

International Center for Alcohol Policies Series on Alcohol in Society

Swimming with Crocodiles:

The Culture of Extreme Drinking

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and
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Book Synopsis

Recent public concern in many countries has drawn considerable attention to the heavy and rapid alcohol consumption among young people, characterized by a range of health and social outcomes. *Swimming with Crocodiles: The Culture of Extreme Drinking* (Martinic & Measham, Eds.)¹ positions this salient and politicized subject within its appropriate social, historical, and cultural contexts.

At the center of the book is empirical research conducted through focus groups in Brazil, China, Italy, Nigeria, Russia, South Africa, and the United Kingdom (Scotland). All groups consisted of young people of legal drinking age. The study reveals a great deal about the way these young people understand and view alcohol consumption, including the negative outcomes of extreme drinking. As one participant in the South African group explained:

When I get drunk, I want to go swimming... This is a stupid thing to do because there are crocodiles and hippos in the river, but you feel like you are invincible when you are drunk, so you do it. I do it.

(South Africa Focus Group participant, Chapter 5)

So why risk swimming with crocodiles, so to speak? In examining this question, a new term—*extreme drinking*—is proposed to describe the excessive and unrestrained drinking patterns of many young people. The factors that motivate young drinkers are explored, contributing a fresh approach to understanding extreme drinking and addressing it through feasible prevention, intervention, and policy.

INTRODUCING THE TERM *EXTREME DRINKING*

Despite significant public focus on young people's harmful drinking patterns, the terminology currently used to describe these patterns fails to fully capture the behaviors and motivations at play, or the outcomes that can follow. Certainly, heavy (or at least excessive) drinking is involved and intoxication typically ensues. Yet the presence of heavy alcohol consumption alone is not sufficient to define these behaviors. Moreover, the existing terms—such as *binge drinking*—hinder public discourse on the topic because of disagreements over their definitions, measurement, and a highly charged media focus.

The term *extreme drinking* offers a more comprehensive insight into a drinking pattern that has many dimensions. The term goes beyond simply heavy drinking; it cannot be constrained by measures of quantity or frequency, or by intoxication alone; and it is embedded within a diverse range of social and cultural contexts in which such behavior is increasingly evident. Importantly, *extreme drinking* takes into account the motivations behind the drinking process and accommodates greater focus on outcomes that are likely to follow. In many ways, extreme drinking is not so far removed from other “extreme” behaviors, such as extreme sports, which also offer a challenge, their pursuit is driven by an expectation of pleasure or excitement, and they are, by design, not without risk to those who engage in them, to others around them, or to society as a whole.

In order to apply the term *extreme drinking*, five definitional criteria need to be satisfied:

- **Intoxication:** Excessive or heavy drinking and its physiological effects.
- **Motivation:** The clear presence of intent and a directed quest for some degree of altered state of consciousness or loss of control (albeit neither unbridled nor limitless).
- **Process:** Typically, a social and positive process in which the pursuit of pleasure and excitement goes beyond the boundaries or norms of usual social drinking within a given culture.

¹This book was commissioned by the International Center for Alcohol Policies (ICAP) and is the ninth volume in the *ICAP Book Series on Alcohol in Society*. ICAP is a not-for-profit organization whose mission is to promote the understanding of the role of alcohol in society through dialogue and partnerships involving the beverage alcohol industry, the public health community, and others interested in alcohol policy, and to help reduce the abuse of alcohol worldwide. ICAP is supported by major international producers of beverage alcohol. The views expressed in this volume are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily represent those of ICAP or of its sponsoring companies.

- **Outcomes:** Attention to drinking outcomes, both positive and negative.
- **Alcohol Experience:** The capacity for a “controlled loss of control,” balanced with the development of so-called “alcohol maturity.”

By sidestepping the unproductive debate on definitions and measurements surrounding current terminology, it is hoped that research can refocus on the areas of particular concern with regard to motivations, processes, and negative outcomes.

WHAT MOTIVATES EXTREME DRINKING?

The concept of extreme drinking offers a new construct for addressing specific behaviors and their outcomes, informed by historical, cultural, and anthropological perspectives on drinking and drunkenness. Both are largely social phenomena, shaped by evolving local attitudes toward alcohol and broader societal norms—including the changing role of young people in society and the concept of extended adolescence (Chapter 2). From an anthropological perspective, possible motivations for extreme behaviors are shaped by the “culture of youth” and what it means to be young (Chapter 3). Alcohol consumption by young people can be viewed as a developmental rite of passage—an exploration of boundaries, with young drinkers often placing themselves at risk for immediate physical effects (e.g., hangovers, blackouts, impaired cognitive and motor coordination, and injury) and more delayed social outcomes, such as problems at home, school, and work.

Why risk such consequences? Sociological and psychological research has shown that extreme drinking occasions are often not accidental, but are planned in advance and engineered in a number of ways—for instance, by drinking quickly to reach intoxication or by “pre-loading,” drinking at home so as to maximize the effect of a night out (Chapter 4). While for some young adults this activity is so habitual that they have difficulty explaining why they do it, developmental, cultural, and social factors all play into the motivations of young drinkers—from drinking to facilitate peer relations and courtships to drinking to cope with problems, or to explore the new freedoms of adulthood.

There is also another simple but powerful motivation for drinking: drinking to “have fun.” Aspects of this motivation include promoting confidence, being sociable, meeting people, feeling good, and “enjoying” drunkenness. Indeed, young people are not unique in expecting a positive experience when they drink. Although the negative consequences are readily acknowledged by young extreme drinkers, positive consequences appear to be perceived as more important and frequent; negative outcomes as delayed and infrequently experienced; and bad effects as “not so bad.” Several other factors appear to enhance the risk of extreme drinking and affect its outcomes, including: cultural acceptance of drunkenness, socializing in groups, and various promotional activities that may encourage heavier drinking patterns.

WHY RISK SWIMMING WITH CROCODILES? FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

Seven ICAP Focus Groups on Extreme Drinking provide further insight (Chapter 5). Although Brazil, China, Italy, Nigeria, Russia, South Africa, and the United Kingdom (Scotland) were chosen in part for their diverse drinking patterns, the focus groups demonstrate striking similarities across different countries in the way young people understand alcohol consumption, its role, and the factors that influence it. Across the board, participants’ primary reasons for drinking were along the lines of enjoyment, sociability, and relaxation. At the same time, respondents were well aware of the negative outcomes of extreme drinking.

Drinking in General

Across all focus groups, participants generally associated drinking with enjoyment and socializing—usually taking place at gatherings (e.g., parties, festivals, family celebrations, and sporting events), in public venues (e.g., bars, pubs, or restaurants), and in the presence of friends, peers, and/or family. There was broad agreement that a “successful drinking experience” included going out with friends, socializing, drinking, and “having fun,” but also avoiding problems and negative experiences that would detract from the pleasure.

Many of the discussions focused on the satisfaction and enjoyment young people linked to drinking. In the words of a Chinese participant, “Drinking is a way to communicate, to establish and maintain relationships. ... It’s a bridge between people.” At the same time, participants in all focus groups also mentioned heavy drinking as a means of self-medication during high-stress situations and under negative circumstances.

In many cases, introduction to alcohol was through parents—often at an early age—in the context of family celebrations and other occasions. At the same time, most considered it inappropriate to engage in extreme drinking around adults; friends and peers played a key role in how young peoples’ drinking patterns developed.

Responses diverged on the topic of “typical” drinking occasions, with age, sex, relationship status, and living arrangements all playing an important role. For example, most participants living with long-term partners reported a typical drinking experience as a drink or two at home with their spouse or partner. Young people still living with parents, on the other hand, were more likely to drink outside the home in pubs, bars, and nightclubs—and to engage in extreme drinking. Finally, one of the key factors cited as influencing the drinking experience was financial solvency. Drinking was most likely to occur (and tended to be heavier) on paydays and when free or discounted alcohol was available.

Extreme Drinking

For a number of respondents in various countries, extreme drinking was part of “typical” drinking with peers. There were clear differences, however, when it came to deliberate extreme drinking. For some, getting intoxicated was an occasional, unintended outcome; for others, it was the main goal. The role of societal norms and cultural permissiveness was strong. Russian participants talked about getting drunk “without realizing it;” in Italy, on the other hand, drunkenness was perceived to be an undesirable outcome of a drinking occasion. In both Italy and Brazil, young people said their main reason for going out and drinking was *not* to drink to excess, but to spend time with friends. At the same time, however, there were also respondents in the Nigerian, Russian, Scottish, and South African groups who felt that people at times deliberately consumed alcohol to become intoxicated.

“Protective factors” against extreme drinking were also identified. The circumstances in which young people said they limited their alcohol intake included being around family members or other adults, being a designated driver, having an early commitment the next day, feeling ill, running out of money, and wanting to stay “in control.” The capacity to retain control was a recurring theme in focus groups, tying into the concept of “alcohol maturity.” According to respondents, the ability to control one’s level of consumption and the outcomes of drinking are determined by age and experience, and, in turn, define what it means to “get drunk.”

The majority of focus group participants believed they were responsible consumers of alcohol, even if they participated in extreme drinking. When asked to explain *why* some young people drink to get drunk, respondents often mentioned age and inexperience, the desire to experiment and enhance one’s self-esteem, group dynamics, and expectations of enjoyment. Some participants also mentioned drinking to excess as a way to manage feelings of loneliness, relationship difficulties, or problems at work.

Although seeking self-confidence, enjoyment, sociability, and relaxation were the primary reasons for both drinking and drunkenness, participants were aware that a range of “bad things” might occur if they drank to intoxication. Focus groups listed a number of potential negative outcomes—from unplanned sexual activities to violent behavior, accidents, and sexual assault. Although some participants talked about changing their drinking behavior after a negative experience from extreme drinking, most agreed that “never again” vows were frequently forgotten the next time they were in a heavy drinking environment.

HOW TO ADDRESS EXTREME DRINKING

Changing the culture of extreme drinking requires looking beyond traditional responses and calls for employing the capacity of all stakeholders in the field (Chapter 6). As more governments and intergovernmental organizations recognize this reality, an opportunity exists to move beyond single-sector responses to multi-sector collaboration, cooperation, and partnership.

A Framework for Collective Action

The necessity for collective action on the part of the public and private sectors has been acknowledged by international agencies such as the United Nations and the World Health Organization. Several key stakeholders ought to be a part of collective action to address extreme drinking, each playing a particular role. They include:

- *Governments*, whether acting at the regional, national, or local level;
- *Criminal justice agencies* at the community and local levels;
- *The beverage alcohol industry*, including producers and retailers;
- *The public health community*, including those involved in research, prevention, and treatment; and
- “*Civil society*,” defined as individuals and groups who are neither part of government nor of the business (for-profit) sector—for instance, the voluntary sector, community organizations, trade unions, faith groups, and philanthropic foundations.

There are various principles for stakeholders to take into account when working together to promote responsible consumption of alcohol and reduce the harms associated with problem drinking. These principles can help avoid so-called “stakeholder asymmetry”—the potential obstacles to partnership stemming from tensions, disparate expectations, and disagreements about resource allocation. They include building trust among stakeholders, transparency of decision-making, and mutual respect of each others’ opinions and positions.

Feasible Policy and Interventions

Within such a construct, it is important that policy and intervention approaches directly address extreme drinking. Although numerous measures exist to tackle alcohol consumption generally and to reduce harm, few approaches either recognize or are aimed specifically at extreme drinking.

For more targeted approaches to be applied successfully, it is important that they are implemented within a proper regulatory framework (Chapter 7). Such a framework outlines reasonable requirements for alcohol production and sale, including taxation and pricing, licensing and consumer access. Typically, provisions as to where or when beverage alcohol may be sold or served are included. Other requirements may define who can be served—for example, prohibiting service to individuals who appear intoxicated or may be under the legal drinking age. The setting and implementation of minimum legal age limits for the consumption and purchase of beverage alcohol goes hand in hand with these requirements.

There is less agreement on the degree to which regulation alone should be relied on and what other measures can be applied and by whom. An effective regulatory framework also provides means for appropriate enforcement, adequate healthcare and social services, and consumer information. While policy measures are generally thought of as originating with government at the national level, filtering down for implementation at the local level, it may be worth re-examining this premise. Policies can also be crafted in a more focused way, tailored to culture, local priorities, and specific needs. This allows policy to be realistic and more feasible to implement, while flexible enough to respond to the immediacy of concerns and priorities. Importantly, it should be acknowledged that policies are not implemented in a vacuum, and that a range of costs and consequences (including some that are not obvious) need to be considered when planning various measures and evaluating their relative impact.

Set within this broader policy framework, targeted interventions can specifically address young people and potentially problematic drinking patterns (Chapter 8). A wide range of approaches has been developed and implemented to affect both the individual and the environment that may contribute to extreme drinking.

Focusing on three key settings where young people can be reached—educational institutions, the workplace, and the broader community—several approaches have been particularly useful. Although criticized as ineffective at changing short-term behavior, *alcohol education* and *life skills training*, delivered primarily through educational institutions, can raise awareness of drinking and potential outcomes and can be valuable components within broader prevention initiatives. Building on peer influences, *social norms marketing*, implemented in schools and universities, may help dispel misperceptions among young people about how much their peers actually do (or, rather, do not)

drink, leading to actual decreases in risky drinking. For those young people whose alcohol consumption is problematic but who are not alcohol-dependent, *brief interventions*—employing a range of harm reduction strategies, from motivational interviewing and personalized feedback to moderate-drinking skills—have been effective in changing behavior. And modifying the *physical and social environment* in schools, for example, by providing safer alternatives to extreme drinking, can be used to compliment programs targeted at individuals.

As many young people—and many extreme drinkers—are already part of the workforce, on-the-job assistance and interventions can help raise awareness of any potential problems. Within this setting, *peer interventions* and *team training* (along with the approaches described above) could be used to help modify drinking patterns. Finally, broader community interventions can include *media campaigns*; *responsible hospitality programs* in bars, pubs, and nightclubs; *efforts against particular alcohol-related outcomes*, such as traffic crashes and public disorder; programs for *marginalized youths*; and comprehensive *community initiatives* that approach several aspects of the drinking context.

Overall, interactive, multi-component programs are more likely to produce sustained, positive results. The reality is that, for many young people, the pattern of extreme drinking carries important social connotations and ritual significance. To truly engage this segment of the population and reduce the harms associated with their behavior, this reality cannot be ignored as programs attempt to modify perceptions, enable informed decision-making, and change the social and physical structures and dynamics surrounding the young in different facets of their lives.

SUMMARY

There is evidence that a distinct pattern of alcohol consumption is increasingly a cause for concern internationally because of its relationship with a range of health and social problems. Its visibility, particularly its high involvement of young people, makes this not only an issue for public safety and order in many countries, but also a highly contentious and politicized subject. To move beyond unproductive rhetoric, a new term and a new approach to addressing both the drinking behavior and its outcomes are in order. The term *extreme drinking* encapsulates all aspects of this consumption pattern, which, like other extreme activities, can be a planned and purposeful pursuit of fun, excitement, and exhilaration, with varying degrees of actual and perceived risk involved.

Although extreme drinking has always had a place in the historical, social, and cultural context of drinking, its current growing rates in some respects and in some cultures represent a significant change in drinking patterns around the world, in part illustrating the changing role young people play in many societies. Policy measures and interventions need to be specifically tailored to address these various issues. By raising awareness of the motivations, meanings, and consequences of this drinking pattern, it is hoped that a realistic reduction in the negative outcomes of extreme drinking can be achieved.

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Martinic, M., & Measham, F. (Eds.). (2008). *Swimming with crocodiles: The culture of extreme drinking*. New York: Routledge.

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