

Short Communication

Social Representation of Alcohol in Perspective

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Submitted: 26 April 2015

Accepted: 02 September 2015

Published: 04 September 2015

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OPEN ACCESS**Keywords**

- Alcohol
- Social representation
- Prevention
- Review

Abstract

Alcohol is an addictive substance that is integrated and normalized indifferent cultural contexts, and therefore has different forms of social representation. These have evolved significantly over the years, as evidenced by the changing consideration of alcohol as a vice to a disease in developed societies over the last fifty years. Social representation is considered to be a way of building and interpreting reality and of integrating collective beliefs. However, a leitmotif exists in societies that have traditionally consumed alcohol, characterized by a great permissiveness that leads to increased consumption. We have reviewed some works that analyze these issues and in conclusion, we point out that social representation is a modifiable construct that may be used as a preventive action in alcohol consumption in the general population and more specifically, in experimental consumption amongst young people.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past fifty years, the progress experimented worldwide in regards to the social representation of alcohol may be described as very significant, especially when compared with the historical background prior to 1950. More representative samples may be found in the assumption of disease in society as problems that have been traditionally categorized as deviant behaviors and have therefore received a social connotation that is consistent with the way of thinking and the beliefs associated with the same in the wake of the tradition. Thus, it is common to find books and medical papers from the 1930s and 40s that made direct references to alcohol consumption as a destructive vice affecting human health, as well as attempts to promote educational systems that fight against this vice (García del Castillo et al., 2014) [1].

Pascual (2004, 151) [2] notes how Salustino Alvarado, in his Treatise of human physiology with hygiene notions of 1934 in Spain, discusses the social representation of the disease of alcoholism of his time: "...It can be said, in view of this, that alcoholism is a real social plague, which in some countries is an issue of such deep concern to governments, that it has led to prohibitive measures of the use of all types of alcoholic beverages, such as the dry law in the United States, presently abolished... As for Spain, the vice of alcoholism is quite limited, although wine is abundant, and therefore, it is not necessary to tackle it with prohibitive measures that would be extended across our country. The fight against alcoholism should be carried out in an

intellectual manner; that is, by educating and revealing the risks of such a vice".

Until the second half of the 20th century, alcoholism in itself was not considered to be an illness. It should be stressed that the alcoholism-illness association existed uniquely within the healthcare context since it took the general population many years to assume and accept the alcoholic as an ill person and not as a vicious and depraved individual. Even today, some social classes still believe that the alcoholic, rather than being ill, is a vicious individual not deserving assistance rights.

The social representation of alcohol in different contexts

Along these lines is the so-called social representation of social psychology theorists (Jodelet, 1998; Moscovici, 1961, 1981, 1998) [3-6], translated into a way of interpreting of thinking about reality or, according to Jodelet, a way of becoming a form of social knowledge. Shared beliefs are another vision of social representations (Gallego et al., 2009) [7]. Reality is a social construction where everyone operates individually to form a collective vision (García del Castillo et al., 2009) [8]. Thus, sometimes the configuration of a concept with a large historical background is resistant to change of the general social perception, thus we continue to find a large percentage of the population that continues to believe that alcoholics are vicious people, offenders and heartless, and no till individuals requiring the health services assistance.

In those societies where alcohol is perceived as a traditional consumption substance that has been fully integrated into the culture, as is the case with some European and American countries, its negative connotation as a health hazard has been reduced since it has become completely normalized.

Social knowledge has also changed depending on the socialization process with alcohol. According to Rolando et al. (2012)[9] the manner in which alcohol is consumed in each culture results in different meanings of the social representation of the same. These authors have observed that in Italy, alcohol consumption occurs progressively from an early age, producing positive memories that are associated with its consumption. In Finland, in contrast, the initial experiences with alcohol tend to be negatively associated with intoxication.

In France, a study by Lo Monaco & Guimelli (2011) [10] addresses the social representation of wine, an alcoholic beverage with strong roots in this country. The conclusions result in two forms of social representation in function of wine consumption, first when the subjects are consumers as opposed to non-consumers. Controversy is generated in both groups, with the prevailing vision of wine as a hegemonic substance, given its cultural nature that is socially accepted by the majority.

Another form of social representation of alcohol is generated by certain behaviors of collective consumption which lead to social interpretations of the reality of specific alcohol consumption. In Europe, we find two representative examples of this.

The first is the British case, in which the consumption patterns of certain populations leads to their being described as prototypes of high alcohol consumption, based on their abusive consumption habits. Thus, due to the social problems related to abusive alcohol consumption, Sunderland has become known as "Britain's drink death capital" and Liverpool is referred to as the "alcohol abuse capital of England" (Duffy, 2010; Gavaghan, 2012; Whiteford & Byrne, 2012) [11-13].

Another example is the Spanish movement of massive alcohol consumption known as the "botellón", which, thanks to its extensive media impact, has been exported to other countries such as Italy and Portugal. It is a gathering of young people in public places (large squares, beaches, etc.) where they consume large quantities of alcohol that was previously purchased in stores (Cortés et al., 2010) [14]. These consumption patterns have resulted in a social representation that is diversified in two different constructions: young consumers who associate alcohol consumption with fun and adults who link consumption with violent behavior, noise and unrest.

In the US, alcohol is also a socially normalized cultural substance. Generally speaking, the social representation of alcohol varies based on collective and age. A study by Keyes et al. (2012) [15] analyzed several factors influencing consumption in young Americans between 1976 and 2007, concluding that this consumption was related to the perception of social norms, with fewer consumers resulting when these norms are more rigid and vice versa. It is interesting to note that regardless of individual attitudes, consumption is affected by the social construction of age and, most of all, of race, with a greater frequency of Caucasian abusers.

Furthermore, a recent study by Kaskutas & Ritter (2015) [16] analyzed the importance of social representations in recovering from substance abuse. It is demonstrated that through language, self-perception, beliefs and real behaviors, social constructions are significantly related to recovery in alcohol abusers.

CONCLUSIONS

It may be concluded therefore, that the social representation of alcohol has a major influence on both regular consumers and abusers. It can pinpoint populations within a social construction of abusive consumption, mark patterns of consumption in youngsters, generate social controversy between traditional beverages such as wine that are highly inserted in the culture, establish consumption standards in young people based on age and race, and influence beliefs and real behaviors of consumers.

These questions suggest the possibility of using the social representation of alcohol as a preventive measure -properly channeled and systematized- among the general population and more specifically, in experimental consumption among young people.

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Cite this article

del Castillo JÁG, del Castillo-López ÁG, López-Sánchez C, Díaz PC (2015) Social Representation of Alcohol in Perspective. *J Subst Abuse Alcohol* 3(3): 1036.