

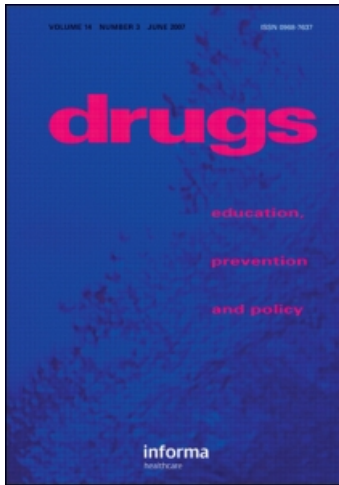
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Young people and alcohol in Italy: An evolving relationship

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Abstract

In Italy, commonly held opinions and interpretations about the relationship between young people and alcohol are often expressed as generalizations and approximations. In order to further understanding of the relationship between young people and alcohol in contemporary Italy, we have gathered, compared and discussed all the available data, both in relation to their approach to and consumption of alcoholic drinks and also to risk behaviours. Analysing this data highlights the dangers of a simplistic interpretation of youth alcohol consumption and confirms its complexity and cultural specificity. The globalization processes of contemporary society have led to a homogenization of consumption styles, but despite this, typical elements of drinking cultures that traditionally characterize the specific social and cultural contexts seem to persist in Europe, even among young people. By comparing the data it can be argued that the level of risk among young Italians appears to be lower than in other countries. Nevertheless, from the same research data emerges that can be interpreted as an indicator that this is changing. This data highlights a dual risk for political decision makers and health promoters and practitioners: on the one hand, the risk of excessive and counterproductive alarmism and, on the other, the equally dangerous reappraisal and understating of the changes taking place.

Introduction

Those in Italy who deal with alcohol use, misuse and addiction from a socio-cultural perspective note how commonly held opinions and interpretations about the relationships between young people and alcohol are often expressed as generalizations and approximations.

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Italy is a society characterized by the presence of alcohol in everyday life and there is a wealth of cultural references to alcohol. However, when considering young people's drinking the focus is on drinking styles characterized by excess and lack of control, on risks linked to abuse, on the dramatic consequences of certain behaviours (the most typical example being drink-driving) and on alcohol-related problems.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that alcohol consumption by young Italians and, for all the more reason, the misuse of alcohol are more and more frequently the subject of social alarm campaigns, in the same way as an epidemic that must be dealt with quickly. Impromptu initiatives often result, which implies the absence of an interpretative effort concerning the nature of the phenomenon and with meagre attention given to the effectiveness of measures and policies. Such initiatives are, in general, merely 'symbolic', related to the need of decision makers to respond promptly when faced with widespread social alarm and support for 'common sense' views. In this field, too, the trend can be seen characterizing many of the public policies of the contemporary era in the context of redefining the relationships between the political system and the civil society under the banner of the exchange between decisions and approval (Pizzorno, 1993; Dal Lago, 1999).

This attitude appears very far removed from that recently expressed by the World Health Organization (WHO) European Region when it maintains that: 'Alcohol policies and implementing actions should be based on the best scientific evidence about effectiveness and cost-effectiveness, and should be sensitive to cultural diversity'. We shall return to this in the conclusion in which we try to provide certain elements that may be reference points for policy trends that have some chance of being effective.

First, we would like to clarify the main aim of this article. Using existing data and knowledge we aim to describe and understand the characteristics of the relationship between young people and alcohol in contemporary Italy. Our starting point is a questioning of the most widespread and common perceptions that exist regarding this relationship.

This is not an easy debate and, furthermore, it is one that is problematic. Not easy because of the limited nature and the kind of data available in Italy and because what we have defined as the approximations and simplifications typical of the way of defining situations characteristic of commonly held opinions have, as do many simplifications, some foundation in real empirically observable data. Problematic because it may cause those about to become involved in the matter to be considered as irresponsible researchers (or even '*in the pockets*' of producers) in that they are less inclined to share the alarm about the dangers of alcohol, an alarm that is to be raised, so to speak, 'regardless' of the evidence.

Notwithstanding this, however, this debate is an important one. It is the responsibility of those who study this question, as many other subjects, with a scientific approach to strive to represent effectively and clearly a reality that, without doubt, is more articulated and many sided than is thought and than is represented. But this is possible only by making an effort to gather descriptive

elements and understand the consumption styles of generation after generation, by noticing changes and continuities. Characteristics that maintain an originality linked to the 'local' culture and others that are an expression of the processes of homologation of those same styles on a 'global' level, directions inspired by the need to integrate and those by the need to transgress.

In other words it is essential to look carefully and objectively at alcohol consumption among adolescents and young people and also at the meanings attributed to this consumption, referring—with a diachronic perspective—to changes that have taken place with respect to previous eras and at the same time—from a synchronic point of view—to the similarities and differences with drinking styles and meanings attributed to it by their peers who live in different contexts.

This is what we shall attempt to do by trying to gather, compare and discuss the range of data available today in Italy concerning the relationship between young people and alcohol, as regards both the approach to, and consumption (or non-consumption) of, alcoholic drinks, and what are considered to be risk behaviours. We shall do this by considering both the diachronic and comparative dimensions, having first highlighted the limits of this study.

Shortage of data and false evidence

The first problem derives from the shortage, in Italy, of reliable, homogeneous data split into age groups, for a sufficiently long time span to allow longitudinal analyses. Such a study would help us to understand the evolution of the phenomenon—including the degree of seriousness of the problem today compared to other periods—and to place the Italian situation into the international context. Within the statistics there is a complete lack of data divided into age groups that could be used to describe the course of alcohol consumption in Italy (Allaman, Cipriani, & Prina, 2006). Thus, it is impossible to state with any degree of certainty which changes have occurred in consumption within the young age groups over the last thirty or forty years. As a result, to speak of higher consumption or more frequent misuse among young people of today compared to young people in the fifties or sixties is a completely unfounded claim, the fruit of superficial impressions and/or misleading correlations.

It is true that, as for many other social problems, the question of the relationship between young people and alcohol has undoubtedly assumed a greater prominence, has been more contextualized and open to public debate. This has happened for a number of reasons: a different approach to health-related questions, the association between alcohol and other illegal psychoactive substances, the importance of alcohol-related accidents, the perception by adults that young people's consumption and misuse follow different rules from those reinforced in tradition and thus controlled, etc.

However, a greater contextualization of the question (and especially a higher degree of social alarm) in this context does not justify any inference about what is

actually happening. One example is very clear: the indicator represented by the presence of excessive consumption in so-called ‘Saturday night accidents’. Whereas it undoubtedly justifies prevention worries and commitments, it says nothing about the intensity of alcoholic consumption among young disco-goers, and in particular it in no way supports the assertion that this intensity is greater than that of young regulars of bars and dance halls of forty or fifty years ago, who—unlike today—used to return home on foot or by bicycle, running the risk at most of falling into a ditch.

In any case, one fact is certain: as we shall see later, in the Italian context, it was not until the 1990s that research (albeit with many limits), was developed that allowed tendencies and changes in young people’s alcohol consumption to be observed.

The second problem concerns, more generally, the role to be ascribed to statistical data and the heuristic potentialities of correlations between variables. In particular, simplistic comparisons are often made, for example, between variables such as the number of consumers or consumption between meals and variables such as the diffusion of alcohol-related problems, and need to be recognized. We will see, with the aid of some examples, that such simplistic comparisons are problematic, and how these correlations can be confuted by revealing that they are being used as support for pre-established theories or the ‘common sense’ ways of thinking of ordinary people.

Here it is important to recall how this is placed within a general tendency of contemporary culture, which is ‘numerical, pragmatic, oriented towards the short and medium term evaluation of quantitative trends’, in which ‘the publication or spreading of “scientific” data about any aspect of social and political life has in itself an enormous persuasive value’ (Dal Lago, 1999, p. 145). A statistic, an indicator or a survey appear more and more reliable—in particular to journalists and, worse still, political decision makers—than a reasoning based on qualitative observations and logical intuition. The consequence of this emphasis is that the ‘power of persuasion exercised by the magic of numbers . . . is extended inevitably also to the magicians who are legitimized (in that they are “influential”) when they deal with both “technical” issues and the more general, perspective and strategic issues’ (Dal Lago, 1999, p. 147).

Developing reasonings and making assertions based on scientific evidence proves not to be simple in this field, as in others. However, at least it should busy the experts in escaping from those generalizations and approximations typical of commonly held views and journalistic language by taking into consideration the building up of the data, the quality of the data processing carried out, the comparability of seemingly similar data gathered in different contexts and cultures, etc.

The general view of the discussion concerning alcohol, and even more so concerning the relationship between young people and alcohol, is far from considering these types of problems seriously. Some partial consolation is granted us when we remember that this trend does not exist only in Italy but is well known by many researchers into social phenomena, some of whom have devoted much

time to ‘deconstructing’ the numerous assertions put forward in scientific, political and/or journalistic contexts regarding sensitive questions (crime, drug addiction, immigration, accidents, causes of death, etc.) [1].

However, the picture of Italian sources is particularly affected by these limits. As an example, it is sufficient to think of certain assertions contained in official documents and declarations, which require some critical ‘treatment’. In an affirmation such as: ‘alcohol directly or indirectly causes... 10% of all illnesses, ... 41% of murders and 45% of accidents...’ [2], we find a deliberately vague wording (*‘directly or indirectly’*) associated with precise numbers. This highlights the impossibility of establishing univocal and sure correlations in the constant presence of a multiplicity of different causes that are difficult to distinguish from one another, the specific weight of which it is impossible to calculate. But it is the impression that the data conjures up that counts.

The fact that it is impossible to deny the only incontrovertible statistic about trends in Italy, that per capita alcohol consumption has been more than halved in the last 35 years (estimated at 6.9 litres in 2005 versus 15.9 litres in 1970!) is necessarily nullified by the consideration that: ‘This level is in any case still considerably above the level deemed desirable by the WHO’ [3].

The reasoning that could be made with regard to the following assertion is significant: ‘At the same time as the reduction in consumption, an increase in the number of consumers was found in 2000. In the same period a reduction in the number of teetotallers can be seen’ [3]. Expressed in the colloquial context in which it is found, this assertion tends to lead the reader into feeling alarmed and worried. From the logical point of view, it could, however, support the opposite theory: not only indeed is there no link between an increase in the number of consumers and alcohol-related problems, but on the contrary the exact opposite may be true, that is, that consumption being equal (all the more so if there is a reduction as has happened in Italy) the increase in the number of consumers means a reduction in per capita consumption and thus in the correlated excess and risk situations.

If we consider the report entitled *‘Alcohol consumption in Italy: Analysis and proposals’* (*‘I consumi alcolici in Italia: analisi e proposte’*) (Scafato, Ghirini, & Russo, 2006)—which represents the official point of view of the National Health Institute (ISS) on the subject of alcohol and its relative public policies—we can again read a series of assertions deserving of critical observation from the point of view of their ‘scientific’ basis and their meaning in the context of processing effective public policies.

Two kinds of stratagem are used to strengthen the arguments aimed at showing the validity of the theory. In the first place, via an option used for all the data that the ISS obtains from the multiscope ISTAT (National Statistics Institute) survey, that is to consider ‘as consumers all those who have stated that they consume at least one of the alcoholic drinks considered or who have *omitted the answer to the questions*’ (our emphasis) while we find in the category of ‘teetotallers all those people who stated in the investigation that they do not consume any of the alcoholic drinks listed in the questionnaire’. The data of the percentages of

consumers, on the basis of this option, are clearly affected when it is considered that the amount of missing responses is on average 3% [4] and that the annual variations are often less than 1%.

The second stratagem consists of the fact that many of the arguments are developed ‘by choosing’ the year that lends itself the most to supporting them. As an example, the percentage of consumers in 2003 (73.6%) is compared to that of 1998 (76.3%) to claim that ‘in the period 1998–2003 the average increase in the number of consumers was 0.4%’, which allows the conclusion that ‘in terms of public health. an increased number of individuals . . . chose to start drinking in 2003, thus enlarging the audience exposed in 1998 to the potential risk factor of alcohol’. Apart from the very slight difference highlighted and the previously mentioned questionable correlation between increase in consumer audience size—together with a constant reduction of the total amount consumed—and the alcohol risk, it is puzzling that an institute such as the National Health Institute should develop such a proposition when the conclusions would be completely the opposite if the year 1999 had been chosen (74.4%) or 2000 (75.0%) or 2001 (75%).

In third place the fetishism of the data do not allow a debate of the reduction of 14-year-old males who claim to be ‘consumers’ (which really is extraordinary, if it is not, as it is reasonable to doubt, the fruit of a material error or some other technical problem) from 43.5% in 2002 to 27.2% in 2003 (see Table I).

An emblematic example of how the tendency to formulate stimulating assertions devoid of any scientific foundation can influence the political decision maker is represented by what can be read in the first report on alcohol by the Health Minister to parliament [5]. The following assertion can be read:

Data regarding the youth population appear to be particularly serious when it is considered that much evidence exists concerning the trend among young people who consume alcohol to practise other risky behaviours and that thus alcohol abuse, as it is a totally legal substance, often acts as a bridge towards other illicit substances.

There are many questions that arise if this assertion is analysed carefully: what is the ‘evidence’ referred to? Do all young people ‘*who consume*’ (and therefore also

Table I. Numbers (%) of 14- to 16-year-old consumers of alcoholic drinks.

Sex	Age	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	% variation (1998–2003)
Males	14	34.3	39.3	46.1	43.3	43.5	27.2	–20.7
	15	42.3	51.8	50.7	52.1	42.6	44.7	5.7
	16	61.0	58.8	61.2	59.1	56.7	62.5	2.5
Females	14	31.8	28.7	31.4	34.7	28.0	27.1	–14.8
	15	33.3	37.9	42.8	40.7	22.2	35.4	6.3
	16	41.3	45.0	42.3	49.6	42.0	44.9	8.7

Source: Elaboration Multiscope-ISTAT data by the National Observatory on Alcohol (OssFAD).

those who have tasted or who very occasionally drink alcohol) show this 'tendency'? Is it the same thing to make reference to 'young people who consume' and, as in the following phrase, to 'alcohol abuse'? How is a 'tendency' defined? What does 'often acts as' mean? Is it the 'totally legal' nature of alcohol that encourages the approach to illegal substances?

As can be seen we are faced with numerous examples of propositions, put forward even at an official level and with the sacredness usually attributed to statistical data or to 'evidence', which is somewhat debatable.

Sources used and their limits

The course of consumption and the frequency of excesses are, therefore, as regards Italy, observable only with reference to a limited period of time, so much so, as to make it rather difficult to formulate a judgement regarding the trend underway. Indeed, it is only since the 1990s that, from an Italian point of view as much as a European one, the availability of data concerning alcoholic consumption, particularly among young people, has grown. Furthermore, the differences regarding the ages under consideration, the grouping of ages, the behaviours studied, in addition to the very wording of the questions, not only make comparisons practically impossible, but also make it difficult to obtain a complete picture.

This makes the task that we have set ourselves not an easy one to carry out. We will try to do it by taking advantage of the available data on alcohol consumption by Italians, the result of specific or broader investigations, and of the comparative data obtained from international research the characteristics of which we can briefly outline.

The Doxa survey for the 'Permanent Observatory on Young People and Alcohol'

Since 1991 the Doxa research institute has been carrying out an investigation, on behalf of the 'Permanent Observatory on Young People and Alcohol', into the behaviours, opinions and attitudes of the Italians with regard to the consumption of alcoholic drinks. So far five surveys have been carried out: in 1991, 1994, 1997, 2000 and 2005.

The data were obtained through direct interviews at interviewees' homes on a random sample of approximately 2000 adults of 15 years and above. From 1994 onwards the youngest age group (15–24 years) was enlarged and for this reason we shall not take the data for 1991 into consideration. In the last survey the sample had a lower age limit of 13 years rather than 15.

This is the only survey on a national scale specifically dedicated to the consumption of alcoholic drinks and therefore provides detailed relative data regarding drinking behaviours among Italians. However, the data for young people are grouped in a wide age range (15–24 years), which makes any comparison with specific international research on alcohol and young people difficult.

The Multiscope ISTAT survey

The data gathered during the ISTAT (Italian National Statistic Institute) Multiscope survey on '*Lifestyles and health conditions of the Italians*' allow us to estimate the percentage of non-drinkers and drinkers at risk by individual drink, by sex and age group, starting from 1998.

The data are based on a sample of more than 20,000 Italian families, processed and presented by the National Observatory on Alcohol (OssFAD) of the National Health Institute (Scafato, 2005; Scafato, Massari, Russon, & Batoli, 2002; Scafato et al., 2004, 2006) are affected by the limited nature of the information about alcohol that also makes this data difficult to compare with the results of international surveys presented below.

The HBSC study

The HBSC (Health Behaviour in School-aged Children) study (Currie et al., 2003) collects information about the lifestyles and health of adolescents thus offering a unique insight into important aspects of the contemporary youth condition in different contexts. This research intends to understand better the lifestyles and their impact on health of a sample of adolescents of 11, 13 and 15 years of age through indicators of perceived wellbeing and self-esteem, the reconstruction of the socio-affective support network and behaviours connected with health.

For the purposes of this article we will consider only the aspects regarding the consumption and abuse of alcoholic drinks, referring the reader to the sources for more complete information. Unfortunately the Italian data do not allow a diachronic analysis of the phenomenon and is not therefore possible to tell whether alcohol consumption among young Italians has changed with respect to the past. For this reason we will use this information principally in order to compare the consumption of young Italians with that of young people from other countries and to examine whether and which elements distinctive to the Italian drinking culture are still present among younger generations.

The ESPAD research

The growing need for data that are comparable on a European scale regarding the consumption of alcohol, tobacco and drugs among young people has moved some researchers to define common research aims and methodologies. In order to reach these aims, towards the middle of the eighties a group of researchers started to work with the *Pompidou Group* and the co-ordination of the *Swedish Council for Information on Alcohol and Other Drugs* (CAN; Hibell et al., 2004). The first investigation was carried out in 1995, the second in 1999 and the third in 2003. The investigation is planned to be repeated every four years so as to observe the changes that have taken place within each country and any variations in consumption models on a European scale.

Consumers and non-consumers of alcoholic drinks

We shall start with the data regarding the consumption of alcoholic drinks by adolescents and young people derived from national sources and from comparative research projects.

Doxa surveys

Between 1994 and 2000, the number of young people aged 15–24 years who had consumed alcohol at least once in the last 3 years remained all but constant (75–77%), whereas the numbers increased in the other age groups (see Figure 1). Between 2000 and 2005 an increase is observed and overall the total number of young consumers grew by 6% in ten years (between 1994 and 2005).

Breaking up the data into two subsets it emerges—according to the data for 1997 only—that 32% of 15- to 17-year-olds have not consumed alcoholic drinks in the last year; this percentage is reduced to 17.7% among 18- to 24-year-olds (Permanent Observatory on Young People and Alcohol, 1998).

Unfortunately in the 2000 survey (Permanent Observatory on Young People and Alcohol, 2000), the data for the 15–24 age group is not split into the two subsets as in the previous investigations (which would have allowed a better comparison with the available international data).

The data regarding 2005 (Permanent Observatory on Young People and Alcohol, 2007) show that regular consumption (at least once a week) rose significantly for aperitifs/digestive drinks and spirits among young people of 15–24 years compared to the previous investigations (Figure 2).

ISTAT Multiscope data

The number of consumers of alcoholic drinks in Italy as highlighted by National Observatory on Alcohol of the National Health Institute for 2003 is 87.1% among males and 61% among females. As a whole 73.6% of the Italian population, therefore, is found to consume alcoholic drinks. These data are in line with the results of the Doxa investigation.

As regards the youth population, the OssFAD survey provides more detailed information, which allows a partial comparison with the European investigations

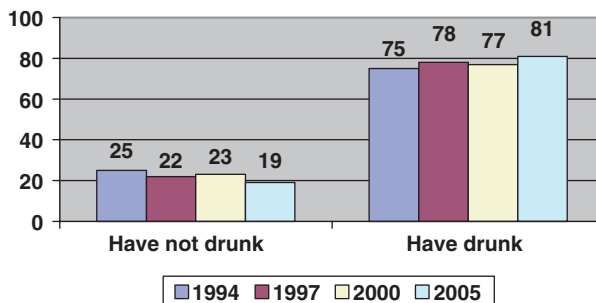


Figure 1. Consumers and non-consumers among young people, 15–24 years (%).

to be made. The percentages of consumers per gender and age vary as shown in Table I. In all three age groups considered, over half of the females do not consume alcoholic drinks, whereas among males the percentage varies from 72.6% of 14-year-olds to 37.5% of 16-year-olds.

Despite a slight overall growth, between 1998 and 2003, in the 14–16 age range among males (+0.6%) and a more substantial increase among females (+5.2%), the broken down data reveal a clear decrease (completely inexplicable, although not considered problematic by the source) among 14-year-olds, whereas the number of consumers among 15- and 16-year-olds increases.

We know that the choice of the year used to calculate the variations is arbitrary: indeed if the comparison were made using the years 1999 and 2000, a clear-cut fall in the number of consumers would be seen both at a total level and in each age range, except for 16-year-old males.

If, in order to avoid annual variances, the means of the three-year periods 1998–2000 and 2001–2003 were considered, the result for the categories of adolescents and young people would be as shown in table II, making it possible, therefore, to develop very different conclusions from thus ones. Indeed, the same data—supplemented by the ISTAT data referring to 1983—have recently been analysed by another research group (Cipriani, 2006), which kept the same age groups as the ISTAT sample using a mean figure among the years so as to reduce the possibility of error due to annual variations (Table II).

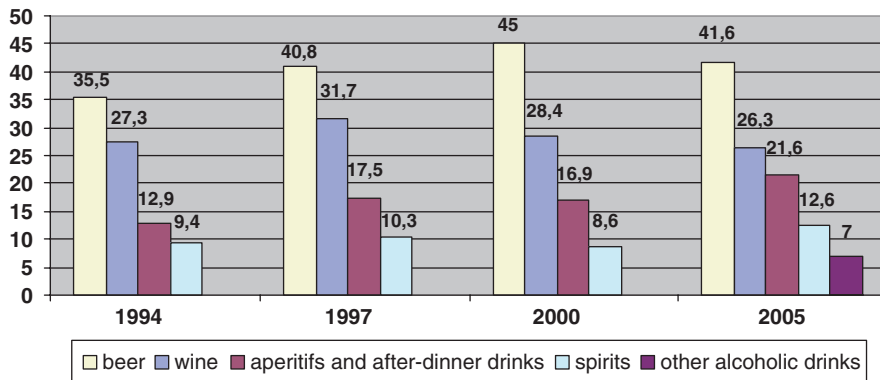


Figure 2. Regular consumers among young people, 15–24 years, according to drink type, 1994–2005 (%).

Table II. Number (%) of adolescent and young consumers of alcoholic drinks (comparison between three-year periods).

Sex	Age	1998–2000	2001–2003	% variation (1998–2003)
Males	14–17	54.5	53.0	–2.7
	18–24	84.3	85.6	+1.5
Females	14–17	41.1	40.5	–1.5
	18–24	62.9	61.3	–2.5

Source: Our elaboration of OssFAD data.

With these data it is possible to make a comparison from 1983 to today for wine and beer, whereas for other drinks only from 1998. In the last few years the number of wine consumers, in the 14–29 age group, has increased both among females and males. This increase is in the number of moderate drinkers, whereas the number of at-risk drinkers (more than half a litre a day) falls (from 3.6% for 1993–1995 to 2.2% for 1999–2001 in males and from 0.6% to 0.5% in females). Among young people, beer is increasingly becoming the drink that rivals, if not replaces, wine.

Other Italian research projects carried out on a national level produce similar results, albeit with different percentages: beer is the most common alcoholic drink, followed by spirits and wine.

HBSC study

The Italian data from the HBSC study show that the percentage of those claiming to consume alcoholic drinks on a daily basis grows as age increases, from 5.3% of 11-year-olds to 9% of 15-year-olds. Weekly consumption reveals a more evident increase from one age group to the next, whereas the percentage of young people who do not consume alcoholic drinks is reduced from 46% in 11-year-olds to 19% in fifteen-year-olds. The figure for teetotallers is, therefore, considerably lower than that resulting from the OssFAD analysis and from the Doxa surveys.

Boys and young men are more likely to drink daily, although with increasing age more girls and young women report drinking daily.

Comparing the Italian data with that from other countries we can observe that the percentages of young Europeans and North Americans who drink any alcoholic drink with a weekly frequency are: 5% at 11 years, 12% at 13 years and 29% at 15 years. The differences between the sexes are particularly important in Italy, Greece and Poland, whereas they are much less so in Austria, Finland, Norway and Great Britain. The geographical differences are evident: consumption percentages among 11-year-olds are the highest in Italy and Israel and the lowest in Finland, Greenland, Norway and Portugal. Whereas Italian 13-year-olds are still in first place, Italian 15-year-olds are overtaken by their Welsh, English, Dutch, Maltese, Scottish and German contemporaries (Figure 3).

This fact, which could be interpreted as indicative of the increasingly problematic nature of alcohol consumption among the very young in Italy, actually seems to show the endurance of typical elements of the wet drinking style characterized by an early initiation into and socialization of alcohol, and in particular of wine.

By examining the data referring to each individual drink type it can be seen that Italy has the highest percentages of weekly consumption of wine in all age groups and for beer it is in the first few positions in the classification. In relation to the consumption of spirits, Italian 11-year-olds and 13-year-olds drink very small amounts of spirits and for 15-year-olds the Italians are in fifth place, well behind the countries preceding them (Malta, England, Scotland and Denmark).

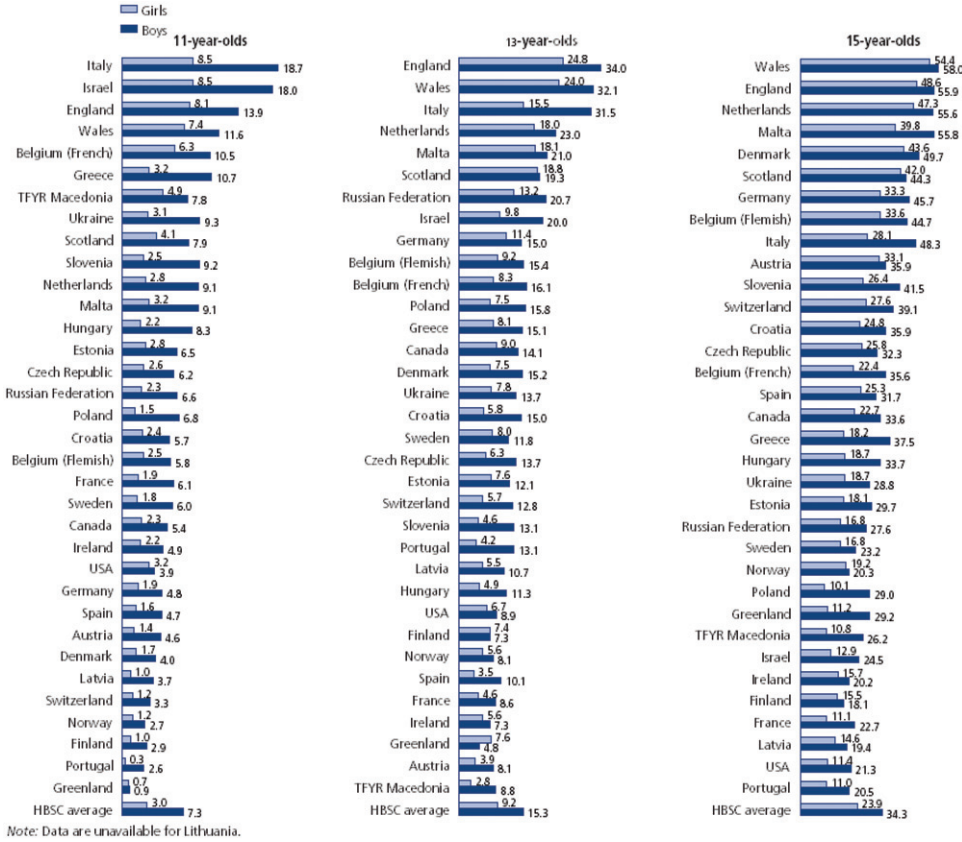


Figure 3. Young people who consume any alcoholic drink weekly (%).

ESPAD research

The most recent data indicate that the percentage of young Italians who have consumed some alcoholic drink in the last 12 months coincides with the European average (82% vs. 83%). Eighteen percent, therefore, have never consumed alcoholic drinks in the last year, which confirms the findings of the HBSC research as far as 15-year-old—and younger—people are concerned, and the results of the Italian Doxa and OssFAD data.

First consumption and first excess

At what age do people start to consume alcohol? At what age do their first experiences of excess, their first drunkenness, occur? The answers to these questions can be found only in the HBSC investigation and in some local studies.

Comparative research provides the age of first consumption of alcoholic drinks and the first drunken experience found among 15-year-olds: as regards the former data the European mean is 12.9 years for girls and 12.3 for boys, whereas for the latter it is 13.9 and 13.6 years.

Young people begin to drink alcohol sooner in the Czech Republic, Belgium, Austria, Lithuania and the United States; later in Israel, Italy (13.7 years for males and 13.2 for females), Greenland and Finland. In Italy the same consideration is true also for the first episode of drunkenness, which seems to occur on average later with respect to other countries (14.5 years for males and 14.1 for females).

This finding gives without doubt a vision of Italy that is different from that of a 'wet' society in which initiation into alcohol consumption occurs at a very early age. As there is no comparative quantitative data regarding consumption among children and adolescents in periods before the 1980s, it is difficult to examine whether there has been a progressive increase in age of first consumption in the last few years, as qualitative observations about the variations in the alcohol socialization processes seem to show.

However, caution is needed, as always, when adopting the data from this investigation as from others. Proof of this is the fact that precisely regarding the age of first consumption, the European health, nutrition and alcohol investigation (European Opinion Research Group, 2003), commissioned by DG SANCO of the European Commission and carried out on a population sample of over 14-year-olds, presents different data regarding Italy's position. Indeed, according to this research study, Europeans begin to drink alcoholic drinks on average at 14.57 years with a wide variance among the various countries: from 12.18 years in Italy (followed by Ireland at 12.70 and Austria at 12.74) to 17.17 in Greece (followed by 15.76 in Luxembourg and 15.74 in Finland). The age of starting to drink in Europe has fallen: in the past the 55-year-olds of today approached alcohol between the ages of 15 and 16, whereas today's 24-year-olds started at about 12 years of age.

Despite the apparent inconsistency, both the findings are confirmed in the latest Doxa investigation for the 'Permanent Observatory on Young People and Alcohol' (2007) from which it is found that, considering all the sample of 13- to 24-year-olds, the mean starting age is 14 years for wine and beer and 16 years for drinks with a high alcohol content. However, the sample becomes different if it is divided into age groups (13–15 years: 12 years on average for wine; 16–19 years: 14 years; 20–24 years: 15 years), which for the first age group coincides with the results of the European Opinion Research Group study and, for the others, with the HBSC data. In this regard the impact of the 'memory' effect cannot be excluded: as time passes from one's first experience, one tends to be less precise about it and therefore to place it at a later age.

This trend is confirmed in the research carried out by Bonino, Cattelino, and Ciairano (2003) on a sample of 2273 adolescents from Piedmont (North-West). From this it emerged that the average age of initiation to alcohol consumption was around 12–13 years. It must be noted that 22% of this sample drank for the first time before the age of ten within the context of their family, at special occasions such as parties and festivities. However, the authors, who investigated the relationship between precociousness of initiation into the consumption of various substances and at-risk behaviour, did not find any significant relationship

between starting age and consumption intensity. Moderate drinkers and heavy drinkers do not differ on the basis of age of the first approach to alcohol, unlike the situation with cigarettes and joints (cannabis). In this case it seems that ‘the potential risk effects linked to precociousness can be not only mitigated but even annulled by the context in which first and subsequent consumption takes place’ (Bonino et al., 2003, p. 77). Among moderate drinkers, those who started drinking in the family, even at an early age, are prevalent, whereas among heavy drinkers the percentage of those who started drinking with friends and therefore in adolescence is higher.

Excessive consumption

To pass from the data regarding simple consumption to that concerning excessive consumption and drunken experiences means an attempt to address the question of problematic consumption. Here, too, we will observe first the national data and then compare the Italian situation with the situation in other countries as emerges from international research.

Doxa surveys

From the Doxa data from 2005 it emerges that 28% of young people have reported at least one experience of excessive consumption in the last 3 months and 12% have experienced an episode of drunkenness (Figure 4).

Of these young people, 16.9% percent drank to excess and 5% were drunk more than once in the last three months (Figure 5).

As proof of the particular nature of drunken experience at a young age, the data show that abuse experiences tend to diminish after the age of 35 years. These data are confirmed also by research carried out at a local level (Ruocco, Gualco, & Angelini, 2003).

ISTAT Multiscope data

Excessive consumption, regarding the Multiscope research, does not display significant variations from 1993 to 2001. Scafato et al. (2006) highlighted

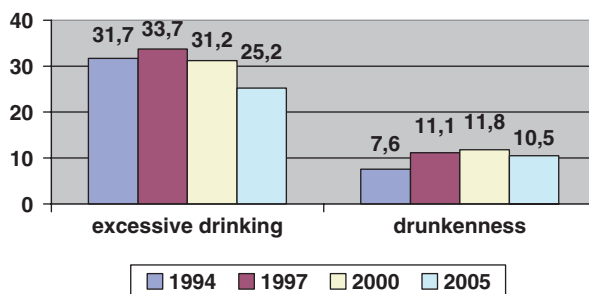


Figure 4. Trends towards excess and abuse (at least one experience) among young people aged 15–24 years, 1994–2005 (%).

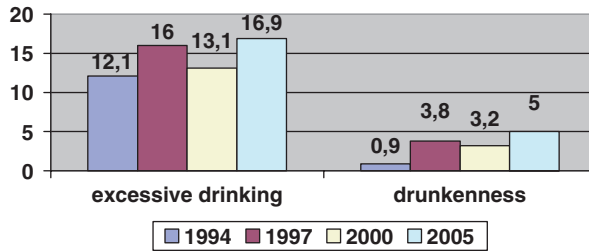


Figure 5. Trends towards excess and abuse (more than once in the last three months) among young people aged 15–24 years, 1994–2005 (%).

that the number of consumers of over $\frac{1}{2}$ litre of wine and $\frac{1}{2}$ litre of beer a day is close to zero.

HBSC study

The experience of drunkenness among young Italians becomes more and more frequent with increasing age: 90% of 11-year-olds claim never to have been drunk, while only 63% of 15-year-olds report never having been drunk. Therefore, at this age, 37% of young Italians have experienced drinking too much and for some of them (19%) the experience has been repeated several times in the course of their lives. Abuse seems to be a phenomenon linked to age and gender. Indeed, the percentages regarding these three age groups are always greater for males and 15-year-olds.

Among 13- and 15-year-olds the percentage of drunkenness (two or more times in their lives) is higher in Denmark, England, Greenland and Wales. England and Wales also hold the record of the greatest frequency of drunkenness among 11-year-olds (Figure 6).

In the variegated distribution of the data regarding drunkenness it is interesting to identify the position of young Italians. As regards 11-year-olds, 1% of girls claimed already to have been drunk two or more times, a figure that is below the mean figure from the HBSC study (1.5%), whereas the figure for boys (5.1%) exceeds the mean (4.3%). Both 13-year-olds and 15-year-olds, on the other hand, are situated at the lower end of the scale, revealing a level of at-risk behaviour much lower than their foreign contemporaries. At 13 years of age, 5.2% of girls and 7.4% of boys, versus the 9.7% and 14.5% of the European average, state that they have been drunk at least twice in their lives. At 15 years of age the percentage rises to 16.8% and 22.8%, respectively.

Although these data indicate that drunkenness is not such a rare experience in young Italians' lives (2 interviewees out of 10), it appears that alcohol misuse has certain characteristics that distinguish it, even today, from that in other countries: in Denmark and Wales 60% of 15-year-olds have been drunk more than once in the course of their lives, and the mean of the HBSC study is 31.4% for females and 39.8% for males.

ESPAD research

Drunken experience seems to be on the increase if the 2003 data are compared with the 1999 data (37% vs. 32%). However, the fact that the percentage of young Italians who have been drunk at least once in the last 12 months is very similar to that of 8 years before (35% in 1995) suggests that we should be cautious about formulating alarmist evaluations.

Also in this study—which, it must be remembered, is based on questionnaires given to 16-year-olds—a far from homogeneous picture of consumption models of young Europeans emerges. A greater frequency of episodes of drunkenness are found in Denmark, Ireland, Great Britain, Estonia and Finland, whereas countries in the Mediterranean area report the lowest number of young people who have been drunk 20 or more times in their lives.

Comparing data of countries characterized by different drinking models, it is interesting to note that Finland is characterized by a very low regular consumption, whereas the situation is completely overturned when the data concerning repeated drunkenness are observed, a phenomenon that is infrequent in Italian and French young people.

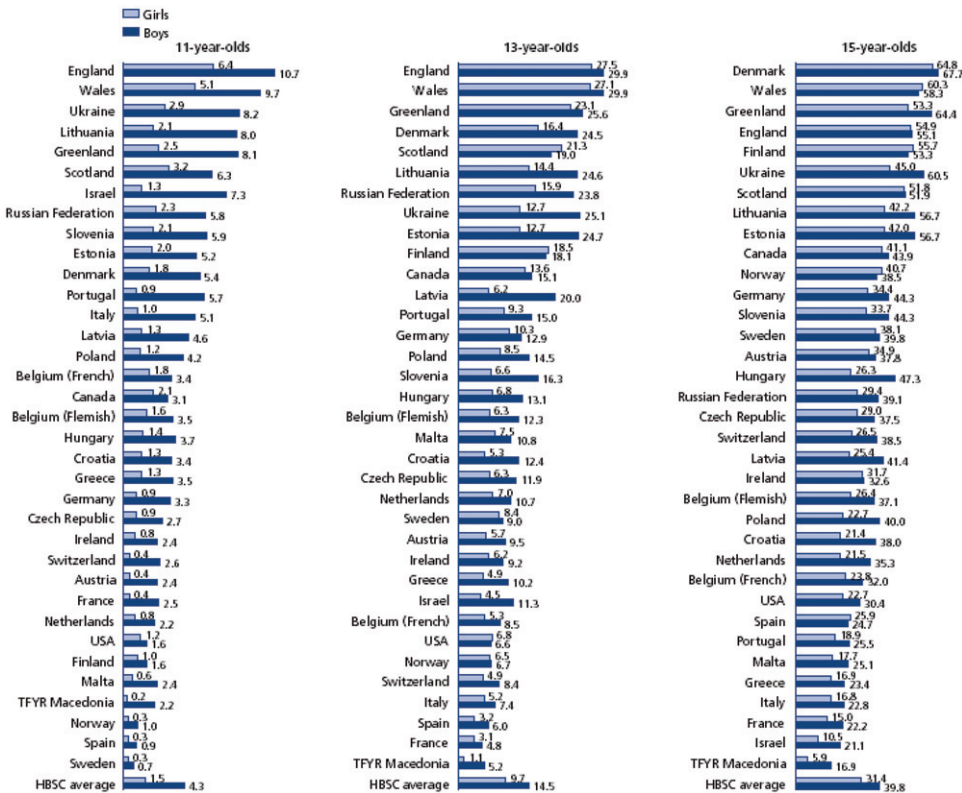


Figure 6. Young people who have been drunk two or more times (%).

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The distance between young people from South European countries and their North European contemporaries is, indeed, even more considerable when the data regarding episodes of drunkenness in the last year are observed. Excessive drinking is not unknown to the Italians, and young people from the Mediterranean area in general, but it seems to be an occasional experience and not one that is sought after, unlike what appears to happen in other European countries.

Binge drinking

One last finding of the ESPAD research concerns *binge drinking*, an expression used to mean the consumption of 5 or more alcoholic drinks on a single occasion.

Various definitions for *binge drinking* can be found in the literature, an expression made popular by Henry Wechsler, a Harvard researcher, who defined *binge drinking* as the consumption of 5 drinks for males and 4 drinks for females in a single context or drinking occasion (Wechsler, Davenport, Dowdall, Moeykens, & Castillo, 1994). In the ESPAD study *binge drinking* is defined as '*having 5 or more drinks in a row*' without taking into consideration that alcoholic units—'drinks'—contain differing amounts of alcohol in the various countries (from 8 grammes in England to 14g in Portugal or the United States). Further problems can derive from the translation into each language of the English expression, which has a precise meaning for Anglo-Saxon young people but might not reflect behaviours widespread in other cultures and therefore might create several problems of comparison.

The fact that the percentage values of every country are higher than frequent drunkenness means that many young people do not feel themselves drunk after drinking 5 or more drinks and so the level of consumption to reach drunkenness is probably considered very high.

Even though a considerable percentage of young Italians (13%) claim to have drunk 5 or more drinks in a very short time with a certain frequency in the last month, they are to be found in the lower half of the European classification, once again at a remarkable distance from their Northern European contemporaries (Ireland being in first place at 32%). Furthermore, Italy is one of the few countries in which the percentage is lower than in the first survey in 1995 (20%; Figure 7).

Today, on this point, we have at our disposal the data from the latest Doxa investigation (2005), which included a specific question about *binge drinking*, though with a slightly different wording from the question on which the previous figure was based. This investigation, indeed, includes in this category the consumption of at least 5 glasses concentrated in two hours or less than two hours, not with meals, in the last three months. These results, although they are difficult to compare among the age groups considered, do not seem to be very far removed from those shown above. Even if Multiscope data from National Institute of Statistic are still provisional they show that 12% of young people aged 16–17 binge drink at least once a year (Sabbadini, 2007).

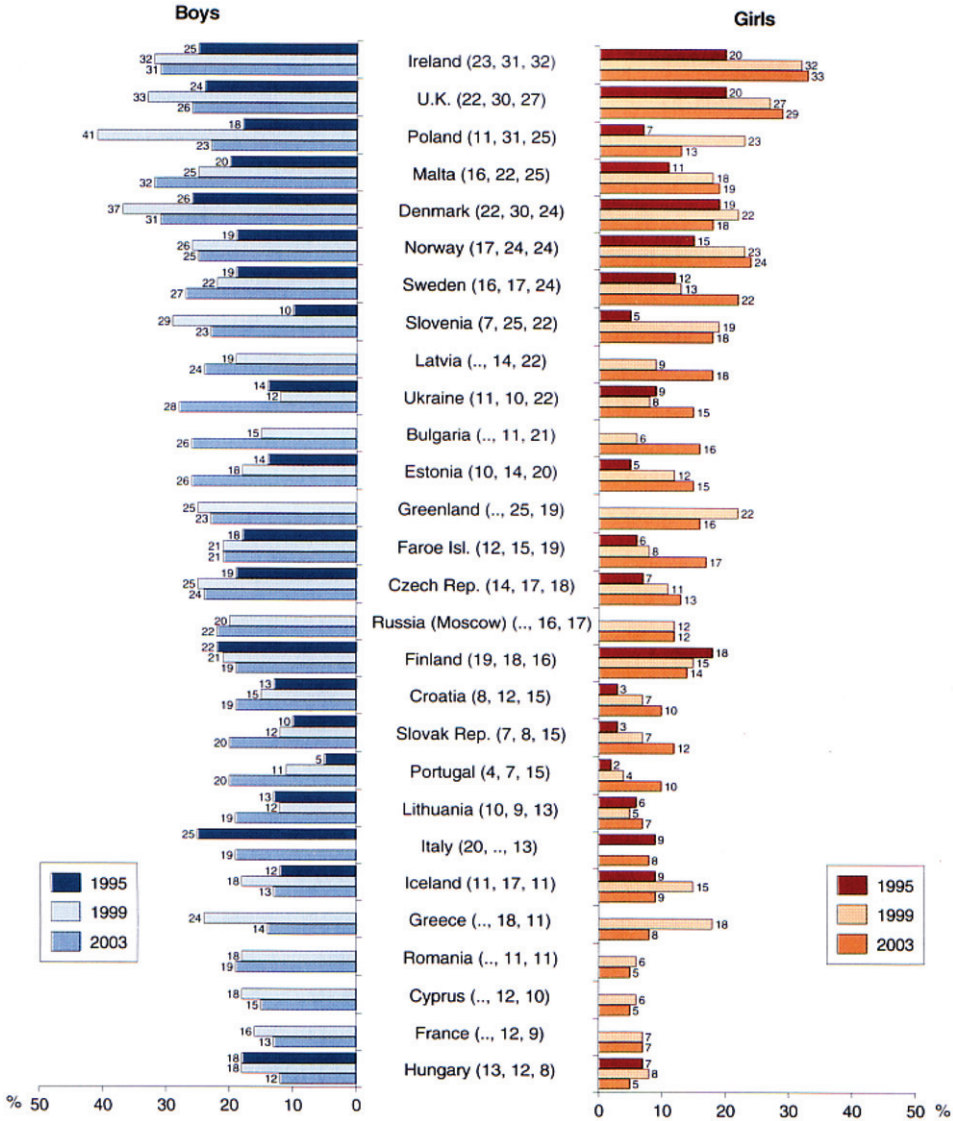


Figure 7. Variations in 'binge drinking' reported three or more times in the last thirty days broken down by gender, 1995–1999–2003 (%).

Conclusions

Historical, anthropological and sociological studies have for many years emphasized the ambivalence of alcohol: in different social and cultural contexts positive and/or negative values are attributed to its use and, as a consequence, it is at various times encouraged, tolerated or censured. As has been continually repeated for some time, this ambivalence is without doubt due to the many uses that alcohol can take on (nutritional, pharmacological, intoxicating, ritual, socializing, etc.). In the various historical periods and social contexts one value

rather than another prevails and this influences collective attitudes and public policies of prevention and treatment of alcohol-related problems (Beccaria & Prina, 1996; Cottino, 1991).

The alarm regarding the relationship between young people and alcohol, even if it is not completely new in Italy (Prina, 1992, 1993; Rolli, 1992), has recently been strongly expressed by certain researchers and political decision makers in Italy. It is motivated by the alleged abandonment of values typical of the wet drinking culture—a culture characterized by a total integration of alcoholic drinks into daily life—in favour of an adoption of consumption styles typical of dry cultures in which the predominant value is intoxication obtained by the consumption of great quantities concentrated on a limited number of occasions (Room, 1989). To consume alcohol as a drug means first of all to seek its psychoactive effects, to drink with the aim of experiencing a psychosensorial alteration similar to that caused by illegal drugs. In virtue of this change of perspective, young Italians would appear to be losing an ability, typical of the Mediterranean drinking culture, to manage the ambivalence of alcohol, with the subsequent risk of an increase in alcohol-related problems.

The data shown here warn of the danger of this type of schematic interpretation and confirm the complexity of the picture of young people's alcohol consumption. Though in the presence of a tendential homogenizing of consumption styles, due to the processes of globalization of contemporary society, elements typical of drinking styles that traditionally characterize specific social and cultural contexts seem to persist in Europe, even among young people. Within the drinking styles of young Europeans we still find the typical features of the various drinking cultures:

- *the Mediterranean culture*: one starts to drink at a young age, the rate of drunkenness is low, but the rate of regular consumption of all alcoholic drinks is high;
- *the Nordic and western European cultures*: episodes of drunkenness begin at an early age and repeated drunkenness is frequent; and
- *the oriental cultures*: despite the high consumption of spirits among adults, young people's consumption and episodes of drunkenness are halfway down the European classification.

Observing the data expressed in a comparative form it can be stated that the risk level of young Italians appears more limited compared to other countries. Indeed, if it is true that the number of drinkers is increasing (slightly) and that young Italians have more consumption occasions (also regular consumption) than their foreign contemporaries, it is also true that this does not necessarily imply a trend towards the repetition of excessive consumption. The increase in the number of wine and beer drinkers, as we have already said, in the presence of a reduction of total consumption, may signify a reduction in per capita consumption and therefore a trend towards growing moderation.

In regard to this consideration it could be argued that perhaps we are witnessing a variation in drinking style causing a growth in the concentration of

consumption previously practised on a daily level into a few occasions, with an increase in the risks characterizing 'dry' cultures.

Two observations urge caution in supporting this position. The first is that, though without precise data concerning consumption contexts, the opportunities to drink at home and during meals, and therefore in an informally 'controlled' way, still appear to be very common. The second is based on the data regarding the incidence of drunkenness. Indeed, when the data on the frequency and intensity of experiences of drunkenness are examined, it is impossible to fail to notice that all research studies agree in observing a frequency decidedly lower than the European average and in particular very far from the data concerning their English, Danish and Finnish contemporaries. Although the differences between samples and, especially, between the various wordings of the questions, do not allow a comparison of the data without uncertainty and doubt, every investigation stresses that young Italians' drinking styles still differ significantly from those of their contemporaries who live in Denmark or Great Britain (where 60% of 15-year-olds have been drunk more than once in their lives, whereas evidence of this is found only for 20% of Italians). And this evidence is reinforced if comparisons between quantitative data are integrated with investigations of a qualitative nature.

From the same research projects, however, data emerge that can be interpreted as an indicator of a change in trends. Two observations in particular deserve to be highlighted:

1. the data from the HBSC investigation regarding drunkenness (5.1% of Italian 11-year-old males have been drunk more than once in their lives, versus a European mean of 4.3%) might be an indicator of a change taking place and certainly highlights the importance of observing and monitoring the phenomenon over time;
2. the frequency of the experience of binge drinking among young Italians (13% observed in the ESPAD research (and in a certain sense confirmed by the Doxa data), although far from the 32% of their Irish contemporaries, indicates a certain propagation among 15-year-olds of alcohol consumption characteristics typical of the northern drinking culture, that is, large quantities in a very concentrated time.

The complexity of young Italians' drinking culture, therefore, is evident. Among Young Italians the predominance of one model rather than another is not detectable today, but rather the coming together of aspects of models typical of other cultures with the traditional model. As maintained in a previous study, we could speak of the emergence of a new drinking model, '*wet drinking*' (Beccaria, 1997).

It follows that it is not clear which scenarios we are facing. And, similarly, it is not easy to answer a central question in this period of change: will these innovative consumption models be maintained into adult life (giving rise to increasingly problematic situations) or are they ways and means that will be abandoned with the passing of time because of the effect of the resistance of the traditional drinking culture?

There is nothing to refute the idea that today, as in the past, for most young people, the consumption and misuse of alcoholic drinks presents distinctive connotations precisely as they are situated during adolescence, a period characterized by experimentation and transgression or at least by the forcing of limits perceived to be imposed by adults. There is no evidence to support the view that when there are experiences of misuse among young people, the relationship with alcohol necessarily takes on a problematic character, nor that it is an important element regarding the prospects of life and consumption that will characterize adult life. If for some young people their relationship with alcohol (as with other risky substances and behaviours) can hinder their journey towards maturity or make it hard, the firm belief remains well founded (based on many observations especially of a qualitative nature) that the great majority of them still go through this experience, as in the past and like other experiences, restricted to the specific nature of adolescence.

However, in order to establish better these interpretations it is time also in Italy to achieve a rigorous system to monitor the data and knowledge with the aim of describing and understanding the continuities and the changes of consumption modes that occur among the various generations of young people. To this end, both repeated research studies (if possible using stable research protocols so as to make the results comparable over time) and longitudinal research projects, which allow a cohort of individuals at different stages of their lives to be followed, are necessary. As we have for years been trying to state (Beccaria, Cottino, & Vidoni Guidoni, 1999; Cottino & Prina, 1997), attention must be given not only to the types of alcoholic drink and the amounts consumed but also to the consumption occasions and to the meanings attached to them.

Quantitative studies may be usefully integrated with qualitative research projects aimed at understanding the meanings and characteristics of consumption among young Europeans in which to place and understand the local specific characteristics in order to 'calibrate' prevention policies on them. Indeed, the gathering of data regarding primarily consumption is not very useful without an effort to understand the meanings, contexts and ways in which it takes place.

If it is agreed that in order to solve the problematic aspects related to alcohol consumption, the method of totally eliminating alcoholic drinks from every individual's consumption is not only impracticable but also heralds more substantial problems, it is necessary to look to policies capable of reducing considerably the risk of such consumption both for the individual and for society.

In Italy an impartial deliberation of this subject cannot avoid considering the 'protective' effects of the 'wet' drinking culture, with special reference to the components of self-control that are part of it. This is, moreover, what the case of Japan seems to prove, where a 'wet' culture seems to be able to neutralize the influence of certain structural determining factors of alcohol consumption and misuse (low prices, availability, starting age, advertising, etc.; Leornardsen, 2006). In this way one could overcome an alcoholic reasoning, which appears schizophrenic when, in expressing deep concern for the 'northern' direction taken by young people, it seems to call for the virtues of traditional drinking, which for

many years was also rightly indicated as being responsible for a large number of alcohol-related pathologies and high human and social costs.

However, to begin with it is imperative that those who are involved in research and 'public debate' on the subject of alcohol undertake to distinguish between (and explain) the objective reality (in as much as this can be the object of observation and measurement) and its social construction adopting a solid scientific approach that imposes caution in advancing data and correlations, and intellectual honesty in refusing to comply with the need for certainties in exchange for approval and media and political visibility.

More and more this involves willingness for interdisciplinary work where the commitment to gathering and processing epidemiological data are associated with the search for good sociological explanations for the social changes—in this case regarding alcoholic behaviours and meanings attached to consumption and abuse by the social protagonists—based not only on the observation of statistical correlations (which can at most describe covariations of phenomenon), but on the search for those social mechanisms (Barbera, 2004; Hedstrom, 2006) that regulate people's behaviours (essentially in terms of desires, beliefs and opportunities). It is indeed these mechanisms that allow us to understand how the protagonists act with regard to a substance like alcohol associated in a special way to desirability, what the sense that they give to their actions in relation to the beliefs that they have matured culturally, which role alcohol can take on in given circumstances when they are faced with opportunities for action (Beccaria & Vidoni, 2006).

Only such deep understanding can enable possible trends to be highlighted and facilitate the setting up of effective policies to prevent the problematic consequences of these behaviours. This can be done by considering elements such as the desirability, beliefs, available options, avoiding a double risk: on the one hand, the risk of excessive and counterproductive alarmism and, on the other, the risk of equally dangerous reappraisal and undervaluing of the variations taking place.

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Notes

- [1] French and Swiss researchers, gathered together in an association with the symbolic name of 'Penombre', have for several years been pondering on the false evidence of numbers and measurements given to the public about the questions mentioned. See: <http://penombre.assoc.free.fr/public/>
- [2] See Scafato et al., *I consumi alcolici in Italia. Report 2004 sui consumi e le tendenze (1998–2001)*, www.epicentro.iss.it
- [3] 'Alcol in Italia, la prima Relazione del Ministro della Salute al Parlamento', 29 January 2004, <http://www.ministerosalute.it/dettaglio/pdPrimoPiano.jsp?id=204&sub=1&lang=it>

- [4] See Scafato et al., 'L'influenza dei comportamenti familiari sul consumo di alcol, 2006' ('*The influence of family behaviours on alcohol consumption, 2006*'), www.epicentro.iss.it
- [5] Report of the Health Minister to Parliament concerning the actions carried out according to law 30 March 2001, No. 125, data regarding the year 2003, Rome, 30 December 2004, page 9.

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