

Ethical issues in alcohol policy in Australia: A key informant interview study

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Introduction / Issues: Alcohol use and policies that respond to it raise ethical questions. For example, does intoxication alter moral responsibility? Are alcohol use or intoxication themselves ethically questionable? When are paternalistic policies justified? Nonetheless there has been little attention to alcohol harms from ethicists, with the exception of addiction.

Methods / Approach: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 key informants from alcohol research and policy work in Australia. The research aimed to identify the major ethical issues related to alcohol policy in Australia, and discover how ethical issues are understood, framed, and discussed in this area. Transcripts were analysed inductively.

Key Findings: Informants raised concerns about: the influence of the alcohol industry over policy; the evidence-policy gap; framing of alcohol-related problems that normalises harmful drinking; drinking cultures; harmful, inequitable, or stigmatising policies; and issues related to freedom of choice surrounding alcohol use.

Discussions and Conclusions: I analyse these results drawing on resources from philosophical ethics and argue for three claims: (1) framing of alcohol-related problems that focus on addiction/dependence, or other individual-level explanations, are still prevalent and are problematic; (2) judgements of individuals' alcohol use differ by axes of social difference (e.g., gender, ethnicity) and this can encourage adoption of policies that reflect and/or reinforce social inequities; and (3) appeals to the value of individual freedom in debates on alcohol control policies need to be tempered by recognition of the social context of choices around alcohol and the ways alcohol policies could support positive freedoms.

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