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Beer – an antidote or a stepping stone to liquor? Conceptions of different beverage types in alcohol policy

MATILDA HELLMAN in cooperation with Robin Room, William Kerr and Christoffer Tigerstedt

THEMATIC ISSUE OF NAD tackles the dissimilar treatment of different alcohol beverages in alcohol policy making. It stems from a project that came about when a group of researchers started to reflect on the conscious steering of consumption towards specific beverage types (with low alcohol-content). The main impetus was the meeting in Moscow in 2007 on "Developing Effective Alcohol Policy for Russia: World Experience and Russian Realities". Nordic researchers were invited by the Russian organisers, who had found that all Nordic countries during the 20th century had moved away from "spirits-drinking cultures". In 2007, shifting from vodka to beer was seen as a possible solution to Russia’s drinking problems. The organisers wanted to know what the Nordic societies had done, and with what effect. While changing beverage choices has been a recurrent topic in Nordic policy, there was however not enough published evidence to make claims about the underlying reasoning or any success over time.

The Nordic Centre for Welfare and Social Issues (NVC)1 funded work meetings and a seminar to gather researchers around the theme. Two levels of inquiry were formulated: (i) to look into historical descriptions of policy changes, investigating if and why lighter alcoholic beverages were favoured in different countries, and (ii) to empirically test whether the changes in beverage preferences have been associated with changes in alcohol-related harm. This journal issue publishes research reports from the first group of inquiries. In a concurrent twin issue of Contemporary Drug Problems, CDP (4/2011), statistical tests of the relations between harm and consumption are evaluated in terms of the beverage type consumed.

The first report is by Øyvind Horverak, who gives an overview of the developments in Norway. He deals with the many aspects intertwined in the regulation of different beverage types from the early 19th century on. Overall, drink preferences have varied over time. In the mid-19th century, the temperance movement sought to wean Norwegians off liquor. Since distilled spirits were the drink of the poor, the temperance movement encouraged its members – the bourgeoisie in particular – to put a damper on the intense boozing culture which was the source of a great deal of harm. The developments in the history of Norwegian alcohol policy – such as the local co-operative system of the late
19th century, the ‘laddevin’ in the 1890s, and the conscious nurturing towards wine drinking by the state alcohol monopoly in the 20th century – tell us much about the history of Norway itself. Investigating beverage-specific policies is crucial for our understanding of Norwegian (and many other countries’) alcohol policy: running through Norwegian alcohol policy is the theme that the weapon should be aimed at the drink believed to cause most abuse and anti-social behaviour, Horverak explains.

In her article, Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir examines Iceland’s exceptional 74-year ban on beer. It is not only the long life of the ban that makes Iceland special, but there is also the Icelandic position between continents of alcohol: the dry drinking culture with socially anchored Nordic policy solutions and the great influences from the North American AA movement and its conceptualisation of alcoholism as a disease. The continuation of the beer ban is explained by the political structure and by generations growing up and continuing to support the ban at times of low alcohol consumption. This, in turn, conserved the spirits-drinking pattern. While spirits were seen to cause intoxicative drinking and all of the alcohol-related harms, advocates of beer felt that beer would lead to new drinking patterns.

The first objective in the law that abolished the ban was “to reduce the large consumption of strong spirits”. Ólafsdóttir identifies divided discourses in medical doctors’ input in the public debate surrounding the beer ban. The main issue of contention was the total consumption model. Those who worked in alcohol treatment were concerned about the proposed legalisation and endorsed the theory, whereas others – mostly general practitioners – saw the discussion in terms of either permitting the mildest alcoholic beverages or only allowing the strongest of drinks (=spirits). The question of whether it matters what beverage type people drink was brought to a head. Ólafsdóttir concludes that in changing the policy, the legislators had a direct impact on the preferred beverages and on the extent of their consumption in contemporary Iceland.

For his part, Esa Österberg uses four case examples to show how policy decisions taken in Finland affected the consumption of different beverage types in the 1950s and 1960s. The first two examples concern adjustments in the system of an alcohol monopoly identification card to purchase fortified wines. The third case relates to pricing policy and encouragement to favour wines and beer over vodka in the 1960s; and the fourth is about the introduction of middle-strength beer in grocery stores in 1968.

The data consists of statistics on the main beverage involved in arrests for public drunkenness – a measurement technique that directly reflects the social consequences of drinking different sorts of alcohol. Österberg infers the course of drinking patterns from the differences in the consumption of different beverages and drunkenness arrests since the policy changes. There have indeed been conscious, direct and clearly articulated aims steering people to drink lighter products, which have been more easily available than fortified products. There has also been a policy bias towards wine. According to Österberg, there has been substitution of beverages to some extent, but his examples show that the substitution of strong alcoholic beverages for lighter drinks seems to work when light alcoholic
beverages can be used for the same purposes as strong alcoholic beverages.

Österberg concludes that strong alcoholic beverages can be substituted for lighter drinks. This substitution seems to work especially when lighter alcoholic beverages can be used for the same purposes as strong alcoholic drinks. It is much more difficult to persuade consumers to switch from strong alcoholic beverages to lighter alcoholic drinks by changing relative alcohol availability if they also have to change their drinking habits by, for example, substituting binging with vodka to drinking light wines with meals. Substitution will take place more likely when the availability of strong alcoholic beverages is restricted than when just the availability of light alcoholic beverages is increased.

Matilda Hellman and Thomas Karlsson take up another period in Finnish society, the 2000s, when showing an alcohol-purchase identity card would most likely be seen as infringing on personal liberties. In fear of large private imports of alcohol beverages from Estonia, the Finnish parliament decided to cut alcohol taxes in 2004, opting for the highest tax relief on spirits. While Österberg portrays an era when policies were almost completely determined by societal and socially established policy reasoning, Hellman and Karlsson identify a public health discourse that looks at guiding consumption towards lighter products as a real – and important – alternative scenario. The proposition to favour spirits over lighter products was put forward in an alcohol policy climate disposed toward lighter products. The consequences of cheap spirits thus gave much cause for concern. The barbaric spirits-drinking Finn threatened to make a comeback. The media discussions neither include clear elements of the total-consumption paradigm nor ideas of straightforward policy liberalisations unlike the media accounts from the 1980s and 1990s. Instead, the debate focuses on steering consumption towards preferable (“civilized”) drinking habits of certain preferable products (lighter beverages, non-spirits). The rationale is more abstractly anchored in beliefs and opinions, and less in empirical knowledge of caused social harm.

Norman Giesbrecht with colleagues give a careful overview of techniques of restricting and permitting different alcohol beverages in Ontario, Canada, from 1995 to the present. They start out by examining the literature published of impacts of harm caused by different beverages, surveying systematically policy interventions which steered consumption to certain products. They also include aspects that are not obvious at first sight, such as density of off-premise outlets and different promotion and marketing strategies. No doubt is left that beer, wine and distilled spirits are treated differently. Often it is not the differences in percentage of ethanol in the beverage types which is emphasised, but the differential treatment appears to be driven by business motives. The authors envision possibilities to polish some practices in order to make them more transparent and informative for the consumer (such as information through labelling).

In the end, the authors find a very similar rationale to that discussed in the Nordic studies: a long-standing and well-established belief that distilled spirits are more risky than beer and wine. However, they find little evidence that decisions about differential access to different types of beverages or their promotion were informed by epidemiological research on harm. He concludes that the apparent
rationale seems to be not that of favouring lighter-strength beverages in order to reduce harm, but rather to accommodate long-standing vested interests which are primarily financially based.

So how do we sum up the studies of this special issue? On the basis of the statistical tests of the sister issue of CDP, one conclusion is that there does not seem to be any universal relationship between the type of beverage and harm; counterinstances can always be found, and cultural effects clearly outweigh the effects of beverage types per se. Nevertheless, it was recommended that policymakers should not forget about differential regulation and taxation by type of alcoholic beverage, as taxes and availability are powerful levers available to national policymakers keen to affect levels and patterns of drinking.

The assembled articles in this thematic issue show the historical rootedness of the belief in the evil of spirits in the countries under study. A change towards Mediterranean – or just less harmful and more civilised – drinking has been the rationale of their alcohol policies throughout history. The studies include accounts of a rather schizophrenic (Nordic) alcohol policy discourse in the 20th century in which ‘lighter’ is hoped also to equal ‘less’. That “lighter is better” has come to signify that “less is better” has sneaked into the equation almost unnoticed. Understanding harm caused by different beverages plays a part in the formulation of policies that abandon restrictions on lighter beverages, whether these are empirically confirmed or not (such as in Iceland and Finland).

The studies also show that a change in regulation towards a stricter policy on lighter products is often based on images of negative developments. It is, to that extent, empirically supported or knowledge-based (Finland in the 1950s). Further, the articles prove that changing drinking patterns usually entails encouragement rather than restriction, while efforts to use restrictions to curb harms usually go together with discouragement and use conceptions of the total consumption paradigm. The conceptualisation of less harmful and more civilised drinking patterns through favouring lighter drinks has to establish evidence in support of a slightly paradoxical scenario: it seeks to reduce harm by encouraging drinking of a certain kind, on the premise that it will replace more problematic drinking.

Returning to the discussion at the Moscow meeting, we may ask whether these northern experiences (Ontario as well as Nordic) offer any lessons for spirits-drinking cultures such as the Russian? Drawing on the studies in this issue we can conclude that a straight-out favouring of beer does not change much in drinking styles or reduce problems, at least in the short term. In view of the possible range of harm and the tendency by consumers to stick to their drinking habits regardless, a long-term liberalisation of light beverages may turn out to cost more than a society gains by small adjustments. Overall, the recommendation seems to be to restrict that which is to be avoided rather than to liberalise what is to be encouraged. Sticking to this formula could at the very least make us less inclined to mix “less is better” with “light is better”.

NOTES

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