

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE DRINKING PATTERNS OF
NEGRO AND WHITE ADULTS IN TWO MISSISSIPPI COMMUNITIES¹

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the events and circumstances which surround the act of drinking among a representative sample of Negro and white adults in two Mississippi communities. It proceeds on the theoretical assumption that within the cultural system of a group of people there is a general ethos or decorum regarding beverage alcohol which influences the type of response men make toward it. Thus, it is assumed that the cultural differences which exist between the racial systems will be reflected in varying drinking patterns. The results, however, showed that the drinking styles and the factors which influence an individual to drink were essentially the same in both racial groups.

THE PROBLEM

In recent years there has been a rapidly expanding literature on the role of beverage alcohol within the American cultural scene. As a result, it is now possible to posit several cautious generalizations with respect to the factors associated with a person's use or non-use of intoxicants.² However, a notable deficiency of these studies is the lack of available data regarding the drinking habits of individuals of different racial and ethnic backgrounds.³ Accordingly, the focus of this paper is to make a comparative analysis of the social factors related to the use of alcohol by a representative sample of Negro and white adults in two Mississippi communities.

FRAME OF REFERENCE

Cultural differentiation has been treated as an important variable in a number of current theories regarding the ingestion of beverage alcohol.⁴ 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 definition of the role of alcohol which, in turn, determines the type of response men make toward it.⁵ Put in another way, the common fabric of values, symbols, and meanings shared by a group governs who drinks and drinking styles. Subsequently, explanations of an individual's imbibing behavior can be accounted for in large measure by the cultural prescriptions for alcohol intake that are included in the social system of which he is a member. The

validity of this approach is evidenced by studies which show that certain ethnic groups exhibit different images of alcohol and, as a result, have different drinking styles.⁶

This paper is prompted by the fact that in Mississippi the Negro and the white person represent two distinguishable subgroups or, in other words, that particular patterns of behaving and values can be identified in each.⁷ Thus, it is assumed that the variations that exist between the two racial systems in terms of cultural life styles will be reflected in differences in the use of intoxicants. Moreover, this study is prompted by the need to eliminate much of the impressionistic speculation regarding the subject of alcohol use in the Negro subculture of the South. Drinking is often associated by the lay public with increased activity of an aggressive or sexually oriented nature.⁸ It is commonly felt, at least in the popular mind, that the Negro subculture displays a greater tolerance for aggressive or sensual behavior which leads to the belief that the Negro is not heavily cautioned against drinking and is given more opportunity to obtain and use alcohol.⁹ Consequently, this belief stereotypes drinking among Negroes as unrestrained and accompanied with aggressive patterns of behavior. However, reliable information to indicate if alcohol use is less restrictive among Negro adults as compared to white adults is almost non-existent and needs to be examined.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYTICAL PROCEDURE

The sample included 219 white and 108 Negro adults who were chosen randomly from a universe of household heads or homemakers of residence units¹⁰ in the communities surveyed. These respondents were contacted by personal visitation from trained research personnel and were interviewed from a pre-tested schedule made up of both closed and open-ended questions. Furthermore, the respondents were questioned by members of their own ethnic group in order to minimize interview bias. The research person explained the questionnaire to each individual and interpreted the items when assistance was requested. Moreover, the interviewees were not asked to supply their names and complete anonymity was assured.

For analytical purposes, the individual's 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?" All respondents who drank at least twice a year were considered as drinkers while those who had imbibed less than this or who had never used alcohol were classed as abstainers. This dependent variable was then studied in order to discern if the drinking styles and the factors which operate to influence alcohol use would vary significantly between the two cultural milieus.

FINDINGS

Drinking Styles

As mentioned, a popular belief is that the Negro cultural system requires less caution and restraint against drinking than does the white society. Subsequently, it is felt that the Negro is given more opportunity to use alcohol and often does so in an excessive and abusive manner. However, the data of this research revealed that the drinking practices of the white and

the Negro adult were essentially the same. That is, the incidence of drinking, where it was done, with whom it was done, how often it was done and so on were similar in both racial groups. For example, no statistical differences were recorded between the white and Negro respondents in the extent of alcohol ingestion, although there was a tendency for more whites to be classed as drinkers. Furthermore, the occurrence of drinking in both racial systems appeared to be less than that recorded elsewhere. Only 44 percent of the white adults and 36 percent of the Negro adults were users of beverage alcohol. There is no national norm with which to compare these percentages. However, previous estimates have shown that approximately two-thirds of the American population over 21 drink.

This finding can be partially explained in terms of the abstinent tradition which has been quite strong in Mississippi for many years. The state, until recently, was legally "dry," a situation which has been in existence for almost a half century. Furthermore, alcohol continues to be viewed with bitter acrimony and suspicion by ascetic Protestant and rural groups which make up significant components of Mississippi's population. Thus, drinking carries with it a stigma and is often defensively described by those who imbibe.¹¹

Relatively infrequent drinking predominated in the two racial systems in that slightly less than 3 in 5 of the Negro and white respondents classed as users drink only between one and fifteen times a year. Light or moderate drinking was also the rule in each racial system. Very few of those questioned said that they consumed more than one glass of beer and wine or two mixed drinks at one sitting.

Beer and distilled spirits were the most popular beverages ingested by the drinkers in both the Negro and the white community. Furthermore, the home or the home of friends tended to be the most likely drinking place. Very few of those questioned said that they drank in lounges, taverns or other public establishments. This is understandable in the light of the fact that the public sale and use of liquor were forbidden under Mississippi's prohibition law which was in effect at the time of the survey.

Finally, there was little evidence to indicate that the indiscriminant and unwise use of alcohol was more widespread in the Negro than in the white community. The warning signs of approaching drinking problems such as solitary imbibing, the increased consumption of alcoholic beverages and the subsequent worry and concern about alcohol intake¹² were just as prevalent among whites as among Negroes. In each case they were rare. The vast majority of those who imbibed in each racial system did so for social or convivial rather than for aberrant reasons. In addition, there was a strong sanction against the abusive use of alcohol in the two racial communities. That is, drunkenness and excessive alcohol use were looked upon with disfavor.

These findings taken together, therefore, suggest that the act of drinking and the conditions surrounding it are compatible within the social environments of the white and Negro cultural systems.

Socio-Cultural Factors

According to the theoretical explanation employed in this study, an individual's drinking behavior can be predicted in terms of the normative prescriptions regarding alcohol use that are part of his cultural system. Within American society varying behavior expectations have arisen toward people of different sexes, ages, social classes and so on with respect to alcohol ingestion. As a result, an individual's decision to imbibe is influenced by the statuses he occupies and the groups with which he identifies. One who identifies with his ethnic, religious or occupational groups will tend to drink or not drink as do other members of the group. Furthermore, drinking is considered to be more appropriate for certain statuses within the social scheme. For example, the use of alcohol is more acceptable for males than for females, for members of higher socio-economic levels, and for those affiliated with churches that do not regard drinking as morally wrong.¹³ Thus, a second task of this paper was to ascertain if the same socio-cultural factors influence both Negro and white adults to use alcohol. That is, are there certain normative prescriptions pertaining to drinking that penetrate both cultural systems?

The relevant data, recorded in Table 1, indicate that such is the case. The factors of sexual status, age, educational level, socio-economic status and religious behavior influenced the use of intoxicants by white and Negro adults in a similar manner. For example, more men than women were classed as drinkers which suggests that the cultural traditions of the white and the Negro society require greater restraint and moderation for the female than the male role. Likewise, there was an inverse relationship between age and drinking behavior which reflects that the use of alcohol has become more acceptable for the younger adults of both racial classifications. The proportion of users among whites and Negroes tended to increase with advancing educational and social class levels.¹⁴ This pattern is also present in the dominant American culture whereby abstinence has become a negative symbol of the life styles of the middle and upper classes. Finally, identification with organized religion was a major variable in deterring the adults of both racial groups from drinking.¹⁵ Individuals, white and Negro, who attended church regularly and emphasized religion in their daily lives tended to de-emphasize the use of alcohol.¹⁶

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UPCOMING ISSUE

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Table I. Selected Socio-Cultural Factors Associated With the Use of Alcohol Among Negro and White Adults (in Percent).

Selected Socio-Cultural Factors	Negro		White	
	Abstainers	Drinkers	Abstainers	Drinkers
Sex:				
Male	59	41	35	65
Female	76	24	67	33
	$X^2 = 2.554$ d.f. = 1 P = .10		$X^2 = 19.178$ d.f. = 1 P = .001	
Age:				
18-25	50	50	59	41
26-35	27	73	38	62
36-45	53	47	43	57
46-55	75	25	54	46
56-65	74	26	62	38
66 & over	81	19	89	11
	$X^2 = 12.697$ d.f. = 5 P = .05		$X^2 = 21.189$ d.f. = 5 P = .001	
Education:				
Primary (0-8 years)	70	30	73	27
Secondary (9-12 years)	52	48	61	39
College (13 or more years)	*	*	42	58
	$X^2 = 3.078$ d.f. = 1 P = .10		$X^2 = 9.471$ d.f. = 2 P = .01	
Socio-economic Status:				
Low	65	35	83	17
Middle	58	42	56	44
High	**	**	27	73
	$X^2 = .449$ d.f. = 1 P = .50		$X^2 = 22.131$ d.f. = 2 P = .001	
Religious Participation:				
Low	33	67	62	38
Middle	59	41	50	50
High	85	15	71	29
	$X^2 = 5.747$ d.f. = 2 P = .10		$X^2 = 6.467$ d.f. = 2 P = .05	

Table 1. (continued)

Selected Socio-Cultural Factors	Negro		White	
	Abstainers	Drinkers	Abstainers	Drinkers
Religious Identification:				
Low	74	26	46	54
Average	62	38	56	44
High	***	***	67	33
	$X^2 = .667$ d.f. = 1 P = .50		$X^2 = 1.027$ d.f. = 2 P = .70	

*Only six Negroes had any college training; four were abstainers and two were drinkers. Due to this small number they were excluded from the analysis.

**No Negroes scored in the high socio-economic level as measured in this study.

***Only two Negroes were classified as high in religious identification as measured in this study. One was an abstainer, the other a drinker.

****A complete set of tables may be secured from the author.

The foregoing analysis, therefore, reveals that the norms regarding adult drinking were the same for members occupying certain status positions within both social systems. Regardless of subcultural differences, if an individual was male, between the ages of 25-35 years, belonged to a higher socio-economic and educational level and had a relatively weak identification with religion, he tended to be a user of beverage alcohol.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

What was suggested in this paper is that the use of alcohol in American society is a culturally defined pattern which varies according to subgroup

affiliation and membership. Consequently, the heterogeneous nature of drinking in this country and the diverse traditions surrounding it are due in part to the differences in the normative prescriptions, values, and meanings that make up ethnic and racial subcultures. In some subcultural systems, the use of alcohol is viewed as morally indefensible; in others it is acceptable in moderation and is not seen as morally wrong. Thus, a person's drinking behavior can be understood in terms of the drinking customs that are part of his racial and ethnic subcultural systems.

In the South, the Negro and the white represent two distinguishable subgroups. Accordingly, it was assumed that the differences that exist between the social systems in their respective values, norms and behavior patterns would result in varying drinking patterns. Moreover, the inception of this study grew out of the need to remove some of the prevailing speculations related to the role of beverage alcohol in the Negro subculture. There has developed a traditional belief in Southern society based on the dogma of caste that pictures the Negro as immature and lacking discipline.¹⁷ It is believed, therefore, by many laymen that the use of alcohol is unrestrained in the Negro society. This research, however, demonstrated evidence to the contrary.

The customs surrounding the act of drinking--how much one drinks, when, where and under what conditions--resembled one another in the Negro and white cultural systems. There was little evidence to suggest that the indiscriminate and unwise use of alcohol was any more widespread in the Negro than the white community. One theory behind this fact is that the Negro in the South has traditionally been "kept in his place." Prohibition laws, like many voting laws, are so written and so enacted that they affect the whites less than the Negroes. For example, Lee has stated:

Suppressed and frustrated Negroes, members of a submerged caste, with some release given to them through drink, sometimes threatened to forget to 'stay in their place,' and the whites handled the situation in the same fashion they handled the problem of Negro voting with laws that applied to Negroes, not to whites.¹⁸

This theory is somewhat in accord with Cloward's explanation that differences in deviancy are influenced by differentials in availability of illegitimate means.¹⁹

Further analysis revealed that the normative requirements regarding alcohol use by white and Negro adults located in certain status positions were essentially alike.²⁰ Put in another way, with respect to the socio-cultural variables that influence drinking, the Negro and white adult were virtually indistinguishable. In addition, these same factors have been found operating in other regional subcultures to influence drinking. All of these findings considered together indicate that there is a general normative pattern concerning alcohol use by adults that penetrates both racial and regional subcultural systems.

Since these data were limited in scope, generalizations from a firm basis of fact regarding the prevalence of drinking or abstaining or the distribution

of drinker types by age, sex, social status levels and so on in the Negro subculture cannot be made at this point. However, they do suggest that many of the popular assumptions made about Negro drinking behavior are erroneous and should be tested.

FOOTNOTES

1. This study was conducted by the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Mississippi State University, with the cooperation of Mrs. Vashti I. Cain, Supervisor of Alcohol and Narcotics Education, Mississippi State Department of Education, and was supported by Public Health Research Grant MH02115 from the National Institute of Mental Health.
2. For a summary of the drinking practices of American adults see: Raymond G. McCarthy, "Drinking Patterns in the United States," in Raymond G. McCarthy, ed., Alcohol Education for Classroom and Community (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), pp. 125-131.
3. This is especially true of America's largest racial minority, the Negro. See Harrison M. Trice, Alcoholism in America (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1966), pp. 22-23.
4. 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 Publishers, 1967), pp. 5-12.
5. Clarence H. Patrick, Alcohol, Culture and Society (Durham: Duke University Press, 1952), pp. 12-13.
6. Frances Todd, Teaching About Alcohol (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), p. v.
7. Albert J. Lott and Bernice E. Lott, Negro and White Youth (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), p. 6.
8. Robert A. Zucker, "Adolescent Drinking: A Problem of Situations or of Personality?" Paper presented at the Fourth Annual Institute for Health Education for Advances in the Health Sciences, Hunter College, October 28, 1965, p. 3.
9. Muriel W. Sterne, "Drinking Patterns and Alcoholism Among American Negroes," in David J. Pittman, op. cit., pp. 66-99. Also see: John Dollard, Caste and Class in a Southern Town (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1949).
10. The universe of homes in the communities was determined by the listing of residence units included in the 1965 Directories of each community.

11. See: Gerald Globetti, "Factors Associated With a Favorable Attitude Toward Alcohol Education in Two Mississippi Communities," Journal of Alcohol Education, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Spring, 1967), pp. 28-39.
12. E.M. Jellinck, "Phases of Alcohol Addiction," Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol, Vol. 13 (December, 1952), pp. 678-679.
13. Harry Gold and Frank R. Scarpitti, "Alcoholism," in Harry Gold and Frank R. Scarpitti, eds., Combatting Social Problems (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), pp. 464-467.
14. Socio-economic status was measured by an Index made up of the factors of occupational prestige and educational level. Occupational prestige was ascertained by the Warner, Meeker and Eells' Revised Scale for Rating Occupations. Educational level was determined by the questionnaire item "How many years of schooling have you completed?" See: Delbert C. Miller, Handbook of Research Design and Social Measurement (New York: David J. McKay, Inc., 1964), pp. 100-101 and pp. 103-105.
15. Harrison M. Trice, op. cit., pp. 19-24.
16. Religious participation was measured by an index which included: (1) Average number of church services attended monthly; (2) Membership in religious organizations; (3) Holding an office or a power position in the church; (4) Regular contribution to the church. Religious Identification was measured by an index which included: (1) The highest calling in life is to be a minister or a priest; (2) No one should engage in activities on Sunday that keep him from going to church; (3) Most people go to church simply to show off their clothes; (4) Everyone should go to church regularly; (5) People who go to church are better than those who do not; (6) Parents should let their children make up their own minds about going to church; (7) Most people who attend church regularly are only seeking reassurance for their insecurity.
17. Arnold Rose, The Negro in America (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964), pp. 1-30. Also see: Bertram P. Karon, The Negro Personality (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1958).
18. Alfred Lee, "Techniques of Social Reform: An Analysis of the New Prohibition Drive," American Sociological Review, Vol. 9 (June, 1944), pp. 65-77.
19. Richard A. Cloward, "Illegitimate Means, Anomie, and Deviant Behavior," American Sociological Review, Vol. 24 (April, 1959), p. 167.
20. Similar findings have been recorded elsewhere. See: J.F. Sills, "Alcohol Education: Assessment of Selected Characteristics of Negro Secondary School Students as a Basis for the Development of an Alcohol Education Program," Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1963. Also see: Gerald Globetti, "A Comparative Study of White and Negro Teenage Drinking in Two Mississippi Communities," unpublished paper accepted for publication in Phylon.