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## **DRINKING TERMS AND CONCEPTS: THEIR MEANING AND USE**

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## **Abstract**

The paper presents the results of the qualitative survey conducted within the SMART project to explore and improve understanding of terms and concepts such as ‘drinking’, ‘heavy drinking’, ‘drunkenness’, ‘alcoholism’ and people’s perception of alcohol related problems and a range of policy options.

As a method: seven participating countries - Estonia, Hungary, Italy, Czech Republic, Poland, Spain and the United Kingdom -conducted focus group discussions using a common guideline; the groups were held in both rural and urban areas and included moderate and heavy drinkers.

The findings indicate the importance of cultural and social sensitivity towards the uses and interpretations of terminology in this field – especially when survey results are used to inform policy and practice; and they provide an initial overview of perceptions of the acceptability and appropriateness of policy approaches to addressing alcohol consumption and harm.

**Key words:** drinking, alcohol consumption, heavy drinking, drinking unit, alcohol policy

## **Introduction**

One of the aims of the SMART project was to explore and improve understanding of the meanings of key concepts used in the pilot survey study. While national surveys typically provide definitions which guide the ways in which concepts are used and measured in the research, the significance and meaning of the terms for survey and research participants has not been examined in any depth. Terms and concepts such as ‘drinking’, ‘heavy drinking’, ‘drunkenness’ and ‘alcoholism’ may mean very different things to different social groups and within different social and cultural contexts. The SMART project afforded an opportunity for cross-national examination of how ‘moderate’ and ‘heavy’ drinkers living in rural and urban areas in participating countries responded to these concepts and to approaches to measuring their alcohol consumption. It adds to growing international studies on concepts, their uses, definitions and interpretations in the alcohol field (WHO, 1992; Cameron *et al.*, 2000; Stolerman and Stenius 2008).

Since the SMART project was also concerned with improving the evidence base for policy, the pilot study asked respondents for their perceptions of a range of policy options for preventing and reducing alcohol-related harms. This, too, is an under-researched area especially at a cross-national level.

Examination of concepts and terms reported in this paper drew on answers to semi-structured questions included in the main survey, but also used focus groups to dig beneath the surface of the results coming from the quantitative pilot research. This produced a rich data set of qualitative material and provides insights into the variable interpretations of many of the concepts and terms which form the basis of much of the research in all countries into alcohol consumption and alcohol-related harm.

The findings from this part of the project lay the foundations for further research; they indicate the importance of cultural and social sensitivity towards the uses and interpretations of terminology in this field – especially when survey results are used to inform policy and practice; and they provide an initial overview of perceptions of the acceptability and appropriateness of policy approaches to addressing alcohol consumption and harm.

## **Methodology**

Participating countries conducted focus group discussions, drawing participants, as far as possible, from among those who had participated in the questionnaire piloting study.

Originally three focus group discussions were planned in each participating country. The intention was to recruit one group from among those identified in the survey as heavy drinkers, one group from normal drinkers living in rural areas and another normal drinker's group from among survey respondents in urban areas. Heavy drinkers were nominated either by respondents from among their friends or relatives or by key informants allowing their own definition of a heavy drinker.

Seven of the participating countries – Estonia, Hungary, Italy, Czech Republic, Poland, Spain and the United Kingdom - organized focus group discussions. Those countries represent different drinking cultures and traditions, even though currently beer seems to be a beverage of choice in all of them.

Although the aim was to involve those who had participated in the pilot survey of the SMART questionnaire, this was not always possible and in some countries, the mode of recruitment was different. This was due to a variety of problems, but mostly because those who participated in the pilot study were not all willing to participate also in the focus groups. For example, In Estonia, most of the contacts recruited from the pilot study appeared unreachable or had changed their minds about participating. So, an additional sample was recruited by snowballing from personal contacts. Altogether 7 people were from the pilot study group and 10 were additionally recruited. All the participants who had not been part of the pilot study were interviewed before the focus group, so they were familiar with the questionnaire. In Hungary and in Spain the heavy drinker groups were recruited from among people in medical treatment.

### *Composition of the focus groups*

The table below shows the composition of the focus groups.

Country	Number of groups	Participants	Age range
Czech Republic	1. urban	6: 3M, 3F	24 – 50
Estonia	1. urban 2. rural 3. heavy	4: 1M, 3F 7: 3M, 4F 6: 2M, 4F	20s -50s 20s -50s 20s-40s
Hungary	1. urban 2. rural 3. heavy	6: 4M, 2F 5: 4M, 1F 4: 4M, 0F	22 – 66 22 – 55 40 - 58
Italy	1. urban 2. rural 3. heavy	5: 4M, 1F 3: 2M, 1F 3. 3M, 0F	35-65
Poland	1. urban 2. rural 3. heavy	6: 2M, 4F 4: 3M, 1F 5. 5M, 0F	20s – 40s 30s – 50s 20s – 60s
Spain	1. urban 2. rural 3. heavy	8: 4M, 4F 8: 4M, 4F 11	25 - 60 26 - 59
United Kingdom	1. urban 2. rural 3. heavy	5: 3M, 2F 6: 3M, 3F 6: 6M, 0F	20s-30s 20s-60s 20s-50s

### *Discussion schedule*

In all participating countries focus group discussions were conducted following a common guideline. The main topics of this guideline were as follows:

- Meaning of drinking in different cultures and groups
  - What people mean when speaking about drinking alcohol
  - What people think is a typical ‘unit’ of a drink

- How well people can recall the quantity and frequency of their drinking within different time-frames
  - How people can best describe the typical quantity and frequency of their drinking
- How people in different cultures understand and explain the meaning of “unrecorded consumption”
- How people in different cultures explain the meaning of “heavy drinking” and “drunkenness”
  - Who do they think of as a ‘heavy drinker’ or ‘alcoholic’
- How people perceive alcohol related problems
- What people think about the role of national and local government in the prevention and management of alcohol-related problems.

### ***Respondent engagement***

In all participating countries, focus group leaders reported that participants were active and interested in the discussion topics. There were no major problems reported in terms of conducting the groups, although ensuring that participants attended the group that was ‘appropriate’ for them (i.e. moderate or heavy drinker) is acknowledged to have been a challenge in some instances.

## **Results: The meaning of basic terms and concepts**

### **Meaning of ‘drinking’ in different cultures and groups**

Within the focus group discussions, we asked participants first of all about what they meant when speaking about *drinking alcohol*. Two main meanings emerged:

- Drinking means only heavy drinking, although, in some cases, moderate alcohol use was also understood as drinking.
- Drinking can be understood as a leisure time activity, or part of a social event.

*Thus, the meaning of drinking is frequently similar to heavy alcohol consumption, and this does not always differ by types of alcoholic beverages.* Drinking alcohol was viewed as extensive consumption (Est), as a greater number of drinks (H) or it was associated with drinking in large quantities of high strength beverages (S) for many participants.

Drinking for Hungarians – similarly to Estonians - usually means *a greater number of drinks*. For Hungarian heavy drinkers ‘drinking’ means drinking several glasses of alcohol, for example 2-3 glasses of spirits at a time or 1 litre of spirits in a week. Somebody who says that he drinks is considered a heavy drinker “I think that s/he drinks too much” (F,R<sup>1</sup> - Pl), “people who abuse alcohol”(F,N - Pl), “alcohol abuse”(M,N - Pl). Opinions among heavy drinkers were more divided. Nevertheless, an opinion prevailed that drinking is understood as heavier consumption: “difficult to say but it is closer to abuse than to occasional consumption” (M,U - Pl), “I make an association with more advanced drinking”(M,H - Pl). Drinking also means greater amounts of consumption *with the goal of getting drunk, or everyday alcohol consumption*. Usually ‘drinking’ does not include occasional consumption for special reasons, like family celebrations. This kind of light drinking is considered as a part of celebration and not the act of ‘drinking’ (H). Also in Spain, drinking beer or wine is so common practice and so deep-seated in people’s customs that it is not seen as “drinking alcohol”.

*Drinking is not always associated with a specific beverage.* Polish respondents’ opinion is that drinking alcohol means “any alcohol-containing beverage”, no matter if it is beer or vodka. One participant, however, stated: “I perceive ‘drinking’ as vodka drinking. Drinking is a good bout with vodka” (M,H - Pl).

Other respondents definitely distinguished ‘drinking’ and ‘alcohol consumption’. This was the general view in Estonia and Hungary. For respondents from these countries

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<sup>1</sup> F,R – female, rural  
M,R – male, rural  
F,U – female, Urban  
M,U – male, urban  
M,H – male, heavy drinker

‘alcohol consumption’ means any kind of consumption: a moderate amount of alcohol (H) or drinking even a small quantity of wine or beer with food (Est).

Respondents from different countries associated drinking not only with heavy drinking, but also mentioned *different functions of alcohol or connected it to different activities*.

Drinking is most frequently mentioned as a *social activity* in all participating countries. It might mean “going out to a pub”, or the everyday consumption of homemade alcohol which is frequently associated with some social act - mostly for rural respondents (H). UK rural people also use the term ‘drinking’ to mean a social or leisure time activity. For Spanish participants ‘drinking’ also implied going out for a drink and involved drinking in a social context to have a good time.

Drinking may also mean *forming relationships and making contact with people*: “Drinking is always a celebration for me, it is a good thing. If there is no one around you know, in a half an hour you will surely meet someone” (M,H - Pl). Others go to a pub where they would meet friends and people they knew (UK). In Italy the social function of drinking is related to wine and beer, and sometimes to spirit consumption. During meetings with friends it is common to drink greater but still moderate quantities of alcohol.

Alcohol drinking was seen as a kind of social glue, a lubricant to create a sense of belonging with friends. “It came to my mind that alcohol blocks receptors of mistrust; over two glasses people will look at each other in a more favourable manner” (M,R - Pl). “Among friends it makes you more talkative; you’re more open and feel pleasant and stress free after a couple of glasses of wine. And it unites also, we’re making toasts...” (F,R - EST)

The relationship between food and alcohol was also mentioned. In Italy and Spain, especially wine and also beer are commonly consumed during meals, mainly dinner, usually in moderate quantities: e.g. 1-2 glasses of wine are considered “appropriate drinking”. Attention to quality and the combination with different kinds of food are reported. In Italy the association of wine with meat or fish, and of beer with pizza, are popular. Alcoholic beverages are commonly drunk during meals with family members

and with friends. “Drinking when thirsty” emerged in the Czech Republic, without distinguishing between alcoholic beverages.

In addition, the health function of alcohol consumption was raised: “drinking a glass of beer a day was recommended by a doctor at the spa” (Cz), or : “...To drink three beers is good for your health, good for kidneys et cetera., for relaxation...” (M,H - Pl).

### **How much is a drink?**

We also wanted to learn more about what people think about the *quantity of alcohol in a ‘drink’*. What is the *typical unit* they drink by different types of alcoholic beverages?

*In most participating countries the concept of a ‘drink’ is mostly related to some mixed alcoholic beverages - like cocktails for example - and is not seen as a unit of alcohol.*

Many respondents agreed that a drink does not apply to beer or wine, and believed that a drink means a *mixed alcoholic beverage*, i.e. a cocktail with hard liquor in it (Cz). In *Estonia* the concept of ‘drink’ also had this meaning. The same was true for Polish respondents; a drink means a cocktail, a mixture of spirits with juice or soda: “I associate this with the western culture, which has arrived here. In the old days one had a small glasses of ‘pure vodka’ or ‘spirits’ or vodka on fruits ... I do not know if drinks are healthy”(M,R). “If you pour 50 grammes of vodka into a glass of fruit you have got a drink”. In modern pubs drinks are rather weak “one third or one fourth of alcohol (40 millilitres) and two thirds of something else”(F,U). For *Hungarians* a ‘drink’ sometimes means *a glass of spirit*.

The concept of ‘drink’ also had meanings related to some special social occasions (Est). Sometimes the word drink is used among the young who go to clubs or discos (Cz) or a ‘drink’ is related to the amount what people get offered in the disco (S).

When speaking about the ‘typical unit’ of a drink, *people from different countries have very different images about the quantity of alcohol contained in a unit*. These differences are not only significant by cultures, but also by types of alcoholic beverages.

Regarding a unit of alcohol, Czech respondents are unified: a typical unit of alcohol is considered consensually a glass of wine (200 ml), a pint of beer (500 ml) or a shot of spirits (50 ml).

For Estonian respondents, it is more convenient to report one's drinking as beverage-based, meaning that a typical unit would depend on the specific drink consumed. For example, wine would be reported in glasses (120 ml) or bottles (750 ml); strong alcohol in glasses (4 cl); and beer in bottles (typically 0,5 litres in Estonia).

For *Hungarians* the traditional quantity of a spirit is 5 cl. Judging by modern drinking habits, one drink of spirit may vary from 2cl to 4cl. For some respondents, one drink of spirits is equivalent to 2 dl (a small bottle). Beer may mean 2 decilitres or 4 decilitres recently, but in the past it has been 5 decilitres for a long time and that is still considered as the most typical amount. Wine is the type of drink that mostly varies. It may mean one glass, 1.5-2 decilitres or even a whole bottle. The difference may also be intensified by the different size of wine glasses or the traditional Hungarian habit of mixing it with water.

*Italians* have a vague idea of the term 'drink', and are not able to give any meaning to the word 'alcohol unit', while they perceive the amount drunk in terms of glasses of wine (usually 200ml) or bottles (750 ml), or cans of beer. Some participants to the focus groups reported that they were surprised to experience how small the 100 ml glass shown to them during the interview appeared to be.

For *Polish* participants a 'drink' is not associated with any standard unit. As with Estonian people, Polish people's opinion is that it is not feasible to have a common measure to report amounts of different alcoholic beverages in a comparable way. "In my opinion, you cannot do it. .... One measure could be half a litre of vodka and half a litre of beer but these are absolutely different things." (M,R) "You cannot do it in a precise way, I cannot say what a portion of alcohol is" (M,R)

*Spanish* participants understood consumption in the same way in all target groups (glass of wine, glass of champagne, mixer or shot), so the task of seeking a reversion appears to be difficult, depending as it does on volume and strength.

Generally consumption is measured in units except in the case of wine and champagne, for which it can also be measured in bottles.

*UK* participants also interpret very differently the quantity of alcohol in a 'drink'. It might be a glass, a shot or a pint. One of the respondents linked the meaning of an alcohol 'unit' to driving: "The alcohol unit is to do with the amount you actually drink to drive – that is, I compare units to whether you drive. If you're driving and you have one unit you are allowed to drive aren't you and anything above that...."

### **Reliability of reporting frequency, quantity of drinking**

The focus group discussions were supposed to cover two major questions as regards frequency and quantity of drinking. The first question was whether the respondents were able to recall their frequency of drinking and amounts they drank over the last 12 months; the second one was whether they were able to calculate typical or average quantity and frequency over the same period. Both questions were raised during focus group discussions.

In all countries the respondents expressed numerous reservations and pointed to limitations of the survey questions with the 12-month recall period. Three major problems were identified:

- too long a period to memorise accurately quantity and frequency,
- personal irregularity of drinking over one year,
- seasonal nature of drinking.

Some respondents claimed to remember only more important occasions, including family festivities: "Such reporting does not make much sense ... I may recall birthdays and Christmas or Easter but not three mugs of beer with friends in a bar" (M,R - PL). "It was twelve months, I did not count those smaller occasions, only some birthdays. If we come together in a bigger group to grill ... you remember these occasions ... otherwise I did not recall drinking with a few people" (M,U - PL)

Others realised that they do not have any regular pattern to be reported. The amount of drinking depends on their mood: "Difficult because it varies with your mood when you go out - whether you want to drink or you just want to go and socialise and you

don't want to drink much, and with how many times you go out. So you can't really tell ...” (UK).

Another important dimension which makes it difficult to calculate 'usual' or 'average' occasion is the weekly rhythm of drinking with less consumption during weekdays and increased drinking during week-ends (“drinking is definitely more associated with weekends” - CZ). “Weekends may also mean higher consumption, even for those, who drink alcohol during weekdays” (H). In Spain they report their consumption in comparison with others' behaviour “*I drink only two or three drinks and that is far less than my friends*” and they tend not to report the drinks of low alcoholic content beverages.

According to numerous respondents their drinking pattern depends on a season, e.g. beer and cider are more extensively consumed in the summer time: “... I do not drink much between October and March but between March and October I go to my cottage ... I have to admit that in the season I have 10 bottles or cans of beer every weekend” (M,H - PL). Frequent drinkers “are not influenced by the season or time of the day in the amount of drinks consumed, only in the types of drink, like drinking more beer in the summertime” (H).

There was a split of opinion as regards accuracy of reporting of occasional drinkers and regular or heavy drinkers. In a Polish group, one infrequent drinker had a problem reporting frequency of drinking “It was very difficult as I drink very, very rarely. I have to admit that I did guess, it was an unreliable approximation” (F,U – PL) while another one claimed: “It was not a problem for me. If somebody drinks rarely s/he remembers. It happens few times” (F,U - PL). A distinction between occasional and heavy drinkers was noted in the majority of focus group reports as in the Hungarian one: “They (light infrequent drinkers) can remember with 80% accuracy” (F,U – H). Some doubts were expressed whether alcoholics can remember the amount they drink as they drink well above the level of drunkenness and cannot recall exact amounts. Nevertheless, frequent drinkers have more regular patterns and even though they may forget individual occasions they may calculate an 'average': “I had no problem ... I have two weekends monthly free and these are days I regularly go out. It means two, three, four days a month and in addition bigger celebrations” (F,U - PL).

Despite all reservations and critiques of the artificial nature of calculating annual frequency and average quantity, participants from all focus group reported that their estimations were quite precise: “Interestingly, although people felt they were guessing to judge how much they drank and how frequently, on reflection most thought their recall was fairly accurate” (UK). Respondents do not find it hard to estimate the frequency of their own drinking during the past year “A question concerning typical quantity ... was surprisingly smooth, both for consumers who drink rarely and in small amounts (such as M. who drinks once every two months, 1 to 2 glasses of wine) and for those who drink regularly (such as S. who drinks three pints of beer a day).” (CZ). Some more frequent drinkers admitted that they just extrapolated amounts and frequencies from a shorter period: “I extrapolated last month to last year” (M,H - PL) or “For me it is much easier if you ask me about the last week and then I multiply per four and then I can calculate the mean per year” (M,H – S). Spanish participants felt also able to calculate their consumption for a shorter period (one week or one day).

Nevertheless, the material collected during focus group discussions suggests substantial levels of under-reporting. Some drinkers tend to remember bigger occasions, family festivities, large parties and do not report “three mugs of beer”. Others report their regular frequency and quantity but seemingly do not include deviations from their regular pattern which may affect both frequency and quantity of drinking.

As for quantity, the respondents seemed to report not ‘average’ but ‘usual’ or ‘typical’ or ‘standard’ quantities which do not represent an arithmetical mean between the lowest and the highest intake. In that way, the heaviest drinking bouts are not reported by both heavy and light drinkers. An additional bias may come from the fact that people simply do not remember the largest amounts due to ‘black-outs’.

### **Unrecorded consumption**

A major question was whether concepts such as *unrecorded consumption* or *to acquire alcohol outside the regular market* are familiar to respondents from different drinking cultures. As it emerged from focus group discussions, both terms were known to participants in most of the countries but their meanings varied.

In Estonia and Poland where home distilling is banned, *unrecorded* meant first of all illicit spirits including home-made stuff and smuggled spirits. In Estonia “both terms tended to have negative connotations and were associated with criminal and antisocial behaviour.” “Acquiring alcohol outside of the regular market” was mostly viewed as buying low-quality and dangerous illegal strong alcohol from illegal sources. Besides seeing it as a signal of a deviant behaviour, such as criminal activity, it was ascribed to people with lower social status and quality of life. The interviewees wished not to identify themselves with those groups and therefore the term was passionately contested”. In Poland, the question of unrecorded consumption seemed to be most relevant in a rural setting. By unrecorded, participants from rural communities understood spirits smuggled from eastern neighbours, moonshine and home wine. “Still, people buy spirit Royal in a market” (F,R). “Nowadays vodka is omnipresent and there is no problem with access, price may be a barrier ... therefore people buy from Russians ... awful poison .. or moonshine if one has ten zloty and wants a booze” (M,R). ‘Poisonous’ stuff from abroad is also present in the experience of heavier drinkers in Warsaw. “In the mid-1990’s we used to go to the railway station to buy vodka from a conductor of the Russian train. But then they started to cheat ... i.e. to process technical spirits ... Other people used to purchase spirits in the stadium ... four or five guys went to heaven ...” (M,H). Moonshine is being produced in Warsaw too “in .... Street there are three places where they make moonshine ... certain tradition of those areas” (M,H).

In addition, home made fermented beverages were referred to by participants from both countries. In Poland a few participants from rural communities mentioned producing wine themselves - which is legal: (M,R). “Every year I make up to 320 litres of wine ... “ (M,R). I also make wine from white grapes (F, R). Also in Estonia “it is quite popular to produce small amounts of alcohol such as beer or cider for one’s own consumption at home. This was not seen as ‘unrecorded alcohol consumption’ by the interviewees”.

Similar popular definitions prevail in the Czech Republic and Hungary. According to the Hungarian report “the expression ‘outside of the regular market’ mainly means the same for participants of the focus groups as for the researchers. The expression itself is obvious and correct for most participants, no better suggestions were made. The expression mainly means home made drinks, spirits or wine, usually from private

distilleries, a manufacturer or from people making drinks as a craft. Home made wines or spirits are associated with better quality, mainly because of the non profit-driven attitude of individuals which is in contrast to commercial actors. Unrecorded may also mean drinks bought from a market place, but not from the commercial sales places. Drinks bought at the market place have an advantage of lower price with acceptable quality. (H)”

“Foreign import, smuggled drinks may be included also, but people can not really buy these kinds of drinks; it is not significant in everyday life; so it is not the first thing to come in to their minds. Bottled, high quality drinks may be fakes, imitations in some cases, only copies, weaker versions of the original one.”

Italian participants stressed that purchasing wine from a farmer is “a positive aspect of Tuscan culture”. Also, in many cases they obtained a regular receipt after their purchase. Italian participants considered the question ‘strange’ as other forms of *acquiring alcohol outside the regular market* are rare.

In Spain home production (orujo, ratafia, pacharán, etc) is also understood as a tradition and is culturally acceptable. Nevertheless it might be identified also with: hawking (selling beer in the street), where the sale is illegal or refilling of bottles with label-less products (for example in discos).

In the Czech report the phrase "to acquire alcohol outside the regular market" means to obtain alcohol from acquaintances, relatives or friends who produce alcohol for their own consumption (domestic production), or to illegally produce fruit distillates for sale.

Unrecorded consumption, according to respondents, is also the illegally produced and modified alcohol that is sold outside the regular shops, such as in the Asian markets (as respondents read in newspapers or saw on TV.) Respondents themselves do not have experience of it. They think that it is difficult to recognise since containers and counterfeit labels and duty stamps are perfectly made. They do not trust suspiciously cheap alcohol sold on market stalls.

In most countries legal private imports by tourists were not considered ‘unrecorded’. As stated in the Estonian report: “buying alcohol from abroad was not associated with the topic which had clearly negative connotations”. A Polish female participant also claimed - while remaining participants nodded, “A bottle of whisky from abroad or

the amount you may legally bring from abroad ... I do not associate it with unrecorded” (F,U). In Spain also, bringing in drink from abroad is not seen as illegal.

In contrast, in the UK “people understood about bringing back alcohol from abroad. But for most people, the question seemed irrelevant. The expression ‘to acquire alcohol outside of the regular market’ was not well understood either”.

### **Meaning of heavy drinking and drunkenness**

In this section of the focus group discussions three topics were discussed:

- Who is a heavy drinker?
- What are the similarities and differences between the term ‘heavy drinker’ and ‘alcoholic’.
- What does ‘drunkenness’ mean?

As previously discussed, in most countries there was reported to be a strong association in participants’ minds between the concept of ‘*drinking*’ and ‘*heavy drinking*’.

There was a strong consensus, both within and across groups, that a heavy drinker is widely considered to be ‘someone who drinks every day’ (H), ‘someone who needs to drink all the time’ (Cz), ‘a person accustomed to drinking frequently (with high tolerance to alcohol)’ and who believes himself or herself to be in control of the situation... ‘this is a step towards being an alcoholic (a faint line can be drawn between both states)’ (S), or someone ‘who drinks throughout the day’ (UK). It was suggested that even though the concept of a heavy drinker does not exist in Poland, that ‘a person abusing alcohol’ (the culturally-sensitive alternative term) would be someone ‘who drinks too much for a given occasion’. In most cases it would appear the discussion moved on fairly quickly from attempting to define a heavy drinker, to consideration of some of the adverse consequences of heavy drinking and/or how a heavy drinker differs (if at all) from an alcoholic. With respect to the first of these issues, it was suggested that the ‘everyday obligations’ of a heavy drinker – or a person abusing alcohol - would change as a result of his or her “always looking for an opportunity to drink” (Pl). The likely effects on a heavy drinker’s domestic life were also mentioned: “losing family, getting divorced, being separated, showing the wrong

example to kids or feeling ashamed in front of loved ones are likely to happen when being a frequent drinker” (H).

Similarly, in the London heavy drinker focus group, heavy drinking was, in the main, regarded as likely to have an adverse effect on people’s relationships, careers and/or the dynamics of a family. In this context a heavy drinker was seen as “someone who drinks and just annoys everybody, like their family, their friends, everyone around them”. However, one participant countered that “I know heavy drinkers who hold their jobs down even though they drink an awful lot”. Interestingly, another participant perceived personal problems as a likely catalyst for heavy drinking/alcoholism – “if you’ve lost everything, if you’ve lost your family, if you’ve lost you’re job... you have become an alcoholic” – as opposed to the other way round.

In the three Italian focus groups, differences between youngsters and heavy drinkers were discussed, Young people may drink to test their limits and risks, but would stop this drinking pattern when they become older; heavy drinkers always drink out of need.

Participants’ perceptions of the *difference between a heavy drinker and an alcoholic* were explored in some detail in most of the groups. Although there was a lack of both clarity and consensus on the issue, it was suggested that “a difference between an alcoholic and alcohol abuser [the Polish term for heavy drinker] rests on the fact that an alcoholic must drink everyday even though he does not need to always get drunk” (Polish urban group).

In the Polish group, it was also felt that an alcoholic would be more likely to “hide the fact that he drinks” than a heavy drinker, suggesting perhaps a desire to avoid some degree of social stigma associated with alcoholism. A related point was made, interestingly, by a Pole who participated in the London heavy drinker group, who recounted a story relating to a period when he considered himself a heavy drinker. “I was drinking every day, beers, beers, beers, beers. Sometimes I would go to the shop and buy something for breakfast and I would buy two beers. I would drink one on the way home – within 200 metres perhaps – and end up drinking [the other] in the toilets or whatever so my woman shouldn’t see this, you know”

In London, opinion was divided as to whether there was a clear distinction between a heavy drinker and an alcoholic. One participant in the heavy drinker group

commented that “they are basically the same, you know, heavy drinker, alcoholism, virtually the same for me, I guess”, whilst other members of the group countered that a heavy drinker “won’t drink as much as an alcoholic”, or that the defining difference between the two was “dependency, that can be the only difference”. A similar point emerged from the Hungarian group in which it was suggested that “persons that need drinks for normal functioning or drink as a habit, without even realising it are also considered alcoholics”. The type of alcohol consumed was also mentioned, with it being suggested “an alcoholic... probably drinks cheaper alcohol” (London moderate drinker). In the Spanish groups a very diffuse distinction between heavy drinkers and alcoholics was found. An alcoholic was seen as an *addict, dependent and sick*, who cannot do without alcohol in his or her everyday life.

A somewhat different perspective came through in the Italian case in which it was reported that there was a feeling amongst participants that ‘the difference between a heavy drinker and an alcoholic was not seen as related to the amount of alcohol consumed but to the reason for the consumption’. The heavy drinker’s reasons for consumption are “enjoying the pleasure of tasting” the alcoholic beverage, while an alcoholic would look for the psychological effects of alcohol. Also, alcohol addiction was felt as an attempt “to fulfil an existential emptiness.”

With respect to *drunkenness*, a number of key themes emerge from the data. Firstly, participants in all countries reported (via the respondent assessment part of the questionnaire as well as the focus groups) that drunkenness is very much individually-nuanced. This was not only expressed in terms of the amount of alcohol required for someone to become drunk, but also the effect it might have in terms of character change. This concept was articulated by numerous references, across various countries, to a ‘continuum’ (or words to that effect) of drunkenness.

The extent to which drunkenness was viewed as being a negative state or condition varied considerably, not only within and across groups, but also at the individual level. For example, one participant in the London moderate drinker group associated drunkenness with ‘smiling, being happy, having a good time and wanting to dance more’. In contrast, she felt the more extreme manifestations, such as those mentioned in the questionnaire (blurred vision, unsteady or your feet, slurred speech), were better defined by the term ‘intoxicated’. She then, however, went on to mention some negative characteristics that she associated with drunkenness – people invading her

personal space, for example – suggesting drunkenness can mean quite different things to the same person depending on the context and who it is that is drunk. A member of the London heavy drinker group also commented somewhat equivocally that ‘you do get people who get stupid when they’re drunk, but you get a lot of people who don’t get stupid when they are drunk and they are quite civil’.

In Spain the normal drinkers reported “drunkenness as lack of control, loss of contact with reality, dizziness and vomiting on one particular day.

In the Polish case, it was reported that ‘drunkenness has a meaning of being drunk in the wrong way’. Developing this point, there was a strong consensus, both within groups and across them, that drunkenness is strongly associated with a ‘loss of control’. Interestingly, there were slight perceptual differences across the countries in terms of the association between drunkenness and violence or aggression. In the Polish, Hungarian and Czech groups, it was felt that there was a strong link - drunkenness “implies the birth of a violent individual” (Polish heavy drinker group) – or “wrong effects may be associated with stealing from the neighbourhood or being aggressive in public places” (H). In contrast, in the London groups there was more of an emphasis on the likelihood of drunkenness making an individual rude or impolite, but a less pronounced emphasis on violence or aggression. For example, “drunkenness means when you can no longer perform or function as a polite human being... drunk is when you can no longer help yourself and you’re being out of place or out of order or rude to people or whatever just because of the alcohol that you’ve drunk” (urban focus group, London) or “Drunkenness is just diminished responsibility, fighting, yelling at people, doing this, annoying someone, that is what drunkenness means”. For the Italians, a drunkard “loses his/her self-consciousness and control on own behaviour, becoming more aggressive and violent.”

A number of interesting points were made in the London heavy drinker group with respect to drunkenness not necessarily being a negative or bad thing. For example, it was suggested that drunkenness sometimes results in people “being able to go into deep and meaningful conversations” or that it might assist in “bringing out the honesty in you”. In contrast, participants in the other countries did not appear to consider drunkenness to be in any way positive.

## **Problems and policy**

In this section three main topics were discussed.

- The effectiveness of an alcohol policy
- The social context of alcohol related problems and youth drinking
- The perception of alcohol related problems within their community

From the focus group discussions, drinking related problems were mostly associated with alcoholism. As a consequence, participants' general opinion was that *preventive measures for all people including moderate drinkers are not the solution*. Especially, higher taxation was not supported and were not believed to have relevant impact: "high taxes won't matter" (M,U - UK) or "Those who could not afford it would go to the stadium to buy cheaper stuff" (F,U, - PI)

Restrictive alcohol policy targeted at the general population was not seen as a relevant tool to change drinking habits embedded in culture. Availability control as a policy measure met mostly criticism only and was seen as useless. "If someone wants to drink s/he will go three kilometres" (F,U - PI). Sometimes government actions are perceived as prohibition or control or too rigorous (S).

In some cases *selling restrictions were seen to be even harmful*. Such rules were believed to be conducive to heavy drinking, leading to a situation where people store more alcohol before-hand and then feel the temptation to drink up everything. In addition to that, restrictions might contribute to illegal activities on the black market.

*Alcoholism was believed to be the result of other problems* in many cases and some social contexts were seen as more likely to result in alcoholism. Structural causes – which restrict people's opportunities - were seen as often lying behind alcoholism and heavy drinking. "First thing is the compulsory closure of State Farms ... people lost employment, poverty was generated, they started to drink. Before that, the State permitted them to survive, they had no miracles but they did not drink; it means they drank as everywhere. After the fall of State Farms they were forcefully rejected, no employment opportunities, they drank out of poverty, one had nothing to do, nothing to eat" (M,U - PI)."

Rural areas were seen to be more at risk where heavy, problematic drinking might happen because of depression and boredom. This is due to a lack of opportunities, of being unemployed or other problems which affect people living in the country to a greater extent. “These living standards are much worse there, there is little work or no work at all, salaries are small and they have very few opportunities to do something better than drinking. There are no opportunities, no theatre or cinema” (F,H - EST)

Drinking was seen as a result of social problems and had become a relevant social problem in itself which has affected whole communities. “It’s a quite depressing sight... the more you go south, the worse it gets. We have a summer cottage in Paganamaa (a rural area in Southern Estonia), there is practically no healthy man left in the village. All have gone away, drunk themselves to death, fallen from a tractor while being drunk...” (M,H - EST)

Since, in rural areas, problem drinking is socially visible and is believed to create a negative image of countryside living, it can be one of the reasons in neglecting rural areas and escalating all problems.

On the individual level, the negative outcomes of heavy drinking were related to feelings of shame, negligence and general social disapproval. One’s drinking especially affected his/her significant others, as it often causes problems in families, resulting in divorces, misleading role models for children and a general feeling of guilt and remorse.

The best prevention and rehabilitation approaches to existing problem drinking and alcoholism were believed to be better living conditions. A higher employment rate with acceptable salaries would give people better future perspectives and opportunity to focus on their long-term goals instead of trying to escape from their problems by focusing on the moment with the help of alcohol. In some countries (Cz), the importance of using examples of the harmfulness of alcohol to change attitudes in society was stressed. In other countries (H), it was pointed out that special prevention strategies to reduce drinking are not needed, but that the resources should rather be spent on solving social problems. Regional policy targeted at rural areas was mentioned as a relevant measure for improving the situation in the countryside.

*Youngsters were singled out as an especially vulnerable group* as alcohol misuse might result in neglect in education, health problems, and generally harmful lifestyle choices. The perception was that young people mostly drink because of boredom, if there is little else to do. Again, this happens even more often in rural areas with less opportunity for leisure time. “The problem is that they have nowhere to go, to chat, dance, listen to music, whatever, they have nowhere to go” (F,R - EST)

*Changing the motivations for drinking* among young people was believed to be important while pure control only would not work. As the reason behind the drinking was boredom, better leisure and working opportunities were seen as a crucial intervention. “Some 16/17 year olds if they drink, like if you cut back at that level, they will need to have something to replace that, maybe playing the guitar or doing something, work or something” (M,H - UK)

Here, people saw an important role for local authorities which should take on the responsibility to provide all young people with access to different facilities. “Local authorities should provide activities for youngsters that they could do without payment. Not all children have wealthy parents who could pay for expensive hobbies” (F,R - Estonia)

In addition to that, *restrictive alcohol policy targeted at youth was found necessary and useful*. The main justification for availability control was the possible prevention for young people. “I favour restrictions – may-be young people will not drink because of that” (F, Est)

It was stressed that the *rules and restrictions should be very strict for minors*. In some cases (in Czech) also high penalties for serving alcohol to minors was believed to be the most effective measure for decreasing problems related to alcohol. At the same time reasonable drinking in the family was not necessarily perceived as giving wrong ideals to youngsters. It was considered that drinking in the family can educate young people in alcohol consumption in a safe environment. “A fine example is the European attitude to alcohol and things, you know, having a glass of wine at the table and being under age it breeds respect and ... as opposed to saying you are not to touch a drop until you are of a legal age.” (F, UK)

In some countries the importance of responsible drinking as an alternative to prohibition was stressed. In Italy, as the representative of a traditionally

Mediterranean drinking culture, “prohibition was not the solution”, and more culture-oriented interventions were said to be needed; e.g. tasting courses were seen as suitable cultural interventions because they relate to the cultural and traditional aspects of alcohol consumption. Also in other countries (Estonia, Spain) the importance of educating young people and cultivating good taste was seen as good prevention. “There should be some education for young people – how to drink and what are the dangers of irresponsible drinking. It is not that all drinking is completely bad /.../ may-be one way to solve problems would be to teach young people to drink better and more expensive alcohol /.../ then they would not have money to drink in big quantities, when enjoying the taste is more important than getting drunk” (M,H - Est)

When problems with alcohol were associated mostly with alcohol related harm, then *in the case of young people even less excessive drinking was a concern*, since their drinking habits will shape the community and society in the future.

Regarding *drinking in community or neighbourhood*, focus group participants claimed that drinking is not disturbing unless it becomes extensive and causes harm to others. Most disturbing alcohol-related behaviour in the community were considered to be socially visible gatherings of drunk people in public places (e.g. bus and train stops; in front of shops etc). “Well in bus-stops and let’s say in trains, it is very unpleasant, they smell“ (F,U - EST).

Socially marginalised alcoholics in the neighbourhood were also perceived as potential problem causers, especially when located a short distance from one’s own home. “In my district, rubbish heaps are mostly affected, a lot of homeless people, they sleep and live there, collect bottles and cans to sell them and buy alcohol, they always urinate out-door” (M,H - Pl). „Well I live in a private house and a short distance away there’s another house, where a kind of antisocial contingent live /--/ so in that sense I don’t feel safe, because if there is a fire or something, my house goes as well”(F,R - Est).

Also less marginalised drinking in one’s house or near it was perceived disturbing when it is noisy and dirty. “I have two young neighbours, boys. Every weekend noisy parties, screams, empty bottles in the staircase.”(F,U - Pl)

Serious problem related alcohol use which would affect others was drunk driving and this was believed to deserve severe penalties. “Penalties and depriving of driving license – it is the only efficient measure ... fines and suspension of driving licence do not work” (M,U - Pl). In contrast, Spanish participants’ opinion was that the penalties for drink driving were too rigorous.

Generally the problems associated with alcohol consumption in municipal places were believed to be solved the same way as alcoholism – with *better social policy and improvement of leisure and work opportunities*.

## **Summary**

On the basis of 18 focus group discussions conducted in 6 European countries belonging to different drinking cultures we can conclude that people definitely distinguish ‘drinking’ and ‘alcohol consumption’. While the expression ‘alcohol consumption’ includes any kind of alcohol use, including moderate or occasional use, ‘drinking’ is mostly related to heavy alcohol consumption. ‘Drinking’ might also mean a social event or social activity for many people. For future research, it is worth considering these distinctions between the two expressions related to alcohol use.

When speaking about a ‘drink’, people never see it as a unit of alcohol, but usually relate this term to different cocktails or other mixed alcoholic beverages or sometimes spirits. There are significant differences by country and also by types of alcoholic beverages regarding what people think about the quantity of alcohol contained in a drink.

In relation to recalling the frequency of drinking, the most important problem to emerge was the irregularity of drinking which make it difficult to speak about ‘usual’ or ‘average’ occasion. As for ‘quantity’, people mostly report the usual and not the average consumption, and the heaviest drinking occasions are rarely included. Despite all reservation, the general conclusion drawn from the discussions is that estimations of annual frequency and average quantity are quite precise.

The results from the focus groups show variation in the meaning of ‘unrecorded’ purchasing. In countries where most of the unrecorded supply comes from the home-production of licit and illicit beverages and where a grey market still flourishes, a concept of “acquiring alcohol outside a regular market” seems to be well understood. In those countries where only well-regulated markets exist, and where home-

production is rare or non-existent, unrecorded consumption, in public perception, seems to consist solely of private tourist imports. Therefore, the questions of unrecorded purchasing need to be tailored to cultural specificities of individual countries and exemplified by local instances of ‘unrecorded beverages’.

The meaning of ‘heavy drinking’ is very different by country, but in most of the countries there was a strong association in participants’ minds between the concept of ‘drinking’ and heavy drinking. Heavy drinking mostly meant frequent or too much drinking. Participants distinguished heavy drinking from alcoholism. An alcoholic differs from a heavy drinker by the reasons and motivations for drinking. Drunkenness is mostly defined by the loss of control in most participating countries, but there was a consensus between the participants that not only the amount of alcohol consumed but also individual differences might affect getting drunk. Drunkenness might have both negative and positive connotations dependently on different perceptions in different countries and cultures.

Independently from countries, in people’s minds alcoholism and alcohol related problems are mostly related to social and structural problems. It follows from this that the only possible solution to reduce alcohol related problems is to improve work opportunities and living conditions. The general opinion was that alcohol policy itself is not appropriate to reduce alcohol related problems. Interestingly enough, people had a different view in relation of youth drinking. While the general opinion was that young people also drink too much because of the shortage of leisure and working opportunities, restrictive alcohol policy was seen as more desirable and acceptable in reducing adolescents’ alcohol consumption.

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