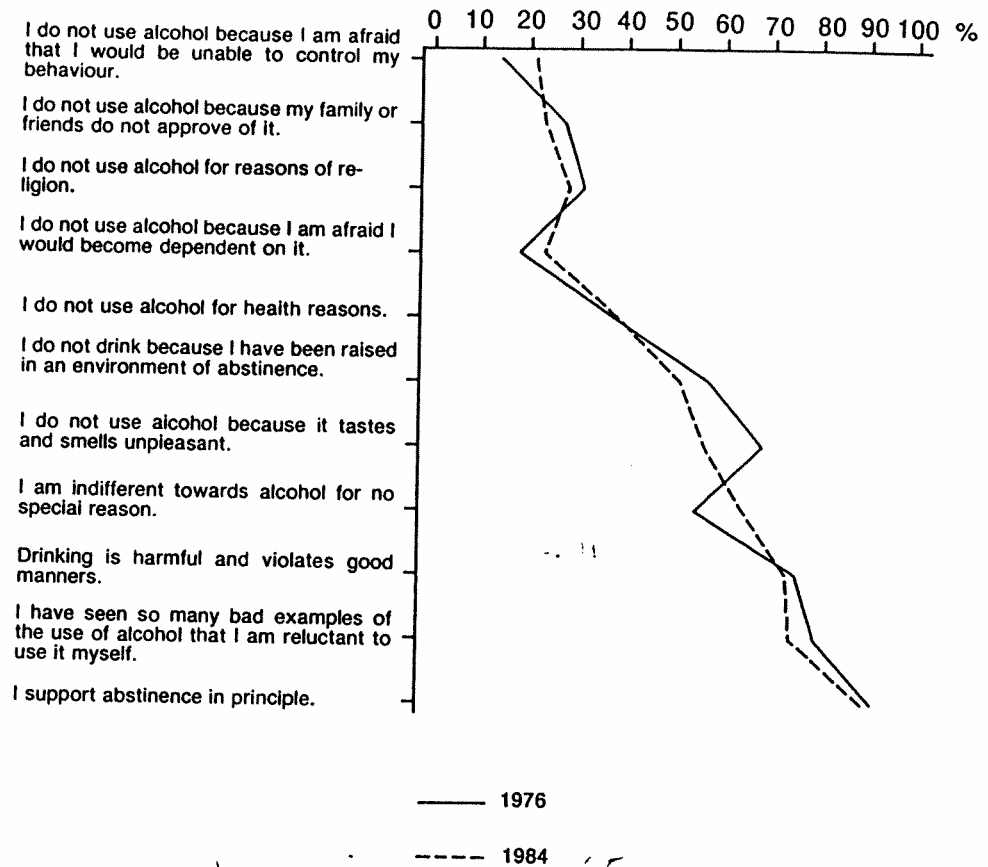
that the increase in abstinence which began in the mid-Seventies was primarily due to people who had never been habitual drinkers forswearing alcohol altogether.

There is some slight indication that neo-abstinence does exist. Whilst it is true that very few of the women classified as abstainers used to be frequent or habitual drinkers, their relative numbers increased by one hundred per cent between 1976 and 1984.

The overall trends for abstinence amongst men are much more clearly inked. Whilst many who are nowadays classified as abstainers never drank with any marked regularity, a conspicuously large number of men who do not drink at all were formerly habitual drinkers. This, however, is hardly surprising when one bears in mind the fact that regular drinking is far more widespread amongst men. Approximately 60 per cent of the male respondents drank more than once a month; the corresponding figure for women was 39 per cent.

Masculine neo-abstinence is especially marked amongst the "wet generation". As may be seen from Table 3.8, fully 40 per cent of all the men born between 1937 and 1952 who were classified as abstainers in 1984 had earlier been in the habit of drinking at least once a month. Contrastingly, most of the women who had become abstainers comparatively recently had never drunk with any regularity.

Figure 3.5 Women's reasons for abstinence, 1976 and 1984



Figures 3.4 and 3.5. They both show that whilst men are nowadays more appreciative of virtually all the various reasons why giving up drinking can be a good idea, the sex as a whole has become far more conscious of the palpable harm wrought by excessive drinking. These days, men are more likely to say that they do not drink because alcohol damages their health or weakens their self-control. Similarly, the likelihood of their talking about how alcohol can be addictive and how drinkers are badly thought of has gone up as well. The men interviewed in 1984 gave such justifications much more often than the women.

All in all, it is apparent that men who are abstainers have probably come to thought-out decisions and been heavily influenced by the potential adverse consequences of alcohol use. No similar trends are observable amongst women.

majority of under 20 year-olds drank in 1976, teenage abstainers were by no means few and far between in 1984.

Summary and Conclusions

1. The prevalence of abstinence fell between 1968 and 1976 and then grew over the next eight years. The population groups where the fluctuations were the most pronounced were those where abstinence had been widespread in 1968. There was not very much change amongst men living in towns and cities.
2. The discrepancy between the various population groups diminished in 1976. Since then, the discrepancy has either remained constant or undergone slight growth.
3. Finnish people are least likely to be abstainers when they are between the ages of 20 and 30. They then become more abstinent as they become older. Nowadays, Finns are comparatively young when they gradually begin to drink less.
4. By 1976, the people who had been born immediately after World War II had earned the distinction of being the least abstinent generation in Finnish history. The age group, however, has since cut down on its drinking. In 1984, people who had been born in the early Sixties were equally as temperate as the generation born just after the war had been at the same age.
5. Male and female members of the "wet generation" — people born immediately before or after World War II — were just as likely to be abstainers in 1976. The discrepancy between the sexes then became more marked by 1984. The discrepancy between rural and urban areas, on the other hand, has not reasserted itself.
6. The pronounced growth in the prevalence of abstinence which occurred between 1976 and 1984 was largely due to one single factor. In the mid-1970s, people who had earlier been abstainers changed their habits and became infrequent drinkers. After experimenting with alcohol, most of them later became abstainers once more.
7. To a lesser extent, the recent increase in the prevalence of abstinence is attributable to the fact that many people who used to drink frequently or comparatively frequently are now abstainers. This trend is especially marked amongst men — almost half of all the "wet generation" men who are now abstinent were previously in the habit of using alcohol.

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