DRINKING CULTURE IN THE THAI-ISAAN CONTEXT OF NORTHEAST THAILAND

Jirawat Moolasart¹ and Siriporn Chirawatkul²

¹Department of Psychiatry, Sappasitthiprasong Hospital, Ubon Ratchathani; ²Faculty of Nursing, Khon Kaen University, Khon Kaen, Thailand

Abstract. Ethnographic research aimed to explore drinking context, drinking behaviors, and perception of lay people about their drinking and drinking-related behaviors in Thai-Isaan context. The study was conducted in a suburban village in the northeast of Thailand during 2008. Participant observation and informal interview were employed for data collection throughout the year. Findings of the study revealed that alcoholic beverages and drinking were woven into everyday life and integrated into various social events and traditional rites as part of social life. Alcohol consumption was permitted overtly with positive attitudes toward drinking and a low level of restriction. Enjoyment and social functions of drinking were recognized by direct experience in real life. Conversely, problem drinking and overt intoxication with loss of self-control or lack of responsibility were not expected or acceptable. Drinking was rarely perceived as a social distress. From an insiders’ view, their drinking was less correlated to alcohol abuse or alcohol-related social problems. In the context of a permissive drinking culture, the existing alcohol regulation measures may be neither supported nor conformed as expected. An alcohol policy that aims to reduce the overall volume of consumption or to indicate the negative consequences may dispute local perceptions and norms. The challenge for public health within this culture is how to persuade the drinkers to realize such negative potential and how to raise societal awareness of negative consequences. Positive local norms and values should be emphasized and strengthened to promote a more healthy drinking culture.

Keywords: alcohol drinking, drinking culture, drinking context, local perceptions, Northeast Thailand

Correspondence: Jirawat Moolasart, Department of Psychiatry, Sappasitthiprasong Hospital, Ubon Ratchathani 34000, Thailand.
Tel: 66 (0) 45 255848
E-mail: jirawatmool@hotmail.com