

# PROBLEM DRINKING AT YEAR-END STAFF PARTIES

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## ABSTRACT

From a study of the relevant literature it is clear there is evidence that alcohol related problems both in and outside industry affect adults of both sexes. The objective of this study was to investigate the structure of year-end-parties in South Africa and it probes the role of alcohol at such functions as a possible trigger to problem drinking. A questionnaire was administered to respondents giving access to information concerning 89 different year-end-parties. The results indicated that the identified benefits accruing from year-end-parties outweighed the adverse effects of the problem drinking they sometimes generated.

## OPSOMMING

Die doel van die studie was om die struktuur van jaarlikse afsluitingsfunksies in 'n aantal Suid-Afrikaanse organisasies te ondersoek en vas te stel watter rol alkohol by sulke geleenthede speel — en in watter mate dit aanleiding kan gee tot drankmisbruik.

'n Vraelys is vir hierdie doel ontwikkel en by 89 organisasies afgeneem. Die resultate dui daarop dat die voordele voortspuitend uit afsluitingsfunksies swaarder weeg as die nadele as gevolg van moontlike drankmisbruik.

Alcoholism can be defined in various ways. The literature, however, shows an increasing trend towards differentiating between those who have a physiological dependence on alcohol — an addiction — and those who merely suffer from a more general "drinking problem" (Miller, 1983). The inference in this regard is that whilst all alcoholics are problem drinkers, problem drinkers are not necessarily 'alcoholics'.

It differentiates between those who have to overcome a dependence on alcohol, and those who have to deal with entirely different circumstances — that is, those circumstances which trigger problem drinking.

Although they may not be dependent on alcohol, problem drinkers certainly still impact negatively on society. There is a substantial body of evidence, for example, which indicates they cause many unnecessary accidents both at work and elsewhere; that they feature prominently in absenteeism and late-for-work lists; that their hangovers result in a significant drop in productivity; and that their decision making capacity is impaired.

Plant (1984, p.36) makes the following observation:

"... there is abundant evidence that alcohol-related problems in industry, as well as outside it, have become widespread and that these affect both sexes, all age groups, and all levels from the shop floor to the board room. There can be no doubt that alcohol misuse is incredibly costly both in financial and in human terms ..."

He also stresses that most alcohol problems at work do not involve dependence (Plant, 1984, p.38):

"Excessive or inappropriate drinking does not necessarily involve addiction or dependence. Much of the trouble that alcohol misuse causes industry relates to *drunkenness or unwise drinking*."

The macro-picture regarding drunkenness tells its own story. Many individuals in the general populations of the four countries which top the alcohol consumption list — France, Spain,

Portugal and Italy — may well suffer from 'alcohol dependency' problems, but they do not exhibit as much 'drunkenness' as do people living in the Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian countries. This is because they spread their greater consumption evenly throughout the day, and week. By contrast, imbibers in the latter countries, although they drink less, tend to indulge in relatively hard drinking sessions (Plant, 1984.) France, Spain, Portugal and Italy pay for their high alcohol consumption through matching high rates of death due to cirrhosis of the liver.

Drinking habits in South Africa, generally, seem to follow the Anglo-Saxon pattern. In this respect it may be instructive to take cognizance of some statistics. According to Van der Burgh (1982), 82% of white males and 67% of white females are current drinkers, and most of them drink at least four times per week. Over 60% of black and coloured South African males drink alcohol, whilst 26% of the females of these racial groups also imbibe; both groups tend to concentrate their drinking over weekends. White South Africans, individually, drink more than they did a decade ago, but blacks and coloureds are consuming less; and although the level of alcohol indulgence by Indian South Africans is positioned at the bottom of the list, Indians have dramatically increased their consumption over the past 10 years.

Since all population groups in South Africa can produce problem drinkers which in turn could lead to an increase in road accidents, Roche-Silva and Pieters (1984) have emphasised the need for further research into the factors influencing problem drinking in this country.

In the United States of America most major employers now have high profile 'Employee Assistance Programmes' which, inter alia, help to identify and to rescue problem drinkers. Although humanitarian in nature, it has proved to be effective in serving the best interests of long term corporate profitability. This response by industry is consistent with current attitudes toward drinking in the United States of America. Price, (1987, p.61) states:

"... people are drinking lighter and drinking less, and seem to be proud of it"

Although some major local corporations have adopted the U.S. approach, the remainder of the South African business community appears to be decidedly less concerned.

In South Africa if a problem drinker is found out he might well lose his job. This attitude is similar to that which prevailed in a majority of companies in the United States until as recently as the 1970's. Both are typified by an informal policy of condemnation, and denial, towards employees with a drinking problem (Wrich, 1988).

Despite this apparently harsh approach toward the problem drinker, it might be argued that South African business itself encourages problem drinking — by sponsoring year-end staff parties at which an uninterrupted flow of alcohol is nearly always available. In fact, millions of Rands are spent on alcohol for such parties every year.

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Webber (1978, p.10) has, *inter alia*, the following to say in this regard:

"A high proportion of the people who come to me for counseling around the Festive Season do so because their marriages or relationships have run into serious trouble as a result of things which have happened either during or immediately after office Christmas parties."

In the light of the above, it was decided to investigate the pattern and structures of year-end-parties in South Africa.

More specifically, the study was aimed at determining whether or not any particular characteristics of end-of-year office parties in South Africa could be identified as factors which promoted, rather than inhibited, problem drinking. Its secondary objective was to find out if year-end functions enhanced an organisation's productivity potentials in any positive manner. By their very nature, businessmen need to know whether the money they spend on such parties serves any useful function.

One of the parameters used in the United States to determine whether or not a respondent could be identified as a problem drinker was whether or not he, or she, in the previous twelve months, had been in trouble with the law for driving after drinking (Parker, Kaelber, Harford & Brody 1983). In South Africa, drunken driving is known to be particularly prevalent toward the end of each year, and law enforcement bodies mount special campaigns to apprehend offenders. Whether a culprit is caught in the act of driving under the influence of alcohol, or is not so caught, however, this criterion identifies any person who drives a motor vehicle whilst in an intoxicated state as being a *de facto* problem drinker.

Accordingly, for the purpose of this study, problem drinking was operationally defined in terms of driving a vehicle immediately after a year-end staff party in an intoxicated state.

In a research situation it would, of course, not be practical to blood-test every departing guest from a staff party, and then to record whether or not they drove away in a motor vehicle. Guests at the party themselves, however, would have a pretty good idea as to who of their colleagues had had too much to drink, and whether or not they subsequently drove home in a motor vehicle. A subjective assessment of this nature would obviously not stand up in a court of law but, by and large, it

would be sufficiently accurate for the purposes of a study concerned with problem drinking. Accordingly, it was decided to try to identify those year-end staff parties which, in the opinion of respondents, launched drunken drivers onto the roads. These then could be identified as the parties which contributed towards the incidence of problem drinking, and their characteristics could be compared with those other end-of-year functions which did not result in obvious drunken driving.

The hypotheses formulated for empirical testing in the study were derived from the following considerations:

Christian functions in December, specifically concerned with celebrating the festival of Christmas, are considered to be less likely to stimulate drunken driving than end-of-year office parties which have an entirely different objective.

The size of the function is also considered to be a pertinent factor in contributing towards drunken driving. The bigger the party, the more anonymous, and less important, everybody would feel, and this, it was thought, would contribute towards inclining the participants to drink excessively. If this proves to be true, the size of office parties would be inversely proportionate to the amount of excessive drinking they encourage.

The duration of each function is also considered to be a possible contributing factor. Hypothetically, the more protracted the party, the greater would be the time available for participants to consume large quantities of alcohol. Research in America, in fact, led the Minnesota Prevention Resource Center to recommend that "cocktail time" should be limited to one hour (Price, 1987).

The degree to which staff are required to pay for their drinks, was considered to be another important factor. If drinks were free, for example, it can be assumed that more alcohol would be consumed than if people were required to pay for them; even if they were required to pay for extra drinks only after a specific time this would inhibit drinking to a degree.

The example set by senior members of staff was also considered to be an important factor that could determine the level of intoxication and drunken driving by their subordinates.

Extramarital romantic attachments might also originate at year-end staff parties and these can both precipitate marital discord and cause problems in the work place.

Despite the fact that in South Africa multiracialism is sometimes a sensitive issue, factors associated with interracial relations are not thought to be pertinent to a study of this nature. They are, however, recognised to comprise a dimension that needs to be investigated.

## METHOD

A questionnaire was administered to a random sample of 91 respondents employed in the PWV and Durban areas during the last week of December 1987, and in the first week of 1988. The profile of this sample is reflected in Table I.

Only two respondents did not attend a year-end function.

This effectively gave access to information concerning 89 different year-end staff parties. The 'real' sample therefore consisted of 89 year-end staff parties.

As regards the characteristics of each respective function,

**TABLE I**  
**PROFILE OF SAMPLE**

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Working environment</b>		<b>Type of worker</b>	
Technical	31,5	Blue collar	29,2
Commercial	34,8	White collar	70,8
Other	33,7		
<b>Size of Organisation</b>		<b>Level of Education</b>	
0-50 people	27,0	Up to matric	47,2
51-1000 people	38,2	Post matric	41,6
More than 1000 people	34,8	Graduate	11,2
<b>Age of respondents</b>		<b>Race</b>	
Up to 25 years	14,6	White	78,7
26 to 40 years	38,2	Other	21,3
Above 40 years	47,2		
<b>Language</b>		<b>Sex</b>	
English	79,8	Male	60,9
Afrikaans	20,2	Female	39,1
<b>Place of Residence</b>			
PWV area	53,9		
Durban	46,1		

respondents were asked to indicate whether it took the form of a cocktail party, a lunch, a braai, a dinner, a picnic or some other form. All responses fell within the first four categories.

Other questions relating to the characteristics of parties included the following:

- The date of the function.
- Whether husband/wives were invited.
- Approximate number of people who attended.
- Starting and finishing times.
- Who paid for the function.
- Estimated cost per person.
- Whether it was a multiracial event.
- Whether alcoholic beverages were consumed.
- Whether any one had to pay separately for drinks.
- Whether any specific mention was made that the function was to be a Christian celebration.

Questions which probed drinking and/or associated problems were as follows:

- Did anyone in your opinion have too much to drink?
- Did any such person drive a motor vehicle afterwards?
- Were disturbances created by any guests?
- Were senior members of staff among those who had too much to drink?
- As far as you know, did any extra-marital romantic activity develop during or after the function?

Questions which were designed to test attitudes toward employer year-end functions were the following:

- Has your regard for any senior member of staff, who had too much to drink, been affected at all?
- In your opinion, did the function contribute towards better working relationships for the future? (The reasons for responses to this question were also called for.)
- Did you personally enjoy the function?

- Would you accept an invitation to a similar function next year?
- How would you feel if your organisation announced that no further year-end functions would be held?
- How would you feel if instead of a year-end function, a specific amount would be paid by the organisation to charitable organisations chosen by the staff?

The data were classified according to the following categories: responses of the total sample; responses (functions) where, in the opinion of the respondents, some drunk driving had ensued. The two groups of data were further classified according to form of function.

Since all the data were obtained at the nominal level of measurement and some categories ?? rather low expected frequencies, Chi-square test were performed to test the hypotheses (Siegel, 1956, p.110).

### Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses and their appropriate alternatives were formulated.

#### Null hypotheses

#### Alternative

There is no difference between the 'drunk-driving set' and the 'non-drunk-driving set' with regard to:

- |                             |  |
|-----------------------------|--|
| 1. The type of function     | 1. The type of function would affect the drunk driving pattern (non-directional) |
| 2. The presence of spouses  | 2. The functions attended by spouses would generate fewer drunken drivers        |
| 3. The date of the function | 3. Functions held before 12 December would generate more drunken drivers         |

4. The duration of the function	4. Functions lasting four hours or less would generate fewer drunken drivers	9. Multiracial attendance	9. Multiracial functions would impact on drunken driving (non-directional)
5. The time of day	5. Functions during office hours would generate fewer drunken drivers	10. Extra marital romantic activity	10. Extra marital romantic activity would be more likely at drunken driving functions
6. Additional payment for drinks	6. Functions which required guests to pay extra for drinks would generate fewer drunken drivers	11. Disturbances	11. Disturbances would be associated with drunken driving functions
7. The function being a Christian celebration	7. Christian designated celebration functions would generate fewer drunken drivers	12. Senior staff members drinking too much	12. Drunken driving would be more likely from functions at which seniors drank too much
8. The number of people attending	8. Functions attended by more than 50 people would generate more drunken drivers		

**RESULTS**

The research results are tabulated in Tables 2 and 3. Unless otherwise indicated, the results in Table 2 are reflected in percentage terms in order to facilitate ease of comparison.

**TABLE 2  
FUNCTION FEATURES AND RESPONSES TO FUNCTION**

Function features	Total		Dinners		Cocktails		Braais		Lunch	
	Full sample	DD* set	Full sample	DD* set	Full sample	DD* set	Full sample	DD* set	Full sample	DD* set
Drunks who drove	39,3	—	47,4	—	61,5	—	50,0	—	32,3	—
Some drank too much	44,8	—	52,6	—	61,5	—	56,3	—	33,3	—
Attended with partner	33,3	40,0	94,7	88,9	15,4	25,0	31,3	37,5	10,3	10,0
Held before 12 December	59,8	71,4	57,9	88,9	61,5	37,5	43,8	75,0	66,7	80,0
Average time (hours)	5,6	6,2	6,2	6,4	4,2	4,4	7,6	8,3	4,3	5,6
Extra charge for alcohol	11,5	2,9	21,1	11,1	—	—	—	—	15,4	—
Labelled "Christian" celebration	35,6	14,3	78,9	22,2	23,1	25,0	6,3	—	30,8	10,0
More than 50 guests	47,1	74,4	77,8	100,0	61,5	62,5	56,2	50,0	25,6	80,0
Multiracial	72,4	77,1	78,9	100,0	76,9	87,5	75,0	37,5	66,7	80,0
Romantic activity	9,2	22,9	—	—	30,8	50,0	12,5	25,0	5,1	30,0
Disturbances	6,9	11,4	5,3	11,1	7,7	12,5	12,5	12,5	5,1	10,0
Seniors drank too much	16,1	42,9	—	22,2	23,1	50,0	31,3	62,5	15,4	40,0
No alcohol served	3,4	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	7,7	—
Average cost per person (R)	24	24	36	35	4	11	18	24	28	26
Range of cost per person (R)	(3-80)		(15-80)		(5-30)		(3-38)		(10-59)	
<b>Response to function</b>										
Contributed to better relations	82,8	85,7	78,9	77,8	84,6	87,5	87,5	87,5	82,1	90,0
Enjoyed the function	88,5	85,7	78,9	77,8	100,0	100,0	87,5	87,5	89,7	80,0
Same next year	88,5	88,6	73,7	77,8	92,3	100,0	87,5	87,5	94,9	90,0
"No function"										
– Positive	9,2	8,6	10,5	11,2	7,7	—	6,2	12,5	10,3	10,0
– Negative	47,1	57,1	42,1	44,4	61,5	75,0	37,5	25,0	48,7	80,0
– Indifferent	43,7	34,2	47,4	44,4	30,8	25,0	56,3	62,5	41,0	10,0
"Charity instead"										
– Positive	40,2	31,4	31,5	22,2	30,8	25,0	50,0	62,5	43,6	20,0
– Negative	37,9	57,1	31,4	44,4	53,8	75,0	43,8	37,5	33,3	70,0
– Indifferent	21,9	11,4	36,8	33,4	15,4	—	6,2	—	23,1	10,0
Firms "ought to" have functions	93,1	91,4	94,7	88,9	92,3	100,0	87,5	87,5	94,9	90,0

All figures are in % — unless otherwise specified

\*Drunk driving set

**TABLE 3**  
**CHI-SQUARE VALUES FOR THE DIFFERENT SETS OF DATA**

Variable	Number of respondents		$\chi^2$	Critical value at $p=0,05$	Null Hypothesis
	DD Set	Remainder			
Dinners	9	10	7,80432	Two-tailed	Reject in favour of alternative
Cocktails	8	5			
Braais	8	8			
Lunches	10	31			
Spouse	14	15	0,94132	2,71	Unable to reject
No spouse	21	39			
Before 12 December	25	27	3,18078	2,71	Rejected in favour of alternative
On or after 12 December	10	27			
4 Hours or less	8	24	5,28616	2,71	Rejected in favour of alternative
More than 4 hours	27	30			
During working hours	19	37	2,50439	2,71	Unable to reject
After working hours	16	17			
Paid extra for drinks	1	9	5,35965	2,71	Rejected in favour of alternative
No extra charge for drinks	34	45			
Christian celebration	5	26	12,27117	2,71	Rejected in favour of alternative
Not specifically Christian	30	28			
Up to 50 guests	9	36	15,93311	2,71	Rejected in favour of alternative
More than 50 guests	26	18			
Multiracial	27	36	0,67738	2,71	Rejected in favour of alternative
Not multiracial	8	18			
Extra marital romantic activity	8	0	10,91181	2,71	Rejected in favour of alternative
No romantic activity	27	54			
Disturbances	4	2	0,97416	2,71	Unable to reject
No disturbances	31	52			
Seniors drank too much	15	0	24,85968	2,71	Rejected in favour of alternative
Seniors did not indulge	20	54			

## DISCUSSION

The results revealed the following interesting information:

- A very high percentage of functions were multiracial
- Lunches and cocktail parties lasted the shortest time. (One lunch, however, lasted an amazing 14 hours. This extreme was ignored when establishing average times.)
- Dinners, cocktail parties and braais generated approximately equal proportion of drunken drivers: more than half of such functions generated drunken drivers. This is undoubtedly a matter of serious concern.
- More than a third (39,3%) of year-end functions launched drunken drivers onto the roads: this is worse than expected and obviously a serious matter.
- Cocktail parties were the cheapest form of function.
- The most costly function was a dinner which cost the organisation concerned R25 000.
- Drunken driver functions cost less on average than those which did not yield any obvious cases of drunken driving. One possible explanation for this is that more time was

spent in the latter parties eating a more plentiful supply of (costly) food.

- Most functions were paid for entirely by employers.
- Responses to the 'no future function' suggestion were classified into positive, negative or indifferent. The actual comments recorded as negative were in many cases strongly worded — some being emotive outbursts of indignation.
- The most common explanations offered for why some respondents considered that their functions had contributed positively towards better working relations, related to the establishment of better and new understandings between subordinates and their seniors in the informal circumstances of the functions; the informal interaction with people in other departments; and the opportunity afforded (where appropriate) to spouses to meet their partners' working colleagues.
- The respondents' regard for those of their seniors whom they thought had drunk too much did not seem to change their attitudes towards them. Indeed, some individuals felt that their senior's drinking indiscretions made them "more human".

- Functions which yielded drunken drivers were not enjoyed as much as other functions.
- Staff members seemed generally indifferent as to which kind of function was held, so long as it remained 'informal'.
- Organisations which sponsor staff functions can clearly be satisfied that their money is well spent insofar as interpersonal and working relationships are improved thereby. Morale is clearly given a fillip by these events and any attempt to stop them is likely to evoke expressions of disappointment at best, and outrage at worst.

The predictions regarding features which were thought to inhibit, or to contribute to, problem drinking were tested using the Chi-squared technique. Significant results are highlighted, in Table 3, by rejection of the null hypotheses. On the basis of these results the following tentative conclusions might be drawn.

- Functions held prior to 12 December were more likely to produce problem drinkers than those held after that date. It is as well to note that about half of the functions held before 12 December, occurred during the last two weeks of November. These 'early' year-end functions might well have been organised so as to permit everyone to attend prior to departing on holiday. It is however, suspected that, in many cases, the early date was selected to minimise the possibility of employees being caught in the act of drunken driving. If this is the case, party organisers are obviously less concerned by the fact that employees might drive in an intoxicated state than they are considerate of the fact that they may be arrested and convicted for this crime. Only one of the parties probed provided a taxi/kombi service to ferry home those employees who felt they were not in a fit state to drive.

Perhaps the time has come for South Africa to follow the American system, which places a legal obligation upon the host whose guests become intoxicated to the extent that they are no longer safe behind the steering wheel of a vehicle. In America, those who dispense excessive quantities of alcoholic beverages are often held liable for accidents and damage caused by their intoxicated guests (Price, 1987).

- Contrary to popular belief, the presence of spouses does not appear to inhibit drinking patterns nor does it reduce drunken driving.
- The bigger the function and the longer its duration, the more likely problem drinkers will be found in a drunken state behind the wheel of a motor car. Lunches clearly cater for fewer people and most of them draw to a close within three hours of commencement. The result is that lunches showed the lowest incidence of reports of drunken driving.
- Religious functions appear significantly to inhibit excessive drinking.
- Functions which fall into the drunk driving set are characterised by the fact that some seniors drank too much. The research did not probe whether or not they were the drunk driving culprits (perhaps chauffeurs took most of them home). Whether they were, or were not, however, makes little difference because the pattern of their own drinking habits undoubtedly influenced the degree to which their subordinates imbibed at the same function. A bad example is easy to follow under such circumstances. It should be a more important factor to consider, however, that when a senior executive is himself a problem drinker, his potential for more profoundly harming the interests of his company is greater than that which applies to lower echelon problem drinkers.
- The study revealed the surprising fact that few functions were disrupted as a consequence of the behavior of those

who had had too much to drink. It was not surprising to learn, however, that where such disruption did occur, subsequent drunken driving was also a feature.

- Charging extra for alcoholic drinks does not appear to inhibit drinking patterns.

## CONCLUSIONS

Most workers have come to expect company year-end functions and any attempt to discontinue them might well impact adversely on organisations through the lowering of staff morale. Employees, generally, enjoy such functions and interpersonal relationships between different hierarchical levels and between departments are undoubtedly enhanced by them. It would appear, therefore, that South African organisations should be advised to continue to provide these year-end festive occasions in an informal atmosphere.

Concern should be expressed, nevertheless, that apart from the immediate potential for road accidents resulting from the excessive drinking that goes on at these functions, the individuals who drink too much have, by so doing, have identified themselves as problem drinkers. Sooner or later the drinking habits of these people will, in one way or another, adversely affect their organisations. Rather than ignoring overindulgence at these end-of-year parties, or even passively condoning it therefore, businessmen would be better advised to minimise the role of alcohol at such company functions.

Managers who really care about the welfare of their subordinates (and so too, ultimately, about the welfare of their organisations) should arrange year-end functions in such a way that they minimise the possibility of a latent problem drinker, actualising his malady. In the absence of an American-type 'Employee Assistance Programme', the very least the chief executives of organisations should do is to avoid the creation of *provocative* and tempting alcoholic circumstances at their official functions. This might be accomplished in several ways:

- Opting for a lunch or mid-day cocktail party lasting no longer than two hours (costs are also minimised).
- Ensuring that senior management understand that they are expected to set an example of moderation.
- By giving prominence to the deterrent effect of 'breathalyzer testing'. This could be achieved by purposely holding year-end functions when such efforts by the authorities are at a peak.
- The merits of providing a taxi/kombi service for those too intoxicated to drive home are debatable. It does not, for example, reduce the 'alcoholic circumstances' of the party. In fact, it may encourage some people to drink more than they would have done had the service not been provided. It might also be interpreted as tacit approval for staff to overindulge themselves. Should such a service be provided by the organisation, therefore, it should be made quite clear to staff that the service is intended purely as a safeguard for those who inadvertently find themselves to be somewhat 'high'. A senior member of staff would need to be responsible for the supervision of the service.
- Enforce the use of tot-measures by bartenders and ban the serving of "double-tots".
- Avoid the serving of salty, thirst provoking appetisers.
- Limit the number of guests to 50.

In the light of the findings in this study it is difficult to avoid a normative stance. There is no doubt that some year-end staff parties can trigger problem drinking. Also, those individuals who succumb are not only dangerous on the road but can sour interpersonal relations with adverse implications for future co-

operation in the work place. Accordingly, the planning of such events should be undertaken very carefully by a responsible, senior official. If handled correctly, the positive effects of these costly functions can be enhanced and the potentially negative elements minimised.

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