

Thinking About Drinking

Summary of Themes and Future Directions

Durham University, Workshop, 11 April 2025

This workshop brought together scholars, practitioners, and stakeholders from diverse backgrounds to rethink alcohol use, addiction, and recovery. The event encouraged participants to challenge prevailing paradigms and explore richer conceptualisations. Below is not a comprehensive report but a thematic synthesis intended as a generative seed for future research, collaboration, and potential funding applications.

The workshop was hosted by the [Centre for Philosophy of Epidemiology, Medicine, and Public Health](#), generously supported by the [Wellcome Discovery Research Platform for Medical Humanities](#).

1. Epistemological and Methodological Challenges

Discussions highlighted significant limitations of standard quantitative approaches in alcohol research, suggesting a need for broader methodological pluralism:

- Current methodologies may produce biases due to non-response or simplistic biological assumptions.
- Emerging technologies (such as digital monitoring or social media sentiment analysis) alter how drinking is measured and understood, but may also reinforce problematic assumptions.
- Interdisciplinary research, including qualitative, ethnographic, historical, and philosophical methodologies, is needed to capture the complexity of drinking behaviour.

2. Revisiting Addiction and the Concept of Disease

Participants critically examined dominant narratives around addiction, asking foundational questions such as:

- Is addiction best understood as a disease, a risk factor, a social label, or something else entirely?
- What are the conceptual, ethical, and practical implications of framing alcohol problems as medical disorders?
- How do different professional discourses (medicine, social care, public health) influence public and policy understandings of addiction?

3. Recovery: Pluralism, Inclusion, and Meaning

The concept of recovery was explored as inherently diverse, challenging one-dimensional policy narratives:

- How can recovery pathways reflect multiple identities and experiences (gender, class, spirituality, neurodiversity)?
- What would an inclusive and culturally sensitive recovery environment or intervention look like?
- Public health campaigns may need reframing to incorporate diverse experiences and non-health-based narratives effectively.

4. Pleasure, Positivity, and the “Good” of Drinking

Participants challenged the common tendency to frame alcohol use purely negatively, asking how to meaningfully conceptualise and empirically study the positive aspects of drinking. Key questions included:

- How can “pleasure” or “enjoyment” from drinking be operationalised without reductionism?
- What ethical considerations arise when studying or promoting “good drinking”?
- Can health promotion and public policy productively integrate nuanced, context-sensitive ideas of beneficial alcohol use?

5. Contextual and Cultural Dimensions of Alcohol Use

Participants emphasised that drinking practices are culturally, locally, and temporally situated:

- How do cultural norms shape meanings of drinking, abstention, and recovery?
- Can cross-cultural comparisons (particularly North-South, or Euro-African) yield new insights for public health?
- How does locality shape both drinking behaviours and their temporal consequences (not all alcohol-related harms are permanent or linear)?

Next Steps

One of the most striking features of the workshop was the difference in underlying perspectives among participants: those working in public health, those with experience in recovery, and those who enjoy drinking all seemed to understand alcohol differently, not merely as a social practice, but as an object of knowledge and value.

This raises profound epistemological and ethical questions. Who gets to define what counts as harm, misuse, or recovery? Can we speak meaningfully across different framings – biomedical, experiential,

moral, cultural – without collapsing them? What does it mean to live well with or without alcohol, and whose vision of the good life is being privileged in policy or discourse?

These questions open the door to a deeper inquiry, one that is not only interdisciplinary, but philosophically ambitious. Future directions may include:

- An epistemological investigation into contested categories like addiction, alcohol use disorder, and harm, asking how evidence is mobilised and authority is claimed in each.
- A philosophical study of drinking as a cultural practice embedded in meaning-making: how do people justify or condemn their own and others' drinking? What does this reveal about ideals of virtue, authenticity, control, or freedom?
- A normative analysis of public health ethics, particularly the tension between individual flourishing and collective well-being in alcohol policy.
- A conceptual mapping of alcohol as a boundary object, claimed by multiple disciplines and communities, but understood in conflicting ways.

These directions could feed into a distinctive collaborative research proposal that bridges philosophy, public health, and lived experience – perhaps beginning with a small funding bid or position paper.