

Book review

The Handbook of Intoxication and Intoxicants

*Edited by Geoffrey Hunt, Tamar Antin and Vibeke Asmussen Frank
Taylor & Francis, Routledge
2022
614 pages
ISBN 0429603428, 9780429603426
Review DOI
10.1108/DHS-09-2023-068*

The *Handbook of Intoxication and Intoxicants* is a collection of intriguing essays which seek to understand the contemporary and historical place of intoxication and intoxicants while challenging what they see as hegemonic positions, definitions, policies and discourses. The subject matter is diverse and wide ranging. Key strengths of the book are that it goes beyond the traditional range of illicit drugs, with chapters concerning nicotine vaping, no smoking zones, craft beers, hangovers, coffee and khat. In addition, many of the contributors, and their research, are based beyond the anglosphere of the USA, the UK, Canada and Australia. Although from the Introduction it seemed as though a guiding principle of the book might have been the attitudes to drugs and intoxication that came to prominence when baby boomers were coming of age in 1960s America, perspectives from the Global South were refreshing. These included chapters concerning current or historical intoxication in Nigeria, Singapore and Brazil, as well as chapters concerning intoxication among diasporas.

Despite the varied content, golden threads can be found that unite the chapters and hold the book together. Qualitative research, theoretical essays and historical analysis are the dominant approaches, while positivism and discussions of harms relating to intoxication tend to be eschewed. The entries tend to be critical of stigmatizing, pathologizing and moralizing discourses. In many

chapters, prominence is given to the subjective experiences of intoxication, especially when these experiences are hidden from mainstream discourse for political reasons. Interactionist perspectives regularly crop up with the works of [Becker \(1963\)](#) and [Zinberg \(1984\)](#) regularly cited. Contributors also frequently critique the disapproval or attempted control of intoxication. The term “handbook,” to the author of this review at least, suggests a greater range of methodological approaches to understanding the matter at hand and a different set of priorities. Indeed, chapters contesting definitions of intoxication and intoxicants might be seen as essential for a handbook, as might chapters using more objectivist methods to estimate global or local levels of intoxication or intoxicant use. The latter would have complemented the book well, albeit would have required a broader scope and volume for the book. The editors are clear in their introduction that they were not prescriptive to the authors; however, the end result has been fairly consistent in terms of political outlook. The editors conclude their introduction by referring to “heretical” thinking, whereby authors use theory, analysis and methods in ways that are challenging to the status quo, and this is a good summary of this book’s chapters. One could counter, however, that within academic circles a defense of prohibition or the stigmatization of people who use drugs might have been *more* heretical. The introduction was also used to discuss the considerable difficulties in putting together such a large volume together during a global pandemic. This could relate to difficulties in finding a parsimonious way to structure the book, with the arrangement of sections and chapters feeling a little contrived. This, however, might be largely

inconsequential as most readers, unlike the author of this review, are unlikely to read each chapter in the order in which they appear.

The Handbook of Intoxication and Intoxicants features 34 chapters across eight “themes.” The first theme is “The terrain of Intoxication,” which began with Reinerman’s theoretical chapter looking at “Intoxications and their meanings” and also included Dumbili *et al.*’s chapter which reported on qualitative data from a study of cannabis use in Nigeria. Part II of the book is titled the “Social Life of Intoxicants,” and the topics of the respective chapters are diverse, ranging from Clark’s synthetic history of MDMA to Reith’s essay on capitalism and the commodification of pleasure. Part III on “Intoxicating Settings” is the longest and features seven chapters, which *do* fit together parsimoniously. Chapters in this section included Croegaert’s work on the importance of coffee consumption in Bosnia and among the Bosnian diaspora, and “Join Us for Drinks,” where Keane points out how intoxicating liquids, most often rich in caffeine or alcohol, punctuate and structure proceedings at academic conferences. Part IV, “Intoxication Practices,” features only three chapters also knitted together seamlessly with themes of how context and culture relate to intoxicating practices and outcomes, including Race and colleagues looking to how intoxication can be politically significant for queer communities.

Part V, “Alternative Approaches for Studying Intoxication,” also contained three chapters, and indeed all three advanced interesting methodologies for studying intoxication, including Campbell’s critique of laboratory based and positivist methods and Bååth and Nordgren’s exploration of online trip reports. Part VI, “Scapegoated Substances,” contains three chapters that align through discussion of how meanings and constructions of substances have

related, respectively, to race, ethnicity and nationhood. The chapter by Avelar and Toner offers much needed and underrepresented insights on alcohol, slavery and race in 19th century Brazil. Part VII, “Discourses shaping intoxication and people who use intoxicants,” is made up of four chapters connected by an exploration of how certain discourses are used to justify the control of human behavior. Tan’s chapter uniquely concerns itself with clean air policies in Singapore. The city-state is as well-known for being clean and safe as it is for repressive drug policies; however, the explicit connection of cleanliness, public health and a milder form of repression has been made less often. The final section, “Notions of Excess,” is historical and demonstrates how some common themes have been present in conceptualizations of various forms of intoxication, with a recurring focus on Victorian moralizing. This section provides an especially well-linked coherency of all four chapters demonstrating how constructions of, and responses to, intoxication depend on the class and gender of who is getting intoxicated.

Who will be interested in *The Handbook of Intoxication and Intoxicants*? Students of intoxication and substance use from the disciplines of history, anthropology and sociology will enjoy many chapters, as would some from criminology. Scholars from psychology or public health might find that approaches familiar to them, and research questions of interest to them, are not attended to. The mixture of critical, subversive and exotic accounts of intoxication will also be of interest to those from outside of academia with a strong interest in drug use. In addition, practitioners who work in fields related to substance use, such as recovery, harm reduction, psychiatry and general medicine, will find many chapters of interest. Concerns about the scope and structure of the book should not prevent those interested in

intoxication specifically, and social deviance more broadly, from reading the many illuminating chapters.

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References

Becker, H.S. (1963), *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*, Free Press Glencoe, p. x, 179.

Zinberg, N. (1984), *Drug, Set and Setting: Basis for Controlled Intoxicant Use: The Basis for Controlled Intoxicant Use*, 1st ed., Yale University Press.

Further reading

Hunt, G., Antin, T.M.J. and Frank, V.A. (Eds) (2023), *The Handbook of Intoxication and Intoxicants*, Routledge.