

## Familial drinking in Italy: Harmful or protective factors?

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(Received 24 June 2008; revised 20 February 2009; accepted 3 March 2009)

### Abstract

**Aims:** This study examined relations between cultural norms and drinking practices in Italian young people using qualitative interviewing techniques. We collected self-report drinking history information from young people including whether or not they were allowed alcohol with meals in a family setting when growing up.

**Methods:** We conducted ethnographic interviews of 80 adolescent (ages 16–18) and 80 young adult (ages 25–30) regular and heavy drinkers in two regions (Abruzzo and Umbria). All 20 Italian regions produce wine. Abruzzo has a high ratio of heavy drinkers while Umbria has a high ratio of regular drinkers. We used the AUDIT to determine eligibility. We queried age at first drink, first 5+, first drunk, context of drinking, drinking with family during meals, availability of alcohol at home, parent's relationship to, attitudes about and discussion about alcohol.

**Results:** Half of regular and heavy drinkers were allowed alcohol in a family setting while growing up. Those allowed alcohol with meals when growing up consumed less on their first drink occasion and were more likely to never drink 5+ or get drunk than those not allowed. They also had reduced or delayed 5+ or drunk occasions.

**Conclusions:** In Italy the tradition of incorporating alcohol with meals in a family setting may protect against harmful drinking. Other qualitative research should explore family, other adult and peer relationships to clarify alcohol use and risk-related behaviors. Research in countries with similar and different early age introduction would increase knowledge about the protective aspect of drinking in a family setting.

**Keywords:** *Young people, drinking with family, qualitative methods, protective factors, Italy*

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ISSN 1606-6359 print/ISSN 1476-7392 online © 2010 Informa Healthcare Ltd.

DOI: 10.3109/16066350902867890

## Background

Studies in the US and other countries indicate an association between children's use of alcohol and their parents' use of and attitudes towards alcohol. Exposure to parental drinking is shown to have negative effects including increased use of alcohol and earlier onset of alcohol use (Ary et al. 1993; Adlaf and Ivis 1996; Barnes et al. 1997; Fleming et al. 1997; Yu and Perrine 1997; Jackson et al. 1999; Welte et al. 1999; Yu 2003; Wood et al. 2004; Poelen et al. 2007). For example, recent findings include a study of adolescents in the US in which youths exposed to parental alcohol consumption as children were more likely to start drinking at a younger age (Yu 2003). Poelen et al. (2007) reported that Dutch youths from homes with parents who drank daily or several times a week reported higher rates of drinking compared to youths who came from homes where their parents drank minimally if at all. A 21-year follow-up conducted in Australia showed that young adults exposed to daily maternal drinking had higher rates of alcohol disorders than participants exposed to less maternal drinking (Alati et al. 2005).

Other studies, however, suggest that alcohol introduced in a family setting or by family may reduce alcohol-related risk behaviour among young people, and indicate that young people having their first drink in a family setting are less likely to become problem drinkers than those who initiate drinking outside the family. A national study of 14–17-year-old students in Great Britain found that parental provision of alcohol was related to a reduction of risky drinking. Youths whose parents provided alcohol were less likely to binge and only half as likely to drink in public settings than youths who obtained alcohol from other sources, such as self-purchase, other adults and friends (Bellis et al. 2007). A survey of Scottish school children found them less likely to get drunk when drinking at home (Forsyth and Barnard 2000). Similar findings are reported in the US. In a study of sixth, ninth and twelfth graders in Minnesota, students drinking only at home with the family reported less overall consumption of alcohol than students drinking in other settings. Over time, sources of alcohol changed with family being the primary source for the youngest and friends becoming more important sources as youths transit adolescence (Harrison et al. 2000). Warner and White (2003) reported that adolescents introduced to alcohol in a family setting were at reduced risk for onset to drinking compared to youths introduced to alcohol outside the family setting, who were at greater risk for drinking problems. Related to this, a US national study of 16–20-year-old youths indicated that introduction to alcohol by parents or adult relatives was associated with reduced consumption and lower binge drinking than youths who received alcohol from a non-relative adult (Foley et al. 2004).

In contexts where alcohol is integrated into family life, for instance, southern Europe, young people report lower levels of binge drinking and alcohol-related risk behaviours compared to contexts that separate alcohol from family life (Engels and Knibbe 2000; Hibell et al. 2004; Anderson and Baumberg 2006; Kuntsche et al. 2007). Youths in these cultures learn to drink more responsibly than their US counterparts because drinking is culturally normative, exposure occurs at a younger age, and alcohol is part of the fabric of family mores (OJJDP 2001). Countries in which alcohol is integrated into daily life and activities (e.g. is consumed with meals) and is widely available and accessible traditionally have been referred to as 'wet countries' (Grant 1984; Room 1989; Heath 1995; Gual and Colom 1997). In wet countries, wine is highly integrated in daily life and usually associated with food (Allamani et al. 2000).

In Italy, wine remains the most popular alcoholic drink, and there is a tolerant attitude towards drinking with meals and during social and life cycle events. Italy is the leading wine consuming nation per capita and the total quantity of alcohol consumed in Italy is among the

highest in Europe (WHO 2004; Anderson and Baumberg 2006). The traditional perception of wine as food rather than alcohol is a prime reason underlying high consumption in wet regions (Allamani et al. 2000). Children in Italy may begin drinking at or before age 14 when a small amount of wine is consumed during meals at home (Allamani et al. 2006). Yet, Italians are more likely than other European Union citizens to drink moderately. A recent study of European Union citizens found that 71% of Italians consumed 1–2 drinks on an occasion compared to 59% of Europeans, and 46% of Italians never drank 5+ drinks compared to 34% of all Europeans (Eurobarometer 2007). From 1991 to 2005, the percentage of young people in Italy who drank regularly increased from 74% to 81% (Osservatorio Permanente sui Giovani e l'Alcool 2007), and although Italian youths report more drinking occasions, they are more likely than other European youths not to binge on a given drinking occasion (Hemstrom et al., 2002). However, drinking patterns in Italy are not uniform across the country. There are different drinking typologies in different regions, including regions with a high percentage of regular drinkers and low excessive drinkers and regions with low percentage of regular drinkers and high excessive drinkers (Osservatorio Permanente sui Giovani e l'Alcool 1998).

Policies that influence alcohol consumption by youth vary across nations. In Italy, alcohol can be legally served at age 16 and it is not illegal for adolescents to consume alcohol (Massey and Parson 1989). The present study investigated whether early age drinking is related to frequent heavy drinking among Italian youths and young adults. Familial drinking is normative in Italy and allows us to examine whether cultural norms are protective. Understanding family-related alcohol use is necessary for a full appreciation of the alcohol use experience of young people and of factors that contribute to their drinking behaviours. Further, this information may assist in the design of policies to reduce alcohol problems and harmful behaviour among young people.

## Method

### *Study overview*

*Study design.* We conducted a qualitative study using ethnographic interviewing to obtain data regarding age of onset for alcohol use among Italian young people. Qualitative research stresses the socially constructed nature of reality, and qualitative researchers seek to answer questions about how social experience is created and given meaning (Denzin and Lincoln 1994). This type of research allows for rethinking basic assumptions, reconceptualising problems, and generating theoretical ideas (Strunin and Boden 2005). The term 'ethnographic interviewing' is based on the anthropological method of describing the local point of view and social organisation, the culture, of people and results in studying systems of meaning and rules (Hahn 1995). The objective is to learn how respondents' knowledge of their social worlds is socially constructed and disseminated and how that knowledge affects their behaviours. Ethnographic interviewing permits the researcher to understand the world as seen by the respondent within the context of the respondent's everyday life. The study uses self-report, in-depth interviewing methods and open-ended methods to gather a rich stream of data.

*Sample selection.* The sample was a stratified purposeful sample of young people, large enough for both detailed complexity and depth and to make meaningful comparisons.

The goal of purposeful sampling strategies is to understand a phenomena, not represent a population (Patton 2002). The sample consisted of 160 Italian young people (80 male and 80 female drinkers). Interviews were conducted in two areas of central Italy in two age and consumption groups (per area, 40 each of 16–18-year-old and 25–30-year-old male and female regular or moderate drinkers and heavy drinkers). Although both the younger and older age groups were close to age of drinking onset thus reducing recall bias, the older age group had a longer use history.

The geographical region selected includes two different drinking typologies. Abruzzo is a top-ranking region for the ratio of heavy drinking to low regular drinking while Umbria is a top-ranking region for regular drinking and one of the lowest for heavy drinking (Osservatorio Permanente sui Giovani e l'Alcool 2001). In each of the two selected regions, the interviews were conducted in two different administrative districts (provincia). For the adolescent sample, two high schools were selected in each sampling. The young adult sample was comprised of former pupils of the schools plus young people involved in cultural, social and physical activity organisations. At the time of the study the legal minimum age for leaving school was 16.

The 10-item AUDIT alcohol screen was used to screen regular and heavy drinkers. The AUDIT has been found to perform well in detecting subjects with hazardous alcohol intake and formal alcohol disorders in Italy (Piccinelli et al. 1997; Agabio et al. 2006). Three items were modified to make the scale more relevant for the adolescent age group (Chung et al. 2000). Scores from quantity consumed and frequency of consumption questions were used to identify regular drinkers who drank one to two glasses of alcoholic beverages at least once a week, a category for regular drinkers used in surveys in Italy (Osservatorio Permanente sui Giovani e l'Alcool 1998, 2001). Scores from questions on quantity consumed, frequency of consumption and experience of problems questions were used to identify excessive drinkers. The heavy drinker categorisation score was 4 for youths and 8 for young adults.

In each school, the AUDIT was administered to all students during the last three classes of the day. Of 462 students who completed the AUDIT 197 fit the criteria of regular or heavy drinker. A sample of 80 students and a backup sample of 80 students were randomly selected. The backup sample was used if a student in the primary sample was unavailable on the day the interviews were conducted. The young adult sample consisted of 80 subjects determined eligible after screening. All but two young adults had at least a high school education. A recent survey of Italians ages 13+ found alcohol consumption very similar among all social classes with slightly higher consumption 'in the high and middle-high class with respect to the categories with low incomes and the lower-middle class' (Osservatorio Permanente sui Giovani e l'Alcool 2007:109–110).

*Question development.* To help assure collection of comparable qualitative data, an interview guide listed specific questions and topics to be covered in a particular order in the interview. Questions were drawn from previous research about alcohol use among Italian young people (Osservatorio Permanente sui Giovani e l'Alcool 2001, 2003) and from a national cross-sectional survey about early age of onset among young people in the United States (Heeren et al. 2008). The procedures used to obtain self-reported drinking data included using a quantity-frequency index, a specific settings approach and beverage-specific questions. Questions were asked about the associational characteristics of the young person (the social, cultural and demographic background, work history of the young adults, family history and extended family network; other social networks), as well as questions concerning norms, beliefs, context and behaviours relevant to alcohol use.

Social norms about drinking were explored with questions anchored to the context or situation in which drinking occurs including the drinking practices of parents, family members, other people and friends at different events or places. These were followed by questions about the young person's behaviour in these contexts or situations. Questions probed age at first drinking occasion, first 5+, first drunk, drinking activity in the past month and week including with whom, where, how much and why they drank. Drinking with family probed being allowed wine, wine with water or other alcohol during meals with family when growing up, types of alcohol in the home, availability of alcohol in the home, family's relationship to alcohol, parents' attitudes about alcohol, discussions with parents about possible problems drinking alcohol. Questions about unintentional and intentional injuries when drinking and not drinking probed links between alcohol use and social and cultural context.

The interviews were conducted by 10 interviewers trained in qualitative interviewing techniques by the PI. All interviewers and three adolescents participated in an interview pre-test for language appropriateness and understandability after which some questions were altered for clarity after the pre-test.

*Interview procedure.* The interviews were audio taped and transcribed by the interviewers. Audio tapes were checked by the study coordinator to ensure fidelity with the interview script. The interviews were translated into English by a subcontractor and back-translated by the study coordinator. Written parental consent was required for interviews with minors and the participant's written consent was obtained before the interview. There were no refusals to participate in the study. The study was approved by the university IRB for the PI in the US and the IRB at the Fondazione Santa Lucia, Rome.

*Analytic procedures.* Each interview was evaluated by a set of thematic codes developed inductively from the interview scripts by the PI and a qualitative analyst. Coding organises the text and involves identifying issues and themes of relevance in the text. Codes represent a category or theme found in the data and the codes were attached to corresponding segments of text. To improve inter-rater reliability, the PI and analyst each coded four interviews, reviewed the codes, and when it was clear that they both understood the coding scheme, the qualitative analyst coded the interviews. The PI checked coded interviews at random throughout the coding process to ensure that each interview was coded correctly. The PI and analyst discussed any coding differences and resolved any problem cases. The findings were analysed to explore whether or not linkages exist between and/or among particular themes using HyperResearch software, a text retrieval program geared towards in-depth exploration of data. Young people who gave their ages of onset as within 2 years of interview were placed in the younger age group because of research demonstrating that over time, participants tend to report increasingly older ages of initiation (Parra et al. 2003). The participant's reported age was used to calculate time elapsed from age of first drink occasion to age at first 5+ (4+ for females), or first drunk occasion. The participant's reported age at the time of first drink was subtracted from reported age at the time of first 5+ or first drunk occasion.

### *Findings*

Half of the regular and heavy drinkers in both regions were allowed alcohol with meals in a family setting when growing up. Drinking wine with meals and drinking other types of

alcohol on different social occasions and in different settings was commonplace for young people in both regions. Drinking alcohol in the family setting was both part of the meal and of family social life.

### *Familial drinking and conviviality*

In familial contexts, drinking was associated with convivial behaviour. Most youths and young adults reported that their families drank wine or beer with meals, with spirits or liquor reserved for hospitality such as entertaining guests. Both youths and young adults described their parents' relationship to alcohol and attitudes about alcohol as 'normal' or 'moderate'.

Further, they described moderate drinking as part of the Italian culture, as tradition. Although heavy drinkers do not appear to be modelling their parents' drinking patterns they referred to this cultural norm of moderate drinking. A female youth heavy drinker from Abruzzo remarked about drinking, '*Alcohol is a pleasure, and it mustn't be a way to have fun. It's a part of our culture*'. A female adult regular drinker from Umbria described her parents' attitude to alcohol as, '*A simple attitude. Alcohol is a pleasure, and has to be lived as something positive, this is the type of values we have at home. A wine culture, wine at meals for the pleasure of it, no abuse because that can cause health problem.*' Similarly, a male youth regular drinker from Umbria explained his family's relationship to alcohol as, '*a tradition, a glass of wine or beer is a part of our eating habits*'.

Beliefs about familial and convivial drinking were heard whether or not alcohol was permitted in a family context when growing up. For all, it was customary behaviour for families to drink alcohol with meals. Male and female, regular and heavy drinkers in both regions who were allowed alcohol at family meals when growing up reported being offered a small amount of wine, or wine with water, usually by a male relative such as a grandfather, father or uncle. A female youth heavy drinker from Umbria explained being given '*[wine] with water [by] my grandfather. It's typical*' as did a male young adult heavy drinker from Abruzzo, '*My parents didn't, but my grandfather did... he gave me a small glass of wine and water*'. This practice of diluting wine by adding water occurred at everyday family meals as well as special occasions such as weddings or holiday parties.

The routine or ordinariness of their families' drinking of alcohol with meals, typically wine, was described by both those allowed and not allowed alcohol. Marco, a 16-year-old male regular drinker from Abruzzo who was not allowed alcohol when growing up explained:

'My parents drink water and wine. In the summer we drink tea. Between meals we usually don't have wine, just water... My family consumes alcohol moderately. My parents drink moderately. They think that alcohol should be drunk just like any other type of drink. If you like it you can have some, without exaggerating.'

Susana, a 29-year-old heavy drinker from Umbria who was allowed alcohol when growing up echoed this typical consumption pattern of drinking wine at family meals:

'[My family drinks] wine at lunch and dinner... [My parents'] relationship to alcohol is more or less the same as mine now... a positive relationship, constant. At home we have at least one glass of wine at lunch and at dinner, positive, normal, nothing happens because you don't drink more than you can take. It's something you do for the taste of it, to try something special, not to make you feel in a certain way.'

Different types and varying amounts of alcohol were consumed in different family meal settings. Susana explained that at some meals her family also drank . . . *digestives after dinner, but only when we have guests . . . and when there are guests we have a bit more*. Julia, a 29-year-old female regular drinker and a teacher from Abruzzo who was allowed alcohol when growing up illustrated in more detail the conviviality of different family-related meal settings:

'[We drink] Wine at meals and the rest [digestives and whiskey] is for guests. On weekends you eat more, there might be some guests and so there has to be something to drink for every taste . . . beer too. When we have a pizza out my mother drinks beer, which she usually doesn't do'.

Giorgio, a self-employed 29-year-old male heavy drinker from Umbria who was allowed wine with water when growing up also explained familial drinking as occurring only with meals: '*[We drink] The usual things: wine, beer, some bitters for guests or to drink after meals. In addition, in summer time we drink limoncello. Between meals we don't drink*'. Eliana, an 18-year-old female regular drinker from Umbria who was not allowed alcohol when growing up summarised the social aspect of drinking with family, '*During the weekend . . . my mother prepares dishes that are more delicious, so we eat more and drink a bit more wine*'.

More youths than young adults reported their parents talking with them about possible problems related to drinking alcohol, and parents of youths allowed alcohol with meals were more likely than those not allowed to talk about alcohol-related risks. Parents gave general warnings such as 'be careful' and 'don't exaggerate' and warned about the health issues of addiction, liver and heart disease and youths also said their parents talked about the dangers of drinking and driving. However, a few young people referred to the reasons parents' warnings may not be heard by their children. One male heavy drinker from Abruzzo explained that although parents may talk to their children about the dangers associated with drinking, adults do not understand the dilemma or 'problem' associated with drinking for many youths:

'most of all during my first high school years they [my parents] tried to warn me about everything that causes addiction . . . [but] when adults speak about it I see that they don't really understand the problem. They only speak about numbers and don't try to dig deeper. There's a lack of communication with adults on this subject. My parents are teachers and when I hear them speaking about teenagers who drink it just makes me laugh, because I start thinking about myself at that age.'

### *First drinking*

Although half of both regular and heavy drinkers were allowed alcohol with meals in a family setting when growing up, those allowed and not allowed alcohol in a family setting reported different first drink, first 5+ (4+ for females), and first drunk experiences. Those allowed alcohol when growing up described moderate drinking patterns and less harmful drinking as well as a longer time between first drink and harmful drinking practices than those not allowed.

### *First drink: setting*

Most young people allowed alcohol when growing up had their first drink, not counting small tastes or sips, in a family setting. Youths allowed small amounts of alcohol when

growing up were more likely to have their first drink with family, and among young adults, only those allowed alcohol when growing up had their first drink with family. Among these young people, the context of the first drink with family mirrored familial drinking settings with the first drink occurring at family meals or at a family event. Fabio, a 17-year-old male regular drinker from Abruzzo recounted his first drinking experience:

‘[We were] At the wedding of a relative in the village. I was with my parents [and]. It was offered to me . . . there were people older than me and I accepted.’

as did Carlo, a 26-year-old male heavy drinker from Abruzzo:

‘[I had] A glass of beer at a meal with my parents. [It was] at a meal we had one day that was no different from any other day.’

*First drink: quantity and type*

Young people allowed alcohol with meals in a family setting when growing up consumed less alcohol on their first drink occasion than those not allowed (Figure 1). Further, they drank a moderate amount of one type of alcohol, 1–2 drinks, irrespective of whether or not the first drink was with family. Daniela, a 30-year-old female unemployed regular drinker from Umbria who was allowed alcohol when growing up described having her first drink with friends:

‘[It was] On my [18th] birthday, at dinner. [Wine] was served at dinner so I drank it. One glass of wine, I just had sips so it lasted all evening. [I drank] to celebrate and to drink while eating. The taste, the wines were of very good quality and left a taste of perfume in the mouth.’

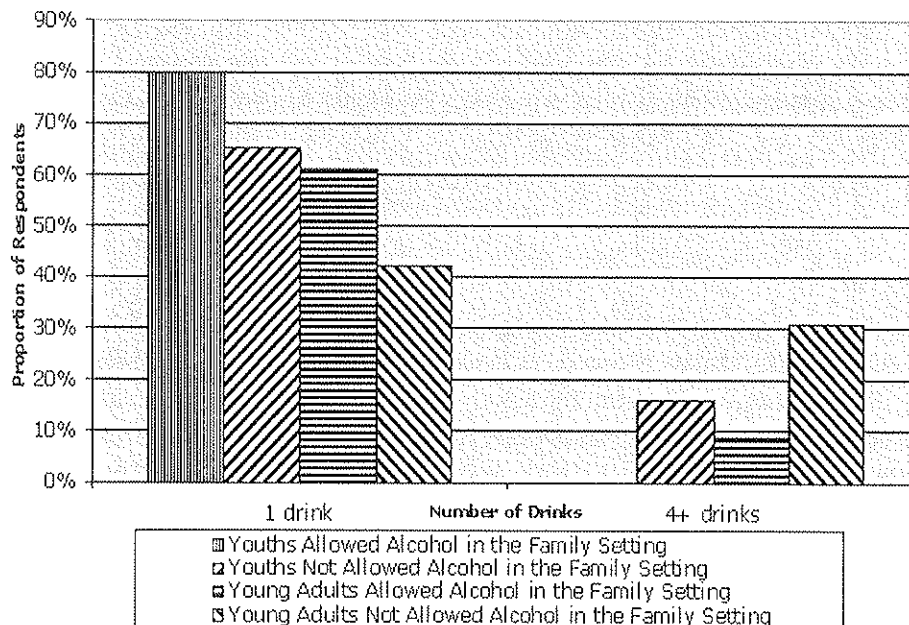


Figure 1. First Drink Quantity

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Similarly, Tomaso, a 17-year-old male heavy drinker from Abruzzo who was allowed alcohol when growing up, had his first drink with friends:

‘[I had] A bottle of beer in the [town] centre with friends. I was okay, I did it to pass the time and for curiosity.’

These first drink experiences contrast with those of young people not allowed alcohol when growing up, who also drank moderate amounts of alcohol when their first drink was with family but who consumed large amounts of more than one type of alcohol and reported getting drunk in first drink contexts with friends. Camilla, a 17-year-old female heavy drinker from Umbria who had her first drink with friends said she drank:

‘Rum and coke, gin and lemon, I mixed different things and I got sick. It was at a swimming pool party with friends... I started taking sips, and then drinking, and in the end we were all drunk. They threw me into the swimming pool and because of the fact that I hadn’t eaten anything and because of the reaction to the cold water I felt sick. I went home and threw up... who remembers what I had... rum and pear, rum and coke, peach vodka, gin lemon, strawberry vodka... up to 2–3 glasses of each. I liked tasting different flavors... My mother came to get me and I sat on my bed and threw up all night. My mother scolded me, she said that I was getting what I deserved for having gone overboard. My father was quite angry, he even gave me a slap.’

Vittorio, a 17-year-old male heavy drinker from Abruzzo gave a similar account of drinking a large quantity of more than one type of alcohol at his first drink experience:

‘I was at a disco with friends and I had alcohol for the first time... and I had a lot, two beers and then 3–4 friends shared a bottle of rum with me. I was on vacation, in a disco... on the beach.

as did Bruno, a 29-year-old self-employed male regular drinker from Umbria:

‘[I drank] beer and spirits, actually more spirits because at that age you don’t understand anything and you drink in a bad way. I was with people my age, friends, and we drank in an experimental way, got drunk and all that. Spirits, all very perfumed stuff like melon vodka. We bought it. [I drank] 10 glasses. I liked the new sensation of being out of my head. I threw up.’

#### *First 5+ (or 4+) and first drunk*

As Figures 2 and 3 illustrate, there were also differences among those allowed and not allowed alcohol when growing up and their first 5+ (4+ for females) and first drunk occurrence. Among the youths, only those not allowed alcohol in a family setting had 5+ in a 2h period on their first drink occasion. Those allowed alcohol delayed their first 5+ experience for a longer period than youths not allowed alcohol and those allowed alcohol were also more likely to never have 5+ drinks. The pattern was different among young adults. Although fewer young adults who were allowed alcohol when growing up had 5+ on their first drink occasion and also delayed 5+ longer, more of them reported having 5+ drinks four or more years after the first drink, compared to those not allowed alcohol (Figure 2).

The first drunk, defined as feeling dizzy, unsteady, sick to the stomach, having slurred speech or blurred vision, did not mirror the first 5+ experiences of either youths or young adults. As with the first 5+, only youths not allowed alcohol in a family setting got drunk at

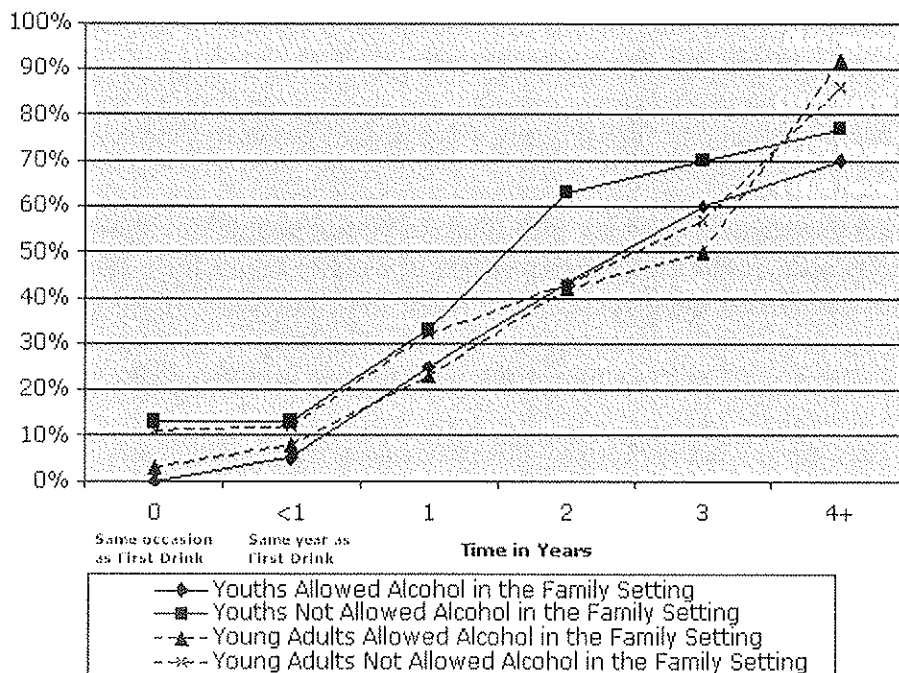


Figure 2. From First Drink to First Five.

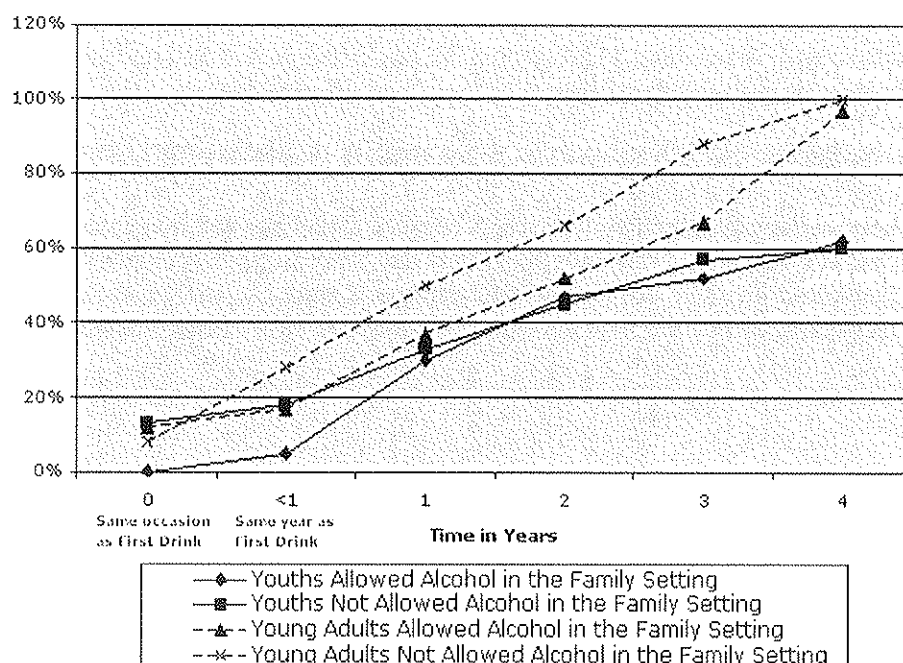


Figure 3. From First Drink to First Drunk.

their first drink experience. Youths allowed alcohol delayed getting drunk longer, but almost the same proportions of youths allowed and not allowed reported ever being drunk four or more years after the first drink. Among the young adults, although similar proportions of those allowed and not allowed alcohol in a family setting were drunk at their first drink

experience, those allowed reported longer delayed first drunk experience. Only young adults allowed alcohol in a family setting when growing up reported never being drunk.

The settings and types of alcoholic beverages consumed were similar for first 5+ and first drunk experiences, and included New Year's Eve celebrations, eighteenth birthday parties, other celebrations, parties and discos. An 18-year-old male heavy drinker from Abruzzo who was allowed alcohol when growing up talked about his first drunk experience 2 years after his first drink:

'We were celebrating the end of the school . . . it was the first time that I drank spirits. I was with friends on a Saturday evening. We had two 40-cl [approx. 13 ounce] glasses of beer each with dinner, then we went out to a pub where I drank 2 glasses of 'B52' [cocktail] and then to a disco, where I had another 1 or 2 glasses of beer. I didn't feel well, after, but I didn't throw up, I rarely do. I had nausea, dizziness.'

Another male, a 17-year-old regular drinker from Umbria who was not allowed alcohol when growing up, described his first drunk experience 1 year after his first drink:

'I drank two beers – that's a given – and three cocktails that were included in the entrance fee, probably with rum or something like that.'

There was little regional variation in the occurrence of first 5+ among youths and young adults or in the occurrence of youths' first drunk. However, there were regional differences in the reports of first drunk among young adults, with those from Umbria who were allowed alcohol when growing up more likely to delay getting drunk. In Umbria, 20% of young adults were drunk within 2 years of their first drink and 35% were drunk four or more years after their first drink, while in Abruzzo nearly half of young adults were reported being drunk within 2 years after their first drink. Umbria is a top-ranking region for regular drinking and one of the lowest for heavy drinking while Abruzzo is a top-ranking region for the ratio of heavy drinking to low regular drinking in the general population.

## Discussion

Italy is a unique setting in which to study alcohol use among young people. Although alcohol consumption patterns have changed in traditional wine drinking southern European countries with a decrease in wine and an increase in beer and spirits, Italians consume the largest amount of wine per capita in Europe. The traditional perception of wine as food and the contextual importance of drinking may be responsible for the fact that Italians drink more moderately than other Europeans.

Our study suggests that the introduction of alcohol, typically wine, in a family setting may protect against harmful drinking including binge drinking and drunkenness. In our study, young people allowed alcohol with meals when growing up were more likely to never drink 5+ or get drunk and also had reduced or delayed 5+ drinking or drunk occasions. Di Grande et al. (2000) reported similar findings in a study of university students in Sardinia, Italy in which early onset of drinking outside the family was a strong predictor of binge drinking among males. Backed by other related findings, the present study shows that in the Italian context, introducing alcohol with meals in the context of a family setting in which alcohol is consumed moderately may offer protection against harmful drinking as well as nurture more moderate drinking behaviours.

Both regular and heavy drinkers in this study described their parents' alcohol use as 'moderate' and talked about moderate drinking as an Italian tradition. Although regular drinkers may be modelling this moderate drinking pattern heavy drinkers appear to be breaking with this cultural tradition. In our study the familial protection provided by drinking with meals in a family setting was challenged and diminished when drinking occurred in social settings with friends or outside the family. Related to this, van der Voorst et al. (2006) reported that strict rules delayed but did not prevent teen drinking in Holland, indicating that parental influence diminished over time.

Other studies exploring parental monitoring of drinking behaviour also show the influence of both parental and peer norms. In the UK low parental monitoring was associated with higher levels of alcohol consumption and high parental monitoring associated with lower levels of drunkenness and binge drinking (Ledoux et al. 2002). In the US, both friends' drinking and low parental monitoring were associated with heavy drinking (Reifman et al. 1998) while Wood et al. (2004) found that parental monitoring moderated peer influences encouraging risky drinking. In our study, more youths than young adults said their parents warned them about the risks of drinking but our findings do not indicate a strong connection between young peoples' consumption of alcohol and parental communication about risks.

We also observed a relationship between type of first alcohol and amount of alcohol consumed at both the first and subsequent drinking occasions when the first drink was not in a family setting. Young people not allowed alcohol, typically wine, in a family setting with meals when growing up reported drinking large amounts of spirits and beer at their first drink occasion as well as having 5+ or being drunk at their first drink occasion or soon thereafter. These young people drank with friends in a public setting in which multiple types of alcoholic beverages were available. Other studies show wine to be a drink of moderation while beer and spirits are more frequently consumed in larger quantities (Smart and Walsh 1995, 1999; Jensen et al. 2002; Paschall and Lipton 2005). In a recent study of young adults in the US, a larger proportion of wine drinkers were light-moderate drinkers than beer or spirits drinkers and were less likely to report problem drinking behaviours than beer or spirits drinkers (Paschall and Lipton 2005). A longitudinal study of moderate drinkers in Copenhagen, Denmark found males who reported drinking moderately at a lower risk of becoming heavy or excessive drinkers if wine was part of their weekly alcohol intake compared to males who did not drink wine. In addition, women who drank beer in addition to other alcoholic beverages were at an increased risk of heavy and excessive drinking than their peers who did not drink beer (Jensen et al. 2002). The increase in consumption of beer and spirits in traditional wine drinking southern European countries including Italy are indicated in the consumption of beer, cocktails and other spirits particularly by the heavy drinkers in our study. Although wine continues to be associated with meals, the consumption of other alcoholic beverages in social settings outside the home challenges the protection of traditional drinking patterns.

There are a number of limitations to the study. By interviewing adolescent participants close to the age of initiation, the study likely provides reliable information about their initiation but, for young adults, the study required retrospective recall about age of initiation that occurred some years before and may have introduced recall bias. Previous research shows that over time, participants tend to report increasingly older ages of initiation (Parra et al. 2003). The young adults in this study were 7–14 years older than the youths. Similar proportions of youths and young adults described drinking with family when growing up, but more young adults reported binge drinking and being drunk. This could be due to their longer experience with alcohol or because in Italy, as in other Southern European countries, drunkenness is relatively stigmatised and youths may be less willing to admit to having

been drunk. Among EU residents, Italians are the least likely to self-report drinking too much (Anderson and Baumberg 2006). Our stratified purposeful sample included adolescents attending high school, and young adults of whom all but two had at least a high school education. Although the goal of purposeful sampling strategies is to understand a phenomena, not represent a population (Patton 2002), as previously mentioned a survey of Italians ages 13+ conducted at the same time as our study found alcohol consumption very similar among all social classes with slightly higher consumption 'in the high and middle-high class' (Osservatorio Permanente sui Giovani e l'Alcool 2007:109–110).

Our findings have a number of implications for further studies about factors that may protect against harmful drinking behaviours in Italy, other countries with similar early age introduction to alcohol, and countries with different norms about early drinking. Cross-cultural research in countries with similar early age introduction to alcohol would increase knowledge about the protective aspect of drinking in a family setting and about drinking in cultures in which there is an openness about drinking. It is important to study whether cultural familial protective influences are reduced when beverage consumption patterns change as is happening in traditional wine drinking countries. More research focusing on changing norms about drinking to intoxication would help inform prevention efforts about alcohol-related risks. Although we queried young people about their parents' relationships to and attitudes about alcohol, and whether or not parents discussed alcohol-related risks, we did not probe familial relationships. Nor did we probe peer relationships. Qualitative studies are needed that explore relationships with nuclear, extended family, other adults and with peers to help clarify dilemmas associated with alcohol use and risk-related behaviours. Finally, research on drinking in a family setting in the US and other countries where early drinking is not the norm are needed in order to inform strategies designed to reduce risk-related drinking.

### Acknowledgement

Preparation of this article was supported by the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) grant # P60-AA013759. The authors thank Jeniffer Leyson for Contribution to interview coding. All participant names are pseudonyms.

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