

Understanding behaviour in the Australian and New Zealand night-time economies

An anthropological study

by Dr Anne Fox

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Summary



Dr Anne Fox is the founding director of Galahad SMS Ltd in the UK. She is an anthropologist who has specialised in the study of drinking cultures for the past 20 years. She has been a consultant on substance misuse, assisting the British Army, the Home Office, the Youth Justice Board and other clients. Her presentations and education packages are always backed up by relevant research and are delivered in styles appropriate to the audience, to ensure maximum knowledge retention. In her PhD thesis, she proposed a radical new theory for the origin of drinking behaviour among humans. She is a frequent speaker at conferences and at Galahad's many educational courses.

Dr Fox conducted field research in Australia and New Zealand throughout 2013 to gain a deeper understanding of the drivers of anti-social behaviour in the night-time economy, the role of alcohol in it, and the policy approaches that will best work to address it.

Her fieldwork included observation, participant observation, 10 focus groups, formal and informal interviews with government officials, transport specialists, sports organisations, lawyers, ride-alongs with police, charity workers, medical specialists and ambulance and emergency (A&E staff), representatives of the drinks and hospitality industry, bar and hotel staff, drinkers in all types of entertainment venues, and RSL/bar/nightclub managers and owners. She visited over 25 towns and cities in Australia and New Zealand across a variety of drinking occasions. This was coupled with a thorough literature review in 2014.

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Lion initiated the project in mid-2012, with fieldwork commencing in July 2013.
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There are four central themes in Dr Fox's report:

1. In a nutshell, the central point of the report is that it's the wider culture that determines the behaviour whilst drinking, not just the drinking.

Dr Fox points out that different societies, with comparable levels of alcohol consumption, have very different levels of anti-social and violent behaviour in their NTEs and explains how cultural attitudes and norms explain much of the differences.

2. The physical effects of alcohol do not determine a behavioural response.

One of Dr Fox's key findings is that – although many people believe it can – alcohol cannot hi-jack someone's better nature and make them violent.

That is not to deny that alcohol can have some very definite physiological effects and Dr Fox fully acknowledges these in her paper. Of course, over-consumption of alcohol significantly increases the risk of both short-term and long-term harm.

As she explains:

- *Dr Fox makes it very clear that “... alcohol does have some very definite physiological effects. At high doses, it is easy to see that the physical effects of alcohol can incapacitate all drinkers equally, regardless of cultural differences.”*
- *“Just because alcohol relaxes and reduces anxiety does not mean it causes inexplicable changes in behaviour or character or blocks impulse control. There are a couple of very simple observations we all can make that support this conclusion. First, the very same person on the same dose of alcohol can react in myriad different ways on different occasions and in different settings. This simply would not happen if we were talking about a purely physiological response. Second, morphologically similar humans in different cultures react completely differently to being ‘under the influence’. Some cultures see very little violence and anti-social behaviour, despite similar levels and patterns of consumption to other nations with high levels of such harm...”*
- *“..If alcohol alone makes people violent, we would expect to find incidents of violence spread evenly across the full range of drinkers, from female post-menopausal librarians to young male rugby players, but we don't. We would also expect to find an equal incidence of violence among drinkers in all societies, but we don't. We would expect to find equal levels of violence in all drinking situations, from weddings to funerals to Saturday nights out on the town, but we don't. The conclusion of this, and many previous studies, is that alcohol can, in certain cultures and situations, be a facilitator of aggression if aggression is there to begin with, both in the individual and in the cultural environment. It does not produce it where it doesn't already exist.”*

3. Violent individuals, a violence-reinforcing culture and violent situations are the three interlinked drivers of anti-social behaviour and violence in the night-time economy.

Dr Fox makes a number of recommendations to address each of these drivers:

Violent individuals

Dr Fox argues that:

- *Direct intervention is needed to tackle the behaviour of the minority of Australians exhibiting a pre-disposition to violence and a reduction in situational cues that trigger their behaviour. Australia and New Zealand must, “Continue and enhance social and family support mechanisms to reduce the cycle of abusive parenting and poor socio-economic conditions that lead to the creation of a cohort of violent and often disempowered individuals.”*

Dr Fox also highlights gaps in our knowledge:

- *“Research is desperately needed into all cases of violent assault in the NTE. Not into only the blood alcohol content of the victims, but into the backgrounds and psychological profiles of the perpetrators. Until we have such a study in our hands, all we have to rely on are the occasional leaked court reports and anecdotal evidence provided by those who have involvement in such cases. Early and purposeful intervention in the lives of young men who commit violent acts could speed up cultural change. In most countries, drink drive offenders are required to attend some form of rehabilitative or educational classes depending on their personal needs and circumstances. Such instruction should focus on counselling, motivational interviewing, lifestyle change, drug and alcohol use, and violence and conflict avoidance. Violators of minor public order offences, such as urinating in the streets or ‘failure to move on’, could perhaps be offered a reduction in their fine in return for participation in alcohol education courses.”*

Violence-reinforcing-cultures

Dr Fox explains that Australia and New Zealand must 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. Young men need to be taught that responding with violence is a failure in self-control, not a symbol of masculinity.

She supports initiatives such as re-branding a ‘king hit’ to a ‘coward’s punch’ and highlights cases where taking a low or zero tolerance of alcohol-related anti-social behaviour does have an impact on the drinking culture.

Cultural change recommendations include:

- *Australia and New Zealand should: “Change perceptions of what’s socially acceptable while intoxicated - create clear social and legislated rules and then genuine social stigma and practical consequences for breaking them. The risks and consequences must be clearly seen to outweigh the benefits.”*
- *The socially sanctioned ‘license to transgress’ must evolve to encourage only pro-social, positive. The rules must be seen as reasonable and proportionate by the community.”*

- “*The aim of cultural change should be to link male status to pro-social behaviours, and particularly, to link male status with effective control of drunkenness and violence. Over-reaction and loss of control need to be stigmatised.*”
- “*Young boys need to be taught not to react aggressively to every perceived slight, taunt or jest. This can be achieved through education focussed on non-violent conflict resolution and face-saving calming and avoidance techniques during developmental years.*”
- “*Cultural-change advertising programs should be reviewed before broadcast by broader teams of social scientists and anthropologists, to ensure that the cultural impact is properly evaluated.*”
- “*A serious and dispassionate review of the way in which young people become part of adult culture is most definitely called for, including the best way to prepare them to be part of a society in which drinking and nightlife is prevalent. Consideration should be given to how parents and children are educated about alcohol, to help guide them how best to manage their child’s initiation into drinking, if they choose to drink.*”

Violent situations

Dr Fox advocates for the reduction of situational cues – like poor facilities and transport options – that trigger poor behaviour. She says:

- “*The inclusion of a broader cross-section of society in the night-time environment will add social pressure to conform to positive societal norms, and can play a role in diffusing machismo among young men. Fostering urban night-time entertainment environments that welcome people across the age spectrum will alter the social dynamic, and reduce the incidence of violence.*”
- “*There should be a de-emphasis on the consumption of alcohol for its own sake and a refocus on entertainment and group conviviality. We need to encourage the establishment of night-time venues where alcohol is ancillary to the entertainment, not the centre of it.*”
- “*Drinking environments should be devoid of obvious aggression-inducing cues or images and designed with ‘calming’ and ‘conflict-reducing’ features. Educational materials on designing drinking environments should be developed to support hospitality operators in improving their establishments.*”
- “*Australia and New Zealand should aim to reduce the triggers of violence through good amenities such as clean and safe public toilets, good availability of 24-hour food service with clean and well-managed premises and adequate transport out of the entertainment district.*”
- “*Consistent, intelligent, fair and friendly enforcement of ‘Responsible Service of Alcohol’ or ‘Host Responsibility’ – both by venues and police,” is needed.*”
- “*There should be coordination between publicans, police, government and the broader community to defuse fights at the source, rather than moving the issue from one space to another.*”

- *It is important to “Empower the community: where successes in reducing NTE trouble have been observed during the fieldwork, these were largely in places where residents had a strong sense of and commitment to their community...”*

4. A dispassionate review of alcohol education is needed

With over 20 years' experience delivering alcohol education programs, Dr Fox's insights into alcohol education are a valuable input into the development of local programs. Below are some excerpts from the Paper that speak to this further:

- *“Much substance-misuse education (especially that directed at young people) focuses exclusively on risks, dangers and consequences. Educators are often surprised that this information does not result in behaviour change.”*
- *“In theory, if we can convince people that the threats are real and that they are susceptible to them, they will change their evil ways. This is the origin of the ‘scare the living daylights out of them’ method of alcohol education. Unfortunately, it does not work, no matter how horrendous we make drinking out to be. Why? Because many people perceive the benefits of drinking to outweigh the harms. Alcohol education therefore must refocus on what people perceive to be the benefits and assist them to achieve these (largely social) goals without harming themselves in the process. Young people in particular are focussed on appearing attractive, desirable, socially accepted, confident. They also want to experience pleasure, fun, novelty and excitement in their lives. For many, alcohol provides all this. The alcohol educator has quite a job to convince them that all this can be had without draining the bottle.”*
- *“The answer really lies in striking a delicate balance. On the one hand, children must be aware of the very real and potentially fatal dangers of drinking too much, and they must have a clear idea of what ‘too much’ is. On the other hand, alcohol education must seek to normalise and temper children’s expectations about the effects of alcohol. If they perceive drinking to be a normal, mundane, non-glamorous or non-risky aspect of daily human life, they have a much greater chance of becoming sensible, controlled adult drinkers. They may well have seen such sensible drinking at their family table or in a pub garden, for example. If they are encouraged to think of drinking as an exciting rite of passage that separates the child from the adult and of alcohol as a terrifying elixir with near-magic qualities, they will seek to steal the privilege prematurely.”*
- *“Previous research has shown that behavioural consequences of drinking are largely determined by cultural expectations. On the research evidence available, it is clear that changes in beliefs and expectancies about the effects of alcohol can and do lead to changes in behaviour associated with drinking. Educational programmes which reinforce existing beliefs and expectancies about disinhibition, intoxication and aggression will increase the prevalence of these anti-social behavioural effects. If young people view alcohol misuse and problem drinking as ‘the norm’, they are less likely to become responsible, sensible drinkers themselves.”*

- “*Elements of effective programmes include: Increase social ability / life-skills training; offer a balanced portrayal of both negative and positive consequences of drinking; change normative beliefs; deliver unbiased information about alcohol’s real effects; demonstrate that self-control over behaviour is always possible, even when very drunk; deliver alcohol education via credible presenters.*”