

Alcohol consumption is a firmly intertwined behavior in societies all over the world. Eighty percent of the alcohol consumption of young adults takes place in social settings, so research into the causes of alcohol consumption should take its social nature into account. An individual's alcohol consumption in a social setting will vary, depending on, for example, norms about drinking and drinking behavior of those around. Past research attempted to scrutinize this process by longitudinally assessing social relations and drinking behavior by questionnaires [1]. These studies provided valuable insights in the outcomes of peer influence, but little information about the actual process of social influence. To fill this gap, a project was initiated in which questionnaire data were combined with video recordings of actual drinking episodes in peer groups. The drinking episodes were analyzed with The Observer Video-Pro 5.0.

## Method

Existing peer groups of eight individuals were invited to participate. Background data were collected by means of questionnaires. The drinking episode took place in an hour that was presented to the participants as a break between two parts of a – for this purpose made up - experiment. During this “break” drinks could be ordered from a research assistant who functioned as a bartender. Both soft-alcoholic (beer and wine) and non-alcoholic drinks were available.

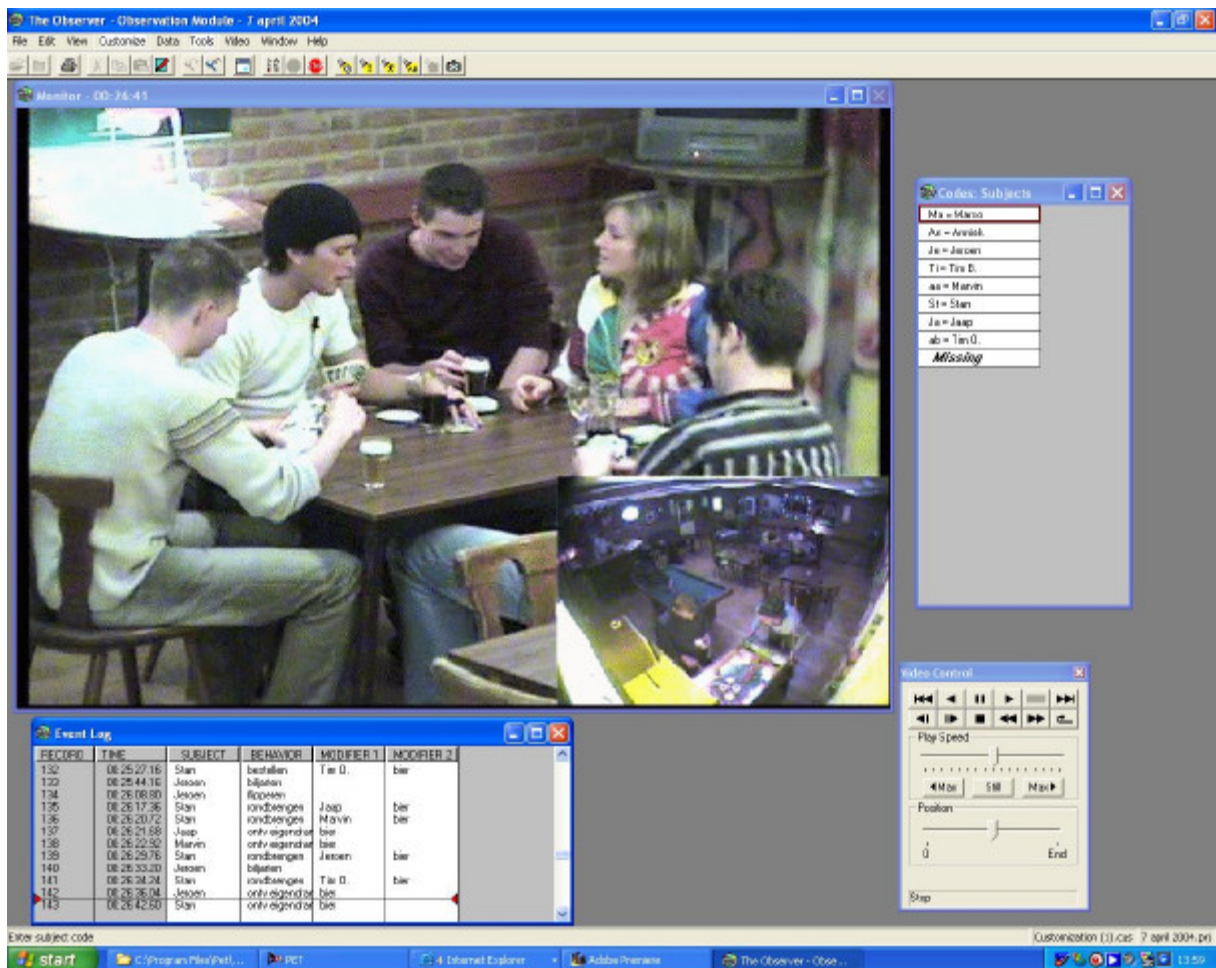
Behavioral patterns during this break were recorded by two cameras, one of which was equipped with a wide-angle lens, and another with pan, tilt and zoom function. The two recordings were mixed to one (with the Observer 5.0 functionality for analyzing multiple recordings) and saved on DVD as an MPEG-4 file. The recordings were analyzed using The Observer Video-Pro 5.0. Two behavioral categories were scored for each participant. First, the process of ordering and consuming drinks was mapped by scoring (as events) who invited others to have a drink, who actually ordered drinks (with or without approval) et cetera. The activities they were involved in, like being in a conversation and watching TV, were scored as states; which allowed to assess the effect of a certain activity on drinking pace and to identify periods of time in which certain individuals were hanging out together.

## Results

Thorough analyses on the observational data are planned for later in 2005, but results from a count of alcoholic drinks consumed in our setting, together with questionnaire data on personal relations within the group are already available and very promising [see also 2]. We also studied the differences in susceptibility to influence in male and female participants [3]. The data showed that the alcohol consumption of males is dependent on the drinking behavior of the entire group present in the “bar lab” and, above that effect, on the drinking of the person the participant likes most. Female drinking was independent from both the drinking of the total group and that of the favored person. A question that arises is why males within a peer group show a drinking behavior similar to each other whereas the drinking behaviors of females in a peer group are very diverse. We believe that this question can be answered by carefully examining the process from which orders for drinks arise. Are some males afraid to lose face when turning down an offer of an alcoholic consumption? Do females order only for themselves? These questions require a system that organizes and categorizes observational data to allow detailed analyses. Our research continues and the results will be published in a future issue of Noldus News.

## Conclusion

Questionnaire studies have taught us a great deal about the outcomes of social influence processes. To scrutinize the way these processes take place, observations of group behavior are essential. The Observer is a powerful tool to answer plain questions that arise from a complex reality.



## References

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