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"UNDERCONSUMPTION" OF ALCOHOL AS A FORM OF DEVIANCE - Minimum Drinking Norms in New Zealand Society and the Implications of their Production and Reproduction During Social Occasions

Grant R. Paton-Simpson  Department of Sociology  University of Auckland

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ABSTRACT

The deviance and alcohol literatures do not theorise expectations about minimum levels of alcohol consumption in any significant detail. Nor do they develop the notion that drinking less than is expected can be defined as a form of deviance. In response to this gap in the literature this thesis introduces and elaborates the concept of “underconsumption”, defined briefly as the violation of minimum drinking norms. The thesis is also concerned to describe the key processes through which minimum drinking norms are produced and reproduced in social occasions, to demonstrate the public health significance of minimum drinking norms, and to provide evidence for the reality of “underconsumption” as a form of deviance in New Zealand society. Empirical research relied on face-to-face interviews, phone interviews, and postal surveys of 113 men - most of them abstainers or “light” drinkers. The main rationale was that likely violators of minimum drinking norms would be the most likely to have noticed and remembered the expression of minimum drinking norms. Transcripts and questionnaires were analysed with the assistance of qualitative database software. An important finding was that minimum drinking norms are in evidence throughout a broad cross-section of New Zealand society. It was also concluded that two of the main processes through which minimum drinking norms are produced and reproduced - people’s reactions to abstention and lighter drinking styles and alcohol-centred hosting practices - continue to be in evidence. The relevant reactions and practices were also identified in a wide range of social groups. Furthermore, the case was presented that minimum drinking norms have potentially negative consequences for both individual “underdrinkers” and for societal levels of alcohol-related problems. These findings have important implications for the public health community and it is suggested that reference to a developed theory of “underconsumption” may have potential benefits for the planning of public health strategies and for public health policy. This research can also be seen to contribute to the alcohol literature, the deviance literature on alcohol, and the broader sociological literature on deviance. In the latter case, the analysis of “underconsumption” is most valuable by virtue of its status as “beneficial deviance”.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .......................................................................................................................... ii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .................................................................................................... iii

INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................. 1

Initial thoughts about New Zealanders' perceptions of abstention and lighter drinking styles .... 1
Research goals ...................................................................................................................... 4
Research methods used ...................................................................................................... 6
  Design of the empirical research ...................................................................................... 6
  Interviewing and surveying a useful selection of "underdrinkers" .................................. 13
  Broader methodological issues related to the empirical work ....................................... 25
  The use of other types of data ......................................................................................... 29
The value of research on "underconsumption" and minimum drinking norms .................. 30
The structure of the thesis .................................................................................................. 33

SECTION 1 - THEORISING "UNDERCONSUMPTION" AS A FORM OF DEVIANCE ........... 36

CHAPTER 1 - A REVIEW OF THE RELEVANT LITERATURES - THE NEGLECT OF MINIMUM DRINKING NORMS AND "UNDERCONSUMPTION" IN THE DEVIANCE AND ALCOHOL LITERATURES ...... 37

Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 37
Documenting the emphasis on overconsumption ............................................................... 37
Explaining the neglect of minimum drinking norms and "underconsumption" ............... 42
Towards a sociology of "beneficial deviance" .................................................................. 49
  "Beneficial deviance" - a neglected topic in the general literature on deviance .......... 49
  Theorists with an interest in deviance and social change ............................................. 52
  Preliminary suggestions about research on "beneficial deviance" ............................... 55

Summary .............................................................................................................................. 56

CHAPTER 2 - CORE ELEMENTS OF A NORMATIVE THEORY .................. 58

Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 58
Core elements of a normative definition and theory of deviance ................................... 58
Summary .............................................................................................................................. 69

CHAPTER 3 - ADDRESSING POTENTIAL WEAKNESSES IN NORMATIVE THEORIES OF DEVIANCE ...................................................... 71

Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 71
The influence of norms over behaviour .......................................................................... 71
Complexities in the evaluation of behaviour ..................................................................... 77
Distinguishing between trivial and serious instances of norm violation ....................... 79
Issues of normative consensus and pluralism .................................................................. 81
The possibility of normative relativity at the level of individuals ................................... 87
Summary .............................................................................................................................. 88

CHAPTER 4 - RELATING NORMATIVE THEORY TO PERCEPTIONS OF ABSTENTION AND LIGHTER DRINKING STYLES .......................... 90

Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 90
Abstention and lighter drinking styles as deviance ......................................................... 91
Summary .............................................................................................................................. 109
SECTION 2 - THE PRODUCTION AND REPRODUCTION OF MINIMUM DRINKING NORMS DURING SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

CHAPTER 5 - REACTIONS TO ABSTENTION AND LIGHTER DRINKING STYLES

Introduction .............................................................................................................................................. 112
Reactions of bartenders, waiters and social hosts ................................................................. 120
Reactions of surprise ...................................................................................................................... 127
Different types of comment about abstention and lighter drinking styles .......................... 128
  Introductory observations on alcohol and discourse .......................................................... 128
  General discussion of the broad types of verbal reaction ................................................. 130
  Imputations about sociability - drinking, intimacy and egalitarianism .......................... 134
  Aspersions cast on a man's masculinity .................................................................................. 140
  Criticisms for being "sober" and "uptight" - drinking and "fun" ........................................ 153
  Defensive reactions to assumed criticism .............................................................................. 159
  Doubts about the adult status of the "underdrinker" .......................................................... 160
  Other comments about abstention and lighter drinking styles ........................................ 163
Spiking and deception .............................................................................................................. 167
Physical reactions and threatening behaviour ................................................................. 167
The contexts in which reactions to abstention and lighter drinking styles were noted 170
Summary ............................................................................................................................................... 173

CHAPTER 6 - EXPLAINING REACTIONS TO ABSTENTION AND LIGHTER DRINKING STYLES

Introduction .............................................................................................................................................. 175
The desire to be generous .............................................................................................................. 176
Perceptions of "underdrinking" as an act of social sabotage .................................................. 177
Assumptions about the superiority of alcoholic drinks .......................................................... 184
Perceptions of abstention and lighter drinking styles as unusual and interesting behaviours 188
The interpretation of "underdrinking" as silent judgment ......................................................... 191
Curiosity about the effects of alcohol ......................................................................................... 198
Assumptions about the necessity of alcohol for toasting ...................................................... 200
Joking to relieve tension .............................................................................................................. 202
Responding to stereotypes about abstainers and "light" drinkers ......................................... 204
  Introductory discussion of typification ............................................................................... 204
  "Religious wankers", "ignorant bastards" and "boring old farts" - negative stereotypes of male "underdrinkers" ................................................................................................................................. 206
  The role of alcohol advertising in reinforcing associations between alcohol and positive personal and social characteristics ................................................................. 213
Perceptions of non-drinking as a sign of hostility ...................................................................... 214
Further explanations for reactions to abstention and lighter drinking styles ........................ 216
Summary ............................................................................................................................................... 220

CHAPTER 7 - KEY ASPECTS OF THE GENERAL STRUCTURE OF SOCIAL OCCASIONS

Introduction .............................................................................................................................................. 221
Alcohol-centred hosting practices ............................................................................................... 225
  Limited (or non-existent) supply, promotion or awareness of non-alcoholic drinks ......... 225
  The privileging of alcohol through supply and pricing policies ........................................ 231
  Unsolicited generosity with alcohol ....................................................................................... 232
  Other alcohol-centred hosting practices ............................................................................... 233
The contexts of alcohol-centred hosting ................................................................................. 234
The limited visibility of abstention and lighter drinking styles .............................................. 238
Summary ............................................................................................................................................... 239
**CHAPTER 8 - EXPLANATIONS FOR ALCOHOL-CENTRED TYPES OF HOSTING PRACTICE AND THE LIMITED VISIBILITY OF ABSTENTION AND LIGHTER DRINKING STYLES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The economics of alcohol in licensed premises</td>
<td>243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The perceived commitment of patrons or guests to alcohol</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habit, routine and the absence of alternative models</td>
<td>248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other explanations for alcohol-centred hosting</td>
<td>249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The influence of depictions of alcohol and drinking in the media</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SECTION 3 - THE SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE ABNORMAL-ISATION OF ABSTENTION AND LIGHTER DRINKING STYLES**

**CHAPTER 9 - THE POTENTIAL COSTS OF “DEVIANCIE” FOR “UNDERDRINKING” MEN**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examples of the different sorts of cost potentially faced by “underdrinkers”</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The personal costs of “underconsumption” - feelings of awkwardness, embarrassment and guilt</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The interactional costs of “underconsumption” - role engulfment and rudeness</td>
<td>262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The broader social costs of “underconsumption” - exclusion from drinking groups and drinking-related activities</td>
<td>263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The business and career costs of “underconsumption” - the consequences of exclusion</td>
<td>272</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>277</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CHAPTER 10 - EXPLAINING THE COSTS OF “UNDERCONSUMPTION” - THE CENTRAL PLACE OF ALCOHOL IN NEW ZEALAND SOCIAL LIFE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The central place of alcohol and drinking establishments in New Zealand social life</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The economics of keeping alcohol central - arguments about the stake of the government and the alcohol and hospitality industries in maintaining consumption levels</td>
<td>289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>291</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CHAPTER 11 - STRATEGIES REDUCING THE POTENTIAL COSTS OF DEVIANCE - STIGMA AVOIDANCE AND MANAGEMENT BEHAVIOUR IN INTERACTIONS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passing - avoiding labelling through camouflage</td>
<td>296</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covering - reducing the obtrusiveness of the stigma</td>
<td>307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Account-making</td>
<td>310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General discussion of accounts</td>
<td>312</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different accounts used for abstinence and lighter drinking styles</td>
<td>318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making disclaimers</td>
<td>335</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acting counter to stereotypes of “underdrinkers”</td>
<td>339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensating</td>
<td>340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other responses to labelling and potential labelling</td>
<td>342</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>345</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Daniel uncaps bottles of beer, more to his taste when there is real drinking to be done, and more filling besides; he needs no glass, swigging straight from the bottle, and then pushing it in David’s direction. “Wrap your laughing gear around that”, he urges. “Wine’s a woman’s drink. Take it from me”. Further along the table, convivial Herman insists that Richard should drink more; no man, he argues, should inhabit the first hours of the new century sober and sour. He also draws Richard’s attention to the Biblical injunction on the value of wine as an aid to the digestive process, advice to be neglected at peril.

(Maurice Shadbolt The Lovelock Version p.477.)