Commentary

The new policy mix: Alcohol, harm minimisation, and determined drunkenness in contemporary society

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the relationship between harm reduction, demand reduction, and supply reduction (collectively, harm minimisation) in relation to the individual, socio-economic, and legal regulation of alcohol, focusing on changing consumption patterns of youths and young adults in the UK. Firstly, harm reduction and practices of self-regulation are considered within the British context of an apparent culture of intoxication, with evidence of determined drunkenness amongst young people that builds upon a longstanding tradition of northern European drinking characterised by weekday restraint and weekend excess. Secondly, demand reduction and the predominant public health programme of recommended sensible drinking levels are discussed in relation to the credibility gap between such messages and contemporary alcohol-related attitudes and behaviours. Thirdly, looking at supply, recent legislative changes and broader developments in the alcohol industry are explored. They counterbalance economic deregulation of licensed leisure with the increased criminalisation of some drinkers. In order to produce the most effective policy mix, individualised models of harm reduction and demand reduction need to be located within broader, culturally appropriate, and context-specific policies that consider the socio-economic, political, and environmental factors influencing harm, demand, and supply.

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Introduction

This paper addresses the relationship between policies related to harm reduction, demand reduction, and supply reduction (collectively, harm minimisation) in relation to changing patterns of alcohol consumption by British youths and young adults. Increased sessional consumption of alcohol since the mid-1990s has led to considerable media and political coverage of the problem of “binge” drinking, without a consideration of both the continuities of traditional British drinking culture and the apparent emergence of a youth and young adult culture of intoxication. It is argued here that the current primary focus of both harm reduction and demand reduction initiatives on individual behavioural change is constrained by a neglect of the broader socio-economic, cultural, and political contexts surrounding changing patterns of consumption—for example, that moderation and restraint are culturally at odds with a contemporary emphasis on economic deregulation and excessive consumption. It is argued that an emergent culture of intoxication has been facilitated by supply-side initiatives. In the UK, such initiatives relate to legislative and economic developments that have resulted in the deregulation, promotion, and expansion of alcohol-based leisure within the last decade. The paper concludes by calling for a greater understanding of why and how young people drink in order to design culturally appropriate, evidence-based harm minimisation strategies that can be communicated in credible and effective ways.

Harm reduction and moderation in a culture of intoxication

A well-established and well-regarding body of empirical and policy-oriented work exists on the application of the con-
cepts of harm reduction to legal and illicit (illegal and quasi-legal) psychoactive substances (e.g., Friedman et al., 2001; Heather, Wodak, Nadelmann, & O’Hare, 1993; Marlatt & Witkiewitz, 2002; O’Hare, Newcombe, Matthews, Bunning, & Drucker, 1992; Plant, Single, & Stockwell, 1997). Evaluation of the relevance of harm reduction strategies to gambling and other addictive or excessive behaviours is at an earlier stage of development (e.g., Dickson, Derevensky, & Gupta, 2004).

Much of this body of work discusses approaches that aim to reduce the harm to the individual and society from the manufacture, marketing, and consumption of legal or illicit drugs through the application of measures that prioritise decreasing the risk and severity of adverse consequences from current use over the reduction or elimination of use per se. In relation to alcohol, consumption can result in harm from drinking itself (such as health outcomes) and when combined with another activity (such as when driving or operating machinery). More recently, harm reduction approaches have also included recognition of the longstanding pleasurable and (sometimes) positive health roles of alcohol in Western societies (see for example, Peele & Grant, 1999).

In the UK, some of the most fully developed harm reduction initiatives in relation to recreational substance use focused on illicit drug consumption, particularly in dance clubs. These efforts were initially implemented at the local level, by local authorities and individual clubs, and gradually become part of a national policy: for example, the ground-breaking local safer drinking initiative in Manchester in 1993, which combined local government, voluntary sector drugs agency, and academic input (Newcombe, 1994); and, more recently, the national safer clubbing guidelines on good practice (Webster, Goodman, & Whalley, 2002).

Despite the far greater numbers of young people involved and the far greater health, social, economic, and public order harms from alcohol, the tailoring of these illicit drug-based harm reduction measures to safer drinking initiatives has yet to be fully developed in relation to national policy in the UK. At the international level, alcohol harm reduction programmes include the following: unit and warning labels on beverage containers, safer bars programs, designated driver and responsible drinking companion schemes, subsidised late night public transport, free water and non-salty bar snacks, and consumption advice, such as interspersing alcoholic beverages with soft drinks and not mixing different types of alcoholic beverages (Graham et al., 2004; Homel, McIlwain, & Carvoth, 2004; Plant et al., 1997). Nevertheless, such schemes often remain patchy, underfunded, and uncoordinated, lacking inter-agency collaboration and state support. It appears that, “... throughout the world, governments are struggling with the concept of harm minimisation in relation to legal drugs” (MacAvoy & Mackenzie, 2005, p. 87).

Many harm reduction initiatives have focused on pragmatic, compassionate, and non-judgemental approaches to reducing the harm to the individual through behaviour change emphasising moderation rather than abstinence. The goal of moderation has been conceptualised by Duff (2004) in his call for an ethics of moderation in relation to the self-regulation of illicit drug use, drawing on Foucauldian notions of “a transformative ethics... established according to specific ‘practices of the self’” (p. 389). Duff’s focus on the extent to which harm reduction policies are relevant to the individual drug user and his commendable re-incorporation of the pleasures of psychoactive consumption into the equation supports the earlier work of Ettorre (1992) on women’s drug use. But what potential does an ethics of moderation developed in relation to Australian policies on illicit drug use have for British alcohol policy? Three issues arise from a consideration of harm reduction in general and the application of an ethics of moderation to British drinking in particular.

Firstly, what is the broader socio-economic and cultural context to notions of moderation and self-regulation when applied to contemporary British drinking, leisure, and the pursuit of pleasure? One aspect of self-regulation already in operation in the UK relates to the primary of weekend leisure time consumption. Drinking is characterised by an emphasis on (mostly) weekday restraint (drawing on the Protestant industrial work ethic and temperance movements of northern European countries) and weekend excess, with a more recent post-industrial ethos of hedonistic consumption superimposed on earlier rural/pagan traditions of finite periods of carnival within the agricultural calendar (Dance & Mugford, 1992; Gofton, 1990; Harrison, 1971; Presdee, 2000).

Concerned by the perceived growing excesses of “intoxicated weekends” (Parker & Williams, 2003), the British government has expressly attempted to transpose what it sees as a more relaxed southern European drinking culture of moderate daily alcohol consumption onto a British drinking culture characterised by weekday restraint and weekend excess. The 2003 Licensing Act implemented in England and Wales in November 2005 allows licensing applications for premises to sell alcohol for up to 24 hours a day with the aim of reducing the pressures of intensified consumption just before the established UK closing time of 11 p.m. and the pressures on transport and catering services after 11 p.m. (Office of Public Sector Information, 2003). This Act has been discussed by Home Office Minister Hazel Blears as part of an ambitious policy to “change the culture for the long term,” whereby, it is believed, longer licensing hours will result in more leisurely (and, by implication, less problematic) consumption (United Kingdom Parliament, 2005, para. 4). The explicit aspiration held by the British government for a continental European drinking culture was evident in the introduction of the Licensing Bill in the House of Lords. Writing in The Guardian, Kettle commented, “... to judge by the speech which Baroness Blackstone made in the Lords when introducing the bill... the government has succumbed to a fantasy. Too many Tuscan holidays or weekends in Paris may have weakened the baroness’s grasp of British realities. She seems to envisage this country becoming a café society in which moderation rules and in which folk such as herself will pop into a subdued bar after a performance of La Traviata to discuss the novels of Jose Saramago. ... Sadly this will not happen...
Longer hours will not mean more sensible drinking. Longer hours will just mean more drinking” (2003, para. 8). There is some consensus amongst researchers, however, that the range of problems associated with alcohol comes not simply from the effects of alcohol consumption or trading hours, but also from the broader historical, socio-economic, cultural, and situational contexts to consumption (Goffin, 1990; Marsh & Kibby, 1992; Sumner & Parker, 1995; Tuck, 1989). Socialisation into alcohol-based leisure within the British cultural milieu includes an understanding of both the effects of alcohol intoxication and the close association for many people between drinking and intensive weekend consumption patterns, aggression, unsafe sexual encounters, public disorder, and other potentially risk-taking or harmful behaviours. If alcohol-related harms are the result of cultural expectations as much as of consumption per se, it is clear that these problems will not be remedied simply by the extension of licensing hours. The processes of cultural change may take decades rather than years, as illustrated by changing attitudes to drink driving, passive smoking, and the wearing of car seat belts. As Keeling (1994) noted in relation to problem drinking and health education, “… this is no short-term project. It will not fit neatly into the scope of 2 years of a grant” (p. 246).

Secondly, there is a distinct cultural context to British licensed leisure since the mid-1990s. It appears that determined excess rather than restraint has come to predominate not only with respect to consumption of psychoactive substances, but also in other aspects of young adult life, such as fiscal management—as illustrated by growing levels of consumer credit, debt, bankruptcy, and a shift in emphasis from saving to spending in recent years (see, Summerrfield & Gill, 2005). In terms of illicit drugs, the “decade of dance” from 1988 to 1998 saw a shift towards weekend recreational consumption of club drugs (such as ecstasy, LSD, amphetamines, and cannabis) with an associated overall reduction in alcohol consumption by a significant minority of young people (Measham, Aldridge, & Parker, 2001; Merchant & MacDonald, 1994).

In response to the development of the dance club scene and set against a pre-existing backdrop of northern European weekend drinking, the UK experienced five key trends that facilitated increased sessional alcohol consumption from the early 1990s onwards: (i) a development of new alcoholic beverages (a variety of flavoured alcoholic beverages or alcopops, ready-to-drink spirit mixers, and so on); (ii) targeted aspirational advertising campaigns; (iii) the redesign of licensed leisure venues to appeal to a new generation and a broader socio-demographic profile of consumers; (iv) changes in licensing legislation that led to the expansion and liberalisation of licensed leisure in the UK; and (v) the merging of legal and illicit psychoactive markets with evidence of a normalisation of recreational drug use both in the UK (McKeganey, Forsyth, Barnard, & Hay, 1996) and elsewhere (Duff, 2005). Indeed, the Regional Director of the World Health Organization has suggested that alcohol consumption by young people “increasingly mirrors patterns of drug use” and that “the boundary between moderate and excessive drinking is a fluid one,” with people often moving “from one to the other without acknowledging the fact” (Danzon, 2001, paras. 3, 5).

The consequences of these developments prioritising consumer and market freedoms over regulation by the individual, the alcohol industry, or the state have been evident in increased sessional consumption across the last decade, with indications from the early 1990s in the North-West of England (Measham, 1996) and in Scotland (McKeganey, Forsyth, Barnard, & Hay, 1996). This is supported by annual national schools surveys in the UK, which report that young people tend to drink more per session and are more likely to drink ready-to-drink spirit mixers and alcopops than they did 10 years ago (Balding, 2004). Amongst 16- to 24-year-olds, alcopops account for 35% of women’s and 14% of men’s weekly alcohol consumption; strong beers, lagers, and ciders account for 9% of young women’s and 25% of young men’s weekly consumption (Lader & Goddard, 2004). The increased sessional consumption of higher strength alcoholic drinks and expansion of licensed leisure, in turn, are part of the broader economic development of the night-time economy and urban regeneration of city centres across the Western world (see for example, Chatterton & Hollands, 2003; Hobbs, Laster, Hadfield, Winstow, & Hall, 2000).

What happens, then, when there are both a longstanding tradition and recent pre-eminence of equating pleasure with excess, when immoderation is the goal in itself? Foucauldian notions of maximising pleasure through self-regulation may seem somewhat abstract for young people out on the town on a Saturday night. In relation to a legal drug (such as alcohol), the individual is operating within the economic and political context of a powerful, attractive, and widely available product designed by alcohol producers and promoted by alcohol retailers through multi-million pound development programmes. Furthermore, the historical and political climate influencing contemporary young adult drinking is rooted in public culture, with over 15 years of an established, mature, and fluid dance club scene in the UK, associated government, local authority, and enforcement responses, and the interaction between the use of legal and illicit drugs within the night-time economy (Measham, 2000b).

Thirdly, moderation as a practice of the self concerns about the individualised emphasis on self-regulation, responsibility, and choice on the one hand and the boundaries between self-control and social control on the other hand. As discussed above, the individual drinker is a customer operating within a modern consumer society, where sophisticated manufacturing and retail industries specifically target their main markets (such as young adult drinkers) with varying degrees of commitment to regulatory codes of practice. In his study of contemporary British alcohol advertising campaigns, Burkitt (with 20 years of experience as an advertising regulator) commented that “the ‘advertiser’ in me recognises that the specific rules on alcohol advertising are generally being
followed, although the ‘regulator’ fears that the spirit of these rules is being widely ignored . . . British drink advertisers may be behaving unwisely” (2005, p. 133).

Thus, the ‘choice’ to consume relates not only to the ratio- nal cost-benefit analysis between perceived advantages and disadvantages of consumption by an individual (Coffield & Golton, 1994; Parker et al., 1998), but also to the reflex- ive construction and presentation of the self by that indi- vidual, drawing on and utilised by the machinery of the alcohol, tobacco, and leisure industries and set against a backdrop of heightened uncertainties about identity and the journey to adulthood by young people in contemporary soci- ety (e.g., Denscombe, 2001; Pavis, Cunningham-Burley, & Amos, 1998). However, whilst there has been a shift in rep- resentations of drug users from helpless slaves of addiction to reasoned and rational decision-makers, the primary unit of analysis and, therefore, locus of responsibility remains with the individual.

Sulkunen, Rantalä, and Määttä (2004), however, have warned that “the emphasis on moral management of the self may lead to moral management of the other, which strongly disadvantages most youth” (p. 427). In the UK, this is evident in responses to both alcohol-related health and crime problems. In relation to health, for example, the public health agenda has repeatedly been broadened to the extent that health professionals are engaging in what Fitzpatrick (2001) has argued is the superfluous and largely unproduc- tive scrutiny of patient lifestyles. In relation to crime, the government’s Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy for Eng- land actively promotes greater use of law and order responses (such as fixed penalty notices, anti-social behaviour orders, and acceptable behaviour contracts) to reduce drunk and disorderly behaviour by young people (Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit, 2004, p. 84). The Violent Crime Reduction Bill currently working its way through Parliament proposes the establishment of drinking banning orders and alcohol disor- der zones to further address alcohol-related social outcomes in the UK (House of Commons, 2005).

Nevertheless, empirical research suggests that young peo- ple intentionally manage their levels of desired and actual intoxication by using strategies that incorporate aspects of perceived risk, accessing well-informed and credible sources, such as online scientific journals, health sources, and the pop- ular dissemination and discussion of these on websites, in chat rooms, and by mobile phones (e.g., Moore, 2004; Moore & Miles, 2004). However, given that the probability of harm and the precise implications are often unclear, it has been suggested that “uncertainty” is a more appropriate term than “risk” (Leigh, 1999), because the former recognises the poss- ible unknown factors in the consequences of consumption, such as outcomes of mixing alcohol with illicit drugs, ingest- ing substances of variable strength, dosage, and purity, and limitations to scientific knowledge of short-term and long- term effects. For example, a recent national schools survey of over 40,000 pupils reported that up to 20% of 14- to 15- year-olds have mixed illicit drugs with alcohol on the same occasion (Balding, 2005, p. 76). These aspects of intoxica- tion suggest that there are significant limitations to the notion of reasoned individual management of harm.

Thus, it is to be welcomed that recently there has been a shift amongst academics and policy-makers from the interpre- tation of harm reduction at the level of individualist behaviour change to the broader environment of consump- tion with an emphasis on social and economic factors as the primary determinants of harm (Rhodes, 2002). In relation to alcohol, Room et al. (2005) note, given that “injuries com- prise a large proportion of the burden of alcohol, it is appro- priate to enhance these policies with targeted harm reduction strategies . . . focused on . . . specific high-risk settings” (p. 165). Identifying and reducing harm through regulation of the environment has particular implications for the hundreds of thousands of young drinkers and recreational drug users who visit leisure venues and retail outlets at weekends.

This draws on earlier cross-disciplinary studies that have identified the role of design, planning, and location of drink- ing environments as playing a part in reducing alcohol-related harms, including crime and disorder (Marsh & Kibby, 1992; Stockwell & Crosbie, 2001; Tuck, 1989). Overheated, over- crowded leisure venues in high-density locations with poor infrastructure and irresponsible sales and management prac- tices have implications in terms of health, safety, security, and public order, particularly for customers who have been con- suming psychoactive drugs, whether legal or illicit. This has been operationalised since the early 1990s in relation to dance events in the UK through safer dancing and safer clubbing policies and made a condition of licenses in some cases, but it has not been effectively and comprehensively transferred to alcohol-based leisure in order to impact on the relationship between alcohol and drinking settings. This issue is discussed further in relation to supply-side policies below.

Demand reduction and prevention in a context of consumption-oriented leisure

The traditional focus of alcohol education and preven- tion has been the reduction in demand for and use of alco- hol through public health programmes targeted at either the general population or specific “at-risk” groups. Despite mixed evidence of the effectiveness of these strategies (e.g., Foscroft, Lister-Sharp, & Lowe, 1997), they remain a key priority. For example, in the UK, individual alcohol man- ufacturers introduced alcohol unit-based information labels on alcohol products in 2004. Research on information and warning labels across the world suggests varying degrees of success with these approaches (e.g., Stockley, 2001). For instance, it has been suggested that, “US alcohol labelling policy is a case study of the alcohol producers’ political power at state and federal levels” (Mosher, 1997, p. 790; see also Parker, Saltz, & Hemmessy, 1994).

As Duff (2004) has identified in relation to Australian drug policy, there is a policy gap between prevention and treat-
ment, because most strategies address drug use “at the two extreme ends of the drug use spectrum”: primary prevention initiatives, which are directed at young people who have not yet started their drug using careers, and treatment efforts for clients whose use has already become problematic (p. 388). Duff’s question relates as much to British alcohol policy as Australian drug policy when he asks, “What exists for the vast majority of existing drug users once prevention has failed and before treatment is considered?” (2004, p. 388).

Similarly to Australian drug policy, British schools-based drug education programmes tend to be limited to the period before most young people have established patterns of recreational usage—and treatment is largely aimed at the small minority of problematic users who present to services or who are netted by the criminal justice system. The vast majority of largely recreational users of illicit drugs are too old for education and prevention initiatives and not in treatment so, with the exception of some local and grass roots initiatives such as safer clubbing strategies, there is a policy and provision gap. The same could be said for young adult drinkers. Research shows that men and women aged 16–24 years are significantly more likely than other age groups to have exceeded the recommended number of daily units on at least one day during the week prior to the interview and to have been “binge” drinking (using the unit-based definition); they are also the heaviest drinking age group by quantity although not by frequency of consumption (Lader & Goddard, 2004). British young adult drinkers could thus be considered most “at risk” of alcohol-related health, crime, and personal problems.

A key aspect of demand reduction in UK alcohol public health programmes is the use of unit-based notions of sensible and risky consumption levels. Understanding of alcohol units and sensible drinking levels continues to grow in the general population, with the most recent national surveys suggesting that 83% of adults have heard of units as a measure of alcohol consumption among young adults” (p. 25).

It is suggested here that sensible drinking levels in the UK guidelines have been determined by a primarily medical model without reference to the wider cultural context of traditional and contemporary influences on British drinking. Despite the strong cultural tradition of weekday restraint and weekend excess that characterises northern European drinking cultures, the focus of government recommendations has been on daily rather than weekly benchmarks since 1995 (United Kingdom Department of Health, 1995). In relation to illicit drugs, Shiner (2003) has noted the limitations of establishing classifications of harm based on medical consequences that are not necessarily grounded in the attitudes and behaviour of users or wider society. Shiner’s critique of the 1971 Misuse of Drugs Act (the legislation that governs the criminalisation and classification of illicit drugs in the UK) suggests that the Act is flawed because its overarching scale of harm is a medico-legal classification based on medical knowledge of the harm caused by specific psychoactive drugs that is both dated and limited. The same could be true for national policies governing alcohol use. However, if we do attempt to establish a more culturally appropriate level of sensible consumption than the current medical model of demand reduction, where would we set levels of socially acceptable risk in the pursuit of pleasure within a culture of intoxication?

The British government appears optimistic that it can instil positive cultural change and reduce alcohol-related violence.
and disorder, whilst increasing the availability of alcohol in licensed and off-licence premises through extending trading hours with the 2003 Licensing Act. Empirical research suggests that government policy is at odds with attitudes to excess. Research by Measham and Brain (2005) with over 350 young adult weekend drinkers in Manchester found evidence of the pursuit of determined drunkenness as a specific aim of weekend drinking. This is supported by a Home Office study of “binge” drinking that found that, “young people often go out with the definite intention of getting drunk, and . . . many deliberately accelerate or intensify their drunkenness by mixing drinks, drinking before they go out, or drinking beverages that they know have a strong effect on them” (Engineer et al., 2003, p. 16). At the national level, this new determined drunkenness has informed UK government policy with the Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit noting that “drinking is often viewed as an end in itself, and public drunkenness is socially accepted, if not expected. . . . Particularly evident . . . is a culture of going out to get drunk. This culture is particularly associated with 16- to 24-year-old drinkers” (2004, p. 23). The pub consistently remains the number one leisure venue in the UK (Summerfield & Gill, 2005). Moreover, the average drinker in the Manchester study by Measham and Brain (2005) had already consumed enough alcohol to have reached (or, in the case of male respondents, to have surpassed) recommended sensible daily consumption levels, although respondents were interviewed towards the beginning rather than end of their evening outing. This is not a picture of unbridled excess however. Aside from the weekday/weekend tradition of self-regulation, the Manchester study found other processes of regulation at work. The study explored the relationship between practices of self-regulation and social regulation and found that when drinkers discussed their desired and actual levels of intoxication in detail, they were bounded by concerns about health, personal safety, image, identity, and so forth, and that these in turn interacted with gender, age, ethnicity, and socio-economic class to produce a complex amalgam of influences on drinking practices to result in a “controlled loss of control” (Measham & Brain, 2005; see also, Brain, 2000; Hayward, 2004; Measham, 2002). The Manchester study provided support for the argument that a new culture of intoxication is emerging that features a determined drunkenness by young adults as part of a broader cultural context of risk-taking and hedonistic consumption-oriented lifestyles bounded by occasion and location. With the longest working hours in Europe, a consumer-based “work-hard-play-hard” ethos (Parker & Williams, 2003), transgressive carnivalesque practices within a highly controlled and surveilled capitalist consumer society (Presdee, 2000), and with growing evidence of emotional, as well as economic, and political costs to globalisation (Elliott & Lemert, 2005), it is to this cultural context that effective harm reduction and demand reduction policies must be addressed.

More recently in the UK, the emphasis has shifted from behaviour change through unit-based alcohol advice to attitudinal change, with attempts to alter British attitudes to drunkenness. A key input into alcohol education directed at the general young adult population of drinkers are media-based public health campaigns such as the Portman Group’s web-based Drinkaware campaign [www.drinkaware.co.uk; but see Demopoulos, 2004] and the Portman Group’s cinema-based Mr. Jekyll or Mr. Hyde’s campaign, which was the first anti-drunkenness campaign in the UK. In recognition of both the acceptability and desirability of altered states of intoxication amongst young people in the UK, the British government devised a £5 million advertising campaign for the Christmas holiday period of 2005/2006 that aimed to make public drunkenness less socially acceptable.

Perhaps a more optimistic assessment of the current wave of determined drunkenness is that the level of sessional consumption has now reached a plateau after 10 years of escalation. Demand for specific legal and illicit psychoactive substances remains in flux. After over 10 years of increased sessional consumption and the expansion of alcohol-oriented leisure in the UK, the emergent teenage cohort might be expected to differentiate itself from the young adult cohort that preceded it in terms of fashion, music, and leisure lifestyle; conversely, as certain alcoholic beverages become more popular with a wider age range, adults too will want to differentiate their leisure identities and consumption patterns from younger drinkers. One of the early indicators that the plateau in drinking volumes may have been reached is the lack of increase in alcohol consumption according to the most recent annual national school survey conducted by Exeter University (Balding, 2005). Amongst the general adult population, national surveys suggest that overall consumption levels have levelled off in the early 2000s (e.g., ONS, 2004; Rickards, Fox, Roberts, Fletcher, & Goddard, 2004).

Types of alcoholic beverages consumed are far from static, however. Recent figures from market analysts suggest that, following a lull in sales of flavoured alcoholic beverages in 2003–2005 (which was in part a response to increased taxation in 2002 and alcopops’ popularity among youths under 18 years of age), the market is consolidating with further product development and diversification. New products include pre-mixed branded cocktails, ready-to-drink spirit mixers, and milk-based alcoholic beverages targeted at 18- to 34-year-olds who are showing preferences for less sweet and more sophisticated alcoholic drinks (Mintel International Group, 2005).

The political climate is also changing. Alongside aspects of deregulation through licensing legislation, recent concerns have been expressed by criminal justice agencies, alcohol researchers, and commentators regarding the need to minimise alcohol-related harms and their costs to individuals and wider society. This is evident in the Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy for England (Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit, 2004) that includes an emphasis on the responsibilities of alcohol producers and retailers (in terms of self-regulation of advertising, promotional strategies, and sales practices) and consequent initiatives—such as the introduction of Standards
for the Management of Responsible Drinks Promotions, published by the British Beer and Pub Association (BBPA), the leading representative of the brewing and pub sector (British Beer and Pub Association [BBPA], 2005). Thus, many harm reduction and demand reduction initiatives concentrate on the individual drinker—whether through regulation, prevention, medically dominated models of sensible consumption levels, or theories of rational decision-making and risk assessment. And so we come to the third corner of the framework: the regulation and control of supply through state, voluntary sector, and alcohol industry initiatives.

**Supply reduction in a climate of economic deregulation**

Alongside socio-economic and cultural influences on fluctuations in demand, supply-side production, promotion, licensing, access, and sales policies and practices also play an important part in patterns of consumption. Media coverage of young people’s “binge” drinking in the UK has led alcohol policy back to centre stage, making reconsideration of the role of supply regulation within harm minimisation timely.

As discussed above, evidence suggests that a new culture of intoxication has emerged in the UK, facilitated by significant developments in licensed leisure (Brain, 2000; Measham, 2004a). In part, this is a response to the perceived popularity of unlicensed leisure and alternative recreational drugs, most notably with the development of the acid house, rave, and dance club scene from the late 1980s (e.g., Collin and Godfrey, 1997). Economic deregulation is evident with alcohol becoming more affordable in the UK since the 1970s due to increased disposable income (ONS, 2004), increased off-license availability through supermarkets and other retailers (alongside increased on-license availability through licensing extensions from the late 1980s onwards), and the re-commodification of alcohol and redesign of licensed venues from the mid 1990s. Within this context, whilst excessive consumption by individual drinkers might precipitate bad publicity for the industry (and undoubtedly most within the alcohol industry would advocate voluntary self-regulation by the industry as preferable to state regulation), deregulation has ultimately led to increased sales/profits across the UK (McKeeganey, 1998; Roberts, Blakney, & Tudor-Smith, 1999), whereas a shift towards individual moderation would lead to reduced sales/profits.

The two routes of state regulation and industry self-regulation are in evidence in the recent legislative changes in the UK. The government has chosen a route of industry regulation through a voluntary social responsibility scheme in England and Wales, established in the Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy for England (Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit, 2004), and by omission from the 2003 Licensing Act implemented in November 2005 (Office of Public Sector Information, 2003). This is in contrast to the 2005 Scottish Licensing Act that follows a more radical policy of supply-side controls, restricting alcohol marketing and certain sales strategies that are seen as encouraging irresponsible or excessive consumption (for example, “happy hours,” bottomless glass drink-all-you-can promotions, and so forth) (Office of Public Sector Information, 2005). So whilst English and Welsh legislation regulates consumers, Scottish legislation regulates both retailers and consumers.

A key feature of both Licensing Acts, however, is the relaxation of statutory permitted drinking hours (a feature of British licensing legislation for over 100 years), allowing license applications of up to 24 h a day. The reasoning behind the liberalisation of licensing legislation is the belief that increased access to alcohol will reduce alcohol-related harms, such as violence and disorder, by staggering closing times, by reducing accelerated consumption just prior to closing time, and by reducing congestion and aggression amongst late night drinkers. This policy has faced widespread opposition from health professionals (Bentham & Temko, 2005), criminal justice professionals, alcohol researchers, and even some alcohol retailers in the UK because it is seen as inappropriate and unrealistic in the current climate of determined drunkenness by young drinkers (Measham & Brain, 2005).

Thus, the economic deregulation and liberalisation of licensing has led to increased availability of a wider range of stronger alcohol products alongside a reduction in supply-side controls, with the British government arguing that increased access to supply will result in the reduction of alcohol-related harm. This is mirrored in parallel government policy on gambling, whereby the provision of gambling venues is increasing across the UK through the liberalisation of gaming laws.

The evidence base that individual legislation can instigate cultural change towards a more relaxed—yet responsible—model of drinking (or gambling) through licensing deregulation is less clear, however. The result of increased trading hours has been mixed in Australia, Ireland, and New Zealand, countries with drinking cultures similar to those in the UK. There is evidence that alcohol-related crime, disorder, health problems, and overall consumption levels can increase (e.g., Butler, 2003; Chikritzhs & Stockwell, 2002). Furthermore, trading hours are just one aspect of a complex interplay of factors that contribute to crime, disorder, and transgression in the city at night. Research suggests that the night-time economy operates within a carefully constructed “wild zone” within cities, where the regulation and bounding of individual behaviour is governed by a multitude of not only individual but also socio-economic, cultural, and political factors (see, Hayward, 2004; Hobbs, Hadfield, Lister, & Winlow, 2003; Stanley, 1997).

The question of how demand and supply interact in a culture of intoxication that includes the pursuit of determined drunkenness can be illustrated by the example of “happy hours” and other promotional practices. Such initiatives are losing favour and are seen as a contributory factor in the cur-
rent problem of “binge” drinking. Unfavourable comments on such retail practices and the threat of state regulation (as in Scotland) have led to establishment of voluntary codes of practice by the manufacturing and retail trade in England and Wales (BBPA, 2005). For example, according to the BBPA’s point of sale promotions standards, whereas “well managed promotions are a wholly legitimate way of maintaining and developing business,” the BBPA members are committed to “driving irresponsible promotions out of the trade” (2005, p. 4). An irresponsible promotion is defined as one “that encourages or incites individuals to drink to excess, behave in an anti-social manner, or fuels drunkenness” (BBPA, 2005, p. 4). If “drinking to excess” is defined as drinking more than the recommended sensible levels that dominate UK public health campaigns, then any promotion that encourages female customers to drink more than three units in a session and male customers to drink more than four units could be considered a breach of standards and result in a BBPA investigation and/or be used as evidence in opposition to license renewal by the police and licensing authorities. Again, as for individual drinkers, there will be a credibility gap between recommended practice for retailers and the realities of current consumption and sales practices.

The aim of reducing the incidence of excessive sessional consumption through promotional restrictions (and increased costs) on on-trade alcohol products is grounded in a well-established inverse relationship between alcohol availability and consumption levels, with increased cost/taxation recognised as one of the most cost-effective policies to reduce alcohol problems (Gray, Saggers, Sputore, & Bourbon, 2000; Room et al., 2003; Stockwell & Crobbe, 2001).

However, restricting availability/increasing cost by reducing promotions through licensed retailers alone can lead to a displacement effect. In the Manchester study by Measham and Brain (2005), respondents reported that the perceived high price of on-trade alcohol products led to greater consumption both before and after visiting city centre bars, thus displacing sales from licensed to off-license retail outlets and maintaining or even increasing overall consumption levels. In particular, the practice of buying and consuming a bottle of spirits in a small group of friends at home—vodka and absinthe being the favourites in the 2004 Manchester study—was widespread and seen as both cost-effective and sociable by respondents, but resulted in the majority of study participants consuming above recommended sensible levels before they had even entered licensed premises. Whether alcohol-related disorder may also have been displaced or reduced along with the displacement of consumption was more difficult to ascertain (Ditto, 2000). Furthermore, the Manchester study found that young drinkers tended to choose bars with promotions outlined as irresponsible practice according to the BBPA standards. This was not only because such promotions were considered to offer better value for money, but also because the bars were perceived to be the busiest, hence most popular, most lively, and most fun. Some of the promotional practices identified in the Manchester 2004 fieldwork—such as “happy hours,” “two-for-one” deals, free shots with every drink, and so forth—have continued since the establishment of the BBPA standards in 2005.

A consideration of illicit drugs illustrates some of the dilemmas of the potentially effective but not necessarily popular supply-side regulation of alcohol. Presumably, the current voluntary self-regulation of the manufacturing, advertising, and retail alcohol trade in England and Wales would be unacceptable to all but the most radical libertarians in a post-prohibition model of illicit drug supply. In relation to illicit drugs, favoured post-prohibition models include important recommendations on the state regulation of supply and recognise the importance of restrictions on advertising, sale, dosage, concentration levels, specified outlets, vulnerable groups, and so forth (e.g., Rolles, Kushlick, & Jay, 2004). Nevertheless, the widespread availability of illicit drugs across the Western world and the illicit production and consumption of non-commercial alcohol products in developing and “dry” nations (Haworth & Simpson, 2004) suggest that restrictive supply-side alcohol policies can be subverted by customer demand.

Conclusions

This paper has considered the relevance of Duff’s call for an ethics of moderation regarding illicit drug use in the Australian context to alcohol use in the British context. It is suggested that some processes of self-regulation and economic regulation operate in relation to British drinking in terms of the longstanding tradition of weekday restraint/weekend excess and more recent practices of bounding consumption. However, both an ethics of moderation and current public health programmes that focus on individual recommended daily sensible consumption levels collide with an emergent culture of intoxication, with evidence of determined drunkenness by individuals, an economic climate of deregulation of the alcohol market, and a political context of licensing reform. This results in a credibility gap between recommended and actual practices for drinkers, alcohol manufacturers, and alcohol retailers.

Clearly, the current media, political, and public perception of unbridled British “binge” drinking youths rampaging the city streets after dark needs tempering. With the development of alcohol harm minimisation strategies, there is the need for continuing consideration of all three aspects of the supply-demand-harm reduction nexus and of the importance of understanding the broader socio-economic context to changing patterns of leisure, pleasure, and psychoactive consumption. It is suggested here that demand reduction policies have a credibility problem because of the gulf between recommended and actual practices of consumption. Harm reduction is pushing against a culture of intoxication that celebrates the pursuit of weekend excess facilitated by developments within
a multi-billion-pound industry. Meanwhile, the subtle processes of self-regulation (such as the binding of consumption by occasion, location, and weekly cycle) operating within the above context have yet to be fully explored. Currently in the UK, supply control policies have a popularity problem with the general public and are underpinned by a political ideology, which presumes that increased access to potentially addictive legal substances and behaviours (such as alcohol and gambling) will not increase associated harms—and, in the case of alcohol, will actually decrease problems. So a two-pronged approach—voluntary and statutory—is evident in relation to British policy on the regulation of supply. Yet, the professed government aim of cultural change in drinking practices clearly cannot be instigated by one piece of legislation alone.

In relation to the bounding of alcohol consumption, central to our understanding of how and why young people drink are the levels of desired and actual intoxication experienced by young adult drinkers in situ, the role of emotionality and rationality in the hedonistic pursuit of pleasure in contemporary consumer society, and the relationship between intoxication, pleasure, and excess. By understanding the context to young people’s drinking, their lived experience, the processes of consumption, and how it is both individually and socio-culturally bounded, we can better understand the relationship between self-regulation, social regulation, and economic deregulation of alcohol within the current cultural context of weekend determined drunkenness. Furthermore, there is a need to shift from individualised analysis to an understanding of the socio-economic, cultural, and political contexts to the relationship between supply, demand, and harm reduction on the level of the city (Hayward, 2004), licensed leisure locations and their broader socio-cultural surroundings (Measham, 2004b), and the trans-national stage (Cooke et al., 2004; Room et al., 2005).

The question then is how we might manage an ethics of moderation in relation to alcohol consumption within a prevailing public health paradigm of demand reduction, against a socio-economic backdrop of market deregulation and consumer choice, when individuals are operating within a culture of excess? The importance of evidence-based realism in public health demand reduction programmes needs to be noted, alongside the development of strategies to reduce harm focusing not only on the individual but also the wider environment of consumption through safer drinking initiatives, multi-agency and multi-site efforts, and greater prioritisation of the health, safety, and security of customers in licensed leisure venues. Further exploration is needed of the nature of the relationship between self-regulation by individual users, social regulation of consumption, and economic regulation of the alcohol industry in the policy mix. Above all, alcohol policies must attempt to bridge the “credibility gulf” between the scientific evidence on risks to health and safety and the need to be culturally appropriate, context-specific, and credible to be effective.

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