

“The moment he starts drinking, the devil comes out of him”: Narrating alcohol use and abuse in Cape Town, South Africa

Introduction

Significant and important work has been undertaken within epidemiology and public health to quantify the extent to which alcohol contributes to South Africa’s significant burden of infectious and chronic disease, exceptionally high rates of violence and injury, sexual risk-taking, HIV transmission and ‘intimate partner violence’. Yet, with the exception of Morojele *et al’s* 2006 research on the influence of alcohol on sexual risk-taking among shebeen patrons in Gauteng and youth perceptions about substance abuse and sexual risk, few studies have qualitatively explored the experiences of alcohol use and misuse. This omission is significant because: (1) little is known about the qualitative links and mediating factors between alcohol consumption and poverty. And (2) because stories of South Africa’s alcohol “scourge” have raged in the country’s press, the national minister for health has vowed to “fight with his bare knuckles” to ban all forms of alcohol advertising and the transport minister has recently called for a reduction in blood alcohol limit for drivers to zero. However, even as alcohol rises and rises up South African media and political agendas, the *everyday* experiences of alcohol in poor places have been under-researched. This paper therefore explores narratives of liquor use, abuse and its consequences in poor communities in Cape Town, as well as their complex entanglements with the spaces and places in which they unfold and are made meaningful.

To do so, this paper draws on findings from focus groups undertaken in Freedom Park, Philippi and Salt River. Due to the nature of Health Survey data in South Africa, we know very little about the social and spatial distribution of alcohol consumption or harms. However, data on the spatial distribution of alcohol-related crimes (i.e. committed by those who have been drinking) is more readily available and information on the spatial distribution of (licensed) liquor outlets in the city is obtainable (with great difficulty) from the Liquor Board. Because of the limitations of this data, the three case study sites in Cape Town were chosen not as places where alcohol consumption and crime rates are particularly high, but rather as places that speak to the more generalised challenges of urbanisation, development and social change – inadequate housing, unemployment, poverty, crime, poor infrastructure – but in contrasting ways. Thus the sites exhibit contrasts and similarities in how alcohol is bought, sold and consumed and consequently how specific alcohol-related harms are generated, unfold and experienced. The paper therefore turns first to the idea of alcohol consumption as an embedded experience that is both a driver and consequence of poverty before

focussing on two of the themes drawn from the focus groups: gender interactions and social expectations; distinction and debt.

The alcohol/ poverty nexus in South Africa

In discussing alcohol, it is often assumed that you are also talking about race and poverty. It is therefore important to heed du Toit's assertion that poverty is 'an essentially contested concept characterised by a 'protean diversity and breadth of meaning, [which] imparts to it a certain inherent "messiness"'. In turn, this messiness is shape-shifting, such that 'poverty' can be invoked as an explanatory category, unsatisfactory outcome or evidence of political or developmental success/failure. In this sense, poverty is a trope and tool that can be mobilised and put to the service of a host of competing agendas. Thus, as du Toit further argues, 'discussions about what poverty is and what it is not play a key role in highlighting (or in hiding) all manner of contentious social problems, and in legitimising (or delegitimising) various political and economic arrangements'. Alcohol is clearly one such 'contentious social problem' that, when elided with poverty, problematizes both the political and economic *status quo*.

We may know more than ever about the quantitative dimensions of poverty, but we know far less about its qualitative scope. This gap is important, especially for behavioural choices that can profoundly influence personal health and wellbeing. Du Toit argues that the study of poverty has been depoliticised and technicised, but in the process, this 'vitiates the ability of participants in South African poverty debates to engage effectively with the underlying causal processes and political dynamics that underpin structural poverty and entrench inequality'. Even so, poverty discourses in South Africa remain characterised by their lack of critical engagement with an 'analysis of social relations of power' and, in even broader terms 'the social' itself (du Toit, 2011, 128). This is important not only to bring agency to accounts of poverty, but also to challenge the presentation of such accounts through either a moral register or in a developmentalist language of technical 'fixes'. Alcohol straddles both these domains as a culture of excessive, hazardous drinking is cast as immoral not just for the accidents, injuries and crimes it causes, but also for representing a particular immorality of the poor who should (or so the moralising goes) be more concerned with addressing basic needs than buying alcohol. Not only is this discourse prevalent throughout the focus group discussions, but it is also evidenced in other ways such as the FAQ section of the 'Basic Income Coalition' which asks the question, 'how can you prevent people from wasting the grant on alcohol'? While the technical fix exists in the form of supply-side restrictions on liquor, the moral and rights-based discourse has shaped policy debates in Gauteng over potentially banning alcohol sales to (poor) pregnant women. Discourses of morality also place the question of *choice* on somewhat

perilous ground. Are the poor irresponsible because they lack in choice? Or are they irresponsible because that is, ultimately, their choice? Here, accounts become hazier. If the poor do choose to drink in an irresponsible way, are they 'undeserving'? Or are there fundamental, structural reasons which condition these choices, rendering the poor at a stroke, 'deserving'? Many South Africans drink too much, but the poor bear a disproportionate burden of alcohol-related mortality and morbidity raising questions about the processes by which this burden unfolds, is experienced, understood and made sense of. This paper offers an initial, tentative and exploratory step towards answering these questions.

i. Gendered and social expectations

South African men are far more likely to be drinkers than women. Indeed, 34% of urban men reported having a drink in the past seven days, compared to just 12% of women. In the Western Cape, 70% of men and 39% of women reported ever having drunk alcohol, and 55% of men and 21% of women reporting drinking in the past 12 months. The gender split is replicated across all education levels (although the difference between male and female drinkers declines with educative attainment). Men between the ages of 25 and 44 are the most likely to have had a drink in the past week, while for women it is those aged 35-44 and 55-64. So there is both a gender split in the likelihood of drinking, but also variations in their age profiles. Interestingly, women are far more likely to report binge drinking at weekends than men, with 42% of women over the age of 65 reporting this compared to only 4% of men the same age. In the Western Cape, 23% of men and 27% of women reported weekend binges, but women are more likely to binge on weekdays (5% versus 1%). Before rushing to assume that women are South Africa's greatest risk-takers with regards to liquor consumption, the differences in the upper limits of bingeing should be noted. This may well account some of the differences between the relatively low likelihood of drinking but the high rates of bingeing among women. Importantly for this discussion, it also points to differences not simply in the physiological metabolisation of alcohol, but also in the societal norms around gendered drinking patterns.

There was a resounding agreement by respondents that women not only drink the most, but were the "worst" drinkers. This was especially highlighted in Freedom Park, reflecting perhaps the fact that the highest rates of weekend binges are found among coloured South African (38%).* While respondents acknowledged that trauma may drive women to drink, they were still judged (most critically by other women) for failing in their maternal and marital duties, choosing alcohol over feeding their children and losing their self-respect. Such judgments were also based on the *type* of drinks that women were consuming, with beverages such as cider (e.g. Savanna) seen as a woman's

drink and beer and whiskey viewed as 'male' drinks, unbecoming of women. The growing number of women drinkers often seemed to be viewed as evidence of a broader decline in the moral fabric of communities, mounting hardship and shifts in behavioural norms and expectations. It is interesting that in this quote it is the women who are told that they should be "ashamed" of their irresponsibility and anti-social behaviour*

The group of older women in Philippi reported their disgust at the growing number of women using men to get alcohol and, in turn, using alcohol to get men. One respondent shirked any notion of female solidarity by arguing that 'if men could control the females it would be better'. The group of younger women also expressed concern at the practice of making oneself dependent on men for liquor, suggesting that it cheapened women and left them vulnerable as 'guys who pay the bills will want something in return, so people expose themselves to such things as rape'. Not only then are women drinkers viewed as setting a poor example to other women, their children and families; but those who use liquor strategically are purposefully placing themselves in (even greater) situations of vulnerability. In communities where rates of rape are among the world's highest and patriarchal structures pre-figure a women's guilt; these drinking practices are a double-edged sword. On the one hand, women have an equal right to drink. However, doing so seems to legitimise blaming women for being victims of violence. Women are somewhat trapped: if they drink they are rendered vulnerable to the actions of men and the moral judgments of others in the community. If they do not drink, they remain at the mercy of the consequences of male drinking*.

As the quote suggests, female unemployment not only drives the stresses that provoke drinking as a coping mechanism, but also creates dependency on the male breadwinner that undermines women's capacity for empowerment and autonomy through paid work. In turn, women are reticent to leave their husband or partner even in violent situations as they are wholly dependent on their income for basic household provisions for themselves and their children (who are viewed solely as their responsibility). These gendered dynamics are central to the ways in which alcohol consumption unfolds in poor communities, but it is inextricable from the broader social norms that also pattern alcohol use and abuse.

One of the questions asked of respondents was 'how often' people in their community drank alcohol. This question is significant given that hazardous and harmful weekend drinking is normalised, but heavy weekday drinking was seen to mark 'addiction', most commonly among older drinkers. Respondents often asserted that drinking everyday emerged from a lack of work, but the group in Freedom Park was slower to ascribe higher rates of alcohol consumption simply to the

unemployed* The question of *how* liquor was sold in communities provoked lively discussion. Almost all respondents stated that they lived near at least one shebeen and that their numbers were growing. Members of the Salt River church group highlighted that the monopolisation of household resources by male drinkers had led at least one woman they knew to start a home-based shebeen to ensure an income to feed the family. The irony of being forced to sell liquor to pay for others' liquor is clear, but selling alcohol is also an important coping strategy in many poor communities. Yet for respondents in Freedom Park, even these shebeens were problematic. Participants recounted the ease of selling liquor, but its negative consequences for the reputation of the shebeener as well as that of their neighbours and quality of life* While personal proximity to drinkers was seen as conveying a bad impression of an individual's social standing or of their home, younger respondents were at pains to point out the distinction offered by drinking, although often at the cost of huge personal debt.

ii. Distinction through debt

Younger focus group respondents were more likely to admit that they 'don't have a cause of [their] drinking, to some it is a problem and to some [i.e. them] it is happiness and exploration' (PYM). Many of the young men for example, sought to distinguish themselves through the purchase of 'green bottle' premium lagers. The recent growth of this market segment (e.g. premium lagers such as Amstel, Windhoek, Heineken, Peroni, Grolsch and Pilsner) shows that not only have consumers turned away from SAB's stalwart beer brands Castle and Black Label, but is also reflective of the tussles for market share between Brandhouse and SABMiller that have dominated the political economy of liquor over the past decade. Amstel in particular was flagged up by the young men as the aspirational drink of choice 'when you have money'. Green bottles are thus seen as a drink for the young and a marker of wealth and status, but beyond this, certain brands of alcohol were viewed as distinguishing particular types of drinkers*

The brand of alcohol is not just a reflection of gender preferences, but also of economic success and personal status, however short-term. Status is also demarcated by the total volume purchased, even if customers had no intention of drinking it all. In turn, being able to splash cash was thought to guarantee the attention of girls and command the respect of fellow drinkers* Rarely, respondents admitted, did they have sufficient money to drink large volumes of Amstel and instead were usually reliant on cadging drinks or getting credit from shebeeners or loan sharks. In such cases, the need to be seen drinking, especially on weekends, subsumed available funds and it was common in all three sites for respondents to have either taken out a short-term loan themselves or to know someone who had turned to loan sharks. Seeking credit was particularly acute at the end of the month when

those on monthly wages got paid and drinking rates were even higher than usual. Here, loan sharks were a common port of call even for those people with jobs*

The young female respondents in Philippi were exceptionally negative about the rise of loan sharks and shebeeners extending credit to patrons or capitalising on inebriation by charging a drunk customer more money for the same drink. While this practice is not doubt entrepreneurial, the young women's focus group concurred that shebeeners were doing little to help the community's alcohol problems and were instead benefitting from the misery of others. Another young female respondent in Philippi corroborated this viewpoint and added that shebeen queens were able to profit from their intimate knowledge of their patrons by extending credit at strategic times. For the older men in Philippi, pensions were the main source of drinking money, but this also failed to last long, especially where there was an expectation of reciprocity in buying drinks. For some, the debts at the shebeen are so huge that any pension income immediately went straight back to the shebeener. Respondents across all sites expressed fears over the negative effects on the community and families of shebeeners extending credit to patrons. Members of the SRCPF expressed opposition to the idea of facilitating parasitic drinking venues that 'profited' from addiction. However, Salt River is unique among the case study sites in its marked variations in venue and clientele reinforced by on-going processes of gentrification*. Again, distinction comes into force as the CPF express a desire to attract the "right" kind of venue and, as a result, a "different", affluent clientele. The social, political and economic tensions wrought by the area's rapid gentrification are clearly visible in the landscape of liquor regulation and provision as, while shebeens are routinely raided by the police, "champagne bars" are positively feted. Alcohol is therefore used as a token of distinction, social differentiation, as a marker of status, (temporary) wealth, an indicator of masculinity as well as a tool to attract women. The aspirations attached to drinking and the desire for the status and state derived from drinking seemed, at least for the young male respondents in Philippi, to exceed the financial resources needed to realise them. The result is a perpetual spiral of aspiration-on-credit, driven by shebeeners and an increasing number of loan sharks, with dramatic consequences for families and communities forced to fill in the resource and care gaps left by the determination to drink.

Conclusion

This paper has explored how alcohol use, abuse and its consequences are experienced by residents of three poor communities in Cape Town. While it would be expected that respondents in the different sites would vary in their views of drinking and its harms, the degree to which they concurred about the magnitude of alcohol-related harms is striking. Indeed, positive stories of alcohol – with the exception of those linked to the bravado of the young male group – were

relatively rare. There was really only one account of positive experiences of alcohol and even this was tempered by the suggestion that drinking for fun could all too quickly turn violent*. Alcohol is a pervasive part of the South African urban landscape and the experiences that shape it, yet when it is laid over situations of absolute as well as relative poverty, the consequences of drinking are only magnified. This may help explain a tendency among focus group respondents to view the problems of alcohol as being local and contained within communities, rather than constituted by forces that operate at a multiplicity of scales. With the exception of unemployment as a driver of stress, boredom and drinking, little reference was made to places outside of the case study sites. It was only one respondent from the Salt River Church Group who alluded to the idea that drinking might not just be a problem in/ of poor places*. Rather, poverty may make drinking and its problems more visible. Richer people might drink the same amounts and commit violent acts, but they might be hidden behind the gates and walls of private homes. Alcohol is a common way of alleviating the stresses of poverty – from severe financial hardship, to everyday stressful events and conditions that typify poor communities – but the consequences of drinking also act as an acute and chronic *stressor*. Moreover when alcohol erodes coping mechanisms, but selling it enables coping, then the question of how best to formulate policy that respects the rights of the poor to consume, while protecting such communities from harm becomes even more complex. Little if anything is written about the rights of the poor to consume alcohol, largely as such discourses are anathema to a public agenda focused on controlling supply, limiting access and regulating availability. Yet, when historical and contemporary inequities in the distribution of liquor licenses mark social and spatial boundaries in the legitimate right to sell and consume, more reflection is needed on how best to manage harms while preserving rights. Here the focus group findings are instructive as respondents agreed that there were already enough rules and regulations, but problems sprang from their lack of fair and efficient enforcement. Without community trust in either the police or judiciary to ensure that drinkers maintain the right to consume without risk, then alcohol control will fail. The mismanagement of both *de jure* and *de facto* rights is a key driver of alcohol-related harms. The latter may follow from the former, but without any guarantee of the former, then alcohol-related harms will remain.