

IS THERE A COMMON DRINKING PATTERN OF CONVICTED DRINK DRIVERS?

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Abstract:

In depth interviews with a sample of 48 male convicted drink drivers, all drinking 50+ units per week, exploring their drinking patterns and styles shows that there is a wide range of drinking patterns and styles and no consistency. Drinking patterns vary over the years, from occasional to daily drinking and are altered by major lifestyle changes. Likewise drinking styles have no consistency but there is a concentration on separating drinking from work-related activities. The quantity consumed on any or each drinking occasion bears no relation to either pattern or style of drinking. The only controlling device is the concept of 'alcoholic' for there is no safe or sensible limits as such. Personal rules for not drinking and driving are associated with 'going out for a drink' rather than drinking per se.

Introduction:

This is a report of interviews held with 48 convicted drink drivers all of whom apart from 1 had been referred to and attended an alcohol education course as a part of the Drink Driver Rehabilitation Scheme. 48 interviews were analysed for this study.

Methods:

During their attendance at an 8 session course held over 8 weeks participants kept a daily diary of drinking. Each diary was discussed within the group and no judgmental comments were made supporting the objective of everyone being open and honest. Interviewees were chosen from among those who recorded drinking in excess of 50 UK units per week during the course. This cut off point was chosen because it is recognised as heavy drinking and it seemed to be the highest cut off point that would produce a realistic sample within a reasonable time. Not interviewing any participants drinking below this level meant they were unlikely to be occasional or irregular drinkers and also reduced any bias due to being selected for the scheme.

All those chosen for the study were written a standard letter of invitation followed by a telephone call. A number were not contacted due to changed addresses and a few refused to co-operate. Interviewees chose to be interviewed either at the person's home or at the familiar venue where the course had been held. All interviews were recorded. The interviews followed a common pattern but were otherwise unstructured. The general pattern was to invite reflections on the start of drinking and how the drinking pattern had developed and changed over time. The influences on these changes were explored.

Results:

The drinking histories of the sample showed a very wide range of drinking behaviour amongst the sample. That range extended from Chris and Joe who had not begun to drink alcohol until aged 33 or "30 to 35" to others who had been daily consumers

since starting drinking in the early teenage years. Of 9 [18.75%] who claimed not to have a regular drinking pattern, 3 said they were occasional drinkers and 4 had long periods of abstinence from alcohol through choice, lack of money or illness. A further 12 [25%] were only occasional drinkers, though their definitions of occasional varied widely but usually range from less than once per week. They also showed that almost all individuals had drinking patterns that showed considerable variation over the years. Only 18 [37.5%] claimed to have one main pattern to their drinking. 63 specific mentions of different patterns, including 2 with periods of abstinence, were made by the 21 men who were regular drinkers, an average of 3 per person. It is thus difficult to claim that there is a standard pattern of drinking over time.

Many patterns fall within a broad general model of commencing drinking as a teenager with friends of the same gender going out on one or two evenings a week, usually at the weekends. This is seen as the thing to do at that age and a part of the young male find-a-partner culture. This stage has a slow start due to lack of available finance but with age develops in terms of the frequency of going out and/or drinking more on the occasions when out socialising. A major change occurs once the female partner has been found and a relationship develops. Then people went out less often, but with the partner more often and on those occasions consume less alcohol than when in an all male group. Again finance was one driving force in the developing pattern because people were saving in order to settle together in their own home.

For those who do so settle into a stable relationship that produces children there is a repeated pattern when 'going out drinking' becomes an infrequent social occasion with the partners going out together with friends in a similar position. This may well only be once a week or fortnight or less. Drinking will almost always be of modest amounts. Some witness to the continuation of such a pattern until, with a combination of increased available money and children growing out of dependency stages, there is opportunity once more to undertake activities purely for pleasure. If this is associated with a hobby or activity such as sailing or the Scouts, the drinking pattern may remain the same or increase but subsidiary to the main social activity. So men 'call for a pint' at the end of the evening after the activity that has taken him out of the family home has finished. If there is no such activity or hobby, going out to the pub to meet with other male friends and have a drink becomes a regular feature of some mid-week evenings. Commonly the man and his partner continue to go out at weekends for activities that may include drinking or to drink and socialise with family or friends.

The sample was little different from the community at large regarding the permanence of their personal relationships and those whose partnerships end almost consistently report a dramatic change in their drinking. They witness to both different drinking patterns and styles. Outside a relationship and the ties that bind one to a family home, many resume a drinking pattern that was theirs prior to their relationship starting. Once again they start to go out on many more occasions each week and bond with male companions in the context of the public house and drinking. The distress at the ending of relationships is clearly considerable and many men cannot cope with remaining alone. In many cases their living accommodation was not adequate and had few comforts, so many prefer to go out to drink with the friends that remain rather than watch television alone. The style of drinking is also subject to change in that there does not seem to be the restraint occasioned by having a partner to return to, so there is much to encourage drinking in greater quantities than had been the case for a

number of years. This changing drinking pattern has, for some, been repeated on a number of occasions as they have developed relationships with more than one female partner. Where a later partnership continues a reduced level of drinking once again becomes the stable pattern. Where the relationships that develop are not permanent, though that may well be the hope or expectation, and they end, the cycle of disillusion or distress and seeking to relieve those feelings by drinking with male companions is repeated, sometimes again and again.

From this variety it is unsurprising that the conceptions of themselves as drinkers are often imprecise and have the same fluidity, as does the drinking pattern. It is easy for someone to see himself as a very modest and occasional drinker, as he has been whenever he has been in a stable relationship. But not to recognise that there have been other, albeit short, periods in his life when he has been daily drinking amounts that would consistently bring him to and beyond the legal driving limit.

The perception of the vast majority that they are modest drinkers is supported when the only terminology and reference point against which to measure drinking is the imprecise notion of an 'alcoholic'. Interviewees spoke of not being 'alcoholic' as do the wider group of offenders with whom I have been working. Yet, few are clear as to what the term means other than that it is a pattern or style of drinking in which the speaker does not participate. The 'alcoholic' has characteristics that do not belong to the speaker though what those characteristics are have wide variation and may not be clearly understood. Given that "alcohol typology theorists are still struggling... to construct a scientific methodology that will bring order out of the complexity that is alcoholism" [1] it is not surprising that few can see themselves as anything other than 'ordinary' and indeed modest consumers of alcohol. All have seen others consuming more than themselves. As Dave, a daily drinker capable of consuming in excess of 100 units a week said, "I do know people who drink more than I do, B.., he's 23 stone and he has sort of 2 gallons or something like that before he goes out for a Saturday night". This is a sure sign of an accurate self-measurement!

Table 1: Consistent patterns of drinking according to age:

<i>Age at Interview</i>	<i>< 20 years</i>	<i>20 - 29 years</i>	<i>30 - 39 years</i>	<i>40 - 49 years</i>	<i>50 - 59 years</i>	<i>65 + years</i>	<i>All</i>
<i>Daily</i>		6 [40.0%]	2 [22 %]	8 [44.4%]	4 [100%]		20 [42%]
<i>4-5 per week</i>		2 [13.3%]	1 [11 %]	1 [05.6%]			4 [08%]
<i>2-3 per week</i>		1 [06.7%]	1 [11 %]	4 [22.2%]			6 [12%]
<i>Once per week</i>	1 [100%]	4 [26.7%]	2 [20 %]				7 [14%]
<i>Weekend only</i>		2 [13.3%]	3 [30 %]	2 [11.1%]		1 [50.0%]	8 [17%]
<i>Occasionally</i>			1 [10 %]	1 [05.6%]		1 [50.0%]	3 [06%]

In broad terms the table shows that of this sample of drinking drivers, all of whom average 50+ units of weekly drinking, 42% drank daily; a further 20% drank on more

than two occasions each week; whilst 31 % only drank once a week or at weekends. 6% were only occasional drinkers. This may well confirm the personal conclusions of the majority that they were modest indeed occasional consumers for only 50% consumed alcohol on average 4 or more occasions per week. If there are to be distinguishing characteristics of these drinking drivers it is not to be found in unique drinking patterns. Recognising the historical aspect of diverse and changing drinking patterns helps us understand the perception people have of themselves as drinkers. These perceptions, which shape so much behaviour, are frequently inaccurate and lead to confusion when apprehended for driving whilst over the legal limit.

The current drinking style must bear the weight of analysis for it is this drinking that relates to the conditions in which a drink-driving offence took place. 31% of the sample only drank once a week or at weekends. For a number this weekend style of drinking was adopted as youngsters either because as with Giles they had little interest in drinking or as Harry expressed it “especially when you go chasing the women like, on a Saturday night, when you’re 18 you’re going to the Embassy.... A fag in one hand and a pint in the other. That was the pitch people expected of you.” This weekend-only style may or may not continue into adult life but for the majority of those who as adults adopt a weekend-only style of drinking this was the pattern they had also adopted as teenagers.

The definition of a ‘weekend’ varies considerably. For Dave it refers only to his Sunday lunchtime drinking but for Ray and Dick it refers to the time between being paid on Thursday and Sunday evening. For others [Brian, Mick, Vince, Clive, Mark] the weekend is a flexible definition that relates to work and is that period when there is no work to be done and the person can relax and ‘do his own thing’. For this group of drinkers one element in their choosing to drink only at the weekend is the safety in separating work from drinking. These two do not mix and alcohol is not consumed at a time when they need to be prepared for and able to work. As Clive expressed it his style developed “when I went in the Army. We had a regime; we’d train all week and didn’t drink at all, and then the weekend off. I was based at Aldershot. We’d start drinking about half past 6 Friday teatime; we’d get the train to Guildford, drink round Guildford, night-club and then taxi back to Aldershot. And that would be Friday night and Saturday night and Sunday dinner”. Clearly limiting drinking to the weekend has no relationship to the quantity drunk. It may be heavy as Dave recorded, “I’ve always liked going out on a Sunday lunchtime, you know, 5 or 6 pints or whatever, coming home, large meal, having a kip, watching a bit of telly Sunday night and then back at Monday morning, you know, out there raring to go.” If drinking leads to inebriation, as it may regularly for some, it is a safeguard that the behaviour associated with such loss of control is limited to leisure time. For some it has the character of throwing off the constraints required to function in the world of work and business and allows a more natural or primeval being to surface and to flourish. Undergirding the adoption of such a drinking pattern is a conception of drinking as a leisure activity.

For other weekend-only drinkers the rationale for adopting this pattern is the leisure activity they pursue such as playing football [Dave, Ian, Tom, Jack], watching it [Vince, Hew] or walking [Owen]. It may be the time for bonding with the partner [Ray] or the family [Tom] or with mates [Alex]. When separated and alone Ray continues with weekend drinking though with an entirely different character in that it

continues from Thursday to Saturday and the quantity consumed increases and bears no relation to what he would drink when out with his partner.

Similar considerations apply to others who made a point of insisting that they only drink in an evening; for Ivor when the shop closed at 10 p.m., for Bill when his Scouting activities ended as or simply for the last “couple of hours” [Mark]. Even when the drinking takes place earlier in the evening it is ‘after work’ and a deliberate choice for many. Again the quantity consumed may vary considerably within this pattern. As the purpose is relaxation it is separated from working activities. Late office working Gary expressed it, “we’d look at each other at nine o’clock and we’d want to go for a drink at the Psalter.” Now working from home, “we’ll look at each other at nine o’clock and say, “Do you fancy a glass of wine”, and that’s as far as it goes.” There is significance in drinking that marks the end of work and the beginning of their own time. As Dave said, “personally I think it is the best drink of the day. You finish work...” For Eric it might begin at other people’s lunchtime when on his half days he finished at 1 p.m. “and then we’d go to the pub and have a game of darts and have a drink of beer.” This is often drinking with work colleagues or other mates, who are met on the way home, share a drink and continue male bonding apart from family life. For some trades it is customary to finish work early on a Friday afternoon and then for the work team all to go and drink together. But for Jim a shift worker and Vince it would mean finishing “work at 2 o’clock and 2 or 3 times a week I’d go straight to the pub and stay out all night.” Ray would be “occasionally going out with a mate after work you know for a pint.” Usually, as with Colin, Dave, Ian, Leo, Sid, Vince, Nigel, Ivor and others, this drinking does not include drinking during working hours such as at lunchtime.

Abstinence may be adopted for a time within a drinking career as with Otto and Sam as a younger man. That career may be delayed, in the case of Chris, “until I was 33 years of age” because “we didn’t have a lot of money, so I mean, we never thought about going out for a drink.”

Discussion:

A ‘pattern of drinking’ is defined, in this paper, as the particular configuration of the occasions of an individual’s consumption of alcohol. This will reflect:

- The frequency of drinking, ranging from infrequent occasions to regular daily consumption
- Whether drinking is an unrestricted activity or reserved to particular times or occasions
- Constraints upon the frequency pattern adopted e.g. not associated with work; only associated with weekend relaxation.

The ‘drinking style’ is the methods, places and people associated with an individual’s consumption of alcohol. This will reflect:

- The location of drinking
- The people with whom drinking is undertaken or whether it is alone
- Habitual, consistent drinking either in relation to time or the quantity consumed
- The introduction into drinking and the early setting of a personal style
- Conditions that direct the pattern of drinking.

It is clear that drinking patterns are very responsive to external social conditions. They are often deliberately chosen to avoid mixing alcohol and work or alcohol and driving and are rather seen as a part of leisure, social, family or personal time. Thus they vary

for individuals over time and even a consistent drinking pattern may have within it many drinking styles and at different times many styles for the same individual.

So far the distinction, accepted by Leo but widely applicable, between 'having a drink' and 'going for a drink' has not been made. 'Having a Drink' means "calling for a pint" because of thirst, or time to waste, or on way home from work, or to see someone to do some business. The characteristics of such drinking are that it is an adjunct to another activity or has a very specific and minor rationale for it. It is almost always associated with ideas as to quantity, which are seen as being limited to "one or two" pints of alcohol though this is flexible. This drinking is distinct from the drinking seen as 'going for a drink' which is meeting friends, going with mates at end of a working day, going to same pub to meet neighbours or associates to socialise. These are occasions when the purpose of the activity is to consume alcohol or to share the drinking of alcohol with others. It may include celebrations. The felt purpose is to consume alcohol or if it has another purpose it is recognised that drinking alcohol will accompany that activity. There are no associations with the quantity consumed for this may vary from 'going out to get drunk' or celebrating and getting 'happy' or sharing a bottle of wine over a meal. There is another distinction between drinking as something done with the partner or friends on a weekend evening, as an adjunct to another activity. A further distinction is between having "a couple of pints" and 'drinking with mates' where quantity consumed will not be considered.

Drinking styles also show wide variation between individuals and within an individual's different drinking patterns. For drinking styles do not directly relate to drinking patterns but different styles operate within any one pattern. Drinking styles may be chosen because they offer individuals particular benefits. As we have seen they may have an underlying function of easing some of the distress and pain of a failed relationship, of bonding men together or of helping a love relationship. These different functions may directly relate to the amount of alcohol consumed. In many drinking careers, drinking pattern and drinking style are independent variables. Style alters though the pattern remains.

Throughout this sample there is little concept of safe or sensible drinking as a controlling device. Rather the factors that bring individuals to choose a particular pattern and style will direct the quantity and frequency of drinking. This is not to say that in relation to drink driving people have no rules. They do. But most of the personal rules are associated with the pattern or style relating to "going for a drink". Consuming alcohol on other occasions, 'having a drink' is rarely considered.

References:

1. Babor TF & Dolinsky ZS. Alcohol Typologies: historical evolution and empirical evaluation of some common classification schemes. In Rose RM & Barrett J. Editors, Alcoholism: origins and outcome. Raven Press, New York, 1988, pp 245-266. Also see Peters D. A Natural Classification of alcoholics by means of statistical grouping methods. *Addiction*, 92,12, 1997, pp1649-1661.