

TEENAGE DRINKING IN AN ABSTINENCE SETTING*

by

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The Problem and Its Significance

Cultural variation has been treated as an important factor in a number of current theories regarding the use and misuse of beverage alcohol. The major assumption underlying these theories, normally designated as the socio-cultural approach, is that within the cultural system of a group of people there is a general ethos or sense of decorum concerning the role of alcohol which, in turn, determines the type of response men make toward it.¹ Put in another way, the common fabric of values, symbols, and meanings shared by a group governs who drinks and drinking styles.² Subsequently, explanations of an individual's use or non-use of intoxicants can be accounted for in large measure by the cultural prescriptions for alcohol ingestion that are included in the social systems of which he is a member.

Within American society, these cultural attitudes regarding alcohol and its use run the gamut from absolute prohibition to permissiveness toward moderate drinking.³ In some subcultural systems the use of intoxicants is viewed as morally indefensible, while in others it is acceptable in moderation and is not seen as morally wrong. One reflection of these differences is revealed by studies of the drinking patterns of rural and urban residents. In farm and small community areas fewer people use alcohol and drink less frequently than do urban people. This pattern probably indicates the strong influence in the rural environ of ascetic Protestantism: a belief that the indulgence of the senses is bad and that alcohol promotes sensualism.⁴

Unfortunately, there have been few investigations of the use of alcohol among young people reared in rural or small community areas.⁵ Accordingly, the focus of this paper is on the drinking practices of a sample of high school students in a small Mississippi community which represents the prototype of the abstinence cultural attitude.⁶ Two forms of data are examined. The first is an analysis of the events and the circumstances which surround the act of imbibing within the abstinence milieu. The second is an examination of the social adjustment of drinkers as compared to abstainers. It is assumed in this respect that drinking among students in a situation governed by abstinence norms is actually a manifestation of a general pattern of deviance and poor social adjustment.

Social adjustment is measured in terms of scores on: (1) an index of deviant behavior; (2) an index of pessimism; (3) a middle class value orientation index; (4) a parent-child relationship index; (5) a school participation index; (6) a religious participation index; and, (7) a community identification index.

The significance of this study is on three levels. The descriptive data on drinking patterns permit a comparison of this type of behavior among students in a Southern regional subculture and a small community setting with their counterparts in other subcultural regions and metropolitan areas. Second, this research may provide some explanation of how an individual acquires drinking values and norms in an abstinent environment. Finally, the data on alcohol use and social adjustment show the causal relationship between drinking by young people and two theoretically incongruent factors. Students with low scores on the middle class value orientation index and high scores on the deviant behavior and pessimism indexes are prone toward deviance in general. It is hypothesized that these students are users of beverage alcohol. Students who make high scores on the family, school, religious, and community indexes exhibit an inclination toward identification with closely knit primary groups. It is assumed that alcohol ingestion by teenagers in an abstinent subculture is not condoned by these groups. Therefore, it is hypothesized that students who score high on these indexes show evidence of social adjustment and are abstainers.

Methodology

The sample included 364 students who were chosen randomly from a universe of ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade students enrolled in the schools of the community studied. These respondents reported to a large conference room in groups of 25 and completed a structured questionnaire within a one hour period. A research assistant explained the schedule to the assembled groups and interpreted each item when clarification was requested. The students, however, were not permitted to discuss the questions among themselves nor to compare answers. Furthermore, the respondents were not asked to put their names on the schedules and complete anonymity was assured.

Findings

Patterns of Alcohol Use:

Drinking behavior was operationalized by the questionnaire item, "Did you have the occasion to drink any of the following types of alcoholic beverages (beer, wine, or spirits) during the year immediately preceding the survey?" Students who responded in the affirmative were asked to answer additional questions with respect to the frequency of alcohol ingestion, type of beverage consumed, where and with whom drinking occurred, and so on.

An examination of the data revealed that the Mississippi student departed from previously reported findings on several factors associated with drinking styles and the drinking situation.⁷ For example, only 27 percent of the respondents were classified as users. There is no national norm with which to compare these students. However, other investigations have reported that from 60 to 90 percent of teenagers in selected areas drink.

This small percentage of drinkers may be explained in part by the rural character of the community studied. In the main, previous studies have been conducted in urban or metropolitan areas and have consistently recorded a positive relationship between community size and the proportion of young people who use alcohol. As mentioned, the relatively small locality studied here is situated in the "Bible Belt" of the South and is surrounded by a rural hinterland. Furthermore, the population of the community is composed largely of persons who have, in the main, migrated from this rural surrounding. Not surprisingly, the community is homogeneous in terms of those religious and ethnic groups which strongly censure any form of alcohol intake.⁸ Thus, the strong rural symbol that to drink is to give in to impulse and the tighter social controls found in small communities act as major deterrents in the use of alcohol by teenagers. In other words, imbibing among the students in this locality is not only an illegal activity but it is also a taboo one.

Yet, despite the low percentage of users, there was evidence of an ungoverned or uncontrolled drinking style among the students. (See Table I). Those who imbibed were usually introduced to alcohol outside the home and continued to secure their beverages from illegal sources such as a bootlegger. They drank without parental knowledge and approval and most frequently drank in a subrosa situation with friends their own age. This pattern is somewhat in contrast with that found elsewhere. Previous studies indicate, for instance, that the first personal use of alcohol by the young is typically reported to be in the home with parents or other relatives present. Moreover, the majority of teenagers who drink say that they usually imbibe in the home with their parents.⁹ In essence, the use of alcohol among these adolescents appears to be a kind of anticipatory socialization in which drinking by teenagers is accepted and sanctioned by adults if it occurs in the home. This pattern is obviously absent within the locus of this study. As a result, the drinking that does occur is outside the home and is not governed by agencies which could effect restraint.

Evidence indicates that drinking under these conditions can lead to a more frequent and possibly a more abusive use of alcohol.¹⁰ The data suggest that a significant number of the students were experiencing some of the signs normally associated with problem drinking or alcohol misuse. For example, 2 in 5 of those who imbibed said that they had drunk from once to several times a week while 1 in 3 said that they had experienced some personal or social complications as a result of their drinking.¹¹ When asked about their motivations for using alcohol, approximately one-fourth of those classified as users replied that they did so in order to gain some degree of euphoria or to remove themselves from reality.¹² In other words, drinking for these students was utilitarian in the sense that the anesthetic effects of alcohol provided a means for handling psychological tensions. Another indication of alcohol abuse revealed that something on the order of 30 percent of the users were excessive drinkers. That is, they had become inebriated once or twice during the month immediately preceding the survey.

TABLE I

CLASSIFICATION OF STUDENTS' USE OF ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES BY SITUATIONAL FACTORS

Situational Factors	N	%
Source of First Drink		
Home	23	24
Home of friends (no adults present)	13	14
Bar, tavern, night club	9	9
Automobile with friends	39	41
Other (outside home)	12	12
Companions at First Drink		
Parents and/or older relative	19	21
Friends of same age or older	63	71
Alone	7	8
Present Source of Alcohol		
Parents and/or older relatives	6	6
Friends of same age or older	12	13
bootlegger	69	72
Other (outside home)	9	9
Drinking Companions		
Friends of same age	67	70
Older friends	9	9
Parents or older relatives	6	6
Alone	2	2
Other (outside home)	12	13
Proportion of Friends Who Drink		
Practically all	40	44
More than half	26	28
Only a few or none	23	25
Don't know	3	3
Parental Knowledge and Approval		
Both parents approve	2	2
Only one approves	9	10
Both disapprove	42	44
Do not know	42	44
Frequency of Alcohol Use		
Frequently (once a week to several times a week)	40	42
Occasionally (once to three times a month)	25	27
Seldom (once or twice a year to once every two months)	29	31

TABLE ONE (CONT.)

	N	%
Personal and Social Complications Index		
Low	35	36
Moderate	30	31
High	32	33
Excessive Use of Alcohol Index		
Non-excessive use	70	72
Mildly-excessive use	14	15
Excessive use	13	13

Since the various studies do not report measures of teenage drinking styles in a manner that allows for specific comparisons, no statement can be made to the effect that alcohol use in an abstinent setting engenders a high incidence of abusive or problem drinking. The only point that can be made with a degree of certainty is that the students in this study who drink usually do so under surreptitious conditions without control and normal propriety. Furthermore, they appear to be circumventing the social control mechanisms of such significant primary groups as the home, the church, and the community. Subsequently, it might be surmised that the users of beverage alcohol lack social adjustment to these primary groups and possess a propensity toward deviance.¹³ The remainder of this paper is concerned with an investigation of this proposition. (See Table II).

Propensity Toward Deviance:

The three major variables investigated as a test of the hypothesis on deviance were scores on a deviant behavior index, a pessimism index, and a middle class value orientation index. The measure of deviant behavior was constructed from questions used by Deschin *et. al.*, in their study of teenagers with venereal disease in New York City.¹⁴ These questions were: (1) Have you ever driven a car without a driver's license or permit? (2) Have you ever taken little things that did not belong to you worth less than \$2.00 (3) Have you ever played hookey? (4) Have you ever purposely damaged or destroyed public property? (5) Have you ever run away from home? (6) Have you ever picked fights with other kids? and (7) Have you ever driven over the speed limit? Each affirmative answer received a score of one while each negative response was scored zero.

Students who made scores of 0-1 on the index were classified as low in deviant behavior while those who made scores of 2-4 and 5-7 were considered to be average and high in deviant behavior, respectively. The expected relationship was observed. A significantly higher percentage of users than non-users made high scores on the deviant behavior index.

The second test of the hypothesis involved the examination of scores on the index of pessimism as related to drinking behavior.¹⁵ This index was developed from responses to the following items: (1) Times are getting better; (2) Any person with ability and the willingness to work hard has a good chance of being successful; (3) Most people can be trusted; (4) A person can plan his future so that everything will come out all right in the long run; (5) It is easy to keep people from taking advantage of you; (6) No one cares much what happens to you; (7) Laws are so often made for the benefit of small selfish groups that a man cannot respect the law; (8) The future looks very dark; (9) Life is just one worry after another; (10) Most people just pretend they like you; (11) Success is more dependent on luck than on real ability; (12) Life is just a series of disappointments; (13) It is hard to bring oneself to confide in others; and, (14) It is easy to lose confidence in oneself. Answers were coded as endorsement or lack of endorsement on a continuum. Three categories of pessimism were established: Low (0-4); Average (5-14); and High (15-23). There were no significant differences at the .05 level of probability between drinkers and abstainers in their degrees of pessimism. However, users tended to be more pessimistic.

A final factor measured in relation to deviant behavior and alcohol use was concerned with the students' identification with middle class values. The items employed in this index included: (1) People should only keep promises when it is to their benefit; (2) Good manners are for sissies; (3) Do not let anybody your size get by with anything; (4) The only thing I ought to be responsible for is myself; (5) Most people are better off than I am; (7) I will never have enough money to go to college; and, (8) Most successful men probably used illegal means to become successful. Each answer that suggested a middle class orientation received a score of one while negative replies were scored zero. Students who possessed scores of 0-3 were said to be low in identification to middle class values, those who scored 4-7 were considered to be average, and those who scored 8 were viewed as high in identification. Although not statistically significant at the .05 level of probability, the expected relationship materialized. That is, there was a steady decrease in the percentage of drinkers as identification with middle class values changed from low to high. Conversely, non-drinkers tended to adhere to a middle class orientation.

Social Adjustment:

The second general hypothesis had to do with the association between drinking behavior and scores on four indexes related to primary group relationships, namely: (1) The community identification index; (2) The school participation index; (3) The religious participation index; and, (4) the parent-child relationship index.

On the community identification index, the students were asked to agree or to disagree with several items which were constructed to measure their attachment to their place of residence. The items were: (1) This used to be a better community to live in; (2) People do not work together to get things done in this community; (3) We have too many organizations for doing good in this community; (4) Real friends are hard to find in this

community; (5) What is good for the community is good for me; (6) Local concerns deal fairly and squarely with everyone; (7) This community is very peaceful and orderly; (8) Families in this community keep their children under control; (9) The different churches here cooperate well with one another; (10) Almost everyone is polite and courteous to you; and, (11) I feel very much that I belong in this community. Each reply that indicated a favorable evaluation of the community received a score of two, while unfavorable evaluations were scored zero, and undecided answers were scored one. The data showed a steady decrease of users as the scores on the index increased. Abstainers, on the other hand, were likely to exhibit close identification to their place of residence.

The school participation index was based on: (1) The number of extra-curricular activities the students engaged in; (2) The number of leadership positions they held in school; and, (3) Whether or not they usually attended school sponsored functions such as sporting events, pep rallies, and so on. Scores were assigned on a continuum from low to high participation. The data were not significant at the .05 level of probability. Yet, non-users, in general, were more likely than their drinking counterparts to engage in school activities.

A third measure of social adjustment was concerned with the students' involvement in church sponsored organizations. The index was made up of the following items: (1) The average monthly attendance at Sunday School; (2) The average monthly attendance at other religious organizations; and, (3) The average number of leadership positions held in all church organizations. Scores of zero to ten were assigned when the answers were arrayed from low to high. As the index scores increased the percentage of users tended to decrease, while the percentage of non-users increased. Thus, the abstainers were more active than drinkers in church participation and involvement.

The final test of the hypothesis on the students' adjustment to primary groups involved the examination of scores on a parent-child relationship index and drinking behavior. This index was first used by Dynes, et. al., in their study of occupational aspirations as related to family experience.¹⁶ It contained the following items: (1) How frequently have you felt that you were not wanted by your father? (2) How frequently have you felt that you were not wanted by your mother? (3) Who do you think is your father's favorite? (4) Who do you think is your mother's favorite? (5) How close are you to your father? (6) How close are you to your mother? and, (7) How often do you do things with your parents? Answers were classified as favorable or unfavorable and assigned on the basis of a continuum rather than a dichotomy. The differences in parent-child relationships among users and non-users were slight and of no statistical significance. However, the hypothesized direction was observed.

TABLE II

CLASSIFICATION OF STUDENTS BY DRINKING BEHAVIOR AND SCORES ON SELECTED INDEXES OF PERSONAL AND SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT

Scores on Indexes of Adjustment	Non-Users		Users	
	N	%	N	%
Deviant Behavior				
Low	135	88	19	12
Average	117	68	56	32
High	15	41	22	59
$X^2 = 39.173$	d.f. = 2	P = .001		
Pessimism				
Low	22	76	7	24
Average	216	76	70	24
High	29	59	20	41
$X^2 = 5.735$	d.f. = 2	P = .10		
Middle Class Value Orientation				
Low	27	66	14	34
Average	122	71	49	29
High	118	78	34	22
$X^2 = 2.969$	d.f. = 2	P = .30		
Community Identification				
Low	40	62	25	38
Average	172	75	58	25
High	55	80	14	20
$X^2 = 6.347$	d.f. = 2	P = .05		
School Participation				
Low	9	64	5	36
Average	229	74	81	26
High	29	72	11	28
$X^2 = .6742$	d.f. = 2	P = .80		
Religious Participation				
Low	132	65	17	35
Average	170	73	63	27
High	65	79	17	21
$X^2 = 3.098$	d.f. = 2	P = .30		
Parent-Child Relationships				
Poor	27	73	10	27
Medium	199	73	74	27
Good	41	76	13	24
$X^2 = .2136$	d.f. = 2	P = .90		

Conclusions and Implications

This paper has shown that the circumstances which surround the act of teenage drinking within the abstinence setting of a small Mississippi community are different than those reported on elsewhere. For example, fewer Mississippi students imbibe. Yet, the drinking styles disclose many "unhealthy" aspects that one would expect to be associated with alcohol abuse in later life. As a rule, users do not have parental permission to drink, and, for the most part, they identify with churches that condemn alcohol on moral grounds. Since they procure their beverages illegally from a bootlegger they tend to drink in a secretive manner. Moreover, a significant number of these students use alcohol frequently and excessively, for aberrant reasons, and experience personal and social complications as a result.

This suggest that the teenage drinkers run some risk in their alcohol use in as much as their drinking styles conform roughly to a pattern of incipient alcoholism. A major task of this report, therefore, was to ascertain if the users lacked attachment to the significant primary groups which would insure restraint. The data show that drinkers may be characterized as higher in deviance than non-drinkers as indicated by their participation in mild forms of deviant behavior, by their pessimism, and by their rejection of middle class values. In addition, they appear to be estranged from such important socialization groups as the family, the school, the church, and the community.

The users identified in this study, so the data suggest, seem to be teenagers with problems. Their drinking appears to be an expression of rebellion or hostility toward the normative authority of the community. It may be predicted that unless some form of intervention occurs these students will continue to experience problems in their personal and social life. Data from several studies, for example, indicate that anti-social behavior and an absence of attachment to primary groups in childhood is significantly related to deviant adult drinking behavior.¹⁷ These problem aspects may be overcome either by a modification of the socialization factors which have contributed to them, or by an emphasis on personality development through some positive mental health approach in the school and the community designed especially for this age group.

FOOTNOTES

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1. David J. Pittman, "International Overview: Social and Cultural Factors in Drinking Patterns, Pathological and Nonpathological" in David J. Pittman ed., Alcoholism (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), pp. 5-12.
2. Robert A. Zucker, "Adolescent Drinking: A Problem of Situations or of Personality?" An unpublished paper presented at the Fourth Annual Institute for Health Education for Advances in the Health Sciences, Hunter College, Oct. 23, 1965, p. 7.
3. David J. Pittman, op. cit., pp. 5-12.
4. Harrison M. Trice, Alcoholism in America, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1966), p. 22.
5. The notable exception of this is a study conducted in metropolitan Wichita and the non-metropolitan counties of eastern Kansas. See: Marston M. McCluggage et. al., Attitudes Toward the Use of Alcoholic Beverages (Lawrence, Kansas: The Mrs. John S. Sheppard Foundation, 1956).
6. For a description of the cultural attitude toward alcohol use which prevails in this community see: Gerald Globetti, "Factors Associated With A Favorable Attitude Toward Alcohol Education in Two Mississippi Communities," Journal of Alcohol Education, Vol. 15, No. 1, Spring, 1967, pp. 39-40.
7. For a summary of research on teenage drinking see: George L. Maddox, "Adolescence and Alcohol" in Raymond G. McCarthy ed., Alcohol Education for Classroom and Community, (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1964), pp. 32-47.
8. About 95 percent of the students in this study identified with Protestant churches which condemn any alcohol use on moral grounds. There are very few ethnic groups in the state such as Jews, Italians, Greeks and so on which approve of moderate alcohol intake. The largest minority group is the Negro which tends to possess similar attitudes and behaviors toward alcohol as whites. See: Gerald Globetti, "Comparative Study of White and Negro Teenage Drinking in Two Mississippi Communities," unpublished paper accepted for publication in Phylon.

9. George L. Maddox, op. cit., pp. 35-37.
10. C. Norman Alexander, Jr., "Alcohol and Adolescent Rebellion" Social Forces, Vol. 45, No. 4, June, 1967, pp. 545-550. A recent study in Mississippi showed that students who drank under these types of conditions tended to be problem drinkers. See: Gerald Globetti "The Social Adjustment of High School Students and Problem Drinking," unpublished paper accepted for publication in Fall Issue (1967) Journal of Alcohol Education
11. The factor of personal and social complications as a result of drinking was measured by a scale developed by Straus and Bacon. The items were: (1) Has drinking ever interfered with your preparations for classes and exams? (2) Has it ever caused you to lose close friends or damage friendships? (3) Has it ever resulted in accidents, injury or arrest or brought you before school authorities? (4) Do you sometimes drink before going to a party? (5) Has the cost of liquor ever caused you to forgo other things? (6) Have you ever experienced a blackout when drinking? (7) Do you sometimes drink alone? (8) Do you sometimes drink before or instead of breakfast? (9) Have you ever participated in aggressive or wantonly destructive behavior when drinking? Students who answered "Yes" to three or more of these questions were considered to have experienced social and personal complications. See: Robert Straus and Seldon D. Bacon, Drinking in College. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953).
12. Motivations for drinking were measured by such items as: Do you usually drink: (1) when some particular thing is bothering you; (2) when you are in an especially bad mood; (3) when you are with people who make you uncomfortable; (4) when you just want to forget everything. In each case about one-fourth of the student users replied that they drank for these reasons.
13. A recent study in another Mississippi community showed this to be the case. See: Gerald Globetti and Gerald O. Windham, "The Social Adjustment of High School Students and the Use of Beverage Alcohol," Sociology and Social Research, Vol. 51, No.2, January, 1967, pp. 148-157.
14. Celia S. Deschin, et. al., Teenagers and Venereal Disease (Atlanta: U.S. Public Health Service, 1961).
15. These questions were used in the Minnesota Survey of Opinion, See: Delbert C. Miller, Handbook of Research Design and Social Measurements, (New York: David McKay Company, Inc. 1964), pp. 156-160.
16. Russel R. Dynes, Alfred C. Clark, and Simon Dinitz, "Levels of Occupational Aspirations: Some Aspects of Family Experience as a Variable," American Sociological Review, Vol. 21, April. 1956, pp. 212-215.
17. See: Lee N. Robins, William M. Bates, and Patricia O'Neal, "Adult Drinking Patterns of Former Problem Children," in David J. Pittman and Charles R. Snyder, eds., Society, Culture, and Drinking Patterns, (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1962), pp. 395-413.