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Jean-François Hamon

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## ALCOHOL USE AND ABUSE AMONG ADOLESCENTS IN REUNION ISLAND : AN INTRODUCTION

JEAN-FRANÇOIS HAMON  
UNIVERSITÉ DE LA RÉUNION

### Résumé

Il n'existe que peu de données sur l'alcoolisme juvénile à La Réunion. Cet article se propose de faire, d'une part le point sur l'état des connaissances sur le sujet et d'autre part une analyse des facteurs de risques au travers d'une triple approche : historique, socioculturelle et familiale. Il ressort qu'une combinaison de facteurs de risques individuels (trajectoire de vie et antécédents), familiaux, socioéconomiques et culturels (s'inscrivant dans l'histoire) sont impliqués dans le développement des comportements alcooliques chez les jeunes réunionnais.

**Mots clés :** adolescents, alcool, facteurs de risques, île de La Réunion.

### Abstract

*There are few published data on juvenile alcoholism in Reunion Island. Our purpose is to investigate risk factors in alcohol use and misuse among Reunionese teenagers. The findings show that patterns of alcohol abuse within this group are explained by a combination of individual (present and past life experience), family, socio-economic and cultural (historical) factors.*

**Keywords :** teenagers, alcohol, risk factors, Reunion Island.

### INTRODUCTION

Reunion Island is a French overseas department located in the south west Indian Ocean. It has a surface area of 2,512 sq. km and a population of approximately 700,000 living in both urban and rural environments. Research into alcoholism among Reunion Island's population over the last decades has shown risks of alcoholism and alcohol related problems in adults (Bald and Godeluck, 1995).

Much research has been carried out on the subject of the use of alcohol by young adolescents throughout the world, and it is now well established that alcohol abuse among teenagers is quite common (Killen, Hayward, Wilson, Haydel, Robinson, Taylor, Hammaer and Varady, 1996 ; Murray and Brian, 1996 ; Pritchard and Martin, 1996). Heavy or frequent drinking affects both physical maturation and the development of cognitive

skills in adolescents (Choquet, Ledoux and Menke, 1988). Alcohol abuse amongst young people is a major health problem. Indeed, throughout the world, youth alcoholism has risen constantly over the last thirty years (Bailly and Parquet, 1992 ; Parquet and Bailly, 1988). Epidemiological studies have consistently found that children who have their first experience of alcohol before ten years of age are at an increased risk of alcohol use during adolescence (Bailly, Vignau, Boutelier, Beuscart, Moreau-Meresse and Parquet, 1993).

There are few published data on juvenile alcoholism in Reunion Island. Bouchara (1995) reported frequent alcohol use among schoolchildren in Reunion Island, finding that 40 % frequently drank alcohol and that 10 % had had their first drink at 10 years of age. More recently an investigation in schools by Cattau (1998) revealed that 60.7 % of the students questioned admitted having tried alcohol ; 26 % said they drank heavily and 23.2 % that they had five or more drinks during the same day. The aim of the present paper is a prospective analysis of the influence of history and social context, motivational (alcohol expectancy) and family factors, and also of the context of identity formation in the development of alcohol abuse patterns among young people in Reunion Island.

## HISTORY AND SOCIAL CONTEXT OF ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION

### HISTORY

Like some other West Indian Ocean islands, Reunion Island is the product of three centuries of interaction between French, African, Indian and, more recently (since 1844), Chinese populations and French culture. Insular, ethnic diversity and several centuries of isolation have formed and original culture.

The period of slavery and the ensuing period of indenture have deeply marked the mentality of Reunion Islanders. These periods of history coincide with widespread use of alcohol by the population. As has been reported by Leguen (1979), in the mid-1700s the settlers used to regularly distribute alcohol to slaves during and after hard working days. The positive attitude towards alcohol in the island originates in this period. The development of sugar cane cultivation around 1815 also enhanced the image of alcohol, and heavy drinking became the norm.

After the abolition of slavery, former slaves drank in increasing quantities to forget the hardships of their lives. The idleness and poor living conditions of people living in Reunion Island are factors which have increased alcohol use. As Trice and Sonnenstuhl (1990) suggested, « drinking is essentially a social act embedded in a context of values,

attitudes and other norms and ... is not the inevitable outcome of genetic or psychological risk. » This seems true in the case of Reunion Island, where cultural identity has been influenced by the island's slave history. Indeed, today slavery has been replaced by a dependency upon social security and government aid for the majority of adults.

## SOCIAL CONTEXT

In recent years, urbanisation in Reunion Island has increased : this phenomenon has been brought about by internal migration from rural areas to large urban centres. This trend, together with the development of a consumer society has, over a short period of time, caused many changes in the traditional customs and socio-economic structure of the island. It is generally assumed that changes brought about by unemployment and social exclusion lead to considerable stress in individuals and antisocial behaviour in the population (Sadava and Pak, 1993 ; Bau and Salzano, 1995 ; Stasiewicz and Lisman, 1995). The high unemployment rate among young people in Reunion Island generates strong social constraints, such as competition for jobs and education, with which some people cannot cope. As a result of this, they adopt a lifestyle that helps them face these problems. For many, this alternative lifestyle includes alcohol abuse and dependency. Thus, young people with poor education and therefore limited job opportunities opt out of conventional society and establish a lifestyle of their own in order to escape from their predicament. As has been suggested by Karwacki and Bradley (1996), « alcohol abuse may serve the function of compensating for a lack of hope, ability or opportunity to achieve desired goals » in borderline adolescents. This is particularly true for the young people of Reunion Island. For underprivileged young people, a permissive social attitude toward alcohol in Reunion Island is an incentive to drink and is an ideological justification for this drinking behaviour. The commercial availability of alcohol in Reunion Island, especially at retail traders' (Chinese shops), and the low cost of locally produced rum, are yet other incentives.

In 1996 and 1997, a study was carried out on about fifty adolescents aged between 14 and 20 with extremely poor school results and severe family and social problems (Hamon, 1997). This led to the definition of three profiles :

- Adolescents with identity formation difficulties and drinking problems ;
- Adolescents with antisocial personalities, highly impulsive behaviour, lack of inhibition, and deviant peer group associations ;
- Adolescents suffering from anxiety, stress of life, alcohol problems and suicidal tendencies.

The subjects are representative of the identity problems of Reunion Island adolescents with social disorders and/or experiencing unpleasant emotions and social conflict with others. All are at risk of developing abnormal drinking patterns because of personal psychological motives for escaping from personal life stress, such as, in the case of younger adolescents (14 to 16 years old), educational failure or constraints, and in the older age group (18 to 20 years old), unemployment and social exclusion. They are left out of the developing consumer society, as they are unable to be consumers. The resulting deprivation reinforces negative self-image and pushes them towards alcohol addiction and delinquency.

#### ALCOHOL EXPECTANCY AND FAMILY FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH ALCOHOL USE IN ADOLESCENTS

##### ALCOHOL EXPECTANCY

The alcohol expectancy theory (Goldman, Brown and Christiansen, 1987 ; Goldman, 1994) describes the role that cognitive factors play in drinking choices. Expectancies about alcohol's effects are present even before the first experience with alcohol and develop from childhood from adulthood. Alcohol-related expectancies consistently and predictably relate to consumption patterns and can be used to predict future drinking behaviour (Leigh, 1989).

Beliefs about the effects of alcohol are multifaceted and include both positive-effect and negative-effect expectancies. Behaviour patterns (temperament and personality characteristics), peer influence and parental drinking are strong factors which may shape an adolescent's beliefs about the effects of alcohol (Leigh, 1989 ; Leigh and Stacey, 1993). It has been suggested by Aas and Klepp (1992) that :

alcohol expectancies offer an explanation of how children's backgrounds, through the socialisation process, can influence their drinking patterns several years later.

Social pressure is a strong factor in the alcohol expectancies of Reunionese adolescents. This factor is multidimensional and includes low educational commitment, weak family bonds, unemployment, and peer, culture and family influences.

Academic failure and exclusion from the job market, which are the lot of many in Reunion Island, are stress factors which lead adolescents to drink more heavily. Here again, alcohol abuse is an escape route from unsatisfactory school performance, low social status or personal problems.

Peer influence is considered as an important causal factor in initiating adolescents into alcohol use (Gilvarry, 1996), due to the wide availability of alcohol in Reunion Island. It is known that as adolescents get older, they

become more independent of their parents and are more likely to comply with like-minded peers. Peer affiliation seems to be a determining factor in the establishment of borderline lifestyles in adolescents with social difficulties and leads to antisocial behaviour. We believe that the search for deviant peers enhances a latent vulnerability to alcohol and the development of antisocial disorders in Reunion Island's adolescents with limited social and cultural opportunities.

#### FAMILY RISK FACTORS AND THE CONTEXT OF IDENTITY FORMATION

During adolescence, influences from outside the family increase, but teenagers remain largely dependent on their families, especially parents, for support and guidance (Gecas and Steff, 1990). Two psychosocial dimensions of parental style and family environment are very important in the socialisation of adolescents : support and control behaviours (Maccoby and Martin, 1983). Support relates to the development of emotional bonds with the family, and control to rules, discipline, permissiveness and authority.

Most families in Reunion Island have a structure which originates in the island's period of slavery. During this period, the children remained with their mothers. Similarly today, women are recognised as being the head of the family by the French government because they bring up the children. So, financial government aid for children is paid to women. The result of this is that many men are excluded from the upbringing of their children, and often take refuge in drinking. This in turn causes deviant behaviour of men toward their families. To exert authority over wives and children, men resort to violence, ill-treatment and incest, generally under the influence of alcohol.

It is widely accepted that authoritarian and power-assertive parent-child relationships have a direct effect on adolescent identity formation (Rollins and Thomas, 1979 ; Foxcroft and Low, 1995). Indeed, Maccoby and Martin (1983) have shown that children with low parental support and guidance tend to be impulsive and withdrawn.

In assessing the status of adolescents, two criteria are used : crisis and commitment. Crisis refers to a period of active questioning and of choosing meaningful alternatives, and commitment refers to the presence or absence of decisions in the areas of occupation and ideology (Flum, 1994). Achievement of identity

characterises individuals who have undergone a period of questioning and who have evaluated critically their parents' values and expectations before making a decision on their own terms. Having a period of crisis, the identity achiever is committed to his or her choice of ideology and occupation.

Meanwhile, identity diffusion, consisting of lack of exploration (or crisis) and commitment are evidence of a break that took place during adolescence (Marcia, 1980). An abusive family background is one of the main causes of diffusion. We have found that adolescents with parental and social difficulties display antisocial behaviour, high levels of impulsiveness and suicidal tendencies which seem to result from diffusion during early and middle adolescence (Hamon, 1997).

The emotional distress of ill-treated adolescents in Reunion Island which leads to identity diffusion, characterised by lack of independence and inability to take responsibility, seems to be a high risk factor in the development of drinking behaviour. It is an established fact that children of alcoholic parents run a higher risk of alcohol abuse in adolescence (Chassin, Rogosch and Barrera, 1991 ; Leigh, 1989 ; Colder, Chassin, Stice and Curran, 1997). Barnes, Farrel and Cairns (1986) found that parental drinking patterns are a good way of predicting the drinking patterns of children.

In Reunion Island, alcoholic parents who provide a low level of support but exert a high level of control are more likely to have children who drink heavily. Adolescents with a lack of independence are more inclined to copy their parents' drinking behaviour. That is why drinking is still considered to be acceptable among Reunion Island's teenagers.

Σ

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