



# Intoxication and Intoxicated Behaviour in Contemporary European Cultures: Myths, Realities and the Implications for Policy, (Prevention) Practice and Research

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The meeting "Intoxication and  
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## Introduction

Over recent years, media and policy attention has highlighted 'binge' drinking as a social problem which had spread across Europe. Viewed predominantly as a youth problem, the focus of concern has been on young people's drinking and on the behaviours and harms associated with it in relation to public health, public safety and public order.

This emphasis has neglected examination of the wider issue of 'intoxication' and 'intoxicated behaviours'. But to understand youthful binge drinking and associated behaviours, and to find ways of intervening to prevent or reduce harm, it is necessary to understand the prevailing concept(s) of acceptable and unacceptable forms of intoxication and intoxicated behaviours and its/their wider social and cultural determinants.

Classical anthropological studies have shown how different cultures at different times respond differently to intoxication and have demonstrated the multiple roles alcohol plays in social life. However, rapid social, economic and political changes in Europe since the 1970s, have been accompanied by deep seated changes in alcohol consumption and alcohol-related harms and in the contexts within which harmful patterns of drinking have emerged and been sustained or declined. It is, therefore, also important to consider the emergence of phenomena such as binge drinking as part of the wider processes of social and cultural change in European countries,



to look at how particular patterns of consumption become defined as problems and at the myths and realities which may underpin some forms of intoxication and intoxicated behaviours as unacceptable.

A workshop was organized to consider current research and knowledge, debates and discussions on intoxication and intoxicated behaviour in contemporary European cultures. Workshop participants were asked to consider questions relating to the transmission of drinking patterns across generations; if, how and why new patterns of intoxication and intoxicated behaviour emerge; how patterns of drinking and drunken behaviours have been defined in European cultures at different times and how some drinking patterns and alcohol-related behaviours are perceived as normal and acceptable or deviant and unacceptable. Participants were free to discuss one or more aspect of the questions as relevant to their own research studies.

Anticipating the outcome of the workshop, it has to be mentioned that though the workshop was intended to examine the wider issue of intoxication and intoxicated behaviours in Europe, and to shift the focus from youth to adults and from intoxication patterns to intoxication contexts and concepts, it did not succeed entirely in avoiding the prevailing emphasis in discussion on 'binge drinking adolescents': Public attention also ties and bundles scientific attention, and imprints the landscape of social research by defining the most acute problems, by influencing the questions asked and the financial means given to scientists to explore these questions. It is also important to note that discussion in the workshop concentrated mainly on the cultural aspects of drinking and responses to intoxication. Measures such as the use of price, taxation and availability were recognised as evidence based approaches to reducing alcohol-related harm but were not the focus of the papers presented on this occasion.

The workshop was jointly organized by Irmgard Eisenbach-Stangl and Betsy Thom. It was hosted by the European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research, and it was subsidized by the European Forum for Responsible Drinking (EFRD), by the International Center for Alcohol Policies (ICAP) and by participants own organisations. Fourteen participants from nine European countries and from different social disciplines (anthropology, history, sociology, psychology, psychiatry, public science, science of law, criminology, alcoholology, psychoanalysis and epidemiology) shed light on the topics from different angles and contributed to a lively, stimulating and successful meeting. The sections below provide the flavour of the main themes discussed and the recommendations emerging from the workshop.

## Changing drinking and intoxication patterns in Europe

Drinking patterns and intoxication behaviour in Europe have been changing over the last few decades. A well known and widely discussed trend is the overall increase in beer consumption and the overall decline in wine consumption, associated with a change in the meaning of the latter from an everyday beverage to a luxury good, especially pronounced in wine growing countries such as France and Italy. But considered on the national level, the changes in alcohol consumption differ strongly across Europe and they partly diverge in opposite directions; wine consumption, for instance, has gone up in many countries where wine has been rarely consumed - as in the Nordic countries - and it has decreased in countries in which, traditionally, it had been high - France, Italy and Spain. The opposite trend is also observed with per capita consumption of pure alcohol in general, decreasing in some countries over the last decades - as in Italy and Austria - and increasing in others - as in the United Kingdom. Seen from a European angle, the drinking patterns in European countries are slowly converging to some extent; but due to the starting point of change within deeply rooted national and regional traditions, it is hardly possible to identify common trends.

Intoxication and intoxicated behaviour are changing along with consumption patterns, though not too much is known about the alterations. On the one hand, during the last decades, drinking to intoxication seems to have lost its exclusively male - "heroic" - character (as in Finland) and in many countries (as in Denmark and the United Kingdom) it seems to be more widely accepted nowadays - also among women and younger generations. This trend appears to be linked, at least partly, with the greater visibility of drunken behaviour. On the other hand, intoxication has also become more problematized in most European countries, due to a number of factors, including the increasing stigmatisation of some variants of intoxicated behaviour such as 'binge drinking', more recently re-framed as 'extreme drinking' (or in German speaking countries as 'coma drinking'). In addition, intoxicated behaviours have been linked increasingly to a range of acute alcohol related harms, such as accidents, injury and violence and this, too, has added to the problematization of patterns of heavy episodic drinking especially in public contexts. Intoxicated behaviour is especially prone to being defined as a problem when it occurs among groups of 'new drinkers', women and young people.



Finding ways of changing harmful patterns of intoxication and drunken behaviour is slow and meets resistance. Contrary to the use of other substances, as for instance tobacco or illicit drugs such as cannabis and ecstasy, alcohol is considered as the 'traditional' drug, as a drug deeply rooted in the culture of industrialized societies, as a drug with manifold persistent meanings and conservative, formalised rules for use. There are countries where the new, more European and more 'democratic' drinking and intoxication patterns discussed above have not arrived, as for instance Russia. In other countries, considerable societal segments demonstrably stick to traditional patterns of alcohol consumption and intoxication. One impressive example, apart from the famous "Oktoberfest" in Munich and the carnival in Mainz, is the annual event of the Italian Alpini – a part of the Italian military - and their relatives and close associates. This event has been taking place since 1920. For the Alpini, wine is the 'cement' between generations; it is a symbol of friendship among those coming from different regions and it is transmitted through the annual event to younger generations who learn the rules of intoxication and drunken behaviour at the annual gathering. The concept of intoxication as an agent of social cohesion can also be found still in some other European societies. For instance, among traditional Fins, drinking still functions as a way of expressing social cohesion, uniting class and generation (although perhaps not as strongly as in the past); traditional Austrians, through drinking rituals and songs, discover their familiar ties and become equal brothers ("Trink, trink Brüderchen trink...").

Nowadays, changes in drinking and intoxication patterns are frequently associated with younger generations, even if the older generations have paved the way for the new habits or have already adopted them, something which is usually the case since new habits do not appear out of the blue and influence all exposed. But, if changing patterns of drinking are discussed, they are mostly discussed as a youth problem and as a problem with youth. The new drinking and intoxication patterns are then perceived by many as a threatening deviation by youth from (national) traditions and values which the older generations try to transmit and as a danger for social cohesion, the common good and future generations. Research on the new drinking and intoxication patterns and the new consumers is consequently much better developed than research on traditional practices which still survive – and, possibly, prevail in many instances. Comparative studies across Europe are rare and mostly restricted to quantitative surveys, which do not cater for rigorous assessment of innovations and emerging patterns.



But what distinguishes the 'new culture of intoxication', as it is called by some, from more traditional patterns, and what distinguishes the youthful new consumers from those belonging to older generations?

## The new youthful culture of intoxication

Though young people in many countries still stick to traditional beverages they also increasingly consume non traditional ones, e.g. beer and spirits in the 'wine countries' of France and Italy, and alcopops and/or various mixtures of non alcoholic drinks and spirits, both ready made and self prepared. Their drinking contexts are also new; the younger generation tends to drink visibly and to get drunk in public space – as in Spain, Austria, Switzerland – and in new leisure venues. The new 'factories of drunkenness' - mostly discotheques, pubs, clubs and bars – specialize in catering for young people and they consequently are more or less exclusively visited by persons under 30 years of age. They are often equipped with private security guards, controlling the arrivals and their bags – occasionally confiscating alcoholic beverages and weapons brought along - and managing the intoxication and the aggression of those allowed to enter. Visitors threatening the more or less hidden private regulations of the venue are thrown out and eventually the police may be called on the scene. Seen from another angle, the new leisure venues are apparently safe settings for people intending to get seriously drunk and/or looking for a thrilling and risky night out.

Drinking is perceived as fun. Drinking up to intoxication is, in itself, a main aim of alcohol consumption among young persons, though by far not of all young people, not everywhere and not at every time. But drunkenness, in many European countries and for many young people, has become a regular, expected ingredient of communal leisure time activities at week-ends, of a form of frequent carnival devised by young people themselves. Visible intoxication in public settings is part of 're-claiming' space and an active assertion of generational changes and differences. Consequently, for many young people drunkenness is no longer a deviant act, associated with shame and guilt, that has to be hidden from adults; it can be exhibited before an audience in public. As a result, those who abstain may find themselves socially excluded and at risk of related psycho-social problems (as a comparative study carried out in five European cities indicates); but contrary to intoxication abstention is not perceived as incurring associated social problems and is neglected in research and policy.



Drinking up to intoxication does not necessarily have negative consequences, but it often has: memory loss, headache, vomiting and hangover are common, fights are frequent and also nuisance, vandalism and accidents are frequently observed. The negative consequences are as much expected by the young persons as intoxication itself and often seen as part of the drinking event. The drinking is sometimes also accompanied by the consumption of other substances, mainly 'recreational' illicit drugs such as cannabis and ecstasy, and more rarely, 'harder' illegal substances. Some researchers, therefore, perceive a new culture of intoxication, where the psychoactive properties and the legal status of the substances are no longer of importance and where the aim is an altered state of mind irrespective of the source.

The main motive for the pattern of 'extreme' drinking given by young people across Europe is 'fun'. But a closer, more qualitatively oriented look, also reveals less positive motives; on the one hand, it reveals the burdensome social situation of young people today, besides other things, determined by an extended transition to adulthood associated with an extended socio economic dependence; and on the other hand, it reveals the increased (economic as well as sexual) competitive nature of today's societies, accompanied by an increasing work load and an uncertain future. Considered even more basically, young people today live in a world of rapid change and since social change inevitably evokes anxieties and stress, extreme and visible drinking and intoxication might be one way to express and treat the heightened burden of strain, given an apparent lack of other ways to manage the difficulties experienced. If the deliberate and visible intoxication of young people is understood as a reaction to rapid social change, their reactions resemble those of many adults during periods of societal transition throughout the last centuries: Periods of radical social change in Russia - for instance, the abolition of serfdom in the mid 19th century, the Bolshevik revolution, and Perestroika in the 20th century - were regularly accompanied by heavy drinking among the general population.

## The societal context: fashions, generations and pleasure

The new culture of intoxication had an onset – in the early 1990s in Finland and Denmark, and about 10 years later in Austria – and it presumably has an end: The most recent surveys in the United Kingdom indicate that, already, the drinking habits of young people have been changing over the last few years and that adolescents' alcohol consumption and intoxication are decreasing. Thus, the new culture of intoxication may also be seen as a fading fashion. This does not mean that intoxication is fading among all segments of youth. On the contrary, some subgroups of youth presumably will neither consume less nor get less often intoxicated; in the UK, while younger age groups seem to be consuming less, those who do drink are drinking greater amounts. In other words, there may be a polarization among young people based on differences between consumption and intoxication patterns.

Another way of looking at the new culture of intoxication is to see it as the commercialised successor of the rave culture, which was organized around illegal substances and around privately organised events supported by modern communication technologies. This fashion was not profitable for the leisure industry and it therefore invested in innovations to re-attract the young consumers; besides other things, new and stronger alcoholic drinks were invented and new types of venues were developed; and to seduce the young consumers, a diversity of bargain offers unfolded. The innovations were successful; the night time economy today is a powerful factor in most European countries and many governments have promoted it by introducing measures intended to stimulate local economies and civic regeneration; in some cases, this has included liberalizing the regulations on licensing which has aroused concern and debate regarding the effects on youthful participation in alcohol consumption and in public intoxicated behaviour.

The recent rave culture as well as the new culture of intoxication are fashions created by youth, fashions that orient the thoughts, feelings and actions of significant subgroups of young people in the same way and help shape their identities. It has not always been the case that youth or subgroups of youth had the power to create fashions attracting so much attention from the media and stimulating so many reactions from policy makers. But generation in late modern societies gained weight as a force



in structuring collective identity – as some researchers say, at the expense of class and gender. Generation became a leading force in structuring collective identity because late modern societies are to be considered as ‘pre-figurative societies’, that is, as societies where both the young people and also their elders are in need of permanent education in order to manage life. To put it in other words, social change in late modern societies became so rapid that the knowledge of the older generation is of no value for the younger; the knowledge of the younger generation is of some value for the older, though neither knowledge is sufficient.

Contrary to traditional drinking and intoxication cultures, the new youthful culture of intoxication - as with youthful rave culture – does not aim at general social or even national cohesion; it aims at cohesion in selected subcultures and subgroups. Furthermore, the juvenile subcultures and subgroups, where youth socialize and built up (collective) identities are no longer built up on the basis of common education and work (common achievements) and the societal organisations/ institutions of education and employment. Rather identities are forged on the basis of common leisure and consumption and their respective (public) organisations and ideologies, that is, on fun, pleasure, and recreation.

The public consumption and ‘leisure scenes’ of young people are mostly gender mixed, but they seem to differ remarkably with regard to the gender roles they offer. The differences are to be observed within the various subgroups and subcultures in a given region, but they are also apparent between European countries. Young women participating in the new intoxication culture in the United Kingdom, for instance, behave much more equal to young men in regard to drinking and intoxication than young women in Austria, who drink in far more traditional ways, that is much less and in much less risky ways than their male counterparts. The gender differences, besides other things, could also be understood as an indicator of the strong national and regional variations within the new culture of intoxication. This is an area which warrants further exploration.

## Perceptions of and responses to intoxication

Perceptions of the nature of intoxication and of the appropriate response have changed over the centuries and from country to country as have common terms. Workshop participants emphasised the political, social and cultural foundations of definitions of 'drunkenness' and of the acceptability or sanctioning of different levels of intoxication and intoxicated behaviour.

The history of the temperance movement, for example, illustrates how dissemination of a temperance philosophy spread from aristocratic and middle-class beginnings to become a working-class mass movement in the new industrial context of the UK and in a climate which emphasised respectability, self-reliance and upward mobility. Sobriety and abstinence were perceived as the means to success, 'moral suasion' as the appropriate response to induce compliance in the population and the provision of alternatives, such as libraries, parks, museums and sports facilities as an inducement to adopt a healthier lifestyle. The gradual incorporation of temperance into a "new discourse of social reform" to tackle issues such as poverty, indicates the dynamic nature of problem definition, shifting in response to changes in the general culture of drinking, more active government involvement and widening debate within local areas concerning the response. At the same time, the fact that temperance was not a unified movement – it displayed internal tensions and differences of opinion regarding how to change a culture of drunkenness – demonstrates the extent to which perceptions of the problem and responses to it are subject to multiple influences at national and local levels.

Similar tensions and differences underpin discussions of youthful intoxication today as the terms used have already illustrated. The most used term 'binge drinking' can be criticized as a 'confused concept' which is measured variably and imprecisely and perceived differently by professionals, 'authority' figures and lay people, including young people. A number of other definitions have been used to describe the same types of drinking patterns and behaviours – e.g. 'heavy episodic drinking' – some of these terms incorporating explanations and descriptions of the behaviour – e.g. 'extreme drinking', 'hedonistic drinking', 'bounded drinking'. Such terms reflect professional or research descriptions in contrast to the rich array of lay terminology used by drinkers themselves, which tends to reflect the acceptability of some degree of risks and harms as part of the fun and excitement of a 'good night out'. Moreover, the use of variable terminol-

ogy indicates differences in perceptions of the behaviour and, in turn, differences in perceptions of the problem and the necessary response. It is not surprising, therefore, to find wide variation in perceptions of intoxication among different social groups in the population.

Good examples of the variability of responses to intoxication and intoxicated behaviour are available both historically and in contemporary European countries. As mentioned in an earlier section, drunkenness still forms part of some festivities and ceremonial events which function to integrate young people and confirm affiliation for older members of a group. As in the case of the Alpini, the social response is acceptance – possibly because the drunkenness is seen as short-term and non-threatening to prevailing social practices and norms. But if the term binge or coma drinking is used, it is to be expected that intoxication is perceived as ‘deviant’ and threatening to the status quo; these terms elicit a very different response, one which demands increasing control of young people’s alcohol consumption and associated behaviours and seeks to change drinking and behaviour to more acceptable patterns as defined by professionals, policy makers and ‘the general public’. Frequently, the response is an increase in enforcement measures and restrictions on the drinking environment - a controversial response, as witnessed by debates on alcohol licensing regulations. Securing change in young people’s drinking has, therefore, become a priority for much prevention and intervention activity in European countries although, as in the case of the temperance movement, there is a lack of consensus regarding the best way to secure change.

National policies and strategies contain a wide range of prevention, treatment and harm reduction responses to the problems of intoxication and unacceptable drinking behaviours. Research studies have highlighted some approaches which appear to have a greater chance of success than other approaches in tackling harmful drinking patterns and behaviours. But there are still considerable cultural differences between European countries regarding which responses are adopted or rejected and there are still differences of opinion within countries about the adoption of some kinds of responses. The possibilities of partnership with the alcohol industry is one example; as the history of the temperance movement shows, this has historic roots at least in the UK as a controversial response, and it is still a contentious topic.



Alongside 'official' responses, there are many attempts by voluntary and lay organisations to set up initiatives to respond to problem drinking behaviours in their local areas. One example highlights the importance of the role of parents. In Denmark, parent organised parties illustrate how 'non-official' responses operate in the prevention and harm reduction arena. Parents organise and supervise parties at which young people are allowed to consume alcohol and even to become intoxicated. This provides them with experience of using and managing alcohol in a safe environment. The example also illustrates the importance of looking at socialisation into alcohol use against the wider background of institutional and structural changes in societies, changes which influence the learning process and interaction between parents, children and peers. There is no particular consensus regarding policy and practice responses, rather an emphasis on developing, as far as possible, evidence based strategies and approaches which are culturally sensitive to national and local cultures and which take account of differences between different population groups.

Finally, it is necessary to recognise that the inclusion of (illicit) drugs would provide a more rounded examination of perceptions of, and responses to, intoxication and intoxicated behaviour. The relevance of a 'drug, set and setting' analysis as applied to alcohol control with special emphasis on binge drinking provides one way of looking at the problem and at the responses. It could be argued that there may be unconscious reasons for the persistence of an irrational taboo against those drugs which have been defined as illicit. It then becomes relevant to examine the mechanisms of creating a taboo and of constructing the drug scare, and to consider whether there are significant differences between illicit drugs use and binge drinking. Comparison with illicit drug use also serves to illustrate the ambiguous position of drunkenness and drunken behaviour in many societies. On the one hand, binge drinking or unacceptable intoxicated behaviours are officially denounced and on the other hand, commercial and state interests (alcohol producing, distributing and advertising industries; taxes on alcohol) send contrary or even encouraging signals regarding alcohol use and intoxication. These messages, received by the unconscious, make it difficult to devise appropriate prevention messages and approaches.

## Intoxication and intoxicated behaviour: Implications for policy and research

During the meeting, the discussion tended to be focussed on young people although this was not the intention in setting the programme. However, it reflects the extent to which attention over the past decade has concentrated on the drinking patterns of younger people and the bias in research towards investigating drinking among the younger age groups. As a result, the implications for policy and research emerging from the meeting are also heavily weighted towards addressing key issues arising from changing patterns of consumption and intoxication among young people. It is important, however, that problems associated with drunkenness and drunkenness behaviour in other age groups should not be neglected. Some of these problems – such as partner violence – require further research to understand more clearly the dynamics of the association between alcohol and domestic violence and other more ‘hidden’ harms. Other issues, such as the links with dependent drinking or intoxication in older people were recognised in the course of the meeting but not addressed in depth. Most importantly, the meeting highlighted the tensions and debates in research and policy around explanations for intoxicated behaviour, the meaning and function of drinking to drunkenness and perceptions of appropriate responses to identified alcohol-related harms. In addition, participants recognised the importance of the cultural context and cultural sensitivity in developing policies and planning research.

### Issues for Policy

- Consider whether nation states (and Europe as a whole) should have a youth policy. This should cover substance use / problem use/ intoxication and intoxicated behaviours (licit and illicit substances) as well as other issues important for the health and social well-being of all young people.
- Policy makers and researchers should be aware of the limits of policy. There is a need to take account of what people do in everyday life outside policy. For example, grass-roots initiatives and not-for-profit based responses are important.
- Especially in times of rapid cultural change, grass-roots initiatives and responses outside ‘official’ policy may not be in line with government approaches. This should be recognised and examined, particularly in evaluating policies to address intoxication and intoxicated behaviours.
- Policy also needs to be responsive to differences between and within European countries. It should aim to formulate culturally sensitive policies.

- In addressing problems of intoxication and intoxicated behaviours, there is a need for greater awareness of the economised context of consumption and behaviour. The development of the 'night time economy' and the rise of 'youth consumerism' are examples of social changes which impact on individual behaviours by increasing access to alcohol and increasing the risk of associated harm.
- There is also a need to take account of the political context within which particular policies are formulated. Policy itself impacts on the problem and may have diverse effects. Among the factors influencing policy formulation, for example, issues regarding political stability and instability, or the 'transition' status of a political system are likely to influence policy formulation as well as the drinking patterns of the population. Changes in drinking patterns in Russia demonstrate the complex relationship between political turmoil, alcohol policy and a rise in harmful consumption patterns.
- It is also necessary to examine the constraints of European laws or other international pressures on national policy and responses.
- The increase of visible alcohol consumption and intoxication among young people in some European countries over recent decades is recognised (although there has been no rise in Southern or Central European countries, and, as mentioned earlier, the threshold in the rise of youth consumption may have been reached). It is not known if this will be a long term trend and this needs continuing monitoring. It is likely that there are multiple reasons why young people engage in 'extreme' drinking. There is a need to explore different 'models' and ways of responding to intoxication and intoxicated behaviours among young people.
- Policy should be more specific in addressing risk groups and especially those experiencing multiple problems and their basic needs. Appropriate, effective interventions are required.

### Issues for Research

- There is a need to investigate initiatives, perhaps especially 'non-official' grass-roots and not-for-profit initiatives about which we have very little information.
- Research is needed into the role of evidence and into the processes by which problems / issues for policy attention are identified and constructed. This includes: examination of the role of different social groups and institutions (e.g. media, professions, policy makers, young people, lay groups); the emergence and evolution of different types of

responses and forms of control, and shifts in policy emphasis between types of responses e.g. treatment, harm reduction and control approaches.

- Related to the above are issues concerning the structural basis of problem construction – issues of the theoretical bases, funding sources and power structures which influence definitions, responses and research.
- Research into issues around abstention would also be valuable, in particular to explore the dynamics of interaction between young abstainers and their drinking contemporaries, especially those who frequently or occasionally participate in excessive drinking events.
- There would be great value in comparative studies of the context of drinking behaviours in different European countries and of the meaning and function of intoxication. This should include contexts where intoxication is viewed as positive and functional as well as contexts where it is seen in a negative light.
- A cross-national study of young people's own constructions and understandings of intoxication and intoxicated behaviours would be useful.
- There is a need for longitudinal/ developmental research using both quantitative and qualitative methods to obtain a better, more dynamic perspective of the issues. Although monitoring trends is important, the emphasis on epidemiological research needs to be balanced by a broader range of research using qualitative as well as quantitative methods.

### **Presentations**

*Franca Beccaria* (Turin): The Italian Alpini annual event

*Virginia Berridge* (London): Temperance and culture: a case study of using history

*Lorenz Böllinger* (Bremen): The socio-psycho-dynamics of drug prohibition – a psychoanalytical perspective

*Marie Choquet* (Paris): Fading wine cultures in Europe, fading influence of the older generations and their traditions?

*Ladislav Csémy* (Prague): Heavy episodic drinking and intimate partner violence

*Irmgard Eisenbach-Stangl & Gabriele Schmied* (Vienna): "Street



scenes, disco scenes and private scenes”: Same drinking patterns, different meanings, different reactions

*Iossif Gurvich & Veronika Odinokova* (St. Petersburg): Russian history, hazardous drinking and recent changes

*Pekka Hakkarainen* (Helsinki): Is generational transmission fact or fiction?

*Torsten Kolind* (Aarhus): Constructing youth identities: How Danish adolescents learn themselves to drink and party

*Fiona Measham* (Manchester): Determined drunkenness and the pursuit of pleasure

*Stephan Quensel* (Bremen): Normal drinking, deviant abstention

*Betsy Thom* (London): The concept of binge drinking: construction and reality



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