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Revised version

Alcohol “use” and “abuse”: When culture, social context and identity matter

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ABSTRACT

Alcohol is an ancestral beverage. Both divinized and demonized, it is nowadays at the heart of a great controversy at health and social levels. Its consumption is subject to great control, consumption thresholds are instituted (i.e., WHO), limits imposed. However, it must be admitted that the consumption of alcohol is regulated by culture, contexts and identity. This article aims to show that the terms “use” and “abuse” conventionally mobilized to speak of good and bad consumption are not able to exhaust the range of possibilities in terms of alcohol drinking behaviors understanding. Indeed, only the consideration of contextual and identity dynamics can allow us to understand with accuracy the relationship to this substance.

Dealing with the issue of alcohol consumption, its uses and abuses, involves considering different aspects at physical, physiological, psychological and social levels. Obviously, this issue is becoming eminently complex. One has to consider the antecedents of such a consumer behavior referring to questions of taste, habit, need, therapeutic remedy, social integration and so on... All of these factors are also influenced by a cultural norm that is as implicit as it is explicit in line with its prescriptive nature, but also coercive in relation to the need of being compliant with a reference system. Compliance with such a norm also helps to meet the basic epistemic and affiliation needs [1]. Indeed, it fulfills a sense-making function concerning our practices and the practices of others and it guarantees us, when we comply with it, a place within a social group.

Therefore, this article proposes to take a more general look considering that the question of use or abuse responds to social logics making this issue an eminently contextual problem bearing in itself a set of normative and identity issues. These logics, which sometimes seem to be illogical, must not be reconciled to a form of anomaly of thought but rather as forms of adaptation authorizing the qualification of Human as a Social Human.

Thus, first, we will address alcohol as a social and cultural object, before questioning the role of context in consumption practices to give sense to alcohol “use” and “abuse”. A final part will be devoted to the analysis of the identity regulations involved in these practices and more generally in the way such a social object is represented.

Culture and alcohol: from historical roots to present stakes

A mythical beverage, alcohol, goes from a profane drink to a sacred one, and therefore categorize the act of drinking either at a sacred or profane level, depending on contexts and cultures norms [2].

It appeared in prehistoric time, after humanity established sedentary communities [3]. Different context-dependent meanings were consecrated since then, in religious or profane

celebrations. Alcohol became a symbolic and integrative object. Even before the Christian Era, alcohol have taken a good and/or a dark side. It means it could improve or not human condition in a social aspect [4]. Considering the example of wine, beyond being used in religious ceremonies, in France, it was also perceived as healthy for a period [5]. That is the French paradox, which share the belief of benefits of alcohol consumption [6] [7]. Beyond its healthy aspects, wine drinking can also play a positive role improving social relations. Wine and more generally alcohol, as many other substances, was divinized because of its use in rituals of sociability, healing, devotion, solace and pleasure [8]. Concerning the specific case of wine, one can recall that this beverage was considered as a medicine. We are therefore well aware that according to the times and therefore according to the historical contexts, alcohol and in particular wine had a very different status. Indeed, in 1907 in France, wine was prescribed by doctors and the majority of them considered it to be healthy [7]. This way of looking at wine has long been present in the French context, but it is important to add that when empirical results were provided in the early 1990s regarding the links between wine consumption and cardiovascular risk reduction, individuals were quite receptive to this kind of information in the United States [7]. Thus, depending on the era, some of these substances became discriminated across time and others not.

In fact, alcohol in its use is the subject of a set of normative prescriptions that respond to identity issues. For example, according to Monk and Heim [9], cultures, have produced a set of codes and associated a number of values with this substance. They act as some rules characterizing a good or a bad alcohol use. Thus, even if cultures have not elevated alcohol to the same status, the question of alcohol has always been asked, demonstrating the perceived stake it represents. For example, cultural forms have produced systems of representations of this substance thus defining a set of behaviors to be held about it. This illustrates the prescriptive function of culture defining a set of norms. While the representations of alcohol

may differ from one culture to another, many of them have built meaning about alcohol. In fact, as it was noted by Arfken and Ahmed [10], alcohol and drug abuse is a serious global public health and medical question affecting every demographic group, an issue encountered in different countries rooted in different cultures. For example, there are many alcohol-related problems in Africa (e.g., Nigeria [11]). Otherwise, concerning the specific case of Latin America, epidemiological studies on alcohol are still scarce except in Brazil and Mexico, but reveal problems in terms of violence, injuries, among poor people and marginalized groups [13].

It is also problematic among Muslims [13] [14]. The literature highlights that alcohol consumption can be highly stigmatizing, especially among Muslim populations. Indeed, as an example, it was found that Muslims were less likely to report alcohol use than other religious affiliated groups [10]. From a conceptual point of view, one can consider that alcohol consumption behaviors can be located at the crossroads of social judgment and normative prescriptions. This involves to consider culture and context and their consequences in terms of social integration [15] and exclusion [16]. There is every reason to think that consumer behavior prescriptions are a direct result of the cultures in which they take place. It is within these cultures that norms are established [9]. They are directly inscribed within social groups, allowing the construction of differentiated representations which play the role of identity markers [17]. These social representations fulfill an identity function involved in the allocation of individuals to particular social groups [18] [19] [20]. Consequently, the ingroup versus outgroup affiliation is able to generate typical oppositions to the conflicting relations between social groups [21]. Adopting drinking behavior (i.e., quantity, modality, context [22] [16]) which departs from the normative prescriptions of the group, expose the individual to the risk of negative judgment and exclusion.

Social contexts as normative frameworks: the context-dependent “(ab)use”

Context refers here to the immediate environment of the individual, to the physical/environmental setting in which drinking takes place, and to the social or interpersonal setting in the situation [9] [23] [24].

Drinking contexts have been found not only to impact actual drinking behaviors [25] [26] [27], but also alcohol norms and their perception. These contexts may constitute “*normative frameworks*” [16], that is context may change alcohol norms and their perception. In turn, these norms influence individuals’ drinking behaviors [9] [28] and individuals judgments of others’ drinking behaviors [16]. For instance, it has been shown that US students overestimated norms favoring alcohol consumption in specific contexts (e.g., 21st birthday parties [29]). Furthermore, among French students, alcohol consumption is perceived more favorably when occurring in social groups than when alone [16], and the number of alcohol glasses reflecting a normal consumption in a group situation is significantly greater than the number of glasses reflecting a consumption denoting an addiction in a solitary context [22].

Taken together, these points highlight both the functional character of context [9] and representations [25]. This one contributes to the interpretation of situations [31], and impacts evaluations of drinking behaviors and judgments about individuals adopting these behaviors [17] [11]. They also show that alcohol norms, but also their perception and misperception [32], are context-dependent [9]. There is thus a primacy of the context of consumption in the evaluation of alcohol use and abuse [33]. “Use” in a given context becomes “abuse” in an other one, and vice versa. Indeed, it is useful to question moderate drinking because the

question that arises in relation to the contextual effects that have been highlighted in the literature refers to the meanings carried by these contexts in terms of perception of consumption as adequate or not. Common sense considers that the solitary consumption context refers to the question of the figure of the alcoholic and that the group consumption context refers to the figure of the friendly person. Therefore, the question of moderation no longer arises in terms of quantity but in terms of frequency of consumption. Thus, moderate consumption for common sense would be more like infrequent and occasional consumption than moderate consumption in quantity. This distinction is of great importance in understanding the consumption of young people in particular who seem to feel protected from alcoholism by excessive consumption on particular occasions. For them, in fact, consumption denoting an addictive relationship to alcohol is dependent on the representation of the alcoholic figure consuming alone and every day. This problematic way of looking at their relationship to alcohol therefore leads them to excessive and occasional consumption uninhibited and perceived as legitimate and safe.

These elements make it possible to advocate for a contextual and contextualizing approach to drinking behaviors. As we have seen, the shift in alcohol use or abuse remains relative to the drinking context [16] [9]. However, it is important to remember that despite the shifting appreciation of “good” or “bad” consumption, WHO has defined a set of recommendations. In fact, these general recommendations are renegotiated by consumers in order to legitimize their behaviors. As for example, cannabis smokers renegotiate the harmful and dangerous nature of the use of this substance by making an inter-substance comparison with alcohol. Indeed, Tavani, Lo Monaco, Piermattéo, Guéned, and Collange [34], in a French context, have shown that the more cannabis use is reported by the participants, the

more they resort to comparison with alcohol to justify their consumption and renegotiate the harmfulness of this behavior. Thus, if consumer standards are subject to contextual renegotiation, then it is entirely possible to consider, in the light of Becker's proposals [35], that deviating from a norm is equally subject to this form of contextual regulation. In the end, the distinction between the normal and the deviant remains relative and is more a contextual assessment. In addition, works on positive deviance and related identity issues [36] [37] [38] [39] show how difficult it is to classify a behavior as normal or deviant.

“Use” and “abuse”: an identity matter?

Alcohol, as a cultural object, can contribute to the definition of a given social identity. It is, for instance, the case of wine for French people. In this framework, depending on the meaning attributed to alcohol—or wine, in this example—, the identity associated to it may consist in the adoption of specific positions or behaviors regarding this object. At a lower level of analysis, it is also possible to consider that alcohol consumption—or the amount of this consumption— may be part of the ingroup prototype [40], as it is, for example, the case for students [41] [42] [43]. Indeed, being a student implies to drink, and drinking constitutes one of the signs which allow the recognition of someone as a member of the group (i.e., “we drink therefore we are” [15]). While, as we mentioned before, this norm of consumption may be wrongly identified [32] — especially regarding its quantity —, it will nevertheless affect drinking behaviors, thus contributing in giving a perceptible and descriptive character to the norm [44] [45]. Aside from this descriptive dimension, the norm can also be more injunctive: as drinking constitutes a part of “what it means to be a student”, it thus appears necessary to engage in drinking for the members who share that social identity [46] [47]. On this basis,

“use” and “abuse” will take a specific meaning for the group, who will set the rules and boundaries of the normative consumption, thus indicating what is desirable and what is problematic [15] [9]. This normative character of consumption is then rather coercive. Yet, this pressure to engage in drinking is not only the result of an insubstantial psychosocial phenomenon. Indeed, the members of the group, by their own consumption or other behaviors will contribute to ensure the application of the norm using various means. These ways to “enforce” the norm can range from a reminder of the norm, communication and persuasion [48] [49] to the pure and simple rejection of members who, by not observing the group’s behavioral standards, are considered as deviant [16]. In this framework, Livingstone et al. [15] showed that, regarding alcohol consumption, group members’ integration and rejection dynamics depend on the level of group identification. In substance, high identifiers who have positive attitude to heavy drinking are more prone to exclude non-drinkers. However, social rejection could be considered as a last resort as studies on deviance usually offer this only solution to participants in order to deal with deviant members [50]. In fact, before being rejected, deviant members may first come under scrutiny or be at the center of the attention as other group members may try to convince them to follow the norm [48]. On their part, Lo Monaco, Piermattéo, Guimelli and Ernst-Vintila [16] were able to show that the contexts of consumption updated normative frameworks regulating the relationship maintained to alcohol. They were able to show using the black sheep effect paradigm [52] that group drinking led to a better assessment of an ingroup member than an outgroup member. Furthermore, the authors also showed that in the case of solitary consumption the ingroup member is judged more severely than the outgroup member. From this perspective, the

contexts of consumption have identity issues and indicate the value of understanding the issue of alcohol through the prism of social identity.

In short, for some groups, alcohol can constitute a sign of recognition, a part of the group's identity, and be associated with specific injunctions: what should one drink? When? How? In which quantity? Etc. This identity phenomenon highlighted by several authors [45] [15] [9] [51] may constitute an essential factor to take into account in alcohol-related health prevention actions [43].

Finally, alcohol consumption is therefore a major worldwide public health issue. Whether it is fitting the standards imposed by WHO or exceeds its recommendations, it must be considered above all, from a social psychological point of view, as a very complex social practice determined by the context in which it is practiced and as referring to strong identity and cultural dimensions. Indeed, the various elements presented in this contribution invite us to adopt a plural and contextual conception of the uses and abuses of alcohol. This denotes the whole issue of adapting prevention campaigns and remediation strategies around the problem of alcohol drinking behaviors. In fact, it is probably from this perspective that it must be considered when one wants to have a more grained vision in order to be able to respond to the issues it updates in the varieties of contexts in which one is likely to encounter it.

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