DRINKING PATTERNS OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

by

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RECENT surveys of drinking habits in both Great Britain (Stacey and Davies, 1970; Ritson, 1975; Kinder, 1977) and Ireland (Fitzpatrick, 1972; Irish Council of Churches, 1974) have indicated that, whereas the majority of teenagers drink in moderation and responsibly, the minority who drink heavily experience problems and are a major cause of concern. The work of Blaney and McKenzie (1979) on adults in Northern Ireland has recently drawn further attention to the problem of excessive use of alcohol.

MATERIAL REVIEWED

The findings reported in this paper arise from a general investigation of the association between the knowledge and the stated behaviour over a wide range of health matters of fifth-formers in Northern Ireland conducted in 1976-77 (McGuffin, 1979). A coded-answer knowledge test, which included four items on alcohol, and a behaviour questionnaire, which included a section on the use of alcohol, were administered to a sample of 2439 fifth-formers (average age 15.95 years). These were the fifth-formers in a random sample, drawn from the rolls of all the grammar and secondary schools in the province prepared to take part in the inquiry, who were present on the day the papers were administered. Of the 247 schools invited, 167 (67.6 per cent) participated and of the drawn sample of 3150, 711 (22.6 per cent) were absent. Although every effort was made to obtain a sample statistically representative of the fifth formers in the province, this proved impossible for two reasons. A number of principals declined to participate, most because of lack of time or administrative difficulties and some because they objected to certain aspects of the questions. In particular, the questions on use of alcohol were unacceptable to a few principals who take a definite anti-drink approach and considered it was not appropriate to ask such questions of their pupils. Other principals considered that the questions on the drinking habits of parents and siblings would unduly invade family privacy. Absence on the day the papers were administered accounted for 22.6 per cent of the drawn sample not participating. In some cases, this was due to illness or travel difficulties but there was evidence that, especially in secondary schools, some of the absentees were regular truants. The major consequence of these factors is that the data obtained from the analyses cannot be extra-polated to give statistically reliable figures for 16 year olds generally in the province. Nevertheless, several important trends and patterns are indicated.

RESULTS

The first question in the section on alcohol in the questionnaire asked whether or not the subject used alcoholic beverages. Those who drank were then asked about the age of taking the first drink, the frequency of drinking, the type of beverage taken, and where drink is usually consumed. The results are summarised in Tables I-IV, comparisons between the sexes, and between pupils in different types of school being given where these are of interest.
### TABLE I

**Incidence of drinking**

| Total number in survey | 2439 |
|------------------------|------|
| Drinkers               | 1364 (55.9%) |

| Boys      | 62.5% | Girls     | 50.0% |
|-----------|-------|-----------|-------|
| Grammar   | 58.2% | Secondary | 54.9% |
| Urban     | 59.5% | Rural     | 53.7% |
| Protestant| 68.5% | Catholic  | 41.3% |

| Abstainers | 1003 (41.2%) |
| Past users | 26 (1.1%)    |
| No reply   | 46 (1.8%)    |

### TABLE II

**Drinking patterns (Figures in percentages)**

| Age of starting | Before 10 years | 1.8 |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----|
|                 | 10-11           | 3.8 |
|                 | 12-13           | 21.5|
|                 | 14              | 30.9|
|                 | 15              | 53.7|
|                 | over 15         | 8.1 |
| Mean age        | 13.96 years     |     |

| Frequency in previous year | Once | 14.4 |
|----------------------------|------|------|
|                            | Twice| 14.0 |
|                            | 3-6 times | 21.9 |
|                            | 6-12 times | 15.6 |
|                            | 2-3 times/month | 14.4 |
|                            | at least once a week | 19.7 |

| Boys | Grammar | Urban | Protestant |
|------|---------|-------|------------|
| 56.8%| 53.3%   | 52.8% | 52.3%      |

| Girls | Secondary | Rural | Catholic |
|-------|-----------|-------|----------|
| 41.0% | 48.2%     | 47.5% | 43.3%    |

| Type of beverage | Total | Boys | Girls |
|------------------|-------|------|-------|
| Beer             | 31.3  | 47.5 | Vodka |
| Vodka            | 27.4  | 16.8 | Cider |
| Cider            | 14.0  | 14.3 | Beer  |

| Source of first drink | Total | Boys | Girls |
|-----------------------|-------|------|-------|
| Friend                | 30.4  |      |       |
| Parent                | 27.9  |      |       |
| Adult relative        | 13.0  |      |       |

| Source of first drink | Total | Boys | Girls |
|-----------------------|-------|------|-------|
| Off licence           | 11.8  |      |       |
| Licenced premises     | 10.5  |      |       |
| Taken at home         | 6.4   |      |       |
### Table III

**Usual place of drinking (Figures in percentages)**

| Total          | Friend's house | Home | Hotels | Clubs | Elsewhere* |
|----------------|----------------|------|--------|-------|------------|
|               | 23.3           | 21.9 | 17.8   | 16.6  | 20.3       |

**Boys**
- Friend's house: 25.5
- Elsewhere: 24.6
- Home: 21.2
- Hotels: 19.6
- Elsewhere: 21.8

**Girls**
- Home: 24.3
- Hotels: 22.7
- Friend's house: 21.8
- Elsewhere: 19.3

**Grammar**
- Friend's house: 25.7
- Elsewhere: 21.2
- Home: 21.6
- Hotels: 19.0
- Elsewhere: 18.4

**Secondary**
- Friend's house: 26.5
- Elsewhere: 23.0
- Home: 22.1
- Hotels: 20.9

**Urban**
- Friend's house: 25.5
- Elsewhere: 22.6
- Home: 21.8
- Hotels: 19.4

**Rural**
- Home: 23.4
- Friend's house: 24.2
- Elsewhere: 22.6

**Protestant**
- Home: 25.7
- Friend's house: 23.0
- Elsewhere: 19.4

**Catholic**
- Home: 28.3
- Friend's house: 23.0
- Elsewhere: 19.4

*'Elsewhere' was described as the open-air by the majority of subjects who selected this answer.

### Table IV

**Relationship between drinking habits of subjects and those of parents, siblings and peers.**

| Subject      | Drinks | Does not drink | Yule's Coefficient Q |
|--------------|--------|----------------|----------------------|
| Father       | Drinks | 43.2           | 23.5                 | 0.54                 |
|              | Does not drink | 11.8       | 21.4                 |                      |
| Mother       | Drinks | 34.0           | 12.1                 | 0.63                 |
|              | Does not drink | 20.9       | 33.0                 |                      |
| Older brothers | None drink | 48.3       | 38.9                 | 0.24                 |
|              | Some drink  | 4.6          | 8.2                  |                      |
| Older sisters | None drink | 48.2       | 33.8                 | 0.42                 |
|              | Some drink  | 6.6          | 11.4                 |                      |
| Peers        | Few drink | 13.6       | 34.6                 | 0.84                 |
|              | Half or more drink | 42.5     | 9.3                  |                      |

Those who used alcohol were asked which of eight listed reasons applied to them. Only two of the reasons applied to more subjects than they did not apply to. While 854 (62.5 per cent) liked the taste, 261 said this was not a reason for their drinking and 606 (44.4 per cent) drank because most of their friends did, while for 437 this did not apply. The other most frequently quoted reasons were that drinking relieves tension and anxiety (29.9 per cent), and it makes one feel adult (20.7 per cent). Equal numbers (14.9 per cent) claimed that they drank because they had nothing else to do and because drinking helped them to talk better. Eighty four subjects (6.1 per cent) stated that they drank because they had plenty of money. The only marked
difference in the reasons given by subjects, classified by sex or type of school, as indicated by rank order of frequency was that girls ranked 'it helps me to talk better' fourth and for boys it ranked seventh.

Those who did not use alcoholic beverages were asked to indicate which of the listed reasons applied to them. Of the six reasons, five applied to more subjects than they did not apply to. The most frequently given reason was the parents would not approve (733, 71.0 per cent). The number who never felt any inclination was 696 (67.4 per cent) and for 580 (56.2 per cent) drinking would be too expensive. Very few of the friends of 517 (50.1 per cent) drank; while 468 (45.3 per cent) indicated that they did not like the taste of alcoholic beverages. While 271 of the total abstainers (26.3 per cent) disapproved of drinking on religious grounds, 421 did not abstain for this reason. The rank order of reasons as given by subjects of different sex and in different types of school were almost identical.

In the knowledge test, the items were scored one mark for each correct answer, the average score on the four items on alcohol being 1.38. Table V sets out the results and the answers given to the questions. The only conspicuous difference in the answering of these questions by subjects in different categories was that in every case pupils in grammar schools scored significantly better (p<0.01) than those in secondary schools.

**Table V**

*The knowledge on alcohol (Figures in percentages)*

| Score obtained (out of 4) | Item 1 | Item 2 | Item 3 |
|--------------------------|--------|--------|--------|
|                          | The highest percentage of alcohol is contained in | In terms of alcohol content how much beer is roughly equivalent to a 'half-un' of whiskey? | After half a dozen drinks the body system most adversely affected is |
| 0                        | 6.6    | A beers 4.5 | A blood circulation 38.2 |
| 1                        | 56.0   | B shandies 0.9 | B respiratory 7.9 |
| 2                        | 30.6   | C spirits 88.5 | C nervous 19.9 |
| 3                        | 6.2    | D wines 5.0 | D genito-urinary 29.3 |
| 4                        | 0.6    | No answer given 1.1 | No answer given 4.7 |

**Item 2**
In terms of alcohol content how much beer is roughly equivalent to a 'half-un' of whiskey?

A one bottle 12.5
B 3 bottles 46.6
C 5 bottles 25.2
D 7 bottles 10.0
No answer given 5.7

**Item 3**
After half a dozen drinks the body system most adversely affected is

A blood circulation 38.2
B respiratory 7.9
C nervous 19.9
D genito-urinary 29.3
No answer given 4.7

**Item 4**
In this item subject has to indicate whether each statement was true or false. A person’s behaviour is likely to be affected more quickly by drinking alcoholic beverages if

1 drinks are mixed false 27.7
2 drinks are taken in an empty stomach true 71.8
3 the drink is sipped over a long period false 93.1
4 the person is not used to alcoholic drinks true 86.3
An investigation to find if any association existed between the level of knowledge and the drinking behaviour of the subjects was conducted. The items on the knowledge test were weighted according to difficulty and the subjects then divided into five groups, as nearly equal in size as possible. On the basis of the answer to the question about frequency of drinking, subjects were divided into three categories, those who never drank, those who drank only once or twice in the preceding year and those who drank more often than this. A cross tabulation was prepared and an association between knowledge and positive drinking behaviour, significant at the one per cent level ($X^2 = 48.4; \text{ndf} = 8, p<0.01$) was established. A similar result was obtained for boys, girls, grammar school pupils, secondary school pupils, those who attended rural schools and those who attended mainly Protestant schools separately. Only those in urban schools and those in mainly Catholic schools did not show an association significant at this level.

DISCUSSION

The number of subjects taking alcoholic beverages (55.9 per cent) was very much lower than figures quoted in some recent reports. In Somerset, Kinder (1977) found that 75 per cent of 15 year olds drank alcohol and in a town in North West Ireland, 80 per cent of the 14-17 age group were reported as ‘drinkers’ (Irish Council of Churches, 1974). In a major investigation recently published, Hawker (1978) found that 98 per cent of her sample of 13-18 year olds in English schools had tasted alcoholic drink, and only 7 per cent had not continued beyond an initial taste. A higher percentage of boys than girls were drinkers (62.5 and 50.0 per cent, respectively), as has been generally found. The conspicuous differences in the percentage of Protestants and Catholics who were drinkers (65.8 and 41.3 per cent, respectively) may be explained by the custom of Catholic bishops, in their address at Confirmation Service, to emphasise the desirability of total abstinence, at least until adulthood. Although some of the Protestant denominations, such as Methodist and Baptist, lay great emphasis on total abstinence, these include in their membership only a small percentage of all Protestants.

The use of alcoholic drink begins about the age of 9 and the percentage beginning to drink increases with each year of age. About one half (50.3 per cent) of those in the sample who were drinkers had taken alcohol on 6 or fewer occasions in the year preceding the inquiry. It would appear that these had probably taken alcohol only on special occasions. A parent or relative was the source of the first drink in the case of 40.9 per cent of the subjects. This compares with 50 per cent being given their first drink by parents at home in Hawker’s study. Whereas in this study the largest group (23.3 per cent) generally drank in a friend’s house, 21.9 per cent at home and 20.3 per cent ‘elsewhere’, about half of Hawker’s sample drank at home and almost always with the family, 42 per cent in a pub, disco or party and only 5 per cent in the open air. The patterns shown by the two studies are distinctly different, and point to less parental supervision in Northern Ireland and much greater apparently unsupervised drinking in the open air. The fact that 34.4 per cent claimed to generally drink in hotels or clubs would indicate considerable violation of the licencing laws. The most usual reasons for drinking were quoted as liking the taste (62.5 per cent) and because most of their friends drank (44.4 per cent).
These figures are a cause of considerable concern, in terms of the consequences of the use of alcohol. While alcoholism is a long term possibility, more immediate consequences, such as road traffic accidents and violent behaviour are often reported. Evans (1978) in commenting on Hawker’s work and Rice (1978) draw attention to the need for further research into the situations involving alcohol which young people face and the development of educational programmes to give young people the skills necessary to deal constructively with them.

Parental disapproval was the reason most frequently quoted for not drinking alcohol (71.0 per cent of non drinkers). Almost as many (67.4 per cent) claimed they never felt any inclination and the least frequently quoted reason (26.3 per cent) was disapproval on religious grounds. It appears from the answers generally that parents have a considerable influence on the drinking habits of their offspring. In some cases, this takes the form of introducing the young people to drink in the home under supervision and only on special occasions, while in others disapproval and probably example, leads to total abstinence (at least until the age of 16). However, the evidence shows a greater association between the behaviour of subjects and that of their peers than between subjects and members of their family. This is a general finding, but raises the question, as to whether the peer group is chosen because its general mode of behaviour matches that of the subject or the behaviour of the individual is influenced by that of the peer group.

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