



**AMPHORA – Alcohol Public Health Research Alliance**

**Deliverable D2.7 – Report on European public perceptions of alcohol policy**



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## **Public norms, alcohol policy and drinking behaviour**

### **Report on a project under WP8 of AMPHORA**

#### **Introduction**

This project within the AMPHORA framework is about the relations between alcohol policy, public norms and drinking behaviour. It is based on the common experiences Scandinavians have when they are travelling in southern Europe: They experience a quite relaxed alcohol control policy, and still not very much drunkenness and drunken behaviour. In Scandinavia there are rather strict alcohol control policies, and still excessive intoxication is quite common and easily observable. This can be seen as quite paradoxical, and the purpose of this project is to try to explain this seemingly paradox.

Regarding alcohol consumption people often have very clear norms about what they perceive as acceptable and unacceptable, normal and deviant, use and abuse. But changes have obviously happened over time in the European countries. A study from Norway (Nordlund 2008) shows this very clearly. By presenting 18 concrete descriptions of different kinds of drinking habits to representative samples of the population in 1964, 1989 and 2006, and ask the respondents to decide if they think each of the descriptions could be classified as alcohol abuse or not, a clear change in peoples norms could be shown. More descriptions were characterized as abuse in 1964 than in 1989, and more in 1989 than in 2006. In other words: A clear liberal trend in the norms for alcohol consumption was evident.

Norms does not vary only over time, but also between groups, countries and cultures. In this project we will present results from a study that describes differences in informal norms for alcohol use in different parts of Europe. As far as we know this has never before been done in a scientifically valid way. We will concentrate on the central concept of “abuse”, and describe how people distinguish between “normal use” and “abuse”. This has already been done in the above-mentioned study from Norway, and proved efficient to show differences over time. A natural guess is that it will also be suitable for describing differences between drinking cultures (countries).



## Method

The informal norms will be measured by the same method as in the Norwegian study: We suppose that drinking behavior can be characterized by 3 main dimensions: The frequency of drinking, the level of intoxication and if one drinks alone or in a social setting. These 3 dimensions are quantified in the following way:

Three levels of frequency: “a couple of times a week”, “a couple of times a month” and “a few times a year”.

Three levels of intoxication: “mildly”, “fairly” and “strongly”.

Two levels of context: “alone” and “with friends”

By combining all degrees of the 3 dimensions, we get 18 ( $=3 \times 3 \times 2$ ) different descriptions of drinking behavior. These descriptions are presented, one by one, printed on cards, in a random order, to a presumably representative sample of the population in seven countries: Two Nordic countries (Finland and Norway), Two countries from central Europe (Germany and Poland) and three Mediterranean countries (Italy, Slovenia and Spain; Italy was actually represented by the region of Tuscany). The respondents reply if they think the different descriptions indicate alcohol abuse or not. All data collection has been done, and analysis is progressing.

## Results

The mean number of descriptions of drinking habits that were labeled “abuse” show three distinct levels: The Nordic countries have the lowest mean number of statements labeled as “abuse”, Slovenia and Tuscany the highest, and Germany, Poland and Spain came in between. In other words: People in the Nordic countries have the most liberal views on drinking; they accept both more frequent drinking and more intoxication before they call it “abuse”. People in Tuscany and Slovenia had the strictest view on drinking, and have a stronger tendency to label a drinking habit “abuse” than people in the other countries.

It was also interesting to compare how the different dimensions contribute to the tendency of labeling the alcohol habits as “abuse” in the different countries. One way to do this is to estimate the conditional probabilities for using the different levels of the dimensions, given that the described



alcohol habit is labeled “abuse”. Also the marginal effects on the probability of labeling a drinking habit as abuse have been estimated. These analyses give a picture of the relative tendency of using the different dimensions when people are labeling drinking habits as “abuse”. These relative tendencies give a little more complex picture than the unconditional probabilities of giving an “abuse”-labeling.

An article presenting these results, and discussing them, will probably be sent to *Addiction* in week 8. When the results from another part of Workpackage 8 (Scaling of alcohol policies, by beneficiary 34) will be available, the findings from this article will be related to the policy in the different countries. The purpose is to see how formal rules (control policies), informal rules (norms) and behavior, is interacting in the different parts of Europe. An article on this will be submitted later this year, depending on when the results on policies will be ready.

## References

Nordlund, S. (2008) What is alcohol abuse? Changes in Norwegians’ perception of drinking practices since the 1960s. *Addiction Research and Theory*; 16 (1): 85-94.