LECTURE

Images and realities of alcohol

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Abstract
The paper discusses the relationship between the images of alcohol and society, on one hand, and the reality of drinking and drinking problems on the other hand, from the point of view of policy-relevant research. Images of alcohol influence policy but they also depend on the social and cultural environment of policy-making. The epidemiological total consumption theory of alcohol-related problems is used as an example. The theory is embedded in the modern welfare state's ideals and its policy relevance presupposes that these ideals—universalism, consequentialism and public planning—are respected. If the approach today receives less attention by policy-makers than its empirical validity merits, it may be due to an erosion of these ideals, not of the epidemiological model itself. Images of alcohol influence behaviour and drinking problems but they also articulate the social context in which the images are constructed. This paper demonstrates the point, applying Lévi-Straussian cultural theory to an analysis of a recent beer advertisement addressed to young people. The advertisement not only reflects the images associated with youthful drinking but also the ambiguous status of youth as non-adults in contemporary society. The author stresses that for social and cultural research alcohol is a two-way window, to look at society through alcohol and to look at alcohol through society. Both directions are necessary for policy-relevant research.

Introduction

I am happy and grateful to stand here today. The Jellinek Memorial Award is the most prestigious international recognition that an alcohol researcher can receive. But I am not standing here alone. At this moment I feel very strongly that I am part of a research group, my Finnish colleagues and especially the two previous Finnish recipients of the award, Kettil Bruun and Klaus Mäkelä, who also have been my mentors. I wish to thank all of them for their support, encouragement and stimulation, without which my work would not have been possible.

We are all very different in our research orientations in our group, but there is one view that I believe we all share. We have, often facing political and administrative pressures to do otherwise, stubbornly followed the instruction that Pekka Kuusi, the pioneer in Finnish alcohol research and social policy, formulated in one of his last speeches[1] to us in this way: "Investigate the human condition by studying peoples' relationship to alcohol." For us, alcohol research has been a two-way window that, on one hand, frames our visions of the social world and helps us to focus on major current issues. On the other

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hand, we look at alcohol from the perspective of historical and comparative social theory, whether it is drinking practices, the consequences of drinking, alcohol policy or the treatment systems that are in focus.

My role in our research team has been to look at alcohol from the perspective of cultural theory, and the following remarks will first present my views on what this approach has to offer for the practical functions of sociological alcohol studies in general. The second part of my talk will illustrate how cultural theory applied to alcohol images can draw our attention to cultural ambiguities in society at large.

The practicality of cultural alcohol research

Images shape social reality

We do not believe we are performing applied science. Evaluation of different strategies and techniques to respond to the alcohol problem are, of course, very important and we do it all the time. But to develop strategies and techniques we need something more than applied science, at least if the concept is thought to imply that reality is "out there" and constant, and that scientific knowledge can be brought, taken or bought from academia, ready to be applied to reality in order to achieve predetermined ends. For me the distinction between academic research and applied science makes no sense. I have chosen my title "Images and realities of alcohol" to elaborate on this point.

One does not have to be an alcohol researcher to realize that the premises on which such a conception of applied science is based are mistaken in the area of social problems. The advantage of doing research in this particular field is that at its very heart lies the reason why they are wrong. My experience in alcohol research has taught me better than anything else I can imagine that social *reality* is indeed "out there", but people's *actions* are governed by images of it and through their actions images become part of reality.

Robin Room, in his *Governing Images of Alcohol and Drug Problems* (1978), coined the term "intractable social problem" to describe alcoholism as one of those hardships whose reality alone is not sufficient to give us guidelines on what to do about it. He distinguished three very different governing American images of alcoholism as an intractable social problem. For the

epidemic imagery, emphasis is on public health interventions to prevent the disease; for the imagery of the American *alcoholism movement*, the focus is on the disease itself and on therapeutic responses to it; for the *ambivalence tradition*, the focus is on the causal mechanisms of the social environment involved in the incidence of alcoholism. All these images are laden with implications on the recommended institutional arrangements to deal with the problem, on the division of labour between different professions, and on the policy orientations in prevention; consequently they all are sensitive to different kinds of vested interests. Governing images of alcoholism are very much part of social reality.

Alcohol research shapes alcohol images

Research is an integral element in the construction of such images that are necessary for social action. For me the epidemic image is more familiar than the other two, because I entered the field as a research assistant under Kettil Bruun who was working with his colleagues on *Alcohol Control Policies in Public Health Perspective* (Bruun *et al.*, 1975). My task was to study international trends in the total consumption of alcohol.

As you all know, to develop the epidemic image into the total consumption theory and to turn it into a policy strategy took many years of empirical testing and theoretical refinements by international researchers. But it also required research into the intellectual origins of the idea, analysis of political and ideological assaults against it, and finally macrosociological reflections on its standing in the political, moral and ideological context of contemporary western societies and beyond.

This has not been "applied" research, but it has been very practical. The total consumption theory, or availability theory, has been one of the dominant images of the alcohol problem in many countries for about a quarter of a century. It was a key argument to justify the restrictive 1990 alcohol legislation in France, the country where the theory was born but for long almost forgotten.

Images of alcohol are embedded in images of society

The total consumption approach to alcohol policy, with its implications for the need to regulate the alcohol market in the name of the public

good, is not only an epidemiological model. It is embedded in the modern welfare society's ideals of universalism, public planning and concern about bad consequences rather than good choices. It is universalistic because it is an argument for controlling the availability of alcohol universally for all citizens instead of controlling particular groups of people. It relies on public planning because alcohol availability can only be regulated by public measures. And it is concerned about bad consequences rather than good choices as it refuses to take a moral stand on alcohol itself but is targeted at the pain and cost caused by the drinker to others and to society at large. The very embeddedness of the theory in the modern ideals of the good society may be the reason why it is currently in the defensive position in many countries. These ideals, not the validity of the epidemiological model, are eroding. Alcohol problems are still a reality. It is the image that governs social responses to it which is exposed to a major historical transition in the ideological macrostructures of western welfare societies.

This is a practical conclusion. Accumulating evidence for the epidemic model may not be sufficient to convince society of fruitful ways to deal with this part of reality. It is still necessary to warn governments of the consequences of changing the governing image; but we may also need to start looking for other images of the alcohol problem that respond to the needs of policy-making, in a situation where the values and ideals of the modern welfare state are increasingly criticized. Such images should give us practical guidance for action in a society, where unquestioned acceptance of universal citizens' rights turns into a sentiment of individual duty to exercise responsibility for oneself. They should respond to the fact that the national public good may no longer prompt people towards public action, as each group will seek to protect themselves and their own life-styles. And they should account for the fact that public regulation of the alcohol market may no longer be possible, given the overriding interests of the free international commodity markets. National control of availability may have to be replaced by local action, and the key actors may no longer be well-meaning experts and administrators but groups of committed people. Marja Holmila (1997) calls such groups "fleeting communities" and "transient networks" at the local level, meaning

that their motivation is temporary but based on emotional and personal ties and focuses on the immediate environment rather than the society as a whole.

These conclusions are based on an analysis of modern structures and images of society at large, but on the other hand comparative and historical studies of alcohol policy discourses have been an important contribution to such analyses. The window opens the view in both directions.

Alcohol images and cultural realities of contemporary society

Images are selections from lived experience

Those who demand that we do applied research in order to be policy-relevant are often the same people who refuse to understand our interest in images, discourses, representations or culture because for them only "realities" matter. For me this argument for realities as opposed to images is wrong, impractical and insipid. Anyone interested in drinking as a social and often problematic practice will readily observe that social reality is *both* images (or as many would now say, discourse), and thereby meaningful, *and* something which is beyond meaning. Alcoholism is *both* lived experience and suffering beyond words *and* a set of social constructions that are necessary for people and society to act upon. The task is to study the relationship between them, not to argue priority for one or the other.

The relevant way to formulate the problem is to ask not whether we should study images or reality, but what part of reality is made meaningful through some form of language—text, speech, images or mythology—and what part of it remains beyond meaning. Making meaning is to make selections. As the hermeneutic philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer said, "Being that can be understood is language, but not all Being can be understood" (1972). My understanding of the expression "hermeneutic reduction" is that when we produce images of reality by linguistic means the images themselves become part of reality, but they never exhaust the whole of our lived experience. The way that the realities of alcohol problems are formulated in language—in theories, educational materials, professional discourses, policy rhetoric or institutional arrangements—also implies a choice that leaves something out. This choice depends on other realities such as power, professional and marketing interests and
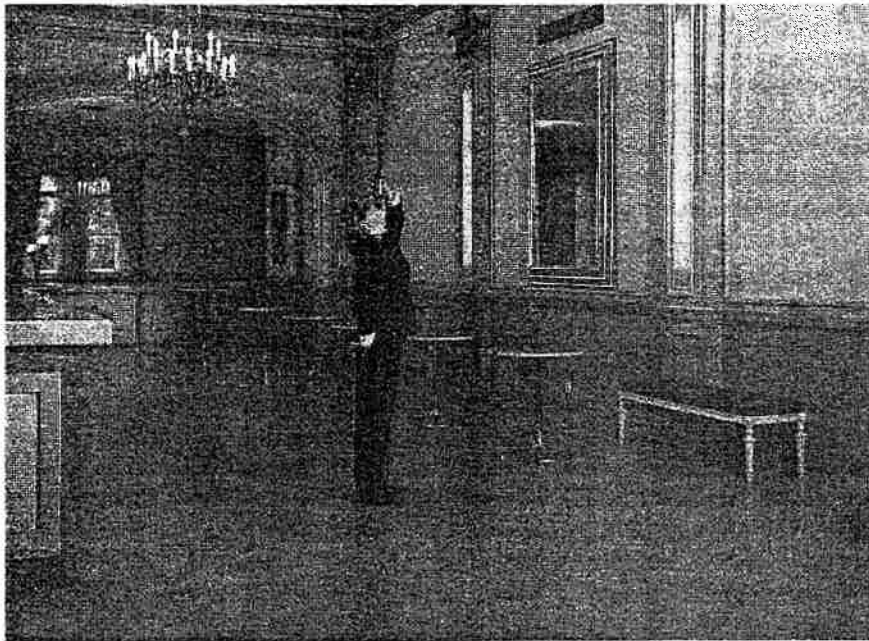
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Figure 1. *Beer advertisement in Finland, 1997, which bears the caption "Drinking culture is culture too. A positive shot of art." Photograph by Marjatta Ollikainen.*

cultural ambiguities in society at large. Such realities are often difficult to discern, but they leave traces in the images of alcohol that our culture produces. This is why we can look through the window not only from society to alcohol but also from alcohol to society.

Example: youth and alcohol in images of transgression

The selections or hermeneutic reductions we make when we construct cultural images of alcohol apply to images of the pleasure we get from it as well as to the problems we wish to avoid. Images give meaning to the lived experience of drinking, but they never cover it completely, thus leaving the meaning ambivalent and open to many interpretations and ironic effects. A recent Finnish advertisement campaign for beer (Fig. 1) shows a picture of a tuxedo-clad young man in the lobby of the opera, drinking beer from a bottle that is in a vertical position. The man is alone but his reflection is seen in a large mirror. In the movie version of the advertisement, he is first shown in the stalls with a woman who attentively listens to the diva, but with a strong hint of boredom on her face.

Suddenly the man disappears, and is found in the lobby, drinking beer from the bottle with his friends.

Let us examine what is image here and what is reality, and which reality it is that the image stands for. To begin with the obvious, an image of alcohol is used here to persuade people to act, i.e. to go and buy beer and then make the best of it in terms of their lived experiences. This is the primary function of beer advertisements. But they organize our conceptions of alcohol and society in other ways too.

First let us look through the window in the direction which shows us alcohol in contemporary Finnish society. The phallic posture is typical of boys in the streets and parks of Finnish towns and cities on weekend nights. The advertisement displays drinking in a public place, breaking the rules of etiquette that would normally be applied in high-culture surroundings. It employs a mocking image of "respectable" society: it represents a humorous disrespect as do the names of pubs such as "The Home Base", "The Evening Off", "The Jogger's Retreat" or the "Chief Fireman's Hose" (Sulkunen *et al.*, 1997). It uses and reinforces the familiar imagery of alcohol as a means of transgression and a symbol of anti-

authoritarian freedom from normative convention. It represents immediate pleasure instead of discipline, cultivated taste and postponed gratification.

We can also look at this image in the direction from alcohol to contemporary Finnish society. High culture is now part of everyday middle-class life, and cultural capital is a valued social resource. It represents middle-class normality, but it is practised far more by females than males in Finland, and many young men consider that going to the opera or to classical concerts is somehow feminine, at least if compared to sports events, rock concerts or pubs. The young man in the picture is in an adult world, in adult costume, as if claiming the sovereignty of grown-ups in a dual way: being both at the opera and "above" it, disregarding its code of etiquette. His defiant posture exalts savage and untamed masculinity that remains "man's nature" although dressed up and placed in the temple of respectable normality.

Such images do indeed direct behaviour, although in a way that is difficult to measure. In any case they govern interpretations of behaviour that are indispensable for what Max Weber called *verstehende Erklärung*, interpretative explanation (1922). If we want to explain drinking behaviour historically and across cultural contexts, we cannot assume that it has a single meaning that can be captured and even measured by the quantity of alcohol alone. E. M. Jellinek realized this and started the International Survey of Drinking Customs to develop such interpretative explanations (Popham, 1976). The so-called "Jellinek method" employed the anthropological informant technique combined with a group interview method and it was therefore a predecessor of many contemporary studies on the cultural meanings attached to drinking, drinking problems and alcohol policy. For Jellinek, an explanation of transnational differences in drinking patterns required such a method because the meaning of alcohol is an essential part of the behaviour to be explained.

Intoxication and the border zone between nature and culture

Drinking is meaningful action. But it is not only that, any more than preparing and eating food or practicing sexuality. The bodily experience of intoxication is an indispensable vehicle of its meaning, even if only as a token of its possibility. A glass of champagne to celebrate the signing of an intergovernemental agreement would not be the same without the intoxicating element in it, just as the bodily experience of eating is an indispensable ingredient in the meaning of a conference banquet.

Recognizing the simultaneous presence of the bodily experience of alcohol and the cultural images that regulate it is fairly easy; but to leave it at that would lead us to the kind of dualism betwen body and soul or nature and culture, for which Norbert Elias has criticized most of western thought (1991). Culture works on nature, not only in the technological sense but by making it meaningful.

To make something meaningful by bringing it to discourse—by naming it—is to make it social. The term "social drinking" is applied to situations where we can formulate the experience of intoxication in terms of the functions that justify it or the norms that regulate it. If drinking can be thought to contribute to sociability, social cohesion, relaxation, nutrition, health and so on it is deemed to be social and so it becomes tamed, less frightening, manageable. Correspondingly, if alcohol use is dysfunctional with respect to these goals, it is asocial and a problem.

Whatever hermeneutic reductions we apply to drinking experiences to construct images of them, something is always left out. In *The Consuming Body* Pasi Falk (1994) calls this something the "nameless desire" or the "desire of the unnamed": without assuming the presence of such nameless desire any act of consumption would be difficult to understand, but especially so for what he calls supplements: luxury, novelty, fashion, style, and anything that goes beyond obvious need. Alcohol consumption in all its forms is a paradigmatic case. In whatever ways we bring it into discourse as a response to a need, there is something left out that is relevant also to the social and not only in the bodily individual experience. It is this "supplement" of meaning which is the most important element in drinking images, making them useful windows between alcohol and society at large.

In terms of cultural theory, the idea of the supplement in consumption—that element of meaning which lies beyond obvious uses of commodities—can be understood as follows. Culture has the capacity to give names to human exper-
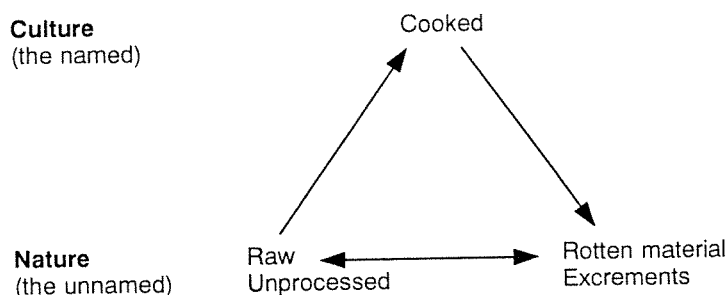
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Culture   Cooked
(the named)

Nature   Raw ←————→ Rotten material
(the unnamed)   Unprocessed   Excrements

Figure 2. *The food triangle of Lévi-Strauss.*

iences of nature and thereby to make them meaningful. But it has another very special capacity that fascinated Claude Lévi-Strauss in his analyses of myths, and this same capacity is what makes drinking images relevant for our understanding of the society in which these images develop. Culture not only turns natural objects into cultural objects by naming them, it also has the capacity to reflect the borderline between nature and culture through what can be called second-order representations. These are the supplements of meaning. Myths are stories about magnificent subjects, marvellous objects and magical events. For Lévi-Strauss they also represent the borderline between what is cultural, thereby social, and what is outside culture, asocial and not meaningful. Images of drinking reflect powerfully this same borderline that is very strongly present in the experience of intoxication.

Lévi-Strauss (1964, 1965) analysed this reflexive capacity of culture in Brazilian myths about food in his famous "food triangle", as shown in Fig. 2.

Myths related to food tell of the origins of foodstuffs, about different ways of preparing them and about the risks and dangers involved in violating taboos that regulate eating. They classify edibles as raw elements of nature or as processed food, part of culture. Some edibles may become over-processed and turn to rotten material or excrements. This is true of all cultural food systems, even in our modern societies. But what is classified as "raw", "processed" or "rotten" varies between different societies. Food images represent the borderline between culture and nature.

Myths are stories and therefore they describe transformations. What is one thing at the begin-

ning becomes something else at the end. Lévi-Strauss distinguished two different types of transformation: those acending from the raw, unprepared state of nature to foods that are elements of culture, for example by cooking; and those descending or regressing from food to rotten material or to excrement. The first is a positive transformation; the second negative, representing destruction and decay towards death, and therefore it is abhorrent and dreadful.

The cultural ambiguity of youth in the image of alcohol

Let me now return to the example of the beer advertisement. It is a cultural representation of alcohol as a vehicle of transgression. But the transgressive image of alcohol itself is a representation of something else, a supplement that is very difficult to name, or to put into words. Like myths it tells us about a reality beyond the story in which a boy drinks beer at the opera. It does this by distributing the oppositions of the image in positions that resemble those of the food triangle. This is illustrated in Fig. 3.

The drinking man represents nature: raw masculinity and youth; the opera symbolizes culture: the orderly conventional normality, adulthood and the female world. The opposite of the virile world of the drinking boy is boredom and decay, being old, and not drinking.

The tension between wild masculinity and cultured orderly femininity is a recurring theme that has appeared in our studies of Finnish drinking images for about 20 years. It appears in drinking scenes in old Finnish films (Sulkunen & Falk, 1983) but it lives on in recent group interviews of middle-class men and women who consider themselves as the avant-garde of
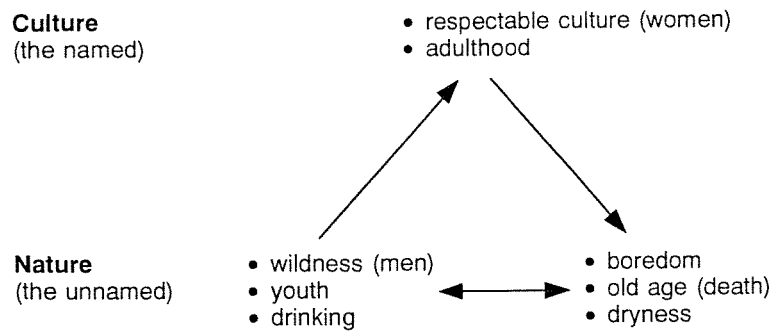
Culture
(the named)

• respectable culture (women)
• adulthood

Nature
(the unnamed)

• wildness (men)
• youth
• drinking

• boredom
• old age (death)
• dryness

Figure 3. *Culture and nature in the beer advertisement.*

modern, civilized and non-problematic drinking patterns.

Now it seems that a new tension is appearing in these images—that between youth and adulthood. Such symbolic tensions often develop in situations where status distinctions become shaky and confused. We develop symbolic devices to restore clarity by exaggerating the features of status identity that we are proud of and that we expect other people to appreciate most.

This has long been the case with regard to gender status. Finnish women participate in the labour force, have achieved an educational level that on the average exceeds that of men, and have played an important role in public life for many years. As a consequence, gender roles have become unclear. Recent studies show that the status of young people as non-adults is becoming mercurial. Youth culture is being exploited by commercial media for adult audiences, and youth fashion is imitated in high couture almost as soon as it appears. These "trickle-up" mechanisms result from the adult cult of youthfulness but can be quite frustrating for the young themselves. In the other direction the prolonged transition from youth to adulthood has become confusing and unclear, partly because of the increasingly ambiguous institution of the family. Confusions about gender and age overlap in young people's drinking practices. Girls drink as much as boys and in the same way, and the tension between youth and adulthood is just one element in their life experience which they articulate in the images of alcohol.

In the advertisement the meaning of alcohol is constructed in the opposition between the virility of unspoiled male youthfulness and the over-processed boredom of adult culture. That beer

drinking can be used as a symbolic vehicle to articulate this opposition is in itself a significant feature of alcohol's role in Finnish society. But the opposition itself, the cultural ambiguity of youth as a social category, is an element of our contemporary reality on which the symbolic function of drinking is based.

This too is a practical conclusion. It would be difficult to make interventions into young people's drinking if we could not understand the language that their drinking speaks. To study it is not applied science, but its relevance may go far beyond worrying about alcohol alone. And when we do worry about young people's drinking, we should understand what youth means.

Conclusion: alcohol, the human condition and practical science

Like myths, drinking images tell us about a reality beneath the outer garments in which they are dressed. They tell us about the intractable experience of being man and woman or young and adult in contemporary society. In Pekka Kuusi's words, they tell about the human condition in a particular culture, in a particular place at a particular time. Drinking culture is culture indeed, in a very wide sense of the word.

In conclusion I should like to stress that as reasonable and morally responsible social scientists we cannot leave goal-setting in social policy outside our horizon of interest. Policy is not only technical problem-solving; it is also a process of social construction that depends on a myriad of complex factors that are related not only to the intractable problems themselves but to the society

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at large. Nor can we pretend to ignore the fact that our research is an element in this meaning-making and that we are not only technically but also morally responsible agents in it. Therefore, to be practical and strategic, we must look through the window in both directions. Understanding the reality of the human condition is in fact the most practical thing that a social scientist can do.

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