

## **Alcohol in the Workplace: A Soft Systems Approach**

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## **Abstract**

This paper focuses on the topic of alcohol in contemporary work organisations. It aims to explore the relationship between the viewpoints of stakeholders regarding alcohol in the workplace and how they have subsequently shaped organisational practices. Therefore, the study examines the use of certain stages of Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) in addressing the extensive information gathered about alcohol in the United Kingdom workplace. This paper will give a description of the problem situation by identifying and organising the different worldviews, vested interests and any overlooked issues that are relevant to the issue of alcohol use or its misuse in the workplace. It will cover the diagrammatic representation of the problem situation, also known as the rich picture, which will include the diverse viewpoints and perspectives involved in the debate. This will unveil aspects of the research process such as the type and quality of the interviews conducted the variety of actors and experts involved in the debate, and the multiple discourses related to these experts.

Consequently, this research offers the possibility to identify some relevant systems in the form of discourses relating to the debate on alcohol in the workplace and finally the third stage of SSM which involves creating root definitions can be successfully undertaken. This methodological approach adopted will help structure a complex organisational, and often political issue. Consequently this allows the various stakeholders to understand the nuances and the interactions between power relations and discourses (expert and lay knowledge) related to the topic in an organised manner.

**Keywords:** Alcohol, Soft Systems Methodology, Office-based workplaces

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## **INTRODUCTION**

When it comes to the issue of alcohol use or its misuse in the United Kingdom (UK) workplace, views and perceptions do indeed vary. Alcohol and drug misuse present a multifaceted and problematic challenge that destroys vast individual lives and undermines the health and safety of the British society (Cumberledge cited Ghodse, 2016). “Systems thinking recognises that the world is made up of interconnected, hierarchically organised technical and social entities, which often produce behaviour that cannot be predicted by analysing the behaviour of the system’s parts in isolation” (Emes and Griffiths, 2018, p. 6). It provides a “framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static snapshots” (Senge, 2006: pp. 68-69).

Reynolds and Howells (2010) argue that although systems thinking lays emphasis on consensus, it subsequently fails to draw attention to power relations that are existent in both organisational and social life. This paper, therefore, only plans to utilise the first three stages of the Soft Systems Methodology (SSM). As with a study involving modern organisations where open debate is assumed to be freely promoted, the use of SSM allows those involved, particularly the stakeholders, to air their different worldviews about the ‘problem’ being discussed. This paper will offer an account of the problem situation by identifying and organising the different worldviews, vested interests and any hidden issues that are pertinent to the issue of alcohol use or its misuse in the workplace.

The depiction of the problem situation will be done by means of acquiring a rich picture, and a way of organising relevant systems in the analysis of alcohol in the UK workplace. There is often the misunderstanding about whether ‘rich picture’ should be viewed as an abstract and conceptual appreciation of the problem situation or a literal diagram or whether it should be seen as a “subjective conceptualisation” or an “objectively true representation” of the problem situation (Lewis, 1992, p.357; Mirijamdotter, 1998). Lewis (1992) suggests, based on an analysis of literature and accounts of SSM use, that the illustration of a rich picture should not be limited to a pictorial representation of the problem but also include the whole process of appreciating the problem. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to explore the relationship between the viewpoints of stakeholders regarding alcohol in the workplace, and how they have subsequently shaped organisational practices.

## **ALCOHOL AND EMPLOYMENT IN THE UK**

According to the British Medical Association (2017), there is evidence to support the claim that individuals in employment are more likely to consume alcohol regularly than unemployed people. Moreover, they add that individuals in managerial and professional occupations are likely to drink more frequently than those in routine and manual jobs. Alcohol use in the workplace has long been perceived as being associated with accidents, inefficiency and absenteeism (Gill, 1994). Consequently, Woodhouse (2017) adds that alcohol use in the workplace invariably have detrimental effects on the health and social behaviour of employees and employers.

Newman and Sell (1992) have argued that the fundamental problem associated with the topic of alcohol at work is finding a realistic definition for the term 'misuse'. That is, even widely accepted medical views that have generally characterised it as a long-term disease have been marred with much controversy. A major inquiry conducted in the UK established that alcohol was more likely to be a problem than illicit drug use. Irrespective of this, less work has been done to investigate the potential to screen for alcohol misuse in the workplace other than in safety critical industries (Godfrey and Parrot, 2016).

From the various worldviews pertaining to alcohol in the work environment, the contention over the on the definition of alcohol misuse or abuse will likely not be resolved soon. Banta and Tennant (1989) made two observations on the issue. Firstly, while there is a debate over whether alcoholism is an illness and what causes it, most definitions agree that it is a condition of dependency on alcohol. Secondly, alcohol is, of course, a drug and suggestions have been made that efforts employed in addressing alcohol in the workplace should be similar to that of 'illicit' drug use.

## **ALCOHOL AND THE WORK ENVIRONMENT**

Many contemporary organisations, and employers for that matter, often see the development of substance misuse policies and measures as a proactive and responsible position. Nonetheless, by not necessarily understanding or evaluating the premise of these 'problems', such firms critically miss the important issue of workplace culture. Henderson et al. (1996) dwell on the need to identify the relationship between general levels of drinking and particular working environments and how consumption may relate to the type of work conducted and the role played by 'normal and accepted' working practices in enabling and maintaining drinking in the workplace.

Allsop and Pidd (2001) highlight the issue of workplace culture as the central factor to consider when shaping workplace expectations and the social environment regarding the use of 'legal' drugs such as alcohol and tobacco and illicit drugs. For instance:

“In a variety of cultures, formal and informal pressures encourage weekly after work team building and relaxation based on alcohol consumption. Sanctioned drugs such as caffeine and tobacco have been embraced in ritualised breaks in worktime” (Allsop and Pidd, 2001, pp.5).

In addition to the review of workforce alcohol consumption by Midford (2001), it was that alcohol consumption level among both white- and blue- collar jobs was on par. In addition to this, Rigby (2005) also notes that, with regards to the white-collar work environment, drug and alcohol addiction in the financial services and the pressures that lead to addiction have been an accepted and notable aspect of popular culture since the cocaine-snorting, heavy-drinking yuppie made his debut in the 1980s.

Ames and Grube (1999) highlight those issues such as lack of control, alienation and stress linked with the individuals' perceptions of powerlessness as important factors in substance misuse in all kinds of workplaces. Furthermore, Galea and Ghodse (2016) argue that the discussion on the work environment and the issue of an alcohol is shaped by employee

characteristics, organisational attitudes and societal beliefs and trends. They stress that these groups or players play a huge role in shaping the acceptance or rejection of workplace culture, and subsequently encouraging or discouraging a work environment which potentially has alcohol-related problems. The UK General Household Survey indicated that in 2002, those individuals occupying 'managerial and professional' positions in the workplace consumed more alcohol than their counterparts working in 'routine or manual' or 'intermediate' roles (Rikards et al., 2004). Such findings do not only indicate the understanding of alcohol-related issues in the UK workplace, but also highlight the point that alcohol problems can affect all levels of employment.

According to a recent study by PwC (2016), the business services sector has experienced the strongest growth since 1978 and now employs over 6 million people as well as being a major contributor to UK exports and productivity growth. Furthermore, it is predicted that the sector could create around 1.5 million more jobs by 2025 and become the second biggest services sector, with distribution, hotels and restaurants in third place. Therefore sampling from this sector is critical to understanding the issue of alcohol and the aims of this research as it represents a key focus for government, media and wider social discourse on the topic (Acas Advisory Booklet, 2017). That is, although this paper does not aim to be statistically representative, it is still necessary that the discourses gathered on a local level still give a typical reflection of the discourses on the national level.

## **SOFT SYSTEMS METHODOLOGY**

In order to address the aims of this the particular paper, it is important to address the concept of the SSM. Soft approaches begin with the assumption that the problem definition is not simple but is itself complex. Also the analytical strength of the soft systems thinking derives not from an ontological view of a systemic world, but the epistemological power of a set of systems concepts which may structure thinking about the world (Checkland, 1999). Consequently, in a research that involves a 'controversial' substance like alcohol and study to understand how it is dealt with in the British workplace, it is important to understand the 'problematic' and 'pluralistic' nature of the topic.

In the case of this research, the use of SSM in this research is strictly limited to organising information involving various appreciations regarding alcohol and its use or misuse in the UK workplace.

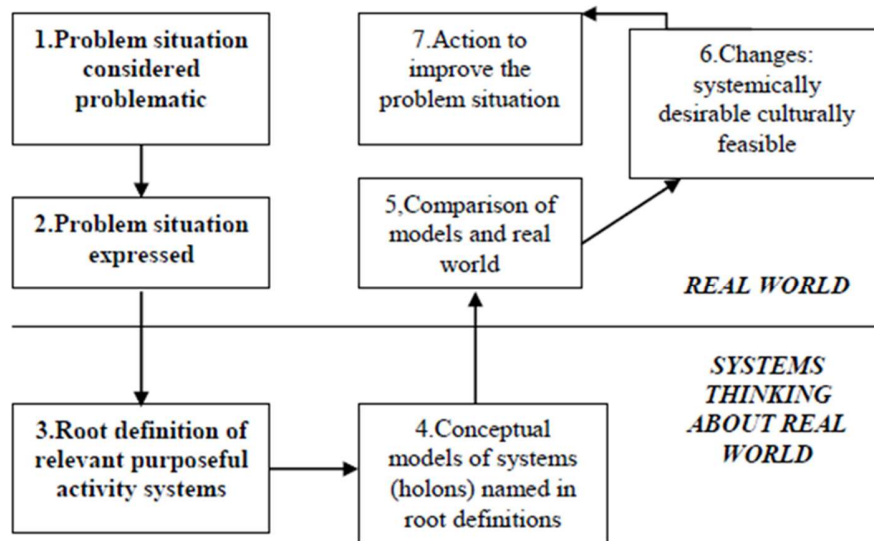


Figure 1: The conventional seven-stage model of SSM

Source: Adapted from Checkland and Scholes (1990, p. 27)

The seven stages of SSM numbered above in figure 1 are not necessarily designed to be followed sequentially because the processes involved in the methodology were extracted from an iterative process. Therefore, depending on the problem involved, there can be movement backwards and forwards between stages. Stages 1-3 are used in this paper. This initial seven-stage model includes two stages, three and four, occurring ‘below the line’ representing a distinction between the ‘real world’ and ‘systems thinking-about-the-real world’. Rose (1997) differentiates between the ‘real world’ and ‘systems thinking by stating that the former is socially constructed whereas the latter represents an “epistemological set of principles which allow us access to a richer understanding, and therefore altered (better, more insightful) perceptions of that domain (p. 6).

The first two stages of SSM involve finding out about the problem-situation and structuring it. The outcome of this is usually illustrated in the form of a ‘rich-picture’ which more often than not entails a ‘drawing’ that depicts the different viewpoints and worldviews, ranging from issues, conflicts and difficulties, that are offered by the stakeholders in the research.

## METHODOLOGY

Purposive sampling strategy was adopted because it enables the selection of information-rich cases over statistically representative ones that would result from probability sampling (Patton, 2002). Because the aim of our research was to gather discourses among employees, which may be overlooked in most mainstream/managerialist workplace-based studies. Hence it was necessary to adopt purposive sampling instead of going for the usual cases; that is, a cross-section or a balanced choice, since researchers would be able to focus on cases which exhibit broad range and possibly even focus on extreme cases to illuminate the topic at hand (Dane, 1990).

The reason semi-structured interviews were employed in this study was to provide qualitative information which would facilitate a richer and deeper understanding of the individuals' representations and experiences regarding alcohol and approaches to alcohol in their respective workplaces (McQueen et al., 2017). It is important to iterate that the opinions that these organisational actors provided were not sought to support or oppose a particular view on the topic of alcohol in the workplace, but rather to show the richness of the research topic and its originality through the provision of a platform for these diverging views to be aired and debated.

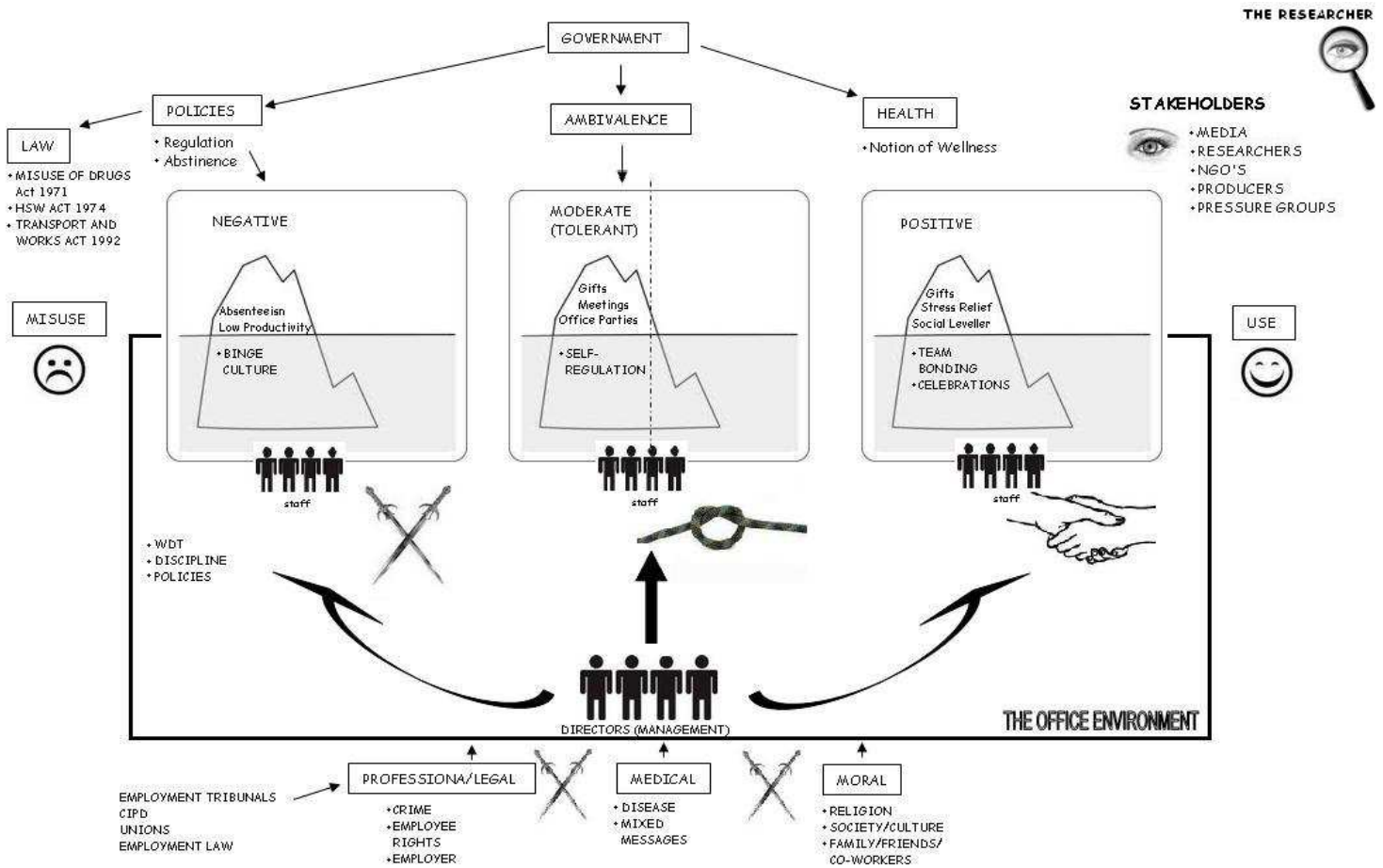
This paper also draws on a selection of interviews conducted with individuals working in three Multi-National Corporations located in the East Midlands region of the UK. These organisations were business service firms and this industry represents a major growth sectors in the UK, especially when considering research on contemporary workplaces (Duquemin et al., 2019). On a pragmatic level, the particular departments selected was motivated by their proximity and their willingness to participate in this research and allowed a substantial degree of access into their respective organisations. Twenty-eight interview participants took part in this research. In selecting the participants, care was taken to ensure there was a balanced number of interviews from the three companies. The influence or level of seniority in their respective firms did little to affect how the interviews were conducted or how much credence would be given to their opinions over others.

The qualitative data analysis software package, NVivo, was used in the data analysis process. This tool enabled the researcher to deal with a large volume of materials, and identify themes and develop meaningful conclusions without encountering issues of disorganisation or tardiness. Moreover, NVivo also allowed the researcher to look at coded segments of the data in context so that it was possible to explore coded passages without separating them from the main material before and after (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013). Furthermore, NVivo is exceedingly useful while creating a rigorous database for the data analysed; that is, it shows vividly all the data coded and how it had been coded. However, the use of NVivo does not guarantee the validity of the study but rather helped increase rigour in terms of data management.

## **FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

It is important to note here that the views mentioned in the rich picture formulation serves as a means of unearthing many aspects of the debate that may not have been given equal exposure as the rest have. As can be seen from the discussion in the research, a rich picture diagram depicting alcohol in the workplace is indeed 'rich' and difficult to draw, usually formed through various iterations, mainly subjective ones. They are unique to a particular problem situation, but very valuable to stimulate debate and understand a problem situation in much more depth than that achieved in more conventional analysis (Avison et al, 1992).

Based on the above discussion and the interviews carried out, it is evident that individuals' perceptions, understandings and personal views on the topic of alcohol have a major effect on how they approach discussions regarding it. Thus, for the individuals interviewed in this research, it was clear that accepted or rejected alcohol use on the basis of the social context within which it was being consumed. Furthermore, some individuals in these workplaces also accepted or rejected alcohol as a means of resistance or conformity to their various



organisational authorities. Such revelations unearth interplay of power-relations, identities and discourses. As has repeated throughout the study, the aim of the research is not to bring to light one set of discourses over another but rather to give such opposing views and often unarticulated views an equal platform as the 'official' discourses.

Hence, for the individual in the workplace, there is a constant struggle between pursuing their goals or ideas and accepting organisational goals. That is, the changing nature of work in post-industrial Britain even has an influence on the employer-employee relationship since the latter is constantly in a predicament of choosing between official and unofficial perceptions or approaches to the issue of alcohol in the workplace. It is also important to note that through the analysis of the interview data, it became clear that the nature of organisations, the emerging enterprise culture and the type of environment or social context that individuals chose to consume alcohol in also influenced how they perceived or approached the topic concerning the workplace.

Figure 2: The Rich Picture

In the illustration of the rich picture above, all views, regardless of the source were given an equal and balanced platform in explaining the problem situation. Furthermore, some of the views about alcohol that usually are in the background of the debate, like moderation and how it is



viewed in the workplace, were exposed to contribution to the richness and diversity of the argument. Besides, although many organisations purport to have zero-tolerance view of alcohol and promote strict policies against it, the practices in such organisations sometimes tolerate and in some instance promote its use and presence in the workplace. The inclusion of different views and perceptions of alcohol to the discussion in the workplace does indeed represent a major contribution of this research.

Although it clear that this research aims to give a non-judgemental stance to each of the opinions offered by the various stakeholders involved in the debate, it is also important to acknowledge that doing so does provide some difficulty. That is, the main challenge here will be for this research to find a way of organising the information that has been obtained from the interviews as well as that present in the literature while maintaining the stated objective of giving equal and non-biased assessment. The next section is aimed at examining and identifying the sections of the rich picture, which will be important or relevant to the problem situation.

### **Relevant Systems pertaining to Alcohol in the Workplace**

As mentioned and discussed in the preceding section, the rich picture that was illustrated was to assist in building up a deep representation of the problem situation. It is clear that the issue of alcohol in the workplace can have various dimensions although it is generally possible to locate these opinions and views within a realm of 'good' and 'bad'. These diverse and wide-ranging opinions about alcohol in the workplace enable the development of the second phase of SSM to be included in this research to facilitate in the identification of the pertinent systems that will contribute to further understanding of the problem situation. It is also at this stage that the research moves from the 'real-world' into the world of systems. Consequently, another aim of this paper is to understand the different perspectives that are possible to draw out of the rich picture. That is, this stage offers a platform for the presentation of different views and tensions unearthed in the rich picture with regard to the understanding of alcohol when the workplace is involved.

It is evident that throughout its history, alcohol has been perceived either on one end as a valuable substance or on the other a detrimental one to the individual (Ghodse, 2016; Godfrey and Parrot, 2016). In the past, some organisations did not see the use of alcohol as a problem and even encouraged it. Although some of these views have persisted and are currently present in contemporary organisations, there has also been a relatively dominant view of intolerance towards any form of substance use in the workplace.

It is also important to note that all of the views, approaches and understandings of alcohol in the workplace may have been influenced by the wider societal perception of the substance at the particular point in time in history. Moreover, it is necessary to note that most of the interviewees involved in the research stated that their views on alcohol as a substance were independent of the views and perceptions on its presence or role in the workplace.

## Root Definitions

This section covers the third phase of SSM that involves the construction of root definitions based on the relevant systems identified in the previous section.

Included in the subsequent sections are the constructions of root definition, which entail the elements of CATWOE (Customers, Actors, Transformation, World-view, Owners, Environment) according to Checkland's SSM and will draw in part on the previous phases of SSM already discussed (Checkland, 1999; Checkland and Scholes 1990). The focus here is to show a deeper understanding into the various discourses that pertains to alcohol in the UK workplace, particularly ones on office-based environments. As argued by Dufuor (2007), the dichotomous view that alcohol is either only beneficial or only harmful is just too simplistic and one-dimensional; thus by applying this approach, which involves an assessment of net outcome, one may be able to produce a deeper insight into the issue.

## Group-Cohesion and Team Building

Although most discourses about alcohol, particularly in the workplace, have portrayed the substance as having a detrimental effect in the workplace, there are still some views that although do not declare the substance as being positive, have expressed beneficial sides to the substance in the workplace (Galea and Ghodse, 2016). One of such views has been that which depicts alcohol as a substance that promotes team cohesion and bonding, possibly both outside and inside the workplace (Martin et al., 1994). These views usually pertain to employees in the organisation, whom due to particular organisational shaping are grouped into teams or work in close proximity to their colleagues, such as an office-based workplace. Alcohol plays an important role in most social activities, from a 'business-lunch' to the parties to the special functions in the workplace such as gift-giving when there is a promotion or some other form of celebration (Goldman et al, 1987; Heath, 1987; Pringle, 1995). Hence from this perspective, "the use of alcohol is seen as a social cement which along with other group activities binds together the members of the community thereby enhancing group solidarity" (Hunt, 1990, pp. 243-244). So it is clear that positive views about alcohol's role in the workplace may be a representation of some section of the wider societies' views. As one manager who was interviewed said:

*"I think that drinking is linked, in this industry, to communal activities for colleagues to get together and let their hair down and actually share some time together. Many good ideas and relationships have been formed while sharing a pint in the company"*

Views pertaining to a somewhat positive or acceptable attitude to alcohol's presence in the workplace can then be summed up appropriately in the following root definition:

**Acceptable views or perceptions about alcohol in the workplace by some organisational actors who mainly lay emphasis on the perceived psychosocial benefits of alcohol consumption as well as its importance to workplace cohesion, group identity and harmony, which they assume override the negative attitudes or views to alcohol in the workplace.**

Thus it is possible to show the transformation that takes place in this instance and further identify other aspects of the CATWOE, in line with SSM, the following way:

RD1: Beneficial use of alcohol to work groups

- Customers: Employees, managers, the organisation
- Actors: Managers, clients, employees
- **Transformation: The identity of the work-group or individuals in the team is drawn-together and reinforced into a harmonious and cohesive unit through the use of alcohol**
- *Weltanschauung*: Alcohol serves a social lubricant in the workplace; it has a symbolic or cultural role in workplace functions
- Owners: Managers, team members, government
- Environment: The social context within which alcohol is used in the workplace exists in a broader debate in which discourses about the adverse effects of the substance are dominant and widely accepted.

The purpose of the CATWOE analysis therefore is to gather the perceptions of different stakeholders in a common platform and provides a holistic understanding that incorporates the different perspectives. These sections are presented in **'bold'** in the analysis. Hence the root definition offers a model for particular views to alcohol use or its misuse in the workplace.

### **The Individual Wellbeing and Alcohol in the Workplace**

Beyond the context of the workplace team lays the view that alcohol may further have specific potential benefits for the individual in the workplace. Employees' alcohol use is often expressed as a direct or indirect response to physical or psychosocial qualities of the workplace (Frone, 1999).

The patterns of drinking in the workplace are described as products of routine or tradition, rather than deviance (Ames and Janes, 1990), and Clark (1991) adds that individual drinking patterns or reasons for drinking vary even though these variations likely reflects salient group customs. An interesting view that was repeated among some of the research participants regarding drinking at work was to serve as a coping tool among colleagues. One interviewee went to the extent of mentioning its medicinal value:

*“Other times if somebody else you are working with is stressing out and they are going through a bad patch its quite common for somebody to put an arm around them and say ‘come on we will go and have a drink‘ and take them out for a pint. So it is almost used in medicinal terms to relax”*

One interviewee also stated:

*“Well its acceptable but with limits. Everything is acceptable if you know your limits. If you drink one or two glasses of wine to unwind, then you possibly go to work the next day with a fresher attitude and drive. But obviously if you are going to drink till 6am when your shift is at 7am then it's just common sense”*

It is possible to portray views that perceive a positive or beneficial effect of alcohol to the individual's overall wellbeing and performance in the workplace and this can be summed up accordingly using the following root definition:

**Tolerable views or perceptions regarding alcohol use in the workplace as a result of the perceived health and social benefits of alcohol consumption on the individual (worker) which may be justified by subjective health perceptions, medical expertise and cultural contexts as well as a tool to cope with stress in the modern day office-based workplace.**

Therefore the above root definition may further be represented as follows:

RD2: Beneficial use of alcohol to the employee/worker

- Customers: Individual workers
- Actors: Managers, employees
- **Transformation: The individual who consumes alcohol is likely to be able to cope with any stressors that will emerge in their day-to-day work activities/environment and also gain medical and social benefits in addition to this**
- *Weltanschauung*: Alcohol use in the workplace has a social and medical role in maintain individual wellbeing inside and outside the workplace
- Owners: Individual, managers, team members, Health and Safety Executive, government
- Environment: The social and cultural context within which alcohol use is accepted exists in a working environment where only discourses about the negative effects of alcohol are overriding and broadly accepted.

Although the benefits that an individual, team or organisation may gain from alcohol consumption have been discussed in this and the previous sections, the most dominant views or perspectives regarding alcohol in the workplace have been that which have regarded or highlighted the negative impacts of the substance on both the workplace and the individual. The next sections thus focus on the negative impacts.

### **Detrimental Impacts of Alcohol to Worker-wellbeing**

For individuals working in office-based environments and specifically in Knowledge Intensive Firms, there are views that cite that alcohol consumption, especially excessive or heavy drinking, may cause cognitive impairment, which in turn may affect the individual's judgement, memory and reaction time. In extreme cases, it is believed that alcohol-related brain damage can affect short-term memory and reduce the ability to engage in abstract thinking or learn new information (Blaze-Temple et al, 1993).

The case of contemporary organisations like Knowledge Intensive Firms, similar to ones that have been recruited in this research, where tasks requires problem-solving skills, or is complex, the effect of alcohol on a person's thought processes and motor skills is greater (The Chamber of Minerals and Energy, 1996). While discussing the alcohol in an office-based environment, an interview argued that:

*“It’s not a good idea no matter what you do. No matter what your workplace is; because it’s detrimental to your job as a whole. Your work suffers, your view suffers, and the quality of your work suffers”*

This view was echoed by several participants. A manager in one of the firms stated:

*“I have done a variety of job roles from administration, labouring, envelope stuffing... I don’t think there is particularly a job where I have had a drink at lunch and thought alcohol will help; it always hinders because you are knackered after a couple of hours after drinking and you are ready for home, there is nothing I have done that it has given me a boost for”*

Thus with regards to a root definition, these views can be represented as follows:

**Views that perceive alcohol as a detrimental substance to the working individual and consequently the work environment due to its physical and social impact on the former and the resulting economic impact on the latter, inspite of the fact that there are studies that have mentioned the potential medical and social benefits of alcohol use to the worker.**

It is also possible to show the root definition and the transformation that takes place as follows:

RD3: Detrimental Impacts of Alcohol on the Worker

- Customers: Employee, co-workers, managers, the organisation
- Actors: Managers, employees
- **Transformation: The individual consuming alcohol in the workplace becomes inefficient and his or her work performance is negatively impacted**
- *Weltanschauung*: Alcohol affects the workplace negatively due to its detrimental impact on the individual’s wellbeing.
- Owners: Employees, managers, team members, healthcare professionals, government
- Environment: Social context in which alcohol is used in the workplace exists in a broader debate in which discourses about the negative effects of the alcohol are dominant and widely accepted.

In this section, the discussion has mainly focused on the impact that alcohol use is believed to have on the individual and although brief mentions were made to the resulting impact on the organisation. However it is important to also mention that the effect of alcohol use in organisations have dominated most studies associated to alcohol in the workplace.

### **Detrimental Impacts of Alcohol to Organisation Wellbeing**

While the previous section discussed discourses surrounding the negative impact of alcohol use on the employee, with few references to the inevitable impact on organisations, this section will specifically address that which emphasises the negative impact of alcohol use on employee-employer relationship and workplace activities.

Alcohol 'mis-use' has been reported to harm people other than the drinker, and can have negative consequences for the workplace as a whole since it is normally believed to play a role in decreased worker productivity, increased unintentional injuries, aggression and violence against others (Gmel and Rehm, 2003).

Hence a root definition for the above viewpoints may be developed as follows:

**Ideas and views that perceive alcohol as being deleterious to the work environment and the organisation as a whole since the organisation bear economic and social consequences for any alcohol-related effects that might occur in the workplace like absenteeism, accidents and inefficiency; all this occurs in a situation where there have been disagreements about the relationship between alcohol and workplace productivity in general.**

Therefore the system described in the root definition above can further be clarified and supported by the following:

RD4: Detrimental Impacts of Alcohol on the Organisation.

- Customers: Managers, the organisation
- Actors: Managers, employees
- **Transformation: Alcohol use or its misuse in the workplace affects employee performance which in turn causes economic and social costs to the employer/organisation**
- *Weltanschauung*: Alcohol affects the workplace negatively due to the costs that the organisation may incur from dealing with its ill-effects on employees and the organisation as a whole.
- Owners: Managers, Human Resource Personnel, Organisational Health and Safety team, government
- Environment: Economic and legal context in which alcohol use in the workplace and its potential consequences could lead to financial, if not legal ramifications on the employer or organisation.

It is important to note that the legal implications of alcohol use or its misuse to the organisation is not a straightforward issue (IIDTW, 2004), there is no direct legislation and vital legal questions hinge on interpretation of a range of provisions in health and safety, employment, human rights and data protection law. The role of the organisation in the discussion about alcohol in the workplace should also be acknowledged not just for the consequences that they might face, but also for the part that they may play in this perpetuation of this phenomenon.

### **Organisational Role: Contributing factors in the Workplace**

There are a number of factors that may be present in the work environment and often blamed for alcohol use or misuse in the workplace and these include work-related stress and work alienation among others. Pidd et al. (2018) suggest that although there are diverse theoretical accounts of

the way workplace factors impact on the alcohol consumption patterns of workers, a unifying and consistent explanation is the workplace culture.

With regards to the impact of culture on individual consumption patterns, Trice and Sonnenstuhl (1990) argue that drinking is a behaviour that is learnt within the cultural context of a social group and can either be functional or dysfunctional. It is this concept of culture that is extended to the workplace to try and understand the viewpoints that believe that alcohol in the workplace is not just the doing of the individual drinker but also the organisation may play a vital role in its presence in the workplace.

As an interviewee mentioned, as part of management, they did sometimes offer alcohol during special occasions in the workplace. This was often during Christmas parties and random work night events.

Some interviewees believed that their particular workplace attitudes towards the discussion of the topic of alcohol, not necessarily its consumption, were very laissez-faire because most people in the workplace had either a first-hand or second-hand experience with alcohol and at one point or the other could relate to the subject. One interviewee said:

*“Well in the UK it is a normal conversation. I think that the alcohol is so much in our lifestyles that I think nobody reacts in some bad way... Even if they don't drink they still have a connection with alcohol”*

One interview participant went to the extent of questioning the effect of alcohol and substance policies in the workplace and described how it was overlooked by both management and staff:

*“That's been in every contract that I think I have ever had; I have drunk at lunchtime with people who interviewed me for jobs and made the decision to employ me, not so much here but my last job I socialised a lot with higher management as opposed to middle management and a lot of work discussion and talking shop was done in the pub at lunchtime with a couple of beers”*

Therefore the root definition of the different but converging viewpoints articulated above may be expressed as follows:

**Ideas and viewpoints that see the organisation or employer as a central figure in promoting detrimental and unhealthy use of alcohol in the workplace due to the poor nature and organisation of work or uncontrolled social and environmental factors that the organisation may allow to exist with regards to alcohol consumption; this occurs in a situation where alcohol use may have been expressed explicitly as unacceptable in organisational policy guidelines**

This Root Definition can further be shown as follows:

RD5: The Workplace as a Contributor to Alcohol Use/Misuse.

- Customers: Employees
- Actors: Managers, the organisation
- **Transformation: Alcohol use or its misuse caused by poor social and environmental factors in the workplace that have resulted as a consequence of poor management practice or organisational structuring**
- *Weltanschauung*: Alcohol use increases as a result of employees trying to cope with the organisational inefficiencies in the workplace
- Owners: Managers, employer organisations
- Environment: Alcohol use in the workplace may be categorically stated by the employer or organisation as forbidden or unacceptable. In the wider societal context, the act of drinking may be acceptable, tolerated or abhorred.

The discussion above suggests that alcohol consumption in the workplace does not solely rest on an individual consuming alcohol as a matter of personal choice but in addition may result as a means of coping with organisational inefficiencies. However, it is important to note that, employers have certain practices and tools at their disposal, which they can utilise to manage the issue of alcohol among their employees.

### **Organisational Role: Control Factors in the Workplace**

The previous section emphasised the role that the organisation may play in facilitating the rise of alcohol use in the workplace, in this section the focus will be shifted to the views that assert that alcohol and other substances are just factors in the workplace that management overemphasises to justify control over employees.

Berger (2009) mentions that alcohol social controls are more immediate and powerful expectations regarding employee drinking behaviour than socially distant formal alcohol policies. The formal social controls include alcohol or alcohol-related written policies and procedures like disciplinary action for drinking 'on-the-job', while alcohol informal social controls which are supervisor and/or employee expectations regarding alcohol-related behaviour like occasionally having a few drinks 'on-the-job' that may or may not be in line with the organisation's formal alcohol policy (Berger, 2009; Ames and Jane, 1992).

In creating a root definition for the above discussion, the management and organisational aspect of the debate will be the prime focus:

**An organisation sees alcohol as a tool or vessel with which they can show to their various stakeholders that they are effectively obeying general governmental laws and societal requirements of them (caring for employees) and in addition establishing a form of control over its workforce (through testing); this occurs in a context where alcohol use is viewed as a public health threat although it is still not an illegal substance.**

The root definition can complementarily be expressed as follows:

RD6: Alcohol as a social control tool.



- Customers: Employees
- Actors: Managers, the organisation, government
- **Transformation: The issue of alcohol use or its misuse in the workplace is used as a means of management establishing control over its employees to ensure compliant subjects**
- *Weltanschauung*: Alcohol use or misuse is an opportunity for dominant bodies to encroach further into the lives of individuals
- Owners: Managers, organisations, government
- Environment: Legal and moral context of alcohol use in the workplace

As mentioned above, the ways that organisations may seek to deal with alcohol in the workplace may be perceived by some a tactic for modern day organisations to encroach further into the lives of individuals. It is necessary to add that this debate does not reject the possible negative consequences that alcohol use in any form may pose to the workplace; however, it must also be acknowledged that many studies have also failed to establish a link between alcohol use and most negative consequences like low productivity and accidents in the workplace. Such developments do give rise to the importance of furthering this debate and also understanding that in order to gain further insight into the topic, a balanced platform for all dimensions of the debate to be expressed should be given.

## CONCLUSION

In the discussions made in this paper, different root definitions concerning alcohol in the workplace were developed. These discussions and viewpoints represent the diverse perceptions and opinions regarding alcohol in the workplace and how some of these discourses may have been generated. It is also evident that the views regarding alcohol in the workplace stem from different and contrasting sources which have enabled a much richer and clearer debate to be represented in this chapter. The six root definitions were created as a result of consulting diverse sources, including interviews with relevant actors. Hence the discussion from this paper has also made it possible to unearth some divergences in the views of alcohol in the workplace, with some emphasis on the substance itself.

Whether one views the issue of alcohol in the workplace as a positive or a negative one, it is important to note that alcohol use particularly in the UK is widespread and valued as a ritual and societal artefact which is deeply embedded in culture. Likewise the need to focus specifically on the workplace, particularly office-based environments, was necessitated in part by the increasing concern and interest about the relationship between alcohol use or its misuse and the workplace by medical, social and scientific institutions, as well organisational stakeholders.

As stated from the outset, certain stages of Checkland's Soft Systems Methodology were utilised in exploring and presenting a clearer and more comprehensible understanding of the subject of alcohol and how it is approached in the UK workplace. Consequently the objectives of this research have been successfully addressed with new insights being made into the topic of alcohol use or its misuse in the workplace in general. Furthermore, these have been translated to economic and social costs, by numerous studies mentioned in the research, to both the employer and employee and the wider society. Aside these issues mentioned about alcohol and the

workplace is also the notion of work which in recent years has been increasingly separated from 'leisure'.

Thus the 'need' for the employer or management to ensure that there is a healthy and productive workforce during the working day and on the other hand a similar need on the part of the employee to feel that they are entitled to act as they please, with regards to alcohol consumption, so long as they are 'doing their job' has further strengthened the need to review and examine the issues of alcohol in the workplace.

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