

Gender & Alcohol: The UK Part of GENACIS, an International Study

Introduction

The use of alcohol, tobacco, illicit and prescribed drugs have very seldom been examined by using comparable methods in different countries. Gender, Alcohol and Culture: An International Study (GENACIS) is an attempt to enable researchers to investigate such issues using sections of an agreed survey questionnaire. Researchers from 16 countries, including the UK, are participating in this study. During October and November 2000 a survey of 2,027 people aged 18 years and older in England, Scotland and Wales was carried out using the GENACIS core questionnaire. Information was elicited by direct interview. Whenever respondents requested, Computer Assisted Personal Interview (CAPI) was used to obtain information on sensitive topics. This, the UK part the study, was directed by Moira Plant of the University of the West of England, Bristol. A summary is presented of the initial findings of this exercise. Additional findings from the UK data and from the complete international study will be made available in future.

Findings

The survey showed that substantial proportions of adults had been exceeding what many UK health professionals recognise as the 'sensible' limits for weekly alcohol consumption. These limits are 14 units for women and 21 units for men. A unit is equivalent to half a pint of normal strength beer, lager, cider or stout or a small glass of wine or a pub measure of spirits. Among those aged between 18-64, between 17% and 34 % of men of different ages and between 7% and 20% of women reported drinking above such limits. People aged 18-24 were those most likely to report such heavy drinking. Interestingly, young women were those most likely to drink at 'high risk' levels (35 units per week for women and 50 units per week for men). It is emphasised that the latter finding relates to very small sub-groups of people. The survey showed that the negative effects associated with periodic heavy drinking were commonplace. Rates of alcohol-related problems were much higher among men than among women. SUCH problems included hangovers, financial difficulties, harm to physical health, and fighting attributed to drinking,

More than a third of those surveyed, 35% of women and 39% of men, had smoked tobacco in the past year. In addition, 9% of women and 6% of men reported having 'misused' prescription medications in the past year. Among the 18-24 year old age group, 41% of males and 34% of females reported having used illicit drugs in the past year, most commonly cannabis.

People who had misused prescribed drugs were more likely than others to have used illicit drugs, to be smokers and to report drug-related problems. Women who had used illicit drugs were more likely than men to report having experienced some form of associated adverse consequence. Females who had used drugs had a slightly elevated risk of heavy drinking.

Males were more likely than females to report that somebody had tried to influence them to reduce their drinking. Males reported more alcohol-related problems than did females.

A number of factors were associated with alcohol and drug-related problems, and/or unwise or risky drinking. These included gender, marital status, and experience of sexual abuse.



Implications

This survey confirmed that there were some major gender differences in relation to drinking, smoking, and prescribed and illicit drug use among British adults.

As expected, males were heavier drinkers than females. Even so, a substantial minority of women, especially younger individuals, reported adverse effects from drinking. As noted above, young women were those most likely to drink at or above 'high risk' levels. Among men, the corresponding age group of 'high risk' drinkers were older. This finding may reflect a temporary phenomenon; young women who drink haz- ardously might tend to drink less with increasing maturity. Alternatively, it may provide a warning if heavy drinking and alcohol problems among British women remain as high with increasing age.

There were some clear gender differences in relation to the social and psychological factors associated with heavy/problem drinking among adults. Factors such as the experience of sexual abuse should be taken into account by carers or other professionals providing support for problem drinkers.

More generally, the information that may be obtained by use of items from GENACIS would suggest that they could usefully be included in many future studies.

Further Information

This study emphasises that there were gender differences, not only in drinking habits of adults, but also in relation to the social and psychological correlates of alcohol consumption and its consequences. Further analyses of the information obtained by this UK study and findings to be obtained from GENACIS research teams in other countries will be reported in future. These should shed more light on the inter-relationship between alcohol and gender in different cultural contexts. In the meantime, researchers and clinicians are urged to take more account of the importance of gender differences in relation to alcohol consump- tion patterns and alcohol-related problems.

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Final Report

