

The global nature of declining adolescent drinking

Does Caluzzi et al.'s [1] theory explain the phenomenon of declining drinking among adolescents, or does it only describe it by using classical sociological vocabulary? Their hypothesis does not address the fact that the decline has taken place world-wide: what global changes in youths' living conditions could account for decreased alcohol consumption?

Caluzzi and colleagues' article [1] is a welcome step forward in trying to account for adolescents' declining alcohol consumption. Instead of focusing upon separate independent variables that might affect alcohol consumption among youth, it tries to provide an explanation for the 'big picture'. However, I have two critical remarks regarding their proposal, according to which the phenomenon can be described as denormalization of drinking and normalization of non-drinking. First, in what sense does the theory explain the phenomenon, or does it only describe it by using classical sociological vocabulary? Secondly, the hypothesis does not address the intriguing and important fact that the decline has taken place world-wide.

I share the authors' starting-point, according to which one cannot explain the 'big picture' by variables that correlate with individuals' alcohol consumption levels. The change is obviously generational and therefore calls for a cultural explanation. In the proposed explanation there is, however, the danger that it merely reformulates the phenomenon and therefore results in circular reasoning. As alcohol consumption among adolescents has declined, it almost necessarily means that a growing number of individuals in social situations abstain from drinking alcoholic beverages. Hence, such behaviour becomes increasingly normal. We can name this 'normalization of non-drinking', or even 'denormalization of drinking': drinking is more seldom considered as a normal, self-evident behavioural model. When people's experiences of behaviour in social situations change, they also adjust their opinions as to what they consider normal, acceptable or preferable conduct. Which comes first: do individuals first change their views on social norms and then behave accordingly, or is it the other way around? Or is talking about norms and normalization/denormalization simply a way to describe the phenomenon by using another vocabulary?

It is not uncommon in socio-economic theorizing to conceive of cultural changes as some type of autonomous waves that come and

go: Kondratiev waves in economics are one example [2]. However, unlike economic trends, we cannot simply assume that despite national differences in, for instance, drinking habits, there are world-wide trends in individuals' behaviour without proposing any mechanism behind a change. In this respect, the hypothesis on denormalization of drinking and normalization of non-drinking is deficient: it does not address nor reflect upon potential institutional changes that would clarify why alcohol consumption is less common among adolescents. Is it because there are more institutional contexts of interaction wherein nobody drinks, or does a growing proportion of individuals abstain in contexts where others drink alcoholic beverages? Or, generally speaking, what are the typical contexts in which adolescents drink or used to drink that have now become less common or 'drier'?

The proposed explanation does not address the world-wide nature of this trend towards decreasing alcohol consumption. Talk about social norms or normalization/denormalization implies a global cultural change. So how did this come about? From this viewpoint, it would be interesting to see whether there is evidence of such a shift in, for instance, transnational popular culture, preferably prior to its alleged effect on youngsters' alcohol consumption.

I suggest that better explanations can be found by identifying global changes in adolescents' everyday life and social environments. From this viewpoint, the rise of social media and mobile digital communication devices simultaneously with decreasing alcohol consumption is a promising way to account for the phenomenon (e.g. see Room *et al.* [3]). Could it be that, as socializing with peers and initiating romantic relationships takes place increasingly in virtual contexts, there are fewer occasions in which alcohol would serve as a social lubricant [4]? The normalization/denormalization hypotheses are not in contradiction with such institutional explanations; they only more clearly explain why this change has taken place now and world-wide.

DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

None.

KEYWORDS

Cultural change, declining adolescent drinking, denormalization, globalization, normalization, social media

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Pertti Alasuutari 

Faculty of Social Sciences, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland

Email: pertti.alsuutari@tuni.fi**ORCID**Pertti Alasuutari  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4111-9641>**REFERENCES**

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Normalization of non-drinking and implications for alcohol epidemiology

Normalization of non-drinking may be regarded as a process in which non-drinkers also become a less deviant group, not only in the statistical sense. The implications for alcohol epidemiology are highly important.

There is a growing literature on the declining trend in adolescent drinking in many countries. With their recent article, Caluzzi and colleagues [1] provide an important contribution to this literature by discussing concepts and processes underlying this trend. One key point in their article is that the process of normalization of non-drinking implies that abstinence comes to be seen as a normal and accepted practice. In addition to this, I will argue that normalization of non-drinking may be regarded as a process in which non-drinkers also become a less deviant group, not only in the statistical sense. The implications for alcohol epidemiology are highly important.

In populations where drinking is the norm and only a small minority are non-drinkers, abstainers tend to deviate from their drinking peers by having poorer social network and/or poorer mental health [2–6]. Whether or not this association reflects causality in one direction or another remains unclear. On one hand, it is suggested that those with small social networks and weak ties are less influenced by the drinking norms of the large majority and therefore less likely to drink [7]. In other words, a poor social network may cause non-drinking, due to lack of someone to drink with and lack of social occasions where drinking occurs. On the other hand, it is also suggested that

abstinence may lead to a weaker social network and that the cost of being abstinent could be social isolation [8]. In either case, this association seems to reflect the co-occurrence of socially deviant and low-prevalence phenomena, much in line with the idea of individual clustering of problem behaviours [9].

What about populations where non-drinking is normalized and prevalent, which is currently the case for young people in many high-income countries? Here, we may expect that abstainers do not differ from their moderate-drinking peers with regard to social integration and mental health, simply because co-occurrence of marginal phenomena does not apply. There is some empirical evidence to support this expectation. An association between abstinence and loneliness was observed among adults in three countries where abstinence was low prevalence, whereas no such association was found in another country where abstinence was more common [10]. Correspondingly, the association between psychosocial problems and substance use among adolescents was moderated with prevalence of substance use; in populations with low prevalence, the association was stronger than in populations where such use was more widespread [11,12]. Thus, the substantial increase in non-drinking prevalence among young people may well have been accompanied by a change in psychosocial correlates. However, further examinations into this issue are clearly needed.

This leads us to the important debate in alcohol epidemiology over the J-shaped associations between alcohol consumption and sev-