

The New Temperance Movement?

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'Binge drinking' as a concept is a changing entity. The term is in common use but the various definitions of binge-drinking reflect perhaps the disparities between sociological, medical and ethical discussions on alcohol consumption. The binge drinker has come to replace earlier epithets such as 'lager lout' (MCM Research, 2004) and the new term offers ever increasing opportunities to impose moral regulation and control. What has influenced the term 'binge drinking' meaning in recent times? Are we witnessing a new temperance movement? If so, what's currently influencing this?

In contemporary society the health status and vulnerability of the body are central themes of social and political discourse. Individuals are expected to take responsibility for their bodies and limit their potential to harm others through taking up various preventative actions (Petersen and Lupton, 1996).

It is argued that alcohol misuse is costing the millions of pounds in hospital bed occupancy, days lost from work, contributing to cancer and other life threatening conditions and causing accidents both at home and in the workplace. Young people's appetite for alcohol intoxication is the focus of the UK government's public health strategy (DH, 2004a; IAS 2005, Room, Babor and Rehm 2005) and the alcohol strategy (DH, 2004b). In the last few decades, along with other lifestyle issues such as cigarette smoking, diet and exercise, consumption of alcohol in the UK has come under the gaze and scrutiny of those working in the arena of public health.

"The Government has a role in taking the lead on issues where strong national and public concern about health indicates the need to do more. This includes coordinated action with industry to increase awareness of the benefits and supply of healthy options – in particular supporting opportunities for exercise and a healthy diet – and action to reduce demand for less healthy foods, tobacco and alcohol, particularly among children and young people".

(Choosing Health, D.H. 2004).

The term 'binge drinking' provides a means by which society can demonise the behaviour of drunkenness and promote more moderate consumption (Roth, 2004). Risks to self, risks to others, the increasing societal harms associated with binge drinking behaviour are projected to the nation by a mass media concerned by the drunkenness that is permeating a society already perceived as 'sick and unhealthy'. Alcohol consumption and the effects on the community provide a focus of government criminal justice policies. Drunken behaviour is tackled, amongst other responses, with anti-social behaviour orders. Film and CCTV footage convey a nation of young drunks. Alcohol consumption by women is causing concern and consternation. Young women become the focus of media coverage. New, alarming societal threats loom with increasing incidence of sexually transmitted diseases.

The first Temperance movement emerged seeking to restrict the use of drink in various ways. In the context of the mid nineteenth century industrialising society

governments increasingly saw drinking as an area with which they should engage. In her report 'Temperance: Its history and impact on current and future alcohol policy', Professor Berridge argues that many of the current initiatives and mix of policies have their antecedents in the past and build, often unknowingly, on past attempts to moderate drinking and its associated problems. Then, as now, women's drinking was seen as a particular problem and the 'future of the race' was of growing concern (Berridge, 2005).

The new Temperance, like the new public health movement which arguably drives it; emphasises two main themes; a shift away from biomedical emphasis towards social factors, particularly 'lifestyle' and a recognition of the multifarious problems associated with alcohol and the need for multifarious solutions. The new temperance movement adopts health promotion and education strategies, diagnostic screening, community participation and healthy policy. It predominantly incorporates voluntary actions on the part of individuals and communities but also uses legislation directed at the control of risk activities such as drink driving, alcohol advertising and licensing.

The new Temperance movement, if such a movement exists, owes much to a faith in the ideas of science and social progress. It relies heavily on the belief that individuals should be assisted to achieve their full potential through their own and others' efforts. It calls for self-regulation and management. Those unwilling to subscribe to the dominant drinking 'norms' are likely to be labelled in a derogatory way (a binge-drinker, for example) and castigated for their lack of self control.

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