

CHAPTER 4. POPULAR NORMS, ALCOHOL POLICY AND DRINKING BEHAVIOUR

Sturla Nordlund

Summary

The aim of this chapter is to study the dynamics between the informal rules (norms) for alcohol consumption and the formal rules (alcohol policy) in different parts of Europe. The norms for drinking were measured by a method which had proved efficient to show changes over time in drinking norms in Norway. The same method was supposed to be applicable for measuring differences in norms between countries. The method was to present 18 descriptions of drinking behaviour to representative samples of the populations in seven countries representing different alcohol cultures in Europe. The descriptions were obtained by systematically varying three levels of frequency, three levels of intoxication and two levels of sociability (alone or with friends). The respondents were asked if they would characterize each of the described drinking behaviours as “alcohol abuse” or not. The mean number of descriptions characterized as “abuse” is seen as an indication of the general “normative climate” for alcohol consumption in each country. The formal rules, or more precisely the comprehensiveness and strictness of the alcohol policy in each country, was measured by a new scale developed within the AMPHORA project by Karlsson, Lindeman and Österberg (2013). A comparison of these two types of rules showed a complementary relation: where the norms are strict the policy is more liberal, and vice versa. A similarity in the “normative climate” between neighbouring countries was also shown, indicating that areas of relatively uniform alcohol cultures exist in different parts of Europe.

Introduction

When people from Scandinavia travel in southern Europe, they see excessively intoxicated people less often than in their home countries. At the same time they experience that there are very few formal rules for sale, serving and use of alcoholic beverages. In Scandinavian countries, traditionally, these areas have been regulated much more strictly by alcohol policy measures, and the price of alcohol has been considerably higher (Karlsson & Österberg 2001, Holder et al. 1998). However, excessive intoxication seems to be much more common in the Nordic countries than in southern European countries (Anderson & Baumberg 2006). This can be seen as quite paradoxical.

To a large extent, the way people behave is governed by norms and rules that can be more or less formalized. When norms are violated different kinds of sanctions may come into force. Norms and rules are social constructs, which sometimes are rationally motivated. However, they may be completely irrational in the sense that they do not serve any particular purpose except the possible pleasure of experiencing the distinction between those who follow the norm and those who do not. For instance, fashion in clothing and hairstyles are examples of quite irrational norms, while alcohol policy measures are assumed to be rationally motivated. Hardly any norms seem to be universal in the sense that they apply to all cultures at any time. Neither will all norms apply in all groups of a society. There will often be great variation between individuals and groups.

The relationship between the prevailing norms in a society and people's behaviour can be described as a feedback process. Informal norms govern behaviour by use of informal sanctions when the norms are violated. These sanctions vary widely in severity, from a disapproving look, expressed concern, objurgation, avoidance and social isolation, to bullying and beating. But if the violations continue and become more common, this may have an influence on the norms, and the norms may be changed. In the alcohol field, people seem to have quite distinct views on what is acceptable and unacceptable, normal and deviant, use and abuse (Heath 1995; Greenfield & Room 1997). But also here there are large individual differences and changes over time. A study from Norway has demonstrated considerable changes in the perception of "alcohol abuse" over a period of more than 40 years; a clear liberalization in norms has taken place (Nordlund 2008).

Formal rules and sanctions are also important for regulating people's behaviour. There are formal rules for sale, serving and use of alcohol in all European societies, but these rules vary both within and between countries and over time. Variation within a country is obvious in the Nordic countries, where several alcohol policy measures are decided on locally in the municipalities. Therefore, there are large differences, for instance, in the density of on-premise and off-premise outlets, opening hours and control of age limits. This can be seen as an indication of a good adjustment of alcohol policy to local attitudes and norms. But local attitudes and norms also have a direct impact on drinking practices. Where norms are most restrictive people also drink less. What is then cause and what is effect in this interaction? When it comes to regulating drinking practices, are people's informal norms or alcohol control policy most important?

This question can also be asked on a more global level. In all countries, the main determinant for how politicians act, and how alcohol policy is shaped and expressed in formal laws and regulations, is the common perception of "the alcohol problem". Apart from personal experience, "common perceptions" are shaped through the public debate around presentations in the media of specific incidents, statistics, research reports and other kinds of reports, and statements from influential persons. A central concept in the public debate on "the alcohol problem", and on alcohol policy in general, is "alcohol abuse". Everybody agrees that "alcohol abuse" should be reduced, but when it comes to political practice, it seems very difficult to agree both on the meaning of "alcohol abuse" and on the measures to reduce it. Therefore variation in policies arises. This is obvious when we look at the political debate within each country, but here, again there are great differences between countries. Karlsson and Österberg (2001) and others (Davies & Walsh 1983; Anderson & Lehto 1995), have shown that there is great variation in the comprehensiveness and strictness of alcohol policy between different European countries. They have also shown great changes in the policies over time. However, the differences in alcohol culture still seem to endure. Therefore, it is interesting to study the dynamics between formal and informal rules for alcohol consumption and behaviour in more detail. There are at least two possible hypotheses:

The first hypothesis is that alcohol policy in a country is a direct consequence of the popular norms in the country, so that restrictive norms lead to restrictive policy and liberal norms lead to liberal policy. We can call this the *congruence hypothesis*.

The second possible hypothesis is that the informal norms in some countries are very liberal so that alcohol policy must be restrictive in order to keep alcohol problems at an acceptable level. On the other hand, the informal norms may be so restrictive that introduction of a restrictive alcohol policy is not necessary. In this case the formal rules are seen to be complementary to

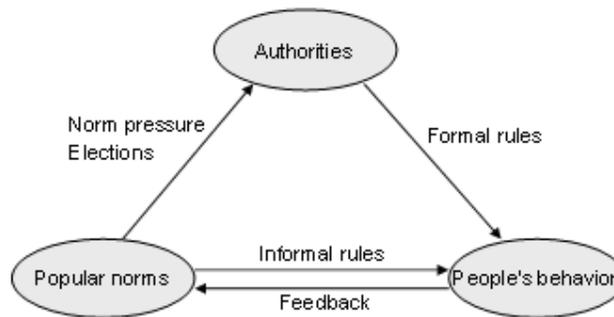
the informal rules: if one is liberal the other must be restrictive in order to keep “the alcohol problem” at an acceptable level. We can call this the *complementary hypothesis*.

What we did

The aim of this AMPHORA research was to study the dynamics between formal and informal rules for alcohol consumption and behaviour empirically, and to try to decide which one of the two hypotheses above (if any) provides the best explanation of the relationship between popular norms, policy and behaviour.

The relationship between formal rules (alcohol control policy), informal rules (norms/attitudes) and drinking behaviour can be expressed as shown in the following simplified model:

Figure 1. Links between popular norms, policy and behaviour



The figure illustrates the connection between norms/attitudes and behaviour as a feed-back process. However, the shaping of formal rules is not seen as a direct response to people’s behaviour, but is influenced by people’s attitudes to different kinds of behaviour. This influence comes from public discussions in the media, or from strong organizations, which puts a normative pressure on politicians. In the longer perspective, the shaping of formal rules is also influenced by replacement of politicians at elections.

In order to study the dynamics of this model, we need to define more precisely and to operationalize the concepts which have been used for the general description of the model. Of course, it is difficult to give precise and measurable definitions for the informal rules (norms/attitudes) and the formal rules (alcohol control policy). However, this has been the aim of two recent studies that are part of the AMPHORA project. The norms in seven European countries were compared by Nordlund and Østhus (2012) and the policies were compared by Karlsson, Lindeman and Österberg (2013). This article is based on the results from these studies.

Comparing “normative climates”

The method that was used to compare norms was originally developed by Lise Paulsen (1969) for comparing drinking norms in different parts of Norway. In order to study the development of these norms over time, the same method was used on two other occasions by Arner (1993) and Nordlund (2008). This revealed a clear liberal development in drinking norms in Norway over a period of more than 40 years. It was a natural idea to use the same method for comparing alcohol norms in different drinking cultures (countries).

The method is based on the central concept of “abuse”, and how people in different societies distinguish between “normal use” and “abuse”. It was assumed that alcohol habits could be

described using three dimensions: frequency, quantity and context. However, the quantity dimension was seen as inadequate, since a certain quantity of alcohol can affect different people differently, depending on their gender and weight. Therefore, this dimension was changed to intoxication, which was seen as more adequate. These dimensions were divided into levels 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”

Of course, there are problems with describing drinking habits using a limited number of concepts like these. The validity of these dimensions and levels for a sufficient and precise description of alcohol habits in different languages is discussed more thoroughly in the above-mentioned article by Nordlund and Østhus, and is not repeated here.

The different levels were combined into 18 (= 3 x 3 x 2) statements describing drinking habits, which range from the most cautious: “Drinks a few times a year with friends and gets mildly intoxicated”, to the most extreme: “Drinks a couple of times a week alone and gets strongly intoxicated”. The 18 statements represent a scale on which the respondents can indicate if they would characterize each statement as “alcohol abuse”, “not alcohol abuse” or “uncertain”. When the response to a statement was “uncertain”, the statement was presented once more to the respondent at the end of the session.

The statements were presented written on cards in a random order (but in the same order for all respondents and all countries) to representative samples of the population in seven countries. In order to have a large variation in cultural norms, it was decided to include two Nordic countries (Finland and Norway), two countries from central Europe (Germany and Poland), and three Mediterranean countries (Italy, Spain and Slovenia). However, Italy was represented only by the region of Tuscany, which for the sake of convenience will be called a country in this article. The samples consisted of about 1000 respondents aged 15 years and over from each country. The interviews were conducted in 2010 for all countries except Norway (2006) and Tuscany (2011). For each country the mean number of descriptions of drinking habits that were characterized as “abuse” was calculated, and this number formed the basis for the comparisons between countries. The mean values were seen as indices characterizing the general “normative climate” for alcohol consumption in each country.

Comparing alcohol policies

A comparison of the comprehensiveness and strictness of the alcohol policy in different countries was made according to a new scale developed by Karlsson, Lindeman and Österberg (2013). This scale is a further development of the previous scale developed by Karlsson and Österberg (2001), because more aspects of the policies are considered and it includes an assessment of how the formal rules are enforced in the different countries. The scale is a sum score of six different categories of alcohol policy measures. The two main categories are a) *control of production, retail sale and distribution*, and b) *alcohol taxation and price*, which weigh 25 per cent each in the total score. The other categories are: c) *age limits and personal control*, d) *control of drunk driving* and e) *control of advertising, marketing and sponsorship of alcoholic beverages*, which weigh 15 per cent each, and f) *public policy*, which weighs 5 per cent. The six categories are divided into several subcategories, presented in a questionnaire, which was filled out by experts in each country. The countries were given points for each subcategory of restrictions that were in place. The maximum number of points a country could

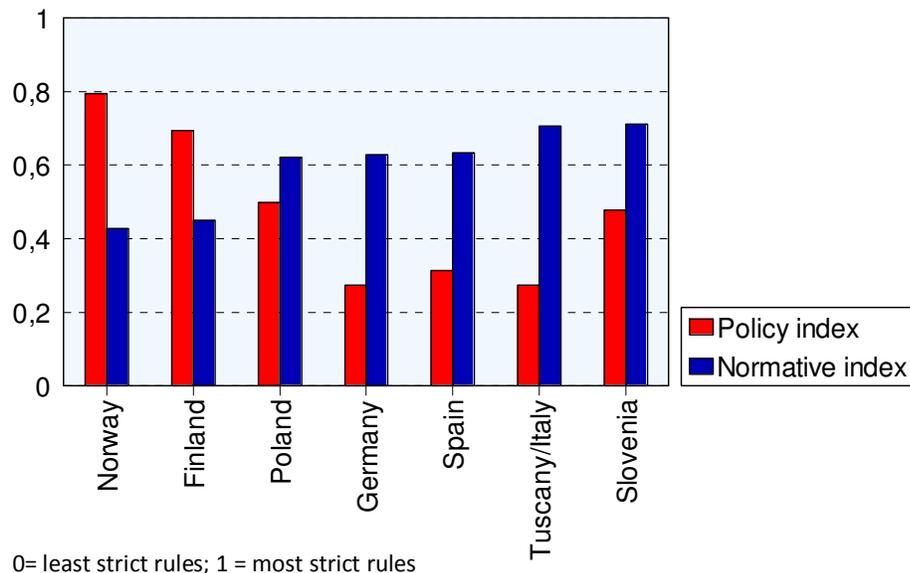
have is 160. The scores for the seven actual countries are presented here by permission of the constructors of the scale.

An interesting aspect of this study is the comparison between the formal and informal rules that are assumed to regulate alcohol consumption, and the drinking patterns themselves. This is a difficult task, because we lack relevant data on drinking patterns that are comparable between countries. The only relatively credible data source is recorded alcohol consumption in the different countries. But, in addition, we have consumption from unrecorded sources. These sources are not very reliable for comparative purposes due to different estimation methods in different countries. Nevertheless, mean consumption is not the most interesting feature of drinking habits in relation to formal and informal rules. It is not drinking itself that is important to other people and to legal authorities, but the problems it generates. Therefore, what is needed is comparable data on different types of alcohol-related behaviour that could be seen as problematic or worrying and cause reactions, either from the general public (normative response) or from the authorities (formal rules and laws), or from both. This type of data is scarce, and not very reliable for comparisons. The most comprehensive meta-study on these topics is probably the report of Anderson and Baumberg (2006), and their conclusions are used here.

What we found

In order to compare the strength and strictness of formal rules (alcohol policy) with the strength and strictness of informal rules (norms/attitudes), the indices for these conditions were transformed to a common scale. By dividing both indices by their maximum value (18 for the norm index, 160 for the policy index), the two indices were normalized to the interval (0,1) in each country. Figure 2 shows both indices for each country.

Figure 2. Indices for the strictness of formal and informal rules for drinking behaviour in 7 countries



The countries shown in the figure are ranged according to increasing normative index. The normative indices seem to lie on three different levels, forming three groups of countries: They are lowest for the two Nordic countries, higher for Poland, Germany and Spain, and highest for Tuscany and Slovenia. The differences between these three levels are statistically significant (Nordlund & Østhus 2012). Each group contains only neighbouring countries (with the

exception of Spain, which has no neighbouring country here), indicating the existence of different areas of relatively homogeneous alcohol cultures in Europe.

The policy indices are contrary to the normative indices; when the normative index is low, the policy index is high, and vice versa. If we compare the Nordic countries with Germany, Spain and Tuscany/Italy, this is very obvious. The policy indices in Poland and Slovenia lie in-between the policy indices in the Nordic countries and the three other countries. Although the normative indices are relatively high in Poland and Slovenia, the policy indices are also relatively high, though not as high as in the Nordic countries.

In their report, Anderson and Baumberg (2006) summarize European drinking patterns in four points:

- People in southern countries prefer wine, while people in central and northern countries prefer beer.
- People in southern countries do more of their drinking with meals than people in other countries.
- People in southern countries drink alcohol more often than people in northern countries.
- Binge drinking and drunkenness are more common in northern countries than in southern countries.

In other words, and even though there are exceptions to this main conclusion, their study supports the common impression of a north-south gradient in drinking habits: drinking on more occasions, especially of wine and with meals, but less drunkenness in the south, and vice versa in the north of Europe.

What does this mean?

The results seem to support the complementary hypothesis: While the Nordic countries have strict alcohol policy measures, the “normative climate” seems to be quite tolerant for drunkenness. In Germany, Spain and Tuscany/Italy it is the other way round: The norms for drinking behaviour are rather strict, corresponding to a more decent behaviour, while the formal rules are more liberal. The norms in Poland and Slovenia come in a middle position: While the informal norms are rather strict, and quite similar to those in the neighbouring countries, the formal rules are stricter than in the neighbouring countries. This might be seen as a remnant from the quite recent communist period of these two countries. In this period, many areas were controlled by more formal rules, including the area of alcohol. Probably the authorities in these countries do not see it as rational to abandon these rules, especially since all other European countries are either continuously introducing stricter rules (Karlsson & Österberg 2001), or stricter rules already apply (the Nordic countries).

The question is how to interpret this finding in causal terms. Is it *because* people in the Nordic countries are so tolerant of drunkenness, and therefore do not behave in an acceptable way under the influence of alcohol, that control policy has to be strict and comprehensive? And is it *because* people in southern Europe have strict norms and therefore behave in a civilized and orderly way even when they are drunk, that they do not need a strict policy?

Or is it the other way round: Are drinking norms and behaviour a reaction to the formal rules, so that people in the north drink seldom but heavily and to intoxication, just because the rules try to prevent them from doing so? And when the formal rules are so liberal in the south, does that make it necessary for people to develop informal rules just to survive in a civilized society?

It is not easy to answer these questions. Probably there is no clear answer, because cultural norms, policy and behaviour have developed over centuries as a process of mutual influence. The different powers that have dominated parts of Europe throughout history have all made their cultural mark, including on alcohol-related norms, rules and behaviour. Religious and ideological ideas and domination have also had an influence in different parts of Europe in different ways. So it is not surprising that drinking cultures have developed differently.

However, at the moment both alcohol control policies and the levels of alcohol consumption seem to be converging slowly among European countries (Karlsson & Österberg 2001; Leifman 2001, 2002; Simpura & Karlsson 2001). But there are still great differences in drinking norms and habits, and we do not know much about the trends in these differences. We know that norms for drinking have developed in a clearly liberal direction in Norway, at least since the 1960s (Nordlund 2008), but in other countries little is known.

One might ask whether modern alcohol policy, as a result of the dominating place of the single distribution theory, has become too focussed on total consumption as the only policy indicator of interest. If total consumption is low, policy is assumed to be efficient and satisfactory. But as we have shown, general norms for drinking are also important, maybe not for curbing total consumption, but for developing more sensible and safer drinking habits, which might reduce the problems and injuries connected with intoxication and drunkenness.

Finally, it must be underlined that the conclusions in this article are based on data from seven countries only. This might be seen as a too fragile basis for general conclusions. On the other hand, the countries participating in this study were deliberately chosen as representing different alcohol cultures. The similarity of norms in neighbouring countries indicates that such areas of relatively uniform alcohol cultures really exist in different parts of Europe. Other countries would therefore probably represent the same cultures, and therefore would not add much to the conclusions. But, of course, more data and more studies would have increased the reliability of the results.

Take home messages

1. Areas of relatively uniform alcohol cultures seem to exist in Europe.
2. In Europe, norms for alcohol consumption generally seem to be more restrictive in southern countries than in the northern countries.
3. There seems to be a complementary relation between the informal norms for alcohol consumption and the formal alcohol policy in the European countries: where the norms are restrictive the policy is relatively liberal, and vice versa.

Conflict of Interest Statement

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