



The Palgrave Handbook of Psychological Perspectives on Alcohol Consumption

Edited by

Richard Cooke · Dominic Conroy
Emma Louise Davies · Martin S. Hagger
Richard O. de Visser

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Preface

Alcohol consumption is a behaviour with a long history. According to archaeologists, chemical traces of pottery jars from China (circa 7000 BC) contained residues of a fermented drink made from grapes, berries, honey and rice, and it has been claimed that wine was first produced in 5400 BC in Mesopotamia. In the present day, according to the World Health Organization's 2018 Global Status Report on alcohol and health, alcohol consumption continues to be a common activity in many societies worldwide. For example, in the Americas, European, and Western Pacific regions, more than 50% of the population describe themselves as current drinkers. However, alcohol consumption is less common elsewhere, with more than 50% of the population in African, Eastern Mediterranean, and South East Asian regions reporting to be abstinent.

Even within regions where alcohol consumption is common, people's consumption varies along several dimensions such as how frequently they drink (daily vs. weekly) and how much they drink on each occasion (one drink vs. multiple drinks). The combination of drinking quantity and frequency has been used to characterise an individual's drinking pattern. For instance, heavy episodic drinking is a drinking pattern that involves drinking above guideline limits during a single occasion; it can occur when drinking at home alone, at home with a partner after children have gone to bed (colloquially known as 'wine o'clock'), or while drinking at social events, like barbecues or parties. In contrast, low-risk drinking is a drinking pattern that involves drinking within guideline limits during drinking occasions, for instance having a glass of wine with a meal.

Because different drinking patterns have been shown to impact on what happens to individuals during, and after, the drinking occasion, psychologists

have been keen to explore and understand why people drink the way they do. They hope that studying alcohol consumption will provide insight into important theoretical and applied issues. From a theoretical perspective, psychologists hope to discover the factors that determine drinking behaviour, by conducting tests of relations between individual and social factors advanced as putative predictors of alcohol consumption. Such tests can be used to evaluate theoretical accounts of drinking behaviour, as well as address applied issues such as to inform the design of interventions aimed at curbing potentially harmful drinking patterns; if determinants of alcohol consumption can be identified, it is possible to target these in interventions as a means to reduce drinking behaviour and the associated harms.

The overarching aim of the *Handbook of Psychological Perspectives on Alcohol Consumption* is to bring together psychological perspectives on alcohol consumption from across the globe to stimulate discussion and debate about issues related to alcohol consumption. Therefore, we invited a range of eminent researchers to contribute to this book, and they have delivered a collection of chapters that provide a comprehensive, detailed, and varied response to the important issues and questions on alcohol consumption. When considering who we wanted to invite to contribute to the Handbook, we sought to represent researchers from countries where much of the psychological research on alcohol has traditionally been conducted (i.e., Australia, New Zealand, the UK, the USA), as well as researchers based in countries with different patterns of alcohol consumption and varied cultures and histories with respect to alcohol, including Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain. The resulting Handbook, therefore, brings together a plurality of psychological perspectives on alcohol consumption in the best traditions of academic collaboration.

The book is divided into five distinct sections. In Section I, *Psychological Theories and Predictors* (Chaps. 2, 3, 4, and 5), contributors provide an overview of various models and theories of alcohol consumption which share the distinctively *psychological* quality of being focused on individual predictors of consumption. Psychology researchers have tended to test the utility of these theories by examining their constructs as correlates or predictors of alcohol consumption.

However, such correlational research is limited as a means to understand drinking behaviour. A key concern is that understanding drinking behaviour cannot be achieved by focusing exclusively on how individuals' beliefs, motives, or perceptions relate to their behaviour, because adopting this approach fails to account for the reality that alcohol consumption is an inherently *social* behaviour, which highlights the context or environment as an important determinant. For example, people generally consume alcohol in

contexts that are inherently social, where they gather together to celebrate, chat, and relax. This means that an understanding of alcohol consumption needs to consider how it is shaped by external factors: the culture in which people live, the people with whom they drink, the location(s) where they drink, and the cues or prompts to drinking present in those locations. These issues are covered in Section II, *Social Contextual Factors* (Chaps. 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10).

Other psychological research focuses on how adolescents and young adults construct their drinking identities. This is important given the potential harms of excessive alcohol consumption in young people and also because patterns of drinking when young may relate to drinking patterns in adulthood. For example, it is normal for adolescents and young adults to construct and present their identities using social media channels. Their alcohol consumption, or their abstinence, is often a prominent feature of such activity. Studying alcohol often lends itself to qualitative methods where researchers adopt critical perspectives to explore these issues. Section III, *Drinking Identities* (Chaps. 11, 12, 13, and 14), covers a range of emerging issues in psychological research on alcohol including online drinking identities, sports teams' role in consumption, pre-drinking, and young people's drink refusal.

Relatively little research has been conducted with samples of children, but there has been a recent increase in interest in conducting studies with children to see how their beliefs about alcohol develop. Once children reach adolescence they become the focus of more psychological research. Three important issues relating to children and alcohol are covered in the Handbook: how parents discuss alcohol consumption with their adolescent children, how cultures affect adolescents' drinking, and the impact of school interventions on adolescent drinking behaviour and beliefs. These topics are covered in Section IV, *Developmental Trajectories for Alcohol Use* (Chaps. 15, 16, 17, and 18).

Psychological-informed interventions to promote safer drinking are covered in Section V, *Interventions to Reduce Alcohol Consumption* (Chaps. 18, 19, 20, 21, and 22). Interventions that are delivered at the population level (e.g., labels on alcoholic products) and the individual level (e.g., cognitive bias modification) are evaluated alongside approaches that have an explicit focus on psychological theories of alcohol consumption such as the social norms approach, which informs web-based personalised feedback interventions, or the model of action phases, which proposes that changing behaviours involves targeting change in both motivational and self-regulatory processes.

The final chapter of the Handbook, Chap. 23, provides a summary of key topics raised throughout the Handbook and presents a vision for future research studies. Specifically, the chapter discusses four themes—samples,

methods, theories, and applications—identified in the chapters within the Handbook. The chapter outlines current knowledge and developments in the theories and predictors of alcohol consumption; the social contextual factors; drinking identities; the developmental trajectories of alcohol consumption; and the development, application and effectiveness of alcohol interventions. The chapter also highlights key limitations of current research including the preponderance of studies on student samples and studies with cross-sectional and correlational designs, a fixation on a narrow set of individual-based theories with a lack of integration, and the lack of translational work and engagement of key stakeholders in the research itself and disseminating findings to the groups most likely to benefit from them.

We hope that you enjoy reading this collection of chapters as much as we have enjoyed working to bring them together in one volume. We also hope that reading this Handbook will inspire you to read the original sources cited in this Handbook and to conduct your own research on alcohol consumption.

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Lisa Buckley has focused on behaviour change research in efforts to reduce adolescent and young adult injury, primarily around the use of alcohol, experience of violence and road-related risk behaviours. Overall research expertise overlies health behaviour change programme development, implementation and evaluation where she has been a chief investigator with over \$US8.5 million in research funding and publishing over 95 papers and reports. Her work takes a focus on promotive factors for well-being, particularly through sup-

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Dominic Conroy is Lecturer in Psychology at the University of East London. Conroy has published qualitative and quantitative research concerning health behaviour among young adults over the last decade. His qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research primarily concerns drinking practices among young adults. He is interested in exploring young adult drinking practices that illuminate issues of intimacy and social bonding underpinning alco-

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Megan Cook is a PhD student at the Centre for Alcohol Policy Research, La Trobe University in Melbourne. Her research investigates young children's knowledge about alcohol. Cook's research aims to understand how young children conceptualise alcohol in terms of how children define alcohol, what children believe happens when alcohol is consumed, and what perceptions children have of the normative role of alcohol within society. Her research interests also include age-appropriate assessment techniques (e.g. the revised Alcohol Expectancy Task and the use of qualitative interviews).

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use this information to promote health behaviour change through intervention. He is also interested in research synthesis, particularly testing predictions of psychological theory across multiple populations, contexts, and behaviours using meta-analysis.

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Andrew Jones is a senior lecturer at the University of Liverpool. His research interests include the role of self-control and cognitive biases in the development and maintenance of alcohol (mis)use and overweight/obesity. He is also interested in the effectiveness of psychological treatments and evidence synthesis. Recent projects include randomised controlled trials of inhibitory control training for the reduction of heavy drinking and examining the compliance rates for mobile assessment protocols in substance users.

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Sara Rolando is a sociologist who works as a social researcher at Eclectica and is a contract professor at University of Torino. She completed her doctoral degree at the University of Helsinki, Finland, with a thesis comparing youth drinking cultures in different geographies. An expert in qualitative, web-based, and comparative methods, her main research interests are alcohol, gambling, drugs, and other addictive behaviours, which she has been investigating from different perspectives including cultures, careers, prevention, and policies.

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1

Psychological Perspectives on Alcohol Consumption

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Alcohol consumption can be considered from a variety of perspectives. For example, an epidemiological perspective would outline the prevalence of consumption, drinking patterns, and associated health conditions; a social policy perspective would emphasise the importance of evaluating the effectiveness of different alcohol control strategies; an economic perspective would highlight that alcohol consumption generates profits for businesses as well as costs for government agencies; a neuroscientific perspective would outline how alcohol affects the brain; and a sociological perspective would adopt a critical position on consumption and drinking practices.

To adopt a psychological perspective on alcohol consumption means, by comparison, to focus on individuals' consumption and the factors, issues, and

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narratives that are associated with drinking behaviour. For example, psychological research studies have addressed questions such as “how well do individuals’ beliefs about alcohol predict their future drinking behaviour?”; “how does an individual’s drinking behaviour (or abstinence) fit with their identity?”; and “how do individuals compare their drinking behaviour to other people’s drinking behaviour?” It is assumed that individuals are attracted to alcohol given its potential to help them to achieve multiple desirable personal goals, such as socialising with friends, relaxing, or loosening inhibitions. Although individuals appear aware of the harms associated with alcohol, they tend not to dwell on them. Such findings challenge the paradigm directing much health-related research, which seeks to account for consumption in terms of population-level harm caused by individuals’ behaviour and can help to steer debate towards a more nuanced, holistic understanding of the reasons for drinking, avoiding moral-based judgements. A key question guiding many psychological research studies about alcohol is: “Why do people drink alcohol?” A natural starting point, therefore, is a consideration of how psychologists have attempted to answer this question.

Why Do People Drink Alcohol?

Most people drink alcohol to achieve positive outcomes: to have fun, to increase their confidence, to lower their inhibitions in social settings, or to help them relax and forget their worries (Cooper, Kuntsche, Levitt, Barber, & Wolf, 2015; Kuntsche, Stewart, & Cooper, 2008). Thus, drinking alcohol can be seen to have positive effects both on the individual and on the people around them, marking it out as an inherently social behaviour that is as determined by external factors (culture, context, environment) as individual-level factors (see Section II).

Nevertheless, psychologists have typically focused on how individuals interact with alcohol consumption and have often adopted theory-driven, quantitative methods to understand why people drink alcohol. Such theories

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