Czechs, Beer, and the Consequences of Drinking

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Introduction

When considering the health impact of beer, simply charting the number of individuals who suffer from alcohol-related ailments does not give a complete picture of the consequences resulting from habitual consumption of this beverage. A perspective that considers the connections between cultural or social factors and biological forces is needed to understand the causes and significance of patterns human food consumption (Pelto et al., 2000). Investigating both the cultural and biological factors associated with beer drinking gives researchers not only the consequences of alcohol intake on a group of people, but also the connotation of the behavior.

Since the introduction of beer into the diet of man, this drink has served a role both in the nutrition and culture of societies. In Eastern Europe, and more specifically, the Czech Republic, beer holds cultural importance as a symbol of national pride. In recent past, studies have shown a steadily increasing amount of alcohol, particularly beer, consumed in this country. The purpose of this paper is to consider the history and social significance of beer and its cultural role in relation to the consequences of alcohol consumption on the body in order to determine whether Czech drinking practices are ultimately beneficial, detrimental, or harmless.

History of Beer

The first confirmed residue of beer comes from ceramics dating to 4000 BCE, but the beginnings of brewing probably started closer to between 9500-8000 BCE (Homan 2004). Homan (2004) attributes the Near East as the place of origin of this beverage, but Forbes (1951) also claims that beer brewing also developed in Britain and Spain, which spread to Germany. Nelson (2005) agrees with Forbes assertion by pointing to
traces of grain and honey found on pottery sherds from archaeological digs in Scotland from as far back as 3000 BC. Throughout the Fertile Crescent, the remains of ceramic pots and jars have been found, which archaeologists conclude were used in the production of beer (Homan 2004). Based on art depictions and remains found in Early Bronze Age tombs, the process of beer production involved baking barley cakes, then putting cakes and water into a large jar which served as the fermentation vat, sealing the lid so fermentation could take place, and finally, as the pressure built inside the jar, beer exited out of the jar’s perforated bottom (Homan 2004). World-wide, two main types of cereal processing have been distinguished: mastication and malting (Nelson 2005).

Although classical scholars such as Aeschylus and Aristotle have expressed disdain for beer in favor of wine, this brewed beverage served as a rich source of nutrients including carbohydrates, vitamins, and proteins. Additionally, beer served as a safer source to quench a thirst than water because the process of fermentation killed many harmful microorganisms (Homan 2004). Beer was the national drink in both Egypt and Mesopotamia, but in the Near East beer was not simply another beverage to be enjoyed; it also served a religious purpose in the worship of gods such as Ninkasi, the beer deity in the Sumerian religion, Dumuzi, Enlil, and others (Homan 2004). For the Egyptians, the god Osiris first introduced beer into the land (Forbes 1951). Furthermore, even the Judeo-Christian God calls for offerings of beer on his altar (Homan 2004). Consequently, beer was regarded as a significant part of the religious experience for these peoples.
Beer also played a major social role in the Near East and frequently factored into bride-prices, medical treatments, and was one often used in festivities and celebrations due to its ability to overcome social obstacles (Homan 2004). Beer-brewing spread from the Egyptians and Mesopotamians to the Greeks and then to the rest of Europe, although there is evidence that some sort of fermentation of various fruits and other products was occurring before this dissemination (Nelson 2005). By the fourteenth century in Europe, beer had become the drink of both commoners and noblemen alike, probably due to an increase in wine prices at this same time (Nelson 2005).

**Czech History, Beer, and the Pub**

Beer has been an integral part of Czech culture for at least 1,000 years, with the earliest written documentation referring to the beverage dating from the 10th century AD (Kubička 2006). The cultivation of hops, one of the methods for flavoring beer, began as early as 859 AD in the Czech lands and exportation of the crop dates to 903 AD (Escher 2007). Two types of beer brewing, pilsner and Budweiser, originated in the Czech lands in the towns of Plzeň and České Budějovice, respectively (Hall 2003). Alongside the development of beer as a part of Czech culture, the pub also rose in social importance, and due to a long, shared history of development, the study of beer cannot be complete without consideration of the hospoda (Escher 2007). Even in the 14th and 15th centuries the pub had become a place for Czechs to relax, share the news of the day, and drink beer (Escher 2007). As Hall (2003) notes, even today beer serves as a social lubricant and is an essential element for leisure of any kind.

Beginning in the 19th century, beer and the pub began to take on a deeper role. By this time in history, under Hapsburg rule, Prague, the traditional capitol of the area
was home to Germans and Jews in addition to Czech peasants and bourgeoisie (Hall 2003). Czechs had almost completely lost their ethnic identity and native language since the official language of the Austrian empire was German (Hall 2003; Escher 2007). Aside from leisure and recreation, the pub was a key location to hold meetings during the revival because it was one of the few places where people could talk in the Czech language (Escher 2007). Consequently, beer and other beverages served in the pub also took on nationalistic sentiments.

The Czech nation finally gained independence in 1918, but then underwent the Holocaust and the expulsion of Sudetan Germans (Hall 2003). As a result, by 1945 two of the three culture groups that had once inhabited that country were gone, which left only culturally impoverished Czechs (Hall 2003). And since the best-recognized Czech product was beer, they used that beverage to help rebuild their identity in the world (Hall 2003). Following this turmoil, Communism took root in the country in 1948 and beer became a means of escape for the Czechs from economic, political, and general dissatisfaction with the new government (Escher 2007). During the years between 1948 and the end of the totalitarian regime in 1989, workers had little hope of promotions or improvement in living conditions, but they could always count on affordable beer to lift their spirits, if only slightly (Escher 2007). Despite the communist effort to portray alcoholism as a lowly and fit only for the bourgeoisie, alcohol consumption rose steadily from 4 liters per capita consumption to over 9 liters between the years of 1949 and 1984 (Hall 2003; Kubička 2006). From 1986 to 1989 there was a slight decrease in per capita consumption, 8 liters, due to a poor imitation of Gorbechev’s anti-alcohol campaign, but
since the fall of the regime, Czechs have long since regained ground and passed all previous levels of per capital alcohol consumption (Kubička 2006).

Since reinstatement of a democracy and market economy in 1990, the consumption rates have increased regularly every year, probably in response to a relatively new feeling of freedom among the Czechs (Kubička 2006). Women, especially, have exhibited the changes that coincided with the change in government through the rapidly rising levels of female alcohol consumption and greater tolerance for female drunkenness (Escher 2007). While consumption rates among men has increased in a virtually consistent pattern, Escher (2007) notes that in a study conducted by Kubička, Csémy, and Kozeny, the proportion of female heavy drinkers has almost doubled from 7.2% to 14% since 1989. Also in Escher (2007), Dr. Václav Dvořák proposes that this increase in female alcohol consumption can be attributed to increase in stress due to the new responsibilities under a democracy. In Hall’s (2003) research, he concluded that the drinking patterns of educated, urban women are beginning to match those of their male complements. So, although communism and the resulting malaise of hopelessness have fled from the Czech Republic, Czechs are still turning to beer and alcohol to cope with their problems.

Czechs, Beer, and Culture

As a result of beer’s long association with the history of Czech culture, the beverage has developed associations with certain drinking habits and behaviors. In Escher (2007) Vlastimil Tlustý states that “We Czechs believe that beer is a part of food” and Hall (2003) observes that beer is “a nearly sacred substance” that is revered and managed with prescribed rules and methods of care (15; 1). Although recent times
have seen an increase in female alcohol consumption, and women sometimes accompany boyfriends or partners, the pub is still generally a male domain (Hall 2003). In his research Hall (2003) notes that Czech men infrequently socialize or relax without some sort of beer or other alcoholic beverage. There are many typical beer foods that are served at pubs for patrons to compliment their beverages. Additionally, most pubs serve only one brand of draft beer and carry canned or bottled beers only for foreign tourists or for patrons desiring non-alcoholic beer (Hall 2003). As a pub patron, mixing an old beer with a new beer is scorned, although bartenders are allowed and expected to perform sometimes complex rituals of mixing beer to achieve the desired foam level, and not finishing a beer indicates that there is something defective with that drink (Hall 2003). Normally pubs have long tables that anyone can sit at, creating an air of camaraderie (Hall 2003). This amity does not extend to buying fellow patrons rounds of drinks, however, and each customer has a tab that he pays off at the end of the night, Hall (2003) states; Slovak neighbors contrast with their own generosity to create an image of Czech stinginess.

Beer also holds a place in Czech folk medical beliefs. Czechs claim that beer and other herbal liquors contain lots of vitamin B (Hall 2003). Hall (2003) also discerned the belief that mixing drinks can cause serious illness and trying to mix drinks, even different brands of beer, will evoke a nervous and cautionary attitude from fellow clients. Furthermore, Czechs firmly forbid drinking beer or alcohol while on antibiotics, which is a rule many countries with a western medical system also observe (Hall 2003).

Although the legal drinking age in the Czech Republic is 18, this rule is lenient and often violated. In general, Czech males begin drinking in their early-mid teen years
and regularly visit pubs by the time they reach 18 (Hall 2003). According to Hall’s (2003) research of a 1993 study, 38% of 15-year old boys and 18% of 15-year old girls drink alcohol of some sort at least once a week. As an adult, drinking alcohol, especially beer, is an essential element to the behavior of socializing or relaxing, and drunkenness along with resulting behaviors such as being late or missing work are socially acceptable in most cases (Hall 2003). In fact, daily, heavy drinking are a part of and supported by Czech cultural norms, resulting in this tolerance of drunken behavior (Hall 2003). From my own experience in the Czech Republic, attitudes towards drinking are very liberal and open compared to those in the southern United States. When going out to dinner, several of the men got beers to drink with their dinner and many more probably would have if I had not been with a group of Americans on a church mission trip. Beer was not a form of rebellion, as with many American teens and young adults, it was just beer for them.

**Beer, Health, and the Czechs**

Although beer was originally consumed for nutritional value and still plays a vital role in cultures worldwide, a debate is currently taking place on whether beer ultimately harms or hurts the body in terms of health. In both a study of Czech men and a Danish study of men and women, and inverse relationship was shown between the risk of coronary heart disease or myocardial infarction and alcohol consumption (Bobak et al. 2000; Tolstrup et al. 2006). Bobak and colleagues (2000) found that men who drank daily or almost daily and those that drank between 4 to 8.9 liters of beer a week were at the lowest risk for a heart attack. In the Danish study, results showed that there was an inverse relationship between coronary heart disease in men over all the ranges of
drinking frequencies, never, less than once a month, 1-3 times a month, once a week, two to four times a week, five to six times a week, or everyday (Tolstrup et al. 2006). For women in this same study, a lower risk for coronary heart disease was found in participants drinking at least once a week compared to those that drank less frequently than once a week (Tolstrup et al. 2006). Tolstrup and colleagues (2006) conjecture that the inverse relationship between alcohol consumption and coronary heart disease is due to the consequences alcohol has on high density lipoprotein levels, plasma fibrinogen levels, the platelet aggregation.

Other studies, though, have highlighted the detrimental health results of alcohol on the body. In Rehm and associate’s (2006) study showed that, in the Czech Republic, alcohol consumption contributed 17,820 male deaths and 7,872 female deaths for ages 20-64 per 10,000 people per year in 2002, despite the finding that 159 female deaths caused by cardiovascular disease were prevented. In this study alcohol was shown to be a risk factor for malignant neoplasm of the lip, pharynx, oesophagus, colon, rectum, anus, liver, larynx, breast, as well as for diabetes, mental and behavioral disorders, degeneration of the nervous system, epilepsy, alcoholic polynuropathy, essential hypertension, cardiac arrhythmias, stroke, alcoholic gastritis and liver disease, fibrosis and cirrhosis of the liver, cholelithiasis, pancreatitis, fetal alcohol syndrome, injuries, suicides, homicides, road injuries, and fractures from falls (Rehm et al. 2006). Although Czechs practice a less harmful drinking pattern than other eastern European countries, alcohol consumption still accounted for 16.3% of male deaths and 5.8% of female deaths in 2002 (Popova et al. 2007; Rehm et al. 2006). More specifically, in 2002 among males, ages 20-64, alcohol caused 690 fatal malignant neoplasm, 101
fatal cases of cardiovascular disease, 778 fatal cases of liver cirrhosis, 881 fatal cases of unintentional injuries, and 259 fatal cases of intentional injuries per 10,000 people in the population (Rehm et al. 2006). Also in 2002, the highest recorded consumption level was found in the Czech Republic at 12.9 liters of pure alcohol per capita and measured 161.7 liter per capita beer consumption, which is equivalent to a bottle of beer for every person, old and young, in the Czech lands according to Escher (2007), in 2003 (Popova et al. 2007; Kubička 2006). Escher (2007) notes that according to the World Health Organization, an average per capita consumption of 8 liters of pure alcohol in a country is a sign of dangerous levels of alcohol consumption. In a 2002 survey, ischaemic heart disease, cerebrovascular disease, colorectal cancer, cirrhosis of the liver, falls and self-inflicted injuries, all possibly attributable to alcohol, were included in the top ten causes of death in the Czech Republic (Kubička 2006). In general, then, research concludes that, although alcohol consumption does create an advantage in terms of cardiovascular health in terms of the inverse relationship between alcohol consumption and myocardial infarction or coronary heart disease, a higher proportion of fatal diseases can be attributed to alcohol, so that the negative consequences outweigh benefits.

In recent times, too, Czechs have begun to realize the destructive results their love of beer is causing. Although 93% of Czechs still regard beer as the national drink, 67% of the inhabitants feel that extreme consumption levels of their country is a disadvantage to the Czech people (Escher 2007). Hall (2003) notes that Tomáš Masaryk, the founder and first president of Czechoslovakia, is quoted saying “a nation which drinks more will undoubtedly succumb to one that is more sober…Each nation
destroys itself by drinking and drinking injures everyone who does not resolve himself against it” (9). Masaryk is quoted saying this in 1905, but public recognition that Czech drinking levels go beyond healthy moderation has been delayed and only now do Czechs begin to realize they may have a drinking problem (Hall 2003).

Discussion

Czechs love their beer. This drink is a part of their culture and their heritage. While research recognizes that alcohol consumption does lower a person’s risk for some types of heart disease, studies like Rehm and colleagues (2007) that study wide variety of illness that can be attributed to alcohol show that improved heart health does not compensate for the other many illnesses that high levels of alcohol consumption can cause. The fact that person is at a lower risk for coronary heart disease or a myocardial infarction means little if his body is impaired or ill in other aspects.

Much research has been done in the past ten years, but more studies are needed to understand the full impact of alcohol on health and the human body. Bobak and associates (2000) study on the risk of myocardial infarction dealt only with Czech men. Because Czech women have been increasing their alcohol consumption since the Velvet Revolution in 1989, more research should be conducted on the health impact of alcohol on women, in addition to men. There should also be study that deals with the role culture plays in health in terms of alcohol consumption: does beer, with its place in the Czech culture, have a positive, negative, or neutral influence on health factors relating to elevated consumption levels?
Conclusion

Beer in the Czech lands has a long history that has led to its designation as the national beverage. As more research is conducted on the positive and negative consequences of alcohol on the body, more Czechs are beginning to consider whether this national love of beer is a harmless feature of their culture, or a maladaptive behavior that should be revised to prevent their own self-destruction. More specific research could be done in the Czech Republic highlighting the benefits of alcohol consumption compared with the risks and negative consequences of high alcohol consumption and a greater focus on women as well as men for a more conclusive verdict on the Czech drinking habit.
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