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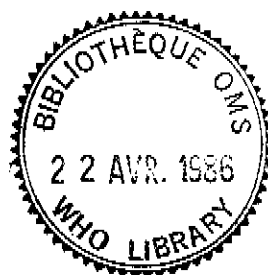
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HOW TO MEASURE PROBLEMS IN COMMUNITY SURVEYS

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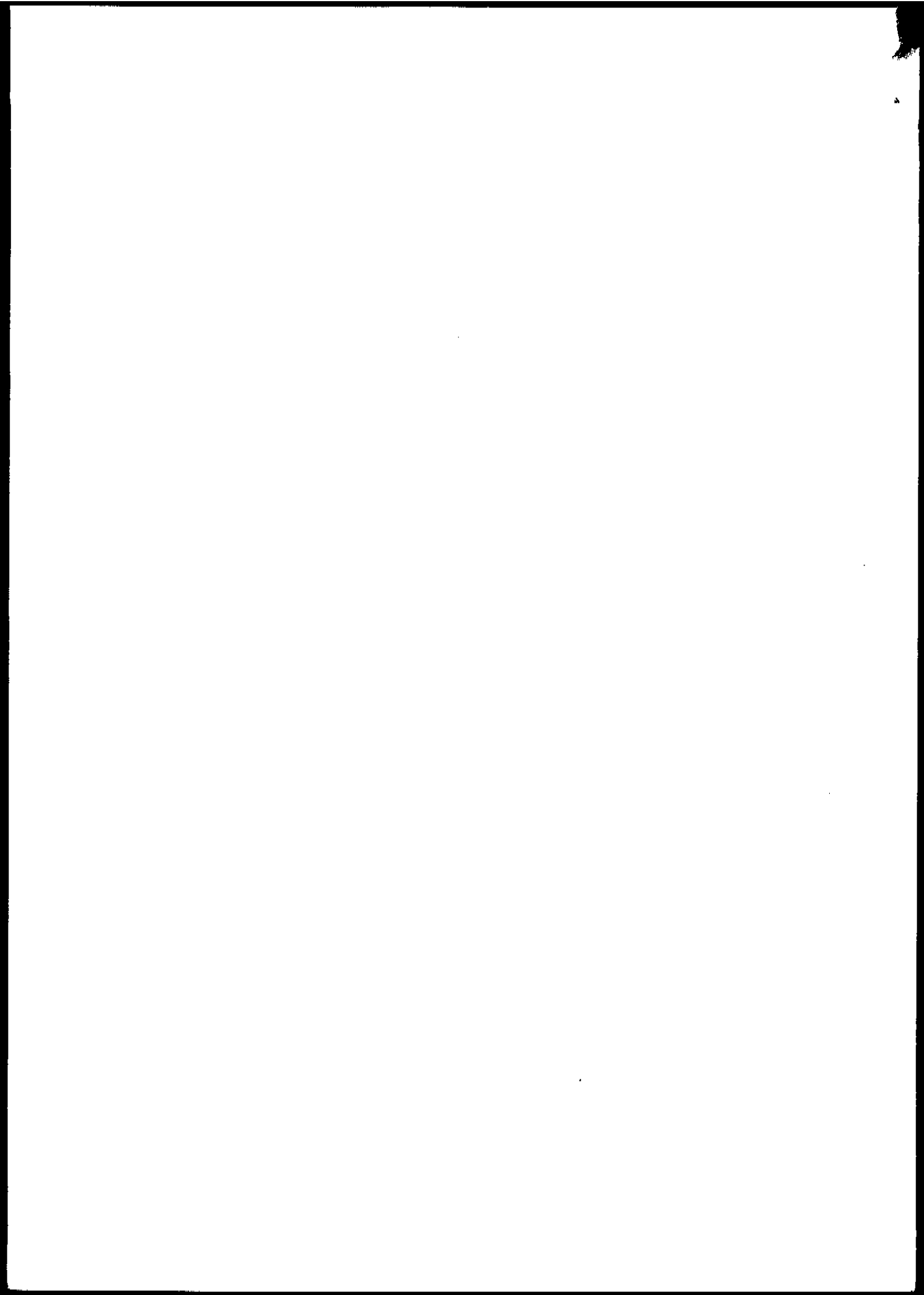
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Alcoholism - in adolescence

ALCOHOL-RELATED PROBLEMS IN YOUNG PEOPLE: A REVIEW OF SURVEY
RESEARCH AND SOME RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

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ALCOHOL-RELATED PROBLEMS IN YOUNG PEOPLE: A REVIEW OF SURVEY RESEARCH AND SOME RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

ABSTRACT

The early 1970's saw the harm wrought by young people's drinking come in for greater notice. Country after country began to use the survey method to collect data which would either support or refute the alarming reports of the prevalence of young people's drinking in the press. Broadly speaking, the national surveys fall into two main categories. The first group may be designated exclusively descriptive, frequently even explorative. The second category either had a theoretical basis or else employed very representative samples.

The majority of the surveys had cross-sectional study designs. The samples used in national surveys differ from each other in two respects: first as regards age groups and secondly according to how representative they are. The data collection methods used in surveys of young people's drinking have often been decided on by the knowledge that youngsters can easily be reached through the school system.

The surveys collected a very wide range of data on both young people's drinking itself, and on those aspects of youngsters' lives and social backgrounds which are linked to alcohol use. A few surveys included questions about whether young people have been involved in difficulties with their families, friends or officialdom because of drinking and enquire about the prevalence of drunken driving and accidents caused by drinking.

Some of the survey method's problems are very general in nature. Others, however, are tied to the hazards of "exporting" sociology from the industrialized countries to less developed areas of the world. The main problem in using survey techniques to investigate young people's alcohol-related problems is that the incidence of the harm wrought by excessive drinking may turn out to be low. It may well be that the survey method is better suited to analyzing young people's drinking patterns than analyzing the consequences of problem drinking in their own right. Research into how young people behave when drunk is urgently needed in order to develop methods of preventing the damage caused by excessive use of alcohol.

1. Introduction

Young people constitute a socially important subgroup. Adolescence is a period when social norms and values are simultaneously adopted and criticized. In the West, adolescence is a culturally-defined time of emancipation and maturation.

Society at large tends to pay a great deal of attention to the way young people drink. Part of this concern reflects a genuine worry about the future of the next generation. Nevertheless, some societies have allowed their concern with young people's drinking to blind them to the serious problems caused by adult drinking, the use of drugs and other social evils.

The consumption of alcohol has risen in the industrialized countries since World War II and has also increased in most of the Third World. In some countries, opinions about young people's drinking and the problems it brings about have conflicted with each other or been founded on exaggeration.

The early 1970s saw the harm wrought by young people's drinking come in for greater notice. Country after country began to use the survey method to collect data which would either support or refute the alarming reports of the prevalence of young people's drinking in the press (e.g. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5). Over the last twenty years or so, therefore, reliable factual data about how matters stand have been at a premium.

2. Survey as a method

The survey method, viewed in very general terms, is merely an all-round tool for filling data matrices. Few people would dispute how important the survey method is and the part it has played in furthering sociology. It has proved indispensable for clarifying the human condition and providing insights into social theory. The rapid development in social science of the last few decades might not have taken place without it. The very success of the survey method, however, now also forces us to pause and take stock of its scope and limitations (6). All in all, the survey method was - and is - merely one of the tools which social science employs to bring its research targets into sharper focus.

When research became interested in young people's drinking in the 1950s, the survey method was chosen. It was relatively easy to reach young people through the educational system or to take representative samples in geographically delimited

urban settings. The studies of the 1950s and 1960s were inspired by theoretical ideas (e.g. 7, 8) or by a certain degree of liberal attitudes to alcohol policy (9).

Broadly speaking, the national surveys fall into two main categories. The first group may be designated exclusively descriptive, frequently even explorative. These surveys were often conducted within tightly fixed geographical limits or used samples which represented but one segment of the young people - certain forms at school, say. They did not avail themselves of the experiences of established schools of research and neither were they part of a wider scheme of research. The second category, however, had a more ambitious point of departure. They either had a theoretical basis or else employed very representative samples in order that their findings might have a more general validity. Indeed, some of them did both.

Study design

The majority of the survey studies which focussed on young people's drinking or the problems it causes had cross-sectional study designs. Some, however, collected retrospective data, asking questions about how old young people had been when they first began to drink and experiment with various categories of alcoholic beverage. Research in North America and in the Nordic countries, in particular, has striven to keep the time trends of alcohol use under observation by collecting data at fixed intervals with cross-sectional studies which employ comparable samples (e.g., 10, 11, 12, 13).

Longitudinal studies are fewer and farther between, some of them have had theoretical points of departure and empirical execution of the highest standard. The time span involved has varied from a very brief 1-3 years to much longer periods. The more prolonged studies have set out to clarify how well the drinking of the young person can be used to predict the drinking habits of the adult - they have not, in other words, been concerned with the evolution of young people's drinking itself.

3. Samples

The samples used in national surveys differ from each other in two respects: first as regards age groups and secondly according to how representative they are. The age groups selected reflect the biological and social maturity of young people at the time the study is carried out. The youngest age group which the studies of the 1960s included was usually 14 year-olds; US studies dealing with the incidence of alcohol use of children aged 12 and under, for instance, were rare before 1970. Nowadays, young people reach biological maturity earlier than was the case twenty years ago, and the youngest survey age group is now usually 12 year-olds. Nevertheless it should be borne in mind that those biological changes accompanying puberty which usually mark the onset of adolescence vary according to environmental factors - for example, geographical location and nutrition (e.g., 14).

The biological changes which accompany puberty can be accurately measured and observed. Adolescence itself, however, cannot be so easily defined. The common view is that adolescence is over when the individual becomes fully initiated into adult roles and responsibilities. But the adoption of adult roles becomes increasingly delayed as cultures become more and more complex. In the developing countries and where social deprivation prevails, adolescence may be very brief indeed. In the industrialized countries, on the other hand, adolescence tends to last for much longer. Furthermore, young people now spend longer at school and find it harder to embark on their adult careers, with the result that the onset of adulthood is turning into a new social interlude or overlap between childhood and maturity.

How representative the samples used in national surveys are, also varies in the geographical sense. Most studies employ samples taken from the capital city of the country in question or concentrate on selected countries or provinces. It is relatively unusual for samples to be representative of young populations as a whole. Frequently, for instance, the education system is used to select the groups to be studied; high school students are generally chosen.

4. Data collection methods

Methodological reference works for social research overflow with both general and detailed advice on how to conduct interviews. Interviewing is considered to be a better way of collecting data than questionnaires. When questionnaires are used, the decisive factor is generally that they are cheaper than interviews.

Nevertheless, the antithesis between interviews on the one hand and questionnaires on the other is largely artificial. The question as to which data collection method is the better one quite simply cannot be answered. Neither, furthermore, should one forget the fact that data collection is a process of interaction, no matter whether it takes place orally or is written down. Even in the case of questionnaires, the fictive role partner - the imaginary social scientist - is always present in the mind of the respondent.

Interview and questionnaires can be used to complement each other. On the one hand, interview data can be amplified at a later date through questionnaires; on the other, questionnaires can be used to delimit the target group for subsequent detailed interviews. It is also possible to use hybrid forms which are a mixture of interview and questionnaire.

When young people are being interviewed, the age of the interviewer should be taken into consideration - especially if "difficult" subjects such as love, sex and drinking are involved. Questionnaires are also more reliable than interviews in such matters; the more socially condoned a given form of behaviour is, the more unreliable the answers given to interview questions about it will be. People are more likely to admit blackouts and drinking to help them recover from a hangover in questionnaires.

The data collection methods used in surveys of young people's drinking have, in effect, often been decided on by the knowledge that youngsters can easily be reached through the school system. Different countries, however, have different traditions of collecting data for alcohol research. For example, in the USA surveys have been conducted by telephone interviews, in Norway and Sweden by questionnaires and in Finland by both interviews and questionnaires.

5. Variables in analysis

National surveys of young people's alcohol consumption and the problems it causes differ widely according to the particular problem being examined and the variables being used to analyse it. More thoroughgoing surveys collect a very wide range of data on both young people's drinking itself, alcohol-related problems, and also on the aspects of their lives and social backgrounds which are linked to alcohol use. Narrower surveys, however, restrict themselves to examining alcohol use with the aid of a few variables only and ignore social factors altogether.

Questions aimed at elucidating background factors, on the other hand, have centered on the young people's surroundings (geographical location, type of housing area), the conditions he lives in (parents' social status, income level, available spending money), his career (whether at school or working), social relationships (dating, gang membership), and on hobbies and pastimes.

The aspects which surveys of young people's drinking have focussed on include, for example, the age of a young person's first drink, how much he consumes on each drinking occasion, drinking frequency, how much he drinks within a given period (fortnight/month/year), and drinking contexts. These factors are sometimes examined in great detail.

Popular methods of conceptualizing young people's involvement with alcohol have been

- 1) to identify young people who have entered an alcoholism treatment facility,
- 2) to apply adult diagnostic criteria of alcohol dependence syndrome and
- 3) to apply psychological measures of alcohol dependence syndrome in adults to adolescents.

The first method of definition has inherent self-selecting qualities that can cause difficulties when attempting to identify the scope of this problem. Probably the most striking flaw of the two other methods is that these instruments were standardized on adult subjects. As a consequence, they have no empirical validity with adolescent populations. Some of the items on these instruments are not translatable into adolescent experience. Only rarely are cases of alcohol-related disease - the classic symptoms of alcohol dependence - or the adverse consequences which befall adult alcoholics found amongst young people (15). Even when there are physiological consequences, young people only rarely show physical dependence on alcohol. And most young problem drinkers, moreover, apparently find a way out of their difficulties by their middle or late twenties (16, 17, 18).

However, Mayer and Filstead (19) have designed an instrument (Adolescent Alcohol Involvement Scale = AAIS) for identifying those teenagers who are misusing alcohol. The instrument does not have practical applications since it was primarily designed as a research tool to facilitate the definition of alcohol misuse among young people and it has not been applied in studies outside North America. The responses to questions of the AAIS do not represent continuous data and the

instrument might work in a very different way depending on the sociocultural context it is used.

There exists, however, another approach; instead of focussing on individual problem drinkers, studies can concentrate on the individual consequences of problem drinking. This approach asks questions about whether young people have been involved in difficulties with their families, friends or officialdom because of drinking (20, 21), and enquires about the prevalence of drunken driving and accidents caused by drinking (falls, exposure, fires, losing property, and so on) (e.g., 20). This enables the researcher to complement the picture given by official records which only lay bare a fraction of the harm wrought by excessive alcohol use.

One important difficulty is due to the fact that both drinking and consequence due to drinking present huge variations during the lifetime of an individual. Most survey studies, however, tend to chart consequences of drinking on a lifetime basis, partly because of the infrequency of severe consequences, and perhaps, partly due to the traditional conceptualization of alcoholism as a progressive disease and of drinking problems as conditions rather than events (22).

Cahalan and Room (23) have made a very careful distinction between current and lifetime problems. They have shown, that roughly twice as many persons as report current consequences of a certain kind will report having ever had consequences of the same type. As a result, if problems are measured on a lifetime basis, we do not know whether they are due to current drinking patterns or belong to some earlier period in the life of the respondent.

To compare the probabilities of various consequences at different consumption levels from one study to another, we would need a common measure for reporting the consumption. According to Mäkelä (22) annual consumption or consumption per some other time unit of 100 % alcohol is the most obvious candidate, but only few social investigators report data in these terms.

The overall intake should be complemented, but not substituted by quantitative measures on style of drinking, such as frequency of drunkenness, rather than qualitative typologies.

A major advance in understanding alcohol abuse, especially in adolescence but also in young adulthood, has come from research showing a linkage between problem drinking and other problematic behaviour. It is increasingly clear that alcohol abuse is not an isolate pattern of behaviour but that it is associated with other problem behaviours such as cigarette smoking, illicit drug use, delinquency, and precocious sexual experience in youth.

6. Survey method's limitations

There would seem to be two reasons why the survey method has been so successful. First, it gives theoretically relevant data and secondly, the data can be statistically processed (6). Whilst social science has never been short of relevant data, only seldom can statistical techniques be applied to them.

Of course, every research method has its limitations. Some of the survey method's problems are very general in nature. Others, however, are tied to the hazards of "exporting" sociology from the industrialized countries to less developed areas of the world.

Empirical sociology has its strongest foothold in the North Atlantic community. The survey method best lends itself to settled societies where there is a slow rate of change and little internal conflict and which are highly individual-oriented, inner-directed and have a high degree of correspondence between thought, word and deed (6). It follows that applying survey techniques to, say, most of the developing countries, will bring about problems.

One problem in using survey techniques to investigate young people's problem drinking is that the incidence of the harm wrought by excessive drinking may turn out to be low. But on the other hand, the frequency of times drunk, for instance, can be used as a "marker variable" for targeting those young people who are likely to experience alcohol-related problems. It may well be that the survey method is better suited to analysing young people's drinking patterns than the analysis of the consequences of problem drinking in their own right.

7. Recommendations

Study design

1. Longitudinal studies which set out to understand the development of drinking habits during adolescence should ideally last for 8-10 years.
2. It is very important to appreciate that cross-cultural studies need more than questionnaire forms which are just translated from one language to another. They should be founded on an overall picture of the entire culture. Consequently, each country should be represented by a spokesman of its own when plans are made.

Samples

3. Representative samples of the young population as a whole are not always feasible. When they cannot be used, the research team should assess the need of additional samples. The populations involved should not only include youngsters at school etc., they should include young people who have jobs or are unemployed and the intake of a range of institutions (approved schools, rehabilitation centres, borstals, and so on).
4. The selection of age groups is especially important since biological maturation varies from one culture to another.

Data collection methods

5. Interviews and questionnaires should be used together, especially in developing countries. Respondents might be given oral advice on how to fill the questionnaire in, even though the actual replies are to be written down. Similarly, the completed questionnaires could be collected the researchers themselves instead of using the mails, thus making it possible to check that all the questions have been answered and understood correctly.
6. The survey method should be complemented by other approaches as well - statistical material could be employed and using observational research could be considered.

Variables

7. The questionnaire/interview should include questions which would make it possible to calculate annual consumption with alternative time units. This would enable the research team to assess the probability of various alcohol problems at different consumption levels.
8. Overall consumption should be complemented with quantitative measures of drinking habits - the frequency of drunkenness, say. Qualitative typologies would not be as good in this regard.

9. Drinking and alcohol problems fluctuate over the lifetime of an individual - especially during adolescence. There should therefore be a clear distinction between questions which refer to lifetime problems and less lasting problems.

The main problem in using survey techniques to study young people's alcohol-related problems is that the incidence of the harm wrought by excessive drinking may well be low. The survey method, perhaps, is better suited to analyzing drinking patterns than the consequences of problem drinking. We urgently need research into how youngsters behave when drunk if we are to combat the damage wrought by alcohol. We also need more information about the part played by society and culture at large, its norms and social sanctions.

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