INVITED COMMENTARY

YOUNG PEOPLE AND ALCOHOL: AN INTERNATIONAL INSIGHT

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Abstract — A survey of the drinking, smoking and illicit drug use of more than 90 000 teenage school students was carried out in 1999. This exercise, known as the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and other Drugs (ESPAD), revealed marked differences in the substance use patterns of those surveyed in different countries. Teenagers in a group of northern countries reported the highest rates of heavy drinking and intoxication (drunkenness). Teenagers in southern Europe reported much lower levels of such behaviours and experiences. Some of these findings are presented and discussed in relation to aetiology and health promotion.

INTRODUCTION

During 1995 a major investigation, the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and other Drugs (ESPAD), was conducted for the first time. This study examined drinking, smoking and illicit drug use among representative samples of 15–16-year-old school students in the UK and in 22 other European countries. Students in all countries completed a common ‘core questionnaire’ under supervised ‘exam conditions’ while in school. Thus, it was possible to elicit comparable survey information from young people in very varied social contexts. This was the first time that either a UK-wide study or such a major international survey had been conducted into these potentially risky behaviours among young men and women (Miller and Plant, 1996). It emerged that teenagers in the UK and a number of other ‘Northern European’ countries reported the highest levels of heavy drinking and intoxication (drunkenness) (Hibell et al., 1997).

A second ESPAD study was carried out in 1999. This venture involved more than 90 000 students from a total of 30 countries. These ranged from Russia to Greenland. This is probably the largest international study of the social and behavioural aspects of alcohol epidemiology ever attempted. A detailed report on this survey was released in February 2001 (Hibell et al., 2001), which attracted considerable media attention.

INTERNATIONAL DIFFERENCES

The new survey has revealed that illicit drug use in the UK appears to have declined somewhat since 1995 (Plant and Miller, 2000). However, UK teenagers retained their position as those most likely in all the 30 countries to have used illicit drugs.

Self-reported alcohol and tobacco use among UK teenagers had remained almost constant since the earlier 1995 study (Miller and Plant, 2001). Furthermore, UK teenagers, together with those in Denmark, the Faroe Islands, Finland, Greenland, Iceland and Ireland, reported the highest levels of alcohol consumption. Countries in which reported alcohol consumption was low included Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Malta and Portugal.

More than half of all the teenagers in the countries surveyed had smoked at some time in their lives. UK teenagers reported a high rate (20%) of daily smoking by the early age of 13 years.

The differences in alcohol consumption revealed by the two ESPAD ventures are fascinating. These differences are set against the context of major changes in levels of per capita alcohol consumption levels in some European nations (Plant, 1997; Thurman, 2000). Alcohol consumption has remained fairly stable in the UK in recent years. In contrast, the Italians have halved their per capita consumption, while the French have cut theirs by a third. In some Eastern European nations, alcohol consumption and rates of alcohol-related problems have reportedly been rising. ESPAD showed that, in most of the participating countries that had taken part in both studies, teenage alcohol consumption had remained fairly stable or had risen between 1995 and 1999. The only countries in which teenagers appeared to have reduced their alcohol consumption levels were Cyprus and Italy.

OLD HABITS PERSIST

Many people have commented over the years on the obvious fact that drinking patterns vary markedly between different social and national groups (Pittman and Snyder, 1962; Pittman and White, 1991). The two ESPAD investigations have cast fresh light on this old theme. In fact, what emerges from ESPAD is that, although there have been some major changes in drinking habits, traditional patterns of alcohol consumption appear to be persistent.

In keeping with their long-standing reputations, those reporting the highest levels of intoxication included the Danes, the Finns, the British, the Irish and the Icelanders. Those reporting the lowest levels of intoxication included the Cypriots, Italians, Romanians, French and Portuguese (Fig. 1). As one might expect, teenagers from ‘high intoxication’ countries reported much higher levels of periodic heavy/binge drinking, than those from low intoxication countries. In other words, the
commonly intoxicated Northern Europeans were far more likely to consume alcohol in relatively heavy sessions. Researchers from these high intoxication countries report that these sessions typically occur as weekend evening carousing. Consistent with this pattern of periodic heavy drinking, teenagers in high intoxication countries also reported some of the highest levels of adverse effects (individual, sexual, relationship and delinquency) associated with their drinking. Strangely, however, some of these same teenagers were among those most likely to report that they believed that drinking would produce positive consequences. This curious phenomenon could be deemed a ‘love–hate relationship’ with alcohol.

Equally, it could mean that those who engage most in any activity experience the greatest number of consequences thereby. This is probably as true of sports enthusiasts as it is of youthful drinkers. This fairly obvious fact may be of great importance in relation to the maintenance of potentially harmful drinking styles and to the difficulty of providing effective alcohol

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**Fig. 1.** Proportion of boys and girls who have been drunk 10 times or more during last 12 months (1999).

*Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. [Source: Hibell et al. (2001), p. 110.*]
education. To elaborate, those who drink the most enjoy drinking the most, even if they also experience relatively high levels of adverse consequences. This presents a powerful paradox, since any concerns about youthful drinking appear to be at least modified, if not actually countered, by the prevailing positive view that young people have about drinking. In other words, young men and women in cultures in which intoxication is commonplace believe that any possible pain is justified by the pleasure engendered by drinking. For them, this is a price worth paying, or a risk worth taking.

THE ROLE OF PARENTS

The young are likely to regard themselves as invulnerable to health risks stemming from their behaviours (Plant and Plant, 1992). This way of thinking has been termed ‘the personal fable’ (Elkind, 1984), and may be summed up by the phrase ‘it won’t happen to me’. ESPAD suggests that there may be a practical acceptance that periodic heavy drinking and intoxication have led to problems, but that young people continue to engage in such behaviours. It should be noted that past attempts at curbing youthful drinking (or illicit drug use) have not been notably successful (Plant and Plant, 1997), even though Wright (2000) has outlined an evidence-based approach to this challenging subject. It is emphasized, however, that there are clearly limits to what school-based health promotion may achieve. Young people are strongly influenced by their out-of-school social contacts, relatives and friends. Many young people are exposed to abusive drinking within the family. Moreover, ESPAD has shown that, in some countries, including the UK, many teenagers report that their parents do not know where they go on a Saturday evening. This may imply that many parents may fail to communicate with their sons and daughters and may also fail to establish reasonable boundaries, which are necessary to restrain and protect.

THE WAY FORWARD?

One conclusion that may be surmised from ESPAD is that countries in which teenagers drink less and with fewer problems are those in which parents typically teach their children to drink from an early age within the context of a controlled home environment. This may be a powerful way of ensuring that the young learn to drink in a moderate and sensible manner. Even so, it should be emphasized that drinking styles are the result of centuries of tradition and are influenced by a host of subtle and powerful social and psychological factors. In short, it may prove difficult to ‘export’ drinking styles, at least in the short-term. It is also a problem that in some countries in which youthful heavy drinking is widespread (such as Iceland and the UK), many adults strongly believe that it is wrong to teach children to drink. The consequence of this appears to be that they will drink anyway, though often in risky situations and without constraint.

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