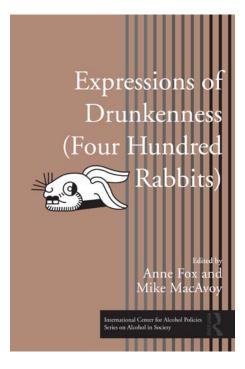
# Expressions of Drunkenness (Four Hundred Rabbits)

**BOOK SYNOPSIS** 



Edited by Anne Fox and Mike MacAvoy



Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this book are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Center for Alcohol Policies (ICAP), DrinkWise Australia, or their sponsoring companies and boards.

## **About the Book**

The goal of this book is to contribute to ongoing scholarly discussion on the very serious topic of drunkenness. The phrase "four hundred rabbits" is one of many illustrations of the deep cultural, religious, and social influences on how individuals and communities view alcohol intoxication: The Aztecs believed alcohol to have a divine origin, with a god and a goddess giving birth to 400 (meaning "innumerable" in ancient Aztec) divine children or "rabbit gods," each representing a varying degree and expression of alcohol intoxication and drunkenness. Hence the book's subtitle, which at first glance might seem light-hearted but in fact represents an in-depth look at a weighty topic.

With such rooted sociocultural factors in mind, the International Center for Alcohol Policies (ICAP)<sup>1</sup> and DrinkWise Australia<sup>2</sup> collaborated to prepare this book to advance current understanding of the individual and collective meanings, purposes, and functions of drunkenness. As the authors explain, interpretations by different disciplines of the terms intoxication and drunkenness are often inconsistent. The chapters of this book address intoxication and drunkenness from three perspectives: biological, cultural, and social. By placing intoxication and drunkenness into these contexts, the book is able to offer language and conceptual tools to help further the ongoing discussion on how best to reduce alcoholrelated harm and encourage responsible enjoyment of beverage alcohol.

- ICAP (www.icap.org) is dedicated to promoting understanding of the role of alcohol in society and to helping reduce the abuse of alcohol worldwide through dialogue and partnerships involving the beverage alcohol industry, governments, the public health community, and others with an interest in alcohol policy. ICAP is a not-for-profit organization supported by major international beverage alcohol companies: Anheuser-Busch InBev, Asahi Breweries, Bacardi, Beam Global Spirits & Wine, Brown-Forman Corporation, Diageo, Heineken, Molson Coors Brewing Company, Pernod Ricard,
- 2 **DrinkWise** (www.drinkwise.org.au) is a not-for-profit research and social change organization that fosters innovative approaches toward developing and maintaining a safer drinking culture in Australia. Its vision is to create an Australia in which drinking in moderation is acceptable and "drinking to get drunk" is unacceptable. DrinkWise is funded by the Australian alcohol industry, and governed by a board of six community and six industry representatives. The structure of DrinkWise represents a unique opportunity to link the objectives of the preventative health sector, the community, beverage alcohol industry, and government.

# **Biological Perspective**

The discussion begins with a review of the biological perspective. Chapter 2 ("The Biology of Intoxication" by Creina Stockley and John B. Saunders) reviews the physiological processes involved in alcohol consumption and examines the intra- and interindividual differences in how alcohol is handled by the body and its effects on a drinker's clinical manifestations.

The biomedical sciences approach the concept of intoxication as a biological mechanism within a social context. By all accounts, there is a measurable physiological aspect to intoxication. As the chapter authors note, "Alcohol intoxication is a pathophysiological state—that is, a disturbance of normal physical, mechanical, and biochemical functions resulting from acute alcohol consumption." Meanwhile, drunkenness characteristically implies the behavior and social effects that tend to be contextspecific. There the simplicity ends; these complex terms describe states and effects that exist on a continuum and are defined in different ways by different cultures around the world. A continuum refers to the fact that intoxication is not an all-or-nothing state; it occurs gradually with continued alcohol consumption—from the initial relaxant effects to slurred speech and a staggering gait, and to the extreme of losing consciousness. A number of official international definitions of intoxication exist. However, there are considerable cultural variations in the use of the term, including among drinkers themselves.

Overall, the chapter concludes that blood alcohol concentration (BAC) levels, although common descriptors of intoxication in biomedical sciences, are poor measures in predicting outcomes of a drinking session, and that intoxication and drunkenness are distinct phenomena. A diagnosis of intoxication must be based on both behavioral (e.g., drunken behavior) and physiological (e.g., BAC) factors—the existence of a predictable dose-response relationship is most likely a convenient fiction.

# **Cultural Perspective**

When engaged in the discourse of the phenomenon of intoxicated and drunken behavior, one cannot overlook the importance of the cultural perspective. As Chapter 3 ("The Origins of Drunkenness" by Anne Fox) explores, cultural impressions of intoxication and drunkenness are shaped by the social context, symbolism, and the perceived purpose of alcohol in a given society, facilitating a multitude of behavioral outcomes (see also Case Study 3.1: "The Round" by Véronique Nahoum-Grappe; Case Study 3.2: "Indigenous Australians and Alcohol" by Creina Stockley and Anne Fox). Despite these varied effects, how is it that we do find a certain uniformity of drunken behavior within cultures and subcultures? As it is suggested in Chapter 3, "Arguably, drunken behavior is in part a feature of culture itself. Culture is an evolutionary survival mechanism that allowed our species to adapt to every environment on the planet. It demands uniformity and predictability of behavior. Everything we do is structured by social rules, even if we are not aware of them. Drinking is no exception. We learn the rules of drunken comportment from an early age. In essence, our culture teaches us what it means to be drunk."

There is a time and a place for drunkenness in many cultural settings. Accounts from numerous countries demonstrate how the experiences, behaviors, meanings, and significance of drunkenness and responses to degrees of drunkenness are firmly located in time and place. For example, Chapter 4 ("Drunkenness, a Historical and Contemporary Cross-cultural Perspective" by Fiona Measham) reviews the competing and contrasting interdisciplinary understandings of drunkenness alongside an overview of historical and contemporary debates on its definitions and measurements in the United Kingdom, with examples of past and new drinking practices from Australia (see Case Study 4.1: "A Peculiarly Australian Phenomenon: The Six O'clock Swill" by Billie Atanasova), China, and Japan.

Overall, the term "drunkenness" is referred to as a set of behaviors associated with—not caused by—alcohol in a given culture. In this context, drunkenness is the product of culture, societal mores, expectations, and ritualized contexts; meanwhile, intoxication should refer to the clinically verifiable levels of alcohol in the bloodstream. From the cultural perspective, intoxication and drunkenness are not synonymous.

# **Social Perspective**

There is some difficulty defining at what point the social pleasures of drinking (the invisible effects) and problematic antisocial behaviors (the visible effects) intersect. In the social sciences, the terms intoxication and drunkenness are often linked with problematic drinking behaviors and issues of public disorder.

Within the legal discourse (see Case Study 2.1, "Legal Response to Intoxication and Drunkenness" by Hurst Hannum), public drunkenness has been defined as an act punishable by law in many cultures, although it might be allowed on certain occasions (e.g., Mardi Gras in New Orleans or Carnivale in parts of Europe and Latin America). On the other hand, intoxication, measured by BAC level or demonstrable impairment, has been used to define unlawful drinking and driving. Extreme intoxication has also been posited as a legal defense for certain "specific-intent" crimes. From a legal perspective, drunkenness is more often linked with problematic drinking behaviors and issues of public disorder; intoxication is defined as the clinical state of impairment. The two terms are, once again, not synonymous.

From a social marketing point of view, intoxication is a technical word that suggests a spectrum from the mildest effects of alcohol ("a buzz") to the extreme of drunkenness (see Case Study 5.1: "Drunkenness on the U.K. Political Agenda" by Jean Coussins). In this context, though intoxication is sometimes used as a synonym for drunkenness, the former may describe the socially and legally permissible process of drinking, which can at certain levels be pleasurable, responsible, and socially acceptable in both public and private. Drunkenness is the result of intoxication going too far, when self-control and personal responsibility are abandoned, and a negative outcome is likely.

Or, as Chapter 4 suggests, a state of intoxication, from a social perspective, can also be assessed in terms of "subjective interpretations of drunkenness mediated by historical and cultural discourses, both official and unofficial." Drunkenness is characterized as a behavior driven by sociocultural factors, a concept linked to cultural expressions of the physical effects of alcohol, where the context can largely predict behavioral outcomes of intoxication—in other words, social rules and expectations teach people how to interpret the effects of alcohol. Many protective factors can shape and influence the social boundaries of intoxication (see Chapter

5: "Drinking Contexts and Youth Drunkenness" by Betsy Thom, with contributions from Irmgard Eisenbach-Stangl). While there is a tacit social assumption that a certain level of intoxication can be positive, enhancing communication and social bonding, drunken behavior beyond that level may be viewed more ambiguously and as a means to disengage the drinker from his or her moral and social responsibilities. When drinking to the point of drunkenness becomes normalized in a culture or a subculture, it becomes extremely difficult to change particularly when there are occasions and contexts in which drunkenness is socially accepted as a rite of passage. Methodologies to change an entrenched drinking pattern to one that does not involve drunkenness have been poorly understood, let alone promoted, and have often focused on manipulating the external factors of supply or demonstrating the negative consequences of excessive consumption, with little effect.

Overall, the various contributors from the social perspective suggest that drunkenness is a behavioral manifestation of a social phenomenon that may lead to adverse immediate and long-term negative consequences. It is generally considered to be a more extreme state than the physical state of intoxication (at least at the lower levels of impairment). Drunkenness, thus, may be defined as the behavioral expression of intoxication, a phenomenon defined by cultural and social norms, a socially learned conduct that can be triggered even by placebo alcohol.

# **Arriving at a Consensus**

Intoxication and drunkenness exist on spectrums that can aptly be described in both objective and subjective terms. So a definition of intoxication ought to take into account both objective and subjective components from physiological to psychological, sociological, legal, and cultural—and attempt to convey the true essence of this state beyond its most obvious and purely physical manifestations. A definition of drunkenness must be motivated by a myriad of contextual factors and perceived social expectancies. For societies where drinking is permitted, rather than simply condemning and aiming to rid society of drunkenness altogether, our energies might be better spent on responding to the realities of drinking and on working to better understand the visible and invisible effects of both intoxication, on the one hand, and "drinking to get drunk" on the other, in order to promote optimal cultural, legal, and health strategies for individual and social wellbeing.

The authors of this volume reject the notion that the terms intoxication and drunkenness are synonymous; instead, they have explored definitions that take into account the full spectrum of the phenomena. They assert that the two concepts are separate yet interrelated, with intoxication being a state, and drunkenness—a behavior. That said, both the condition of intoxication and the behavior of drunkenness exist on a continuum. The levels of intoxication are contingent on certain physiological variables (such as individual tolerance, age, weight, gender, amount of food ingested, and drinking patterns). Meanwhile, the degrees or the extremes of drunken behavior are influenced by factors ranging from psychological expectations to cultural norms and social acceptance (or lack thereof). The authors also assert that there is a need globally to use drinking as a window through which to look at other aspects of an individual's life, to see how parts of a sociocultural system work in relation to each other. The manner in which the sociocultural system works overall reveals much about the when, where, who, what, why, and how of peoples' drinking.

This book seeks to draw a better, more expansive picture of the state of intoxication and the behavior of drunkenness. It is hoped that its chapters—written from biomedical, cultural, and social perspectives—will guide us in understanding these phenomena and help us describe what modifies or exacerbates their existence. As Trish Worth wrote in her "Concluding Remarks," "While we do not arrive at a neat and tidy universal definition of drunkenness, by bringing existing definitions together and exploring their meanings and commonalities, we are able to offer language and conceptual tools to help advance the ongoing discussion and inform the debate."

### Reference

Fox, A., & MacAvoy, M. (Eds.). (2010). Expressions of drunkenness (four hundred rabbits). New York: Routledge. See: www.icap.org/Publications/ICAPBookSeries

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with responsibility for the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme and all regulatory areas including medicines, food, radiation, and medical devices. From 1998 to 2001, she was Parliamentary Secretary for Education and Youth Affairs, responsible for the Youth portfolio, including school drug education. She returned to the Health Portfolio from 2001 to 2004, with added responsibility for alcohol, tobacco, illicit drugs, mental health, and suicide prevention. Since leaving the Australian Parliament in 2004, she has contributed in a number of key health areas, including by chairing the New South Wales Government Alcohol Education Taskforce.

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