

Blaming the bloke but not the booze

April 16 2015, by Rob Brooks



“Spoiling for a Bar Fight” Credit: Jonathan Cohen/Flickr, CC BY-NC

Is alcohol-fuelled violence caused by the booze itself or by the macho culture in which the drinking occurs? If we are to believe a recent study commissioned by the alcohol company Lion, it's the culture that's to blame. That's a rather convenient conclusion for the alcohol industry. But it hinges on a fallacy and has the potential to cause much damage.

The study was conducted by [Dr Anne Fox](#), consultant anthropologist and founding director of [Galahad SMS Ltd](#) (SMS stands for Substance Misuse Solutions) who studies drinking cultures. Fox has been promoting her report in the [broadcast media](#) and [op-eds](#), pushing her conclusion that

It is the wider culture that determines behaviour while drinking, not the drinking per se. While there are very good health reasons to reduce excessive drinking, you must influence culture if you want to change behaviour.

The Lion and the Fox

Fox's report reads as a series of anecdotes and quotes, gathered during discussions with drinkers in a variety of situations, workers in bars, taxi drivers, police, emergency workers, government officials and various other people. Fox's observations are organised thematically, interspersed with folk-evolutionary speculation of the following kind:

Could ritualised drunken behaviour be a re-enaction of an evolved ancient need for joyous bonding that still persists? Given what we know about alcohol and the brain, and the evolution of the brain itself, the question can at least be asked.

And simplistic characterisations of national drinking cultures, such as:

Spaniards and Italians ... are culturally much more emotionally extroverted and do not associate alcohol so much with romantic or sentimental expression.

There is no attempt to grapple with numbers surrounding violence, or the consumption of alcohol. In fact there seems to be no way of sifting evidence with any kind of fairness to the competing alternatives at all.

Instead, as might be expected when a liquor company commissions an expert on 'drinking culture' to study what causes the violence that too-often erupts in and around venues where alcohol is served, the conclusions seems inevitable: you have to change the culture in which the alcohol is consumed.

And which aspects of culture are most in need of changing? Why, masculinity, of course. As Fox put it in the [Sydney Morning Herald](#):

The way to tackle the real underlying causes of anti-social behaviour is to address the cultural reinforcers of violence, misogyny, and aggressive masculinity in all its cultural expressions from schoolyards to sports fields, politics and pubs, movies and media.

Could it work?

The Fox/Lion report reminds me of nothing more than the American gun lobby slogan that "[Guns don't kill people. People kill people](#)". By reducing the complex issues of gun-related homicide to two apparently contradictory alternatives, those most wedded to their right to bear arms find rhetorical - if not logical - comfort in blaming the shooter and not the weapon.

Having read the report, I think there are interesting observations about the relationships that Australians and New Zealanders have with alcohol, well worth injecting into the national debate on antisocial behaviour. But should we leap from observing that culture is important to focusing all interventions on the remodelling Austral masculinity? I'm sure the liquor lobby would like to do so, but I'm not the only one who disagrees.

Deakin's Peter Miller has already published an excellent Fact Check on the Fox/Lion report, concluding:

It's not correct to say you can't "alter the culture of violence and anti-social behaviour in any meaningful way" by tackling the way people drink. There is a lot of evidence showing that changing people's drinking hours and consumption patterns reduces violence and hospital admissions – which is a lot more significant than tinkering at the margins of culture.

Cultural creationist wishful thinking

It seems that those who study 'culture', that slippery omnipresence in which we all wallow, inevitably conclude that the only way to improve society is to change culture. Drain the toxically misogynist, masculine swamp, and replace it with a more rarified egalitarian pond, and everything will be okay.

Changing 'culture' isn't easy. And it certainly amounts to far more than education campaigns, shaming and punishing bad behaviour.

Fox, to her credit, doesn't insist on throwing out all biological insights. She recognises that night-time drinking among young people is about meeting evolved biological needs, for bonding, belonging and courtship. And that [young men](#) competing with men, and seeking to impress women are the well-spring of most of the [anti-social behaviour](#).

Her report considers the example of Icelanders who consume more booze and own more guns, but do far fewer stupid, violent things per capita than Australians. She even recognises that Iceland's low-levels of economic inequality remove some of the incentives for young men to pose, to impress, and to take out the competition.

If Australia wants to "change the culture" in which drinking takes place, it will have to change more than arbitrary social sanctions and "culturally constructed" ideas of what it means to be a manly man. If that is even possible. It will have to recognise that economic conditions, create the

incentives for young men to strive, to compete and to take stupid risks.

And that means resisting the temptation to blame single causes. It isn't just the booze, it isn't just the blokes, it isn't just the economy and it certainly isn't just the culture. What matters is how those ingredients combine.

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