

Fourth Annual Workshop of the International Research Group

on Gender and Alcohol

Edinburgh, Scotland, UK, June 1-2, 1996

The fourth annual workshop of the International Research Group on Gender and Alcohol (IRGGA) was held June 1-2, 1996, in Edinburgh, Scotland, prior to the annual symposium of the Kettil Bruun Society for Social and Epidemiological Research on Alcohol. IRGGA members share an interest in gender-related influences on drinking behavior and drinking problems, and many members have conducted epidemiological and other research on women's drinking behavior. Twenty-five persons attended the IRGGA workshop, representing Australia, Canada, the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Israel, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Scotland, Sweden, and the United States. Major topics of discussion included (1) coordination of IRGGA activities with those of the EU BIOMED-II women and alcohol project; (2) collaborative data analyses and papers prepared by IRGGA members during the past year; (3) activities of IRGGA workgroups concerned with (a) societal-level gender-role indicators, and (b) marital, family, and personality influences on gendered drinking behavior; (4) the role of qualitative research in IRGGA; and (5) plans for future collaborative activities.

IRGGA and EU BIOMED Coordination. Kim Bloomfield described the Women and Alcohol Project recently funded for 1996-99 by the BIOMED-II Programme of the European Commission for Concerted Actions in Public Health. The BIOMED grant, coordinated by Kim, will support travel and collaboration expenses for seven EU researchers (S. Ahlström (Finland), A. Allamani and F. Cipriani (Italy), R. Knibbe (Netherlands), Moira Plant (Scotland), F. Spak (Sweden)) and two associate partners (L. Kubicka (Czech Republic), H. Klingemann (Switzerland)). With the exception of one associate partner, all BIOMED collaborators are also involved in IRGGA. The three major research objectives of the BIOMED project are (1) to standardize alcohol consumption measures for European countries; (2) to analyze relationships between drinking patterns and acute drinking problems within and between European countries with regard to gender; and (3) to analyze relationships between drinking patterns and chronic drinking problems within and between European countries with regard to gender. Kim noted that the standard drinking measures to be developed for European research will probably involve many of the same drinking behaviors and consequences included in the IRGGA set of standard measures. However, the BIOMED project will also gather mortality, hospital, and registry data on chronic consequences of alcohol consumption, and will use detailed reports on the alcohol traditions and alcohol policies of individual countries to interpret cross-national similarities and differences. Potentially, some BIOMED activities (e.g., national case studies) could serve as a model for future IRGGA activities. It was generally agreed that the shared interests and goals of IRGGA and the EU project, and the overlapping membership of the two projects, can enhance the research activities of both groups.

In a general discussion of how to standardize drinking measures, members distinguished between recoding of existing data into “standard” categories (as done thus far in IRGGA collaborative analyses) and developing standardized drinking measures for new data collection efforts. In any attempt to develop new gender-sensitive drinking questions, Tom Greenfield stressed the importance of doing methodological research (e.g., cognitive interviewing) on how question wording and format affect the responses obtained. Sharon Wilsnack suggested that experience gained from IRGGA and BIOMED efforts to standardize coding of existing data might eventually be put to use in a multi-country survey using new standard measures. Members agreed that a joint BIOMED/IRGGA workgroup should be formed to review existing measures of drinking behavior and drinking consequences and prepare recommendations for (1) a minimum set and (2) an optimal set of gender-sensitive drinking questions for future research. Members expressing interest in (and/or suggested by others for) this workgroup include Kim Bloomfield, Susan Bondy, Tom Greenfield, Ronald Knibbe, Ludek Kubicka, Richard Wilsnack, and Sharon Wilsnack.

Cross-National Gender Differences in Alcohol Consumption and Consequences.

Richard Wilsnack distributed a revision of the first collaborative IRGGA paper, “Alcohol Consumption and Adverse Drinking Consequences: Cross-Cultural Patterns.” Based on members’ comments at the 1995 workshop in Porto, major revisions in the paper included (1) relocating the discussion of biological and sociocultural explanations of gender differences in drinking behavior from the paper’s conclusion section to the introduction; (2) reduced emphasis on population gender ratios as a possible explanation of male/female drinking differences; (3) presentation of actual data rather than letter codes for drinking patterns in some tables; (4) inclusion of original questions from each study in an appendix; and (5) additional discussion of limitations of the data reported.

Members expressed general approval of the revised paper. There was some discussion of distinguishing “wet” vs. “dry” countries in the analysis and relating this classification to gender differences in drinking behavior. However, no consensus was reached about specific hypotheses in this area, or about the value of including these additional analyses in this first descriptive paper. Richard asked members to send him any further suggestions by July 15, so that the revised paper can be submitted for publication by early fall.

Should Alcohol Consumption Measures Be Adjusted for Gender Differences?

Richard Wilsnack invited comments on a paper prepared by the IRGGA gender adjustment workgroup and presented at a KBS plenary session on June 5. (First author Kate Graham was unable to attend this year’s workshop; co-authors are Richard Wilsnack, Deborah Dawson, and Nancy Vogeltanz.) Reactions to the paper were generally favorable. Members expressed appreciation for the care with which the paper presents the complex issues related to gender differences in alcohol metabolism and alcohol effects. Members offered several suggestions for additions to the paper, including (1) additional attention to gender differences in drinking patterns as these may interact with biological sex differences; and (2) further discussion of how age-related changes (e.g., in body water and hormone levels) should be taken into account in

determining whether adjustment for body water would be useful. Members having any other comments or suggestions were asked to send them to Kate Graham, who plans to submit the paper for publication this fall.

Consumption Levels as Predictors of Adverse Drinking Consequences. Nancy Vogeltanz summarized data from analyses of alcohol consumption measures as predictors of drinking-related problems and alcohol dependence symptoms in data sets from Australia, Canada, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, and the United States. After discussing several alternative analytic approaches, participants agreed that three different logistic regression models should be used. In these models, problem consequences and alcohol dependence symptoms in current drinkers would be separately regressed (1) on age and gender; (2) on age, gender, usual frequency of drinking, and usual quantity (in ml.) of ethanol consumed per drinking occasion; and (3) on age, gender, usual frequency of drinking, usual quantity (in ml.) of ethanol per occasion, and the occurrence of heavy episodic drinking in the past 12 months. Some participants suggested that the final analyses be conducted separately for women and for men, eliminating gender from the models so that the women-only data sets can be included. Potential problems with this option are that the possible interaction of gender with other predictors in the models could not be examined and that the loss of sample size would result in increased statistical error.

Other issues discussed included the possibility of treating age as a three-category variable (under 30, 30-50, and over 50) so that the interaction of age with other predictors could be more clearly understood. Finally, some participants suggested that using an ANOVA approach, rather than multiple logistic regression, might result in more easily interpreted findings. The University of North Dakota group would appreciate any further input from collaborators before making a final decision about the analytic strategy to be used for these analyses. Nancy will contact IRGGA members who will be conducting these analyses with more specific guidelines once a final decision has been made about the analytic strategy.

Social Indicators of Gender Roles. Members of the social indicators workgroup (Bloomfield, Kubi...ka, Neve, Rahav) led a discussion of potential aggregate indicators of traditional vs. modern gender-role behavior that could be analyzed in relation to gender differences in drinking in future collaborative analyses. Recent UN and OECD statistics for IRGGA countries were used to illustrate a number of potential indicators, including marriage, divorce, and birth rates by age; female and male education, employment, and earnings; abortion rates; contraception prevalence; and others. Ludek Kubicka proposed the general hypothesis that male-female role inequality should be related to male-female differences in drinking: where men have greater power, resources, and rewards than women (as reflected, e.g., in higher education and income), their drinking should exceed women's to a greater degree, as another status privilege or symbol. Members were interested in the use of birth rates, and marriage and divorce rates (including divorce/marriage ratios), as possible indicators of women's emancipation or autonomy. However, there was general agreement that abortion rates were not likely to be valid indicators due to confounding by availability of contraception, legal issues,

and other factors. Several members suggested looking at interrelationships among various potential gender-role indicators, with the goal of developing an index composed of a few of the best and most widely measured indicators.

Several additional indicators were suggested, including a cultural-level masculinity-femininity measure developed by Geert Hofstede (distributed by Rudie Neve) and Interpol data on rates of male/female involvement in criminal activity. Several members expressed interest in a multivariate analytic approach that would include both societal-level and individual-level gender-role variables. Concern was expressed about the relatively small number of IRGGA participants who might contribute analyses of gender roles and drinking behavior. Members suggested specific data sets that might be added to the gender-role study from Germany (Bloomfield); Finland (Ahlstrom); Russia (Mustonen); Great Britain (Plant); Italy (Cipriani); Ontario and Quebec, Canada (Graham, Xie); and possibly Spain and Greece (surveys reported in recent Alcoholism articles). Members of the social indicators workgroup will use comments from the group discussion to further develop their recommendations regarding indicators and to explore other data sets that might be added to the gender-role analyses. Included with this mailing, for non-European IRGGA members, is a copy of Hofstede's cultural level masculinity index and a related chapter by the same author, which the social indicators group proposes to discuss at the 1997 IRGGA workshop. European members will receive copies of these papers from Ingeborg Faulkner and Kim Bloomfield.

Marital and Family Influences on Women's and Men's Alcohol Use. Giora Rahav and Meir Teichman described their preliminary attempts to examine associations between marital and family variables and drinking behavior across four IRGGA data sets. These comparisons were complicated by differences in independent variables, measures, and analytic strategies, and by the scarcity of data on the quality of spousal/family relationships, in the four available data sets. Despite these difficulties, Giora and Meir believe that it will be possible to assess cross-study consistency in associations among various marital and family configurations, gender, and drinking behavior. Participants suggested several questions for analysis, if adequate data are available: (1) Do husbands view wives' drinking and its effects on their relationship differently from the ways that wives view husbands' drinking and its effects?; (2) Do women tolerate/forgive problem drinking husbands more readily than the reverse?; (3) Do women and men differ in the linkages between their interpersonal relationships and their drinking behavior?; (4) How is the quality of life within the family related to drinking behavior?; and (5) Does the presence of young children in the household modify the impact of the quality of marital relationships on women's and men's drinking?

Two new U.S. studies were mentioned that will have detailed data on marital relationships: (1) the 1995 national survey of the Alcohol Research Group, which interviewed both members of marital partnerships about drinking behavior and marital violence; and (2) the 1996 survey of the University of North Dakota group, which will conduct 15-year followup interviews of women respondents as well as interviews with their husbands or partners. Giora and Meir asked all IRGGA members whose surveys include any questions about aspects of current marital or family functioning to send their

survey questionnaires, lists of relevant items and scales, and/or completed analyses or papers in these areas. They will then correspond with interested members about possible approaches to collaborative data analyses.

Qualitative Research in IRGGA. In her presentation, “The Dual Role of Qualitative Methods in Alcohol/Gender Studies,” Jacqueline Wiseman urged workshop members not to see qualitative approaches as competing with quantitative methods. Neither should one be regarded as more “rigorous” than the other. Rather, they should be viewed as forming a partnership in the discovery and understanding of various aspects of gender-related alcohol use. Members were asked to consider how their quantitative research findings could be explained and expanded were they to collect and analyze data using such methods as observation, participant observation, depth or open-end interviewing, ecological studies, or case histories.

It was pointed out that quantification mandates a simplification of person-to-person interaction and accompanying emotions and relationships that are an important part of decisions connected with alcohol use. The strength of qualitative research is that it is compatible with people’s subjective state of existence and thus captures the complexities of human group life. As a result, it offers researchers an opportunity to understand the meaning of their quantitative findings to their research subjects. Such understanding is the best route to developing theories of motivation to act.

This research goal also has an effect on methodological procedures. Qualitative data gathering and analyses often rely on a number of small samples rather than one large one. Researchers conducting depth interviews feel free (in fact, compelled) to change question wording to suit the respondent or the evolution of the findings. Conceptualizing, coding, and analyzing data is accomplished as its gathering progresses, resulting in formulating and reformulating (or grounding) hypotheses in keeping with findings as they emerge. Thus, data gathering and analysis are accomplished simultaneously, the end purpose being the reflection and understanding of human group life as it intersects with the research problem.

Due to the idiosyncratic and detailed nature of the data collected, such findings are not considered generalizable in the same sense that the more simplified quantitative findings are. On the other hand, qualitative descriptions of the impact of relationships and emotions on definitions and decisions do offer the opportunity to create generic concepts that describe general human interactions or attitudes. These concepts have universal application -- across both time and space. Jacqueline Wiseman gave numerous examples of generic concepts that have grown out of her qualitative studies of alcoholics and their wives and offer the possibility of being applied cross-culturally to other studies, to better understand human behavior.

In closing, she pointed out that both qualitative and quantitative research approaches were developed to obtain certain types of data, while at the same time excluding the acquisition of data the other approach offers. Thus, both should be utilized. Ideally, qualitative methods would be used first, in order to develop meaningful quantitative

instruments. Second, the quantitative study should be viewed as exploratory, with follow-up by a qualitative investigation that would explain the human, interpersonal dynamics behind the statistical findings. She mentioned a number of quantitative studies and/or researchers who used or proposed using this combined approach.

Brief presentations were also given by Shoshana Weiss on qualitative alcohol research in Israel, by Jim Rooney on women's drinking in Spain, and by Marja Holmila on her quantitative-qualitative synthetic study of heavy drinking women in Helsinki. These presentations were followed by considerable group discussion of ways in which qualitative and quantitative approaches might be integrated in collaborative IRGGA activities. Jacqueline Wiseman agreed to continue to chair a workgroup on qualitative research, which presently includes Allaman Allamani, Marja Holmila, Moira Plant, Jim Rooney, Lee Strunin, Irmgard Vogt, and Shoshana Weiss. It was suggested that Salme Ahlström and Sharon Wilsnack contact Dimitra Gefou-Madianou, a Greek anthropologist who conducts ethnographic research on alcohol and gender, and invite her to participate in the 1997 IRGGA workshop and KBS symposium. During the coming year, IRGGA members are asked to take note of interesting, unexpected, or difficult-to-explain findings in our collaborative quantitative analyses that might be illuminated by the use of qualitative research methods.

Plans for Coming Year. Major activities for the coming year (and IRGGA members responsible for coordinating each) will include: (1) submission for review and publication of (a) descriptive paper on gender differences in drinking levels and consequences (R. and S. Wilsnack, N. Vogeltanz) and (b) gender adjustment paper (K. Graham et al.); (2) continued analysis of associations between consumption variables and adverse drinking consequences (N. Vogeltanz); (3) coordinated efforts of BIOMED-II/ IRGGA workgroup to develop recommendations about gender-sensitive standard drinking measures for use in cross-national alcohol research (K. Bloomfield, S. Wilsnack); (4) further review of potential societal-level gender-role indicators (K. Bloomfield, L. Kubi...ka); (5) assessment of available measures of marital/family functioning in IRGGA data sets (G. Rahav, M. Teichman); and (6) continued dialogue regarding contributions of qualitative research to IRGGA activities (J. Wiseman). Members wishing to participate in any of these activities should contact the persons listed as workgroup coordinators.

1997 Workshop. The fifth annual IRGGA workshop will be held in Reykjavik, Iceland, prior to the beginning of the June 2-6 Kettil Bruun Symposium. Additional information about the 1997 workshop will be provided in early 1997.

This report was written by Sharon Wilsnack, with the assistance of Richard Wilsnack and Nancy Vogeltanz. Jacqueline Wiseman provided the summary of her presentation on qualitative research.

