

What could qualitative studies on
the Estonian drinking pattern reveal
about men's mental health?

Riina Raudne, PhD

Health Estonia Foundation

NordAN Conference, Tallinn,
13.10.2013

Bridging the gap between evidence and change

- We know the “cause” and epidemiology of the Estonian alcohol problem
- We also know the “evidence base” for effective policy.

Why no change?

Alcohol culture

- Alcohol culture is socially constructed
 - How alcohol affects behavior varies across settings
 - The rules of drunkenness are agreed upon
 - McAndrew and Edgerton (1969). *The Drunken Comportment*
- Alcohol culture continues to evolve, these days driven extensively by marketing
 - Ads show what alcohol can do, what people are supposed to feel when drunk
- Contributes also to the cultural and economic mechanisms that keep the policy unchanged

Context of alcohol problems

- Alcohol problems develop in a wider context
- Need to consider the everyday drinking, not just the forms that are pathological.
- Variations in everyday drinking produce the troublesome outcomes
- **(Beccaria et al., 2010, Room & Mäkelä 2000; Sulkunen 2002; 2009; Tigerstadt & Törrönen 2007).**

Study the drinking habits

- Törrönen & Tigerstedt, 2007
 - Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* – the internalized set of dispositions, attitudes and habits that has developed in response to wider social structures and contexts.
 - Repeated activities crystallize in cultural models that can be described
 - Concept allows for creative responsiveness to changes in context, recognizing that people do not simply repeat their activities but innovate through interactions

Drinking habits

- Purposes of drinking
- Degrees of drunkenness and regularity
- Social control of drinking

Methods

- Qualitative study: eight group interviews with natural groups in two medium-sized workplaces in Tallinn
- Five group interviews with men (n= 27):
 - Two groups ages 18-24; three 25-53
 - Three group interviews with women ages 25-55 (n=18)

Natural group methodology

- Similar to focus groups
- Participants all know each
 - hierarchy
 - social desirability
 - support of majority and censoring of minority voices
 - displays accepted public opinions

Topics discussed

- How is drinking done in Estonia?
- How does it differ from drinking of other nations and places?
- To stimulate discussion, showed two current alcohol advertisements
- Supplied key statistical facts, invited commentary

Data

- Group interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed
- Conducted, transcribed, coded and analyzed in Estonian language
- Quotes translated into English and verified with a bilingual editor
- Ethics approval both from JHSPH and Tallinn Medical Ethics Committee

Coding

- Grounded theory open coding first
- Selecting two sub-themes for articles
- Focused coding, writing memos, looking for links
- Selecting theoretical frameworks and re-coding

What are the drinking habits like
among men in Estonia?

Estonian men's drinking habits

- PURPOSES of drinking: to relieve excessive self-consciousness, worry about what others think, to relieve the “pain” from shortcomings in the national character
- DEGREES of drunkenness: both “moderate” and “drunk” serve the purpose of “forgetting the self control”
“moderate” or “drunk” not dependent on the quantity, more a property of the occasion
- CONTROL of drinking: strictly on self. “Every man has to learn to know their own limit”. Also, strictly controlled by the work schedule

Because Estonians are...

- Participant 1: *The stereotype is that an Estonian is generally tongue-tied and introverted (“drawn into himself”) type, who cannot utter a word, and the only moment when they can display their emotion... where they can express themselves or open up is when they are drunk, then it’s, like, forgivable.*
- Participant 2: *Then everything is permitted.*
- Participant 3: *This is not my idea, but I agree in principle and I cannot argue with that. (Older men).*

Alcohol “has always helped”

- *It's also psychology. Estonia has been very much put down all the time and there were no other ways of letting go. Alcohol has been a very big help all the time. People drink to relax. For example, Estonians were under the rule of Germans. They worked all day and in the evenings they gathered, had some beers, partied, so that they would not have to think about this slavery. Perhaps this is where it came into the psyche of Estonians.*

(Younger men)

Estonian men don't express...

- Participant 1: *If Estonian men sit around and absorb all the negative emotions inside, they don't let it out... then some start drinking, some start injecting drugs. Some will find other ways... but the Mediterraneans express their emotions differently.*

- Moderator: Why do Estonians not express their emotions?

- Participant1: *The culture is different. It has developed like this over long period of time.*

(Older men)

Self-consciousness when sober

- Participant 2: *Perhaps it's the trepidation about what they might think of me when I say something ...and there will be a longer pause for reflection before saying anything.*
- Participant 4: *There is a lot of analysis. If you drink alcohol then you won't start analyzing like that.*
- Participant 1: *If you haphazardly blurt something out when drunk, then you don't feel embarrassed and no one else feels embarrassed either.*

(Older men)

More self-consciousness

- *Not everyone is emotionally open and they are incapable of starting to talk immediately. Alcohol definitely helps many people to start socializing. Some are very quiet, don't dare to begin conversations at all, and they sit by themselves. Although they may be really cool people. But when they drink up... for example... drink a little bit, they become more courageous. They then dare to come to socialize with others.*

(Younger men)

Alcohol as a relief from family and work stress

- Participant 1: *I used to get drunk often. As drunk as possible... But then, another stage of life began. If you have a family, then you can no longer do such things, sadly.*
- Moderator: Sadly?
- Participant 1: *In some sense this is unfortunate. Look. Estonian alcohol culture or the lack thereof has developed to the point, where men, in principle, cannot release themselves from stress in any other way.*

(Younger men)

Other relevant findings

- Many comments about the oppressive nature of the national character, especially among men
- “alcohol has always helped”
 - To express self
 - To cope with the cold
 - To relieve stress
 - To live through serfdom, Soviet occupation, now the demanding work regimens and demands of the family life
 - “We in the North don’t self-express like they do in the Mediterranean”
- *Since we want to belong and relate but don’t know how to, alcohol brings us together.*
- Belief that alcohol and the level of current drinking is a given, immutable part of life

Quitting drinking “is solitary”

- Drinking is construed as social, quitting drinking means losing friends
- Beginning drinking in adolescence is construed as a necessary part of socialization, normal development
- Teaching kids to drink at home is a rational choice that protects them from self-styled experimentation
- All forms of trying to control drinking will lead to people wanting it even more – “the forbidden fruit effect”

To end on a hopeful note

- Participant 1: *But alcohol is what opens Estonians up.*
- Participant 2: *I think it's a personal decision how open or shut down a person is. I started thinking one day- wouldn't it be nice to make my house more beautiful? And then I started thinking more positively. I realized I could accomplish all sorts of things and be happy about that.*

(Younger man).

Strengths

- Among the first qualitative studies investigating the cultural models of drinking habits in the general adult population in an Eastern European country
- Identifies a range of previously unexplored themes
- Provides insight into the cultural justifications of drinking

Study limitations

- Convenience sample
- Generalizability limited even in Estonia
- Potential data limitations due to social desirability in workplace-based natural groups
- Interviewer effects, lack of double coding, translation effects

**HOW TO RELATE THIS TO MENTAL
HEALTH?**

Qualitative insights

- Qualitative studies do not generalize
- Seek to understand mechanisms, to explain
- Reveal aspects that may have been unknown from epidemiological studies alone.
- Generate hypotheses for testing in quantitative surveys and longitudinal studies

Hypotheses generated

- Estonian male gender role shame-based, collectivistic
 - (worried about what others think)
- Better social and emotional skills could allow men to navigate situations without excessive drinking
- Social norms supportive of male drunkenness
 - Individual responsibility “everyone responsible for own limit” - individual absorbs harms
 - Collective action - pressure

Input for further research

- Include insights based on qualitative results in the next population-based surveys
 - How acceptable is drunkenness, in what settings, for whom?
 - How often is it “normal” to drink?
 - What does drunkenness allow one to do that would otherwise be forbidden?

Need to quantify

- Depression scale and drinking status
- Anxiety scale and drinking status
- General self-efficacy and drinking status
- Social and emotional skills and drinking status
- Coping styles and drinking status

More research questions

- In what circumstances is it appropriate and necessary to intervene in others' drinking?
 - Drink driving?
 - Swimming?
 - Making a fool of oneself
 - Violence?
 - Drinking too much without apparent harm to others

References

- Beccaria, F., Prina, F., Rolando, S., Tigerstedt, C., & Törrönen, J. (2010). Alcohol and Generations: Changes in Style and Changing Styles in Italy and Finland. Rome: Carocci editore
- Berking, Matthias, et al. "Deficits in emotion-regulation skills predict alcohol use during and after cognitive-behavioral therapy for alcohol dependence." *Journal of consulting and clinical psychology* 79.3 (2011): 307.
- ESPAD Report 2011. Alcohol and Other Drug Use Among Students in 35 Countries.
- www.espad.org.
- Leask, J., Hawe, P., & Chapman, S. (2001). Focus group composition: A comparison between natural and constructed groups. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, 25(2), 152-4.
- Hellman, M., & Gosselt, J. F. (2011). Interpretations of individualistic and collectivistic drinking messages in beer commercials by teenagers from five European countries. *Cross-cultural Communication*, 6(4), P40-57.
- Kollom, K. (2012). How liberal is Estonian alcohol policy? A review of policy development, 1991-2008. *Nordic Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, 29(3), 283-330.
- Macandrew, C. & Edgerton, R. (1969). *Drunken Comportment: A Social Explanation*. Aldine, Chicago, IL.
- Tigersted & Törrönen (2007). Are Finnish drinking habits changing? In search of a cultural approach. *Addiction Research and Theory*, 15(5), 449-464