# Editorial for Special issue on ‘Social and Environmental Contexts in Alcohol, Drugs and other Addictive Behaviours’.

*The whys and the hows of psychosocial approaches to addiction.*

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# Abstract

The field of addiction psychology attempts to addresses a major social problem. Yet, discourse within the discipline suggests a biological focus, driven by disease-model of addiction, has caused our understanding to be too narrow. In contrast, psychosocial approaches conceptualise the phenomena from various perspectives. We here bring together papers utilising a variety of methods in the context of substance use and mis-use. These explore the effects that alcohol primes have on attentional control, how procrastination may predict hazardous drinking, the typology of ‘pre-drinking’ motivations and the effects of dyadic membership. It also looks at prevention in terms of public health messaging and also heroin use uptake. We hope showcasing these studies will encourage addiction researchers to widen the scope and method of their enquiries.

Keywords; addiction; psychosocial, alcohol, methodology, disease model

*The whys and the hows of psychosocial approaches to the causes and management of addiction.*

Addiction, whether to substances or behaviour, has huge social and personal implications. In the UK alone, problematic alcohol use costs £21 billion a year and drug abuse an additional £15 billion with costs associated with the burden on health-care, welfare and addiction related crime (Centre for Social Justice, 2013). This fiscal cost does not count the emotional distress, family breakdown and co-morbid illnesses (both physical and psychological) that affect both those who are addicted and those around them. Nor does it account for the impact of non-drug related addictions. As such, research understanding the processes which underpin addiction and also that which suggests targets and methods of intervention continue to be needed.

# What is addiction?

“What is addiction?” This is a question that remains under continued debate in our field. Whilst the most popular and prevailing opinion is that it is a medical disease (often limited to the use and mis-use of substances), others argue that addictive behaviours substance behaviours are better understood as the product of psychosocial forces, and encompassing a wider range of behaviours (including, for example, gambling, sexual behaviours). A full summary that justifies the complexity of this discussion is beyond the limited scope of this piece (but see Davies, (2013) and Griffiths, (2005) as two examples of discussions on these and related topics). Nonetheless, the call to consider addictive behaviours as being a social and environmental context-sensitive phenomena, rather than simply biologically driven, is at the heart of this debate.

*The role of context in addiction*

Beyond the field of addiction, there are numerous theories which propose that context may impact behaviour and its perception. However, research within the field has been historically slow to respond to calls to study the psychosocial and contextual factors which may be important to addiction. The dominance of the disease model of addiction may, at least in part, explain this. It is also axiomatic that it is easier to study of substance use in laboratories or clinical settings (rather than in real-life contexts). So too, it is simpler to set aside concerns about the potential variability of findings in different contexts or when exposed to different contextual cues are ignored. However, it is apparent that studying the effect of context on addictive behaviours may be particularly important. For instance, if the factors driving alcohol consumption are impacted by context or environment, a better understanding of this might benefit intervention approaches and thus reduce alcohol-related harm. This special issue therefore aims to contribute to the ongoing pursuit of a wider understanding of the social and environmental contexts which drive addictive behaviours – specifically by taking a psychosocial approach.

How can a psychosocial approach help?

Attempts to understand and combat addiction have, historically, been disappointing in their efficacy. It is notable that, as discussed above, such attempts have been mostly based on a physiological disease-based model with relatively little regard to psychosocial factors related to addiction (see Hammer, Dingel, Ostergren, Partridge, McCormick, & Koenig 2013). Such a disease-based model focuses on the physiological effects of dependency and withdrawal, and the level of enquiry is most often solely the addicted individual. In contrast, psychosocial approaches consider the psychological factors involved in addiction processes and sees an addicted individual as part of a system involving themselves, others (both addicts and non-addicts) and social norms and attitudes, all interacting with one another. These interactions play out against physical backdrops containing a diverse range of behaviourally and psychologically relevant cues and primes. In recent years, approaches considering these nuances have gained more traction and there is a deeper appreciation of the new light that they shed upon addiction.

# Special Issue Overview

One particular strength of a psychosocial approach is that it allows the study of addiction at various levels of analysis. For instance, one can understand the same addictive behaviour as a function of automatic cognitive priming, the result of expectancy based motivational processes and also as a social identity based phenomena. Similarly, this approach recognises that rather than being static, the drivers of consumption vary across contexts and interact in a complex manner. This broad approach also lends itself well to a diverse range of methodologies including laboratory, field-based and online techniques. The current special issue hopes to contribute to the further development of this approach.

The issue begins with a work authored by Dr Sharma, which focuses on the cognitive control that social drinkers can bring to bear when presented with alcohol-related stimuli. It concludes that heavy drinkers may have a greater reliance on bottom-up information processing. Amongst other things, this demonstrates the importance of the environment in affecting attentional processes, and that such processes can be captured using social cognitive tools.

The second paper explores the underlying reasons people consume alcohol and highlights that the misuse of alcohol may be driven, in part, by the way we cope with external pressures and challenges. Westgate and colleagues argue that, in contrast to being a response to attentional biases, alcohol consumption may also be predicted by individual differences in coping with other pressures (such as academic requirements amongst students). Their paper reveals that procrastinating around the production of academic work can be linked alcohol-related problems, craving alcohol use disorders and lower actual academic attainment.

Our third paper expands on this theme by looking at how social influences drive risky drinking behaviour. Labhart and Kuntsche explore the construction of motivations to engage in so-called ‘pre-drinking’ (aka ‘pre-loading’, ‘pre-partying’ and, in the UK, ‘pre-gaming’). Their sample of young Swiss adult drinkers reported motivations involving having increased fun, achieving greater levels of intoxication during the night out, having a more convivial time during the pre-drinking episode and to facilitate greater self-confidence and resilience. Of these, the desire for increased intoxication appeared to be the most prominent amongst the sample.

Frings, Albery and colleagues outline an investigation into how the prospect of undertaking a complex motor task (and confidence) affects alcohol consumption amongst individuals and dyads. This work shows that dyads do not moderate their consumption when expecting to do a difficult wire-loop task, whilst individuals do. Dyads also experience over confidence after consuming realistic alcohol placebo. Finally, it appears that dyads match one another’s levels of consumption by matching drinking levels-with a heavy drinker of the pair setting the pace. As such, this paper demonstrates the importance of the interpersonal interactions which occur when people are drinking.

The final two papers look towards prevention – with the ultimate aim of ameliorating the harm associated with substance (mis)use by examining possible interventions. Monk and colleagues examine the use of graphical pictorial health warnings (akin to those used on cigarette packaging) whilst Darke and colleagues examine possible interventions to prevent heroin uptake. Monk’s research used eye tracking in order to examine attention to the imagery (graphic or neutral) and text on such warnings, whilst measuring changes in alcohol-related expectancies post exposure. Results suggested that in contrast to those who showed decreases in positive alcohol-related beliefs after warning viewing, participants whose expectancies increased spent longer looking at the images – although there was no difference in average dwell times between graphic and neutral content. Moving beyond the realm of alcohol research, Darke et al., also discusses possible interventions for heroin use as well as the psychosocial correlated if use, including social disadvantage, parental drug use/psychopathology, childhood abuse and neglect, early onset psychopathology and antisocial behaviours, and a developmental sequence of drug onsets. Specifically, they focus on the need to prevent heroin use emerging, as opposed to merely intervening after the uptake of drug use.

Together, we feel that these papers showcase a variety of methods that can be used to widen our understanding of addiction beyond a focus on biological antecedents and interventions. We also hope that this special issue highlights the utility and importance of applying psychosocial considerations to the study of alcohol use in particular. In doing so, we hope to encourage more addiction researchers to widen the scope of their enquiries and to harness the breadth of research tools available to them.

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