

The culturally learned effects of alcohol and drugs

By **Hans Olav Fekjær**, Senior adviser, Actis, Norway

Both in alcohol education and in general discussions, there is a conspicuous lack of scrutiny of the motives for alcohol use. It seems to be taken for granted that alcohol is consumed because the beverages have uniquely pleasant taste and because the substance alcohol is a kind of wonder drug with wonderful effects on the mood.

When people are asked about their motives for drinking alcohol beverages, the answers may be classified in three groups:

1. Pleasurable taste
2. Perceived effects on mood and feelings, like "nice and cosy"
3. Characterisations related to change of behaviour, like "removes inhibitions"

1. The perceived special taste of alcoholic beverages

"There's no accounting for tastes." Nobody is entitled to tell us which foods or beverages taste good and which do not. Nevertheless, it may be interesting to scrutinize the widely held assumption that alcoholic beverages are consumed because of their marvellous taste.

Research on taste preferences has established that only the preference for sweet taste is a natural taste preference. This preference exists in all cultures, and even infants prefer sweet taste.

All other taste preferences are socially acquired through learning. The individual adopts the taste preferences encountered in his surroundings. A certain latitude remains for individual variations.

Most people remember that initially, they did not enjoy the taste of beer and wine, but rather found it aversive. Drinking is, however, perceived as a symbol of adulthood. If the neophyte has the courage to show his lack of taste for the symbol, he is told: "After a while, you will enjoy it".

Not until an individual has forced the beverage down his throat several times does he learn to appreciate the taste. The same is true for coffee and cigarette smoking.

The taste of hard liquor is usually, especially in the first period, concealed by adding beverages with less obnoxious taste.

Thus, cultural indoctrination is obviously the reason for the notion that alcoholic beverages are consumed because of their peculiarly wonderful taste. An entirely different issue is whether the alcohol itself has a strong impact upon the taste of the alcoholic beverages.

Pure brandy leaves a burning sensation in the throat. This may have generated an idea that alcohol has a strong taste. The burning sensation is, however, not due to taste properties, but to the fact that concentrated alcohol - above approximately 20 % - is a local irritant to mucous membranes.

At lower concentrations, only the taste properties of alcohol may be detected, and these are not very strong. When alcohol is mixed with pure water, concentrations below 3-4 % cannot be detected. In real life, alcohol is mixed with other taste-producing substances, and therefore, even higher concentrations of alcohol are needed for detection by taste.

This has been demonstrated again and again in experimental studies. Experiments have also proved that the people generally lack the ability to discriminate between expensive and so-called "good" wine and cognac and cheaper brands, and between different brands of beer and wine. Time does not allow me to describe it here, but I can give you an Internet address where you can find it.

2. Perceived effects on mood and feelings: Symbols generate moods

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant pointed out that we do not observe things as objectively as we like to think. We have learned of the object in our cultural surroundings, and our learning biases our perception of things. Therefore, our subjective impression of the object (Das Ding für mich) differs from its objective characteristics (Das Ding an sich).

There are numerous examples.

The Christmas tree certainly contributes to our Christmas mood. However, can a botanical analysis of the characteristics of the pine explain this? Coloured fabric pieces can influence people's mood, if the pieces happen to be flags and the occasion is right.

In such ways, objects whose objective properties are very trivial can influence our feelings. The emotional effects of symbols occur upon recognition.

Symbols are not always identified as symbols.

When the Christmas tree influences our moods and feelings, all people know that the effect is not due to the properties of the pine tree. But the symbolic functions of intoxicants are not always recognized. But it is often evident that the intoxicant's inherent chemistry cannot be the cause of the ensuing feelings:

Many people who "indulge in a glass of wine", only drink very small amounts of alcohol. Studies have shown that the effects of amounts of alcohol corresponding to one or two glasses in most cases are not discernible.

When two friends are "having a good time with a glass of beer or wine", they do not sit waiting for the alcohol to be absorbed from the intestines and then reach the brain, so that the good feelings eventually appear. Their mood peaks much earlier - at the first sip, or even at the mere sight of the unopened bottles!

Symbols and rituals pervade our lives. Candlelight make dark winter evenings cosy. Expensive food, special clothing, decorated tables and rooms generate a festive mood.

Symbols are valuable tools for evoking desirable emotions and moods. When we wish to be in a special mood, we can utilize things (symbols) which through a learning process have become associated with the mood we intend to achieve.

When we are asked if it is not "nice and cosy to have a glass of wine", the most appropriate answer seems to be:

It is nice and cosy to have a good time with one's symbols of nice-and-cosiness.

For many people, wine is a well-established symbol of cosiness. Others have grown accustomed to other symbols. Abstainers too do, of course, easily achieve a Saturday atmosphere and a feeling of cosiness by means of other symbols and rituals.

The most frequently used symbolic function of alcoholic beverages is their function as a token or signal, designed to indicate the distinction between the daily dull routines and the well-deserved leisure time, "Now, I (we) will truly indulge in a little luxury".

Intoxicants are especially well suited to denote "now-I-will-only-relax-and-have-a-good-time" situations. This is because the effect of intoxicants is a handicap in all kinds of useful work. In addition, the high prices add to the feeling of luxury.

Man is a social animal. People have a need for meeting other people, but often they will not say that they meet only in order to meet each other. Participating in some shared activity is perceived as less threatening. People can invite each other to "come for coffee" or to "have a beer". Shared activities produce a feeling of togetherness. Toasting one another serves the same function as the marijuana pipe being passed among the group members.

For groups choosing intoxicants for their important rituals, the selection of substance also has a symbolic meaning. The selected substance belongs to the group's identity and image. Different social groups tend to gather around the glass of beer, whisky, French wine or the marijuana pipes. "Tell me which (if any) intoxicant you use, and I will tell you who you are".

The majority of alcohol users do not use alcohol for the purpose of intoxication, but only for symbolic functions.

Use of intoxicants is often perceived as a symbol of adulthood. Many things which are reserved for adults are perceived in this way. Smoking and coffee are other examples.

And although alcohol for some users symbolize independence and a liberal view, this is still more significant for use of illegal drugs. The establishment views illegal drugs as public enemy number one. This gives the drugs a powerful symbolic value for those who use them, in spite of the vigorous warnings: The use represents a total rejection of the values of the establishment. Because of society's intense fear of the drugs, drug use can provide a tickling excitement similar to mountain climbing and hang gliding: Joy mixed with some fear. Status can be achieved in youth groups by taking risks and living hazardously.

The life as a street addict not only provides membership in a social group, but also an active, purposeful life, albeit a deviant one. The addict becomes intensely preoccupied with providing money for drugs, planning and committing burglaries, buying drugs and selling drugs. This life has been said to be analogous to the life of the compulsory hardworking business executive. It can fill one's life with some kind of meaning and purpose, substituting for emptiness and monotony.

The American psychiatrist Thomas Szasz writes in his book "Ceremonial Chemistry": "Many of these phenomena ... are now discussed in textbooks of pharmacology. This is as if the use of holy water were discussed in textbooks of inorganic chemistry."

Wine is not only consumed, but is also often praised and worshipped like an idol. Foreign hard liquor and cocaine may be embraced in the same way. Especially outside the wine-producing countries, wine drinking is at present increasing and spreading to new social groups. Studying the history of fashions, we can easily understand this spreading of the wine-drinking habit. Styles and fashions have largely been spread by common people's imitation of the life style of the upper classes.

Knowledge of other agricultural products than wine (e.g., potatoes or cabbage) is associated with dirty fingernails and gives no high esteem. Therefore, no one eagerly

gives such information at dinner parties. But knowledge of wine has snob appeal, gives a flavour of the higher socioeconomic classes.

Let me also mention the role of the wine glasses with their characteristic shape. If anyone would serve wine in a cardboard cup, they will understand that the glasses are an important part of the ritual.

3. Intoxicants and changes of behaviour: An alibi for performances and actions.

Intoxicants definitely have symbolic functions, but this is not the unique functions of intoxication. The unique function of intoxicants is to provide an alibi for performances and actions, which in turn leads to changes in behaviour, for better or worse.

Ordinarily, the effects which chemical substances have upon human beings conform to a certain pattern:

- * The number of different effects is limited
- * The effects are characteristic

Popular belief on drugs of abuse differs sharply from this general pattern. A countless number of different effects are attributed to intoxicants. The effects apparently vary infinitely from individual to individual and from one occasion to another. Any feeling and all kinds of behaviour are attributed to these substances.

The effects which are attributed to intoxicants are highly contradictory:

- * Some people get happy while others get sad
- * Some become pleasant and others mean
- * Some become aroused and others sedated
- * Some become active and others passive
- * Some become silent and others talkative
- * Some become friendly and others hostile

The role of intoxication as an apparent explanation for *any* behaviour and *any* emotion is a common characteristic of all drugs of abuse. From a pharmacological viewpoint, this is obviously nonsense - no single substance can have such a contradicting myriad of effects on human beings. It may be called a kind of social convention.

Intoxication is not merely an explanation to be used *after* an event has taken place, but can strongly influence the behaviour of the individual.

The opportunity to explain and justify behaviour can be used in three different ways.

1. As an alibi for bad performance. An example: Male students at Midwest university were invited to take part in wine-tasting. Half of them were told that afterwards, they would be confronted with a handful of young women, who were going to rate their attractiveness. Each student's wine consumption was secretly noted. The group who expected to have their attractiveness rated by young women, consumed on average twice as much alcohol as the others.

2. To avoid doing one's duties.

3. To transgress norms. All human beings have fantasies and impulses which are not converted to actions. The reason for not doing these things is mainly out of regard for one's self-image or one's reputation. If opportunities exist at explaining away the behaviour, more of the forbidden impulses are bound to be converted into actions.

I will only give one example, which is from Norway's most renowned author, Henrik Ibsen. In his play *Peer Gynt*, Peer's mother Aase comforts herself before dying:
Peer: I know I am to blame. What do I benefit from being reminded of that?
Mother Aase: You! No, that damned booze is to blame, that was the reason for the misery. My dear boy, you were drunk, and then man doesn't know what he is doing;

Both parts agree that it happened because he/she/I was intoxicated. The sentence is directed towards the intoxicant, not the individual's personality.

This is why substances which are regarded as intoxicants give a unique sense of freedom, which everyone who has ever been drunk or "high" has felt inside: "*Now it doesn't matter so much what I say and do.*" This feeling is well founded. Society's view of intoxicated people makes it less risky to behave deviantly while intoxicated. The behaviour does not have the ordinary consequences for self-esteem and prestige.

What is surprising to many people is that two kinds of research demonstrate that *the chemical substance alcohol does not by itself remove inhibitions.*

One kind of research is blind tests with alcohol. Because the alcohol itself does not have a strong taste, and because common alcohol doses corresponding to a few glasses can hardly be discriminated by internal cues, researchers can study the effect of having drunk alcohol without knowing it, and the effect of the false belief that alcohol has been consumed. Generally, in well designed studies, inhibition occurs when people believe they have been drinking alcohol, but not when they have taken alcohol without their knowledge. That is, the loss of inhibitions is a consequence of the thought that I have been drinking, not of the drinking itself.

The other type of research is from anthropologists. Alcohol is no invention, but rather a natural pollution: The fungi transforming carbohydrates into alcohol exist in nature in most parts of the world. When beverages containing carbohydrates are put aside for some time, alcohol is produced as a natural adulterant. In many different societies, alcoholic beverages were known before the white Europeans arrived. Some societies chose not to use beverages containing alcohol, other used it.

Anthropologists' reports often contained amazing reports on the effects of alcohol in other cultures. Only the bodily effects (impairment of skills, nausea etc.) are observable in all drinking societies. The effects of alcohol upon behaviour are surprisingly varied.

In many cultures, large amounts of alcohol were consumed without any trace of loss of inhibitions. There are numerous examples. In an anthropological survey of 46 societies, a link between alcohol and violence was only found in one fifth.

In a highly acclaimed survey of the anthropological research, the conclusion was: "Over the course of socialization, people learn about drunkenness what their society "knows" about drunkenness; and, accepting and acting upon the understandings thus imparted to them, they become the living confirmation of their society's teachings."

Whether we like it or not, loss of inhibitions is not due to the innate properties of alcohol itself, but to cultural learning. The most common objection to this conclusion is that alcohol and other intoxicants dull people's minds, what professionals often label "impaired cognitive function". But this is the case with several other substances, and the capacity to physically do things is more severely impaired than the ability to remember behavioural norms. The peculiar aspect of common ideas about intoxicants is that they apparently give a selective effect on remembering norms, while physical abilities and vigour are functioning unimpaired. Sleeping pills make the mind at least as "dull" as those of people who are drinking alcohol, but the ensuing behaviour does not indicate any loss of ability to remember behavioural norms. We remember norms until we are

fully asleep. Thus, there is no necessary or natural connection between "dullness" and transgression of norms.

It should not be so surprising, though, for we have all felt or observed the ability for drunk people to suddenly "sober up" if needed. We also hear drinkers say that "suddenly, I became sober", describing situations where unanticipated events made it very inconvenient to have lost one's inhibitions. This phenomenon can hardly be accounted for by chemical processes.

The analysis of the motives for drinking that I have given now is, in fact, not controversial among professionals. The research on motives which I have referred to are, as a general rule, just *ignored* by most professionals who themselves are alcohol drinkers. They do not want to focus on it.

In my opinion, there are two reasons for not ignoring it. One is that most people find it interesting to gain a new insight into the drinking culture.

The second reason I find for not ignoring it, is that the insight removes the vague idea about alcohol and illegal drugs being magical substances able to change mood and behaviour in very pleasant ways. There is experimental evidence that this insight does reduce drinking among teenagers and alcoholics, while teaching young people about harms related to alcohol has not been demonstrated to reduce their drinking.

About the author:

Hans Olav Fekjær is a Psychiatrist, who has worked with alcohol and drug problems for decades. After 30 years as a municipality doctor in Oslo, he worked as Attending Physician for the Blue Cross centre for 8 years. Fekjær has several publications in print and has been awarded The Norwegian adult learning award (2002), The Scharffenberg award and the advisory council on alcohol and drug problems in Norway's award for his efforts. This spring his book "Rus"- the 430 pages "bible" of the alcohol- and drug field in Norway - first published in 1994, was published in a updated third edition.

http://www.actis.no/no/nytt_fra_rusfeltet/Rus+%E2%80%93+for+tredje+gang.9UFRjS3I.ips

Fekjær: Rus. Gyldendal akademisk. Third edition 2009.

A more detailed version of this lecture, with many references to research, is found on <http://www.fekjaer.org/high.htm> . A more updated version is in the Norwegian book