

Summary Report: Organizational Meeting of the International Research Group on Gender and Alcohol, Krakow, Poland, June 6, 1993

The first meeting of the International Research Group on Gender and Alcohol (IRGGA) took place in Krakow, Poland on June 6, 1993, preceding the Kettil Bruun Symposium. The June 6 meeting included 13 individuals from 9 countries. An additional 13 colleagues from 12 countries (6 not represented at the June 6 meeting), either previously expressed an interest in joining the group but were unable to come to Krakow, or asked to join the group after the initial report about IRGGA was given at the Kettil Bruun business meeting on June 11. A list of persons present at the organizational meeting and others interested in joining the group is attached to this report.

History of the IRGGA. Sharon Wilsnack presented a brief history of the collaborative project. Interest in cross-national research on gender and drinking developed from: (1) communication and sharing of survey instruments among several research groups studying women's drinking in the 1980s (including Kubicka in Prague, Spak in Sweden, and the Wilsnacks in the US); (2) a Kettil Bruun symposium on family and significant others in Helsinki in March, 1991, where several researchers (including Kubicka, and Holmila and Haavio-Mannila of Finland) presented findings on gender and drinking that replicated results reported in other countries; and (3) an opportunity in 1992 to apply for funding from the U.S. National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) to help organize international collaboration among scientists involved in gender-related alcohol research. NIAAA funding, to begin January 1994, will include support for telephone, mail, and FAX communication among the collaborating scientists, as well as limited support for travel costs of collaborators with no other sources of funding. Purposes of the organizational meeting in Krakow were to describe the project to interested colleagues, recruit potential collaborators, and discuss general directions in which the group might proceed.

Available Survey Data Sets. Each participant at the organizational meeting spoke briefly about his or her interest in gender-related research and described relevant studies already conducted and/or planned. The largest number of group members reported having conducted one or more community, regional, or national surveys of drinking behavior and drinking problems among adult women in the general population, including Ahlstrom and Holmila (Finland), Andrews (Canada), Kubicka (Czech Republic), Lukomskaya (Russia), Narusk (Estonia), Rahav (Israel), Sedefov (Bulgaria), Spak (Sweden), Trocki (USA), Wilsnacks (USA), and additional collaborators unable to attend the organizational meeting. Many of these surveys also include male respondents. Some members have data from clinical samples of problem drinking or alcoholic women in treatment (Kubicka, Lukomskaya, Spak). Others have samples of adolescent females and males (Ahlstrom, Rahav). Several studies have focused on married couples or families (Chase, Holmila), and several have longitudinal designs (Kubicka, Spak, Wilsnacks). To maximize comparability, we will probably want to first use data from general population surveys of adult women, including comparable data on adult men for comparison when available.

Conceptual Issues. There was some discussion of whether collaboration should focus on women's drinking specifically, or more generally on issues related to gender and alcohol use. Because of the historical neglect of research on women and alcohol, most members felt that a primary focus on women was desirable. However, because gender roles affect the drinking behavior of both women and men, female-male comparisons can enhance our understanding of drinking by both sexes. Therefore, although the group tended to favor a primary emphasis on women's drinking and drinking problems (i.e., probably not analysis of male-only samples), female-male similarities and differences should be evaluated wherever possible.

Participants discussed possible theoretical frameworks or guiding hypotheses for the project. There was substantial agreement about the general value of feminist perspectives that give central importance to gender roles and gender-based societal stresses as potentially important influences on women's drinking. Group members expressed interest in cross-national analyses of a number of specific influences, including (1) interactions with significant others, including the quality of primary relationships and significant others' drinking behavior; (2) liberation from traditional female roles; (3) employment, including type of employment (e.g., traditional vs. nontraditional), gender and drinking behavior of coworkers, and multiple social role performance; (4) sexual experience, including sexual abuse and violence; (5) depression and anxiety; and (6) social roles that may be risk factors or protective factors for problem drinking in women at particular ages or life stages.

Where Do We Start? There was much discussion about the best way to begin our collaboration during the coming year. Group members felt that coordinated analysis of existing data sets is a logical first step; those analyses may lead eventually to new data collection using the same survey questions in all participating countries. It seemed important to keep initial comparative analyses simple, as even simple analyses may become quite complex to coordinate across studies with different sample designs, respondent characteristics, and measures.

Three general goals were proposed for the group's first year: (1) to develop measures of drinking behavior (and possibly of drinking consequences) that can be used with most or all of the available data sets; (2) to use these common measures to describe patterns of women's drinking in each of the participating countries; and (3) to compare these with patterns of men's drinking in those data sets that include both sexes. Possible next steps might be (4) to relate levels of consumption to levels of drinking consequences, comparing differences in "thresholds of risk" across the participating countries; and (5) to relate levels of drinking and drinking problems to sociodemographic variables such as age, marital status, and employment status.

Information Needed From Collaborators. It is suggested that each collaborator use one data set for the initial cross-national analyses. Typically this will be the data set that the collaborator believes is of the highest quality – in terms of sample size, number and quality of drinking measures, and how well the sample represents the general population.

Most data sets in these initial analyses will probably be general population surveys rather than clinical surveys. Group members who have several data sets of equal quality should choose (1) the most recent survey, (2) national over community or regional samples, and (3) surveys including both women and men where possible.

In the fall of 1993, collaborators will be asked to send to Sharon and Richard Wilsnack at the University of North Dakota (UND) the following information: (1) a brief description of the survey data set to be analyzed; and (2) English translations of all questions about alcohol consumption, drinking-related problems, and symptoms of alcohol abuse/dependence (including response categories, time frames, and any skip patterns that influence which drinking questions are asked of which respondents). The UND team will review the measures received and will try to identify measures of drinking levels and drinking consequences that use questions present in most or all of the surveys. In developing these measures UND staff will consult with staff of Dr. Kaye Fillmore's international longitudinal collaborative project at the University of California-San Francisco, which began a similar process several years ago. Proposed measures will be sent to IRGGA collaborators for their review and comments. When a standard set of drinking measures has been developed, individual collaborators will be asked to use these measures for simple descriptive analyses of drinking levels and drinking consequences in their own samples. Ideally, results of these initial descriptive analyses can be presented at the next IRGGA meeting in June, 1994. At that time, problems arising in the effort to develop standard measures can be discussed, and plans can be developed for the next steps in the collaborative research.

Next IRGGA Meeting. Collaborators present at the organizational meeting agreed that IRGGA meetings should be held annually in conjunction with the Kettil Bruun Symposia. Next year's Kettil Bruun Symposium will be held in Ruschlikon (near Zurich), Switzerland, June 6-10, 1994. Tentative plans are to convene a meeting of IRGGA collaborators for a two- or three-day period preceding the Symposium. Additional information about that meeting will be sent to group members during the coming year.