

□ How does one interpret and understand orgiastic behaviour at parties? What is the role and meaning of alcohol in this behaviour? In an attempt to answer these questions, the author looks at the partying of a group of young Swedish politicians. They use alcohol to break away and cross over into another, liminal reality where it is permissible to do things that otherwise are improper or taboo.

Beyond Everyday Order;

Breaking Away with Alcohol

In the course of my ethnographic studies on the construction of symbolic meanings for alcohol in different groups of people, I came to know a group of young politicians.¹ They were perfectly ordinary young politicians, doing what young politicians do: writing speeches, attending ideology courses, and working for an election campaign in the run-up to the general elections in autumn 1994. During the observation period from July 1994 to May 1995, I kept close contact with these people: I worked with them and I went to their parties, I interviewed them on several occasions and had a number of group discussions.

My chief concern at the parties they arranged was to identify recurring themes, i.e. something that they always did or something that frequently happened and that I assumed was of central importance to the construction

of their culture and identity. One of the recurring practices they had was a striptease show. The show took place at the political organization's parties, often quite late in the evening and always with the same three, well-respected young men in the leading roles. The show seemed to have mainly a ritual meaning, and it was apparently exclusive to these parties and to situations where alcohol was involved.

How can this be interpreted? What is happening here, why is it happening? Another question that is addressed in the discussion below has to do with the way in which alcohol is used in the transition to the uninhibited, orgiastic situation that is created by the young men at their parties. In an attempt to answer these questions, I will be weaving different theoretical interpretations into the discussion of my empirical "findings".

Perverse politician...

The group of politicians whom I got to know more closely consisted of four young men and one young woman, all aged between 17 and 25 years. They lived in a small town in Sweden and were active in a political organization. These five young people had close contact with a larger group of some 30 likeminded people (mostly young men) from a large city nearby. The members of this latter group were also recruited as informants for my studies.

The group culture of these young politicians was anti state and anti socialism, both being regarded as suppressive forces. Instead, they championed values of individual freedom and Swedish tradition. The political organization was above all else concerned with organizing parties: at board meetings, for instance, it was no so much the political substance that mattered as the party that followed. At the party headquarters they had a bar, a darts board and a whole range of classic pub accessories such as beer pumps and beer adverts and whiskey bottles, interspersed with symbols of their liberal conservative ideology: a portrait of the king, American car registration plates, "YES to EU" posters. Countless parties were held here, huge amounts of drink were consumed. The parties provided an opportunity for those who took part to build up a legendary status and reputation in the organization. The following interview excerpt describes the events of one legendary party:

First we drink because it's good, a drop of whiskey and stuffs like that, then we drink because we're so drunk that we think hey, why not drink a bit more and get a bit more drunk while we're at it, after all the elections are coming up and we need to start like breeding some new brain cells, as from tomorrow morning. And so that is what we do, it's quite heavy on the bottle. We get very very drunk indeed. And the last time we had a party, that ended with Anders Carlsson [all names have been changed], who is now our first vice chairman or is he second vice chairman, he was lying stark naked

on the toilet floor and had thrown up, we put him in a taxi to take him home (laughter). So the next thing of course was that he threw up in the taxi as well, in-between the window and the door. He threw up all over the door. That was an expensive operation, I think it was something like 1700 kronor to have the door stripped down to clean it all out. So he was very bright and breezy, at least he got back home.

Alexander who was secretary at the time, he suggested we should go over to my place to carry on the party, so that's what we did of course. (...) It all ended with one of our members dancing on the roof of a discotheque and the police coming to arrest him. Another member fell flat on his face outside a shop that was still open and so he had to be picked up by the police to sober up. The other member who was with him, he went to McDonald's to grab a hamburger and he ended up being stabbed in the leg. And the next day we were all supposed to be bright and breezy because we were having this major campaign in town and we were going to have this demonstration and flags and all sorts of things. And so the one of us who was stabbed in the leg, he came direct from the hospital, in his blood-stained jeans and all that. And our beloved secretary, he had lost his shoes so he was barefooted (laughter) when he went to the police station to pick up these two drunkards. So there he was in his unbuttoned shirt and his shabby hair, stinking of booze and no shoes on, he comes to the police station to bail them out and they look at him and wonder who the fuck he is (laughter). But the campaign went ahead and it was a brilliant campaign, I mean we won the elections didn't we. (Excerpt from an interview with the young politician Johan.)

This excerpt clearly highlights the complete and utter disorder that characterizes these parties and the fervour with which the people involved indulge themselves. One of the members danced on the roof of a discotheque, another was stabbed in the leg, two were picked up by the police. "Anything" can happen at parties, anything forbidden and taboo that does not otherwise happen or that only happens in the imagination but rarely in practice.

One of the recurring highlights at many of

these drink orgies comes when Swedish punk band Ebba Grön's record *Pervers politiker* (Perverse politician) goes on the turntable. This politician, in the lyrics, discribes himself as someting of a Jecyll and Hyde: in his respectable role as a politician he lies and deceives people in the daytime, but at night he turns into a real pervert who is turned on by shitting and by spanking and hitting women in rubber (Ebba Grön 1980).

It is usually with this record that the three well-respected members of the organization begin their striptease show, which features in virtually every party of any consequence. The interesting thing about both the lyrics and the show is the way in which they overturn established roles and norms. The picture of the politician is inverted, almost beyond recognition; the inverted politician takes a greater interest in "women in rubber" and in spanking and hard cocks than in ideological debate or incomes policy issues. The perverted, the sexual and grotesque are championed, instilling in the performers a great sense of freedom.

Another example of the more grotesque pranks played out at these parties is known simply as the "vacuum cleaner". It involves the use of an old industrial vacuum cleaner, but not for its accustomed purposes. Instead, certain members of the organization pick out someone who is thought to be in need of closer introduction to the vacuum cleaner. Having chosen their victim, they grab hold of him, pull down his trousers, force his penis into the vacuum cleaner's mouthpiece, and switch on the vacuum cleaner. The members who have received this treatment do not consider it obscene or offensive; it is just business as usual.²

This alternative use of the vacuum cleaner can be interpreted in different ways. One possible interpretation is to say that these young men are flirting with the taboo of homosexuality, a taboo they otherwise respect. Within their group culture it is important to be seen as "real men", yet the vacuum cleaner prank

draws their attention to homosexuality, to fooling around with genitals. Sex games with members of the same gender are seen as taboo by most people in the Swedish culture. The parties provide an opportunity to confront homosexuality and get closer to it. The point of my argument does not have to do with homosexuality, however. The point is that the party makes it possible for the people involved to do things that they would have great difficulty in doing elsewhere: it makes possible the perverse, that which is excluded from the everyday, that which is taboo.

... or the return of the excluded

The activities described above — the striptease show, the dancing on the discotheque roof, the alternative use of the vacuum cleaner — can be seen as transgressions. Douglas (1966/1993), Falk (1994), Turner (1969), Bakhtin (1968) and Cohen & Taylor (1976/1992) have all described different types of transgression, a process which allows the individual to carry out activities that are otherwise forbidden in that particular cultural environment. Drinking and drunkenness could involve a transgression of the structures of everyday life and a transition into what Turner calls liminality. Alcohol can be seen as a means of transport. "During the intervening 'liminal' period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the 'passenger') are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming stage" (Turner 1969, 94).

The liminal period is characterized by an absence of the social structures that normally order the subject's world. In the words of Berger and Luckmann (1966/1987), liminality means the replacement of what they call paramount reality by another reality, which does not have very much in common with the dominant, paramount reality. In liminality, the social hierarchy and the norm system that

structure everyday life, are both pushed to the sidelines (Turner 1969). Liminality is thus antithetical to paramount everyday reality.

In a liminal state activities become possible that otherwise would not be possible or feasible, for instance regressions, perversions, sub-missions (as in the case of the vacuum cleaner), simulation of one's own death, altruism and sacrifice (*ibid.*). Johan's account of one of their legendary parties and Ebba Grön's lyrics both present an inverted image of the politician. Restrictions imposed by social custom, the things that people are not allowed to do in society, become possible in the liminal state. Behaviours not expected of a politician are possible in the liminal.

In the field of alcohol research, Gusfield (1987) and Pedersen (1992) are among the scholars who have used the notion of transgressions and Turner's concept of liminality. For Gusfield, the drinking of alcohol on Fridays marks a kind of ritual passage from the world of work to leisure, just as the drinking of coffee on Monday mornings marks the return to the world of work. Pedersen (1992) uses the concept of liminality in a discussion of drug use as rites of passage³ from youth to adulthood. Pedersen says that the situation which develops in connection with drinking can be seen as liminality: "Drunkenness disposes of structure, which of course is at once the definition of liminality. *Limen* means threshold. Drunken behaviour implies a transgression of this threshold into a kind of liminal position." (Pedersen 1992, 105)

A concept that shares many features in common with the notion of liminality is that of carnival. Bakhtin (1968) says that carnival constitutes a transgression of civilization's cultural conventions. Carnivals are celebrations of the grotesque, the body's orifices and what exists within the body, such as sweat and saliva. Carnival can be seen as the antithesis of civilized culture: "The grotesque body and carnival represent the other that has been ex-

cluded from the formation of middle-class identity and culture." (Featherstone 1994, 61)

Carnival is thus an expression of the suppressed desire; in Turner's words, it is a liminal state. The striptease show and the party can be seen as carnivalistic events, brimming with practices that these young people, during their formative years, considered taboo. At carnivals they can get closer to them rather than having to move away and take distance.

The body takes over

Transgressions can be seen as antitheses to the everyday. Everyday routines such as table manners may take on an entirely different form and shape at carnivals. Alcohol is thus a medium that helps to achieve what is beyond reach within the confines of everyday life. In this sense the concept of freedom can be used to describe the bodily sensations that set in when the party seems to have taken on a life of its own. The bodily is indeed central in the carnival. Robert Stam compares Nietzsche's views on the Dionysian to Bakhtin's notion of carnival and arrives at the following conclusion: "... both glorify the excessive body that outstrips its own limits and transgresses the norms of decency" (Stam 1989, 89).

Freud's concept of the "oceanic"⁴ is also slotted under the carnivalistic: according to Stam (1989, 94) the idea of carnival is "the locus of oceanic feelings of union with the community". The oceanic state is in many respects similar to the liminal.

Freud's (1932/1995) view was that civilized man has "exchanged a portion of his possibilities of happiness for a portion of security", exercising far too strict self-discipline on the body. Most of what people are taught to discipline and privatize in the process of socialization, are bodily functions: in this process we learn how to behave in the company of other people, when and where it is acceptable to have sex, what is "normal" sexuality, what is

permitted and what is perverted. The adult individual is disciplined and a whole range of bodily functions become taboo.

Transgressions, according to Falk (1994), are states that allow for a more bodily existence. The intimate senses — the senses of smell, touch and taste — take precedence over the senses that operate over a distance: hearing and sight. Transgressions can be of two different types: Firstly, Falk refers to passive transgressions, which may occur in the cinema or in front of television, for instance. Secondly, there are active transgressions, implying personal, bodily involvement, for instance in the form of group sex.

In an active transgression the individual involved will mostly make use of the intimate senses: bodily sensations, including the admission of outside objects into the body, are therefore a more important part of the active transgression than of the passive transgression.

Parties (carnivals) make possible the impossible; people can do what would otherwise be considered perverse. What is more, there is an audience for the transgressions. In other words parties can also be seen as providing an opportunity for exhibitionists who not only want to transgress cultural norms and taboos, but who want to do it together. The exhibitionist's satisfaction is heightened by the presence of a viewing audience. The people who are there watching or who are personally involved in the transgression, become like a secret society: they are jointly responsible for guarding and protecting their deviations from the disciplined everyday. The vacuum cleaner ritual and the striptease show are examples of active transgressions for those who are involved; for the people watching, they are passive transgressions.

“Breaking away” and the other state of attention

However, the liminal/carnivalistic state is not

achieved in just any way, but through what are known as rites of passage. Douglas (1966/1993) says that people have always been fascinated by what in society is regarded as taboo. On the other hand, people are inclined to avoid what they think is contaminated, for the contaminated is always ambiguous and therefore difficult to categorize and relate to.

Also denied and rejected is anything that threatens the continuity of culture and that cannot be articulated. The unacceptable, the taboo is excluded from the paramount everyday reality. Therefore, according to a functionalist explanation, people should not approach these forbidden objects — yet they often do. Douglas stresses the importance of rituals in providing people with the courage they need to approach these taboos.

The reason why alcohol use is so heavily ritualized in many cultures lies probably in people's awareness that they are in effect approaching a danger zone. Rituals give protection to people in this encounter. Turner (1967/1989, 98) describes this by saying that liminality is destructured and prestructured. Following this same line of thinking, drinking songs could be compared to spells recited upon entry into a danger zone where culture does not provide the same sort of protection as normally. However, the transition cannot be completed without ritual and symbolic help. A rite of passage involves the use of symbols which clearly indicate the transition from one stage to another. Gusfield regards alcohol as a symbol that marks the transition from the world of work to leisure: “The use of alcohol symbolizes a temporal life style and accentuates the transformation of the posture of social controls and self-imprisonment” (Gusfield 1987, 86).

For our young politicians their pre-party get-togethers fulfil an important function in prestructuring the transgressions that are due to occur later on in the “main party” or at the discotheque. The time they spend together

watching television, drinking beer and eating chips and peanuts, strengthens their sense of solidarity. At the same time, they are in effect making vows of mutual allegiance and protection for their joint "reality trip" that evening. A lot of joking goes on as well, much of it targeted against the political arch-rivals of Communists and Social Democrats. Sometimes the group will get together to play games, or to watch television and ridicule its celebrities. There is no doubt that all these activities strengthen the group's sense of solidarity. The sovereignty of one's own group becomes more and more pronounced.

There is no obvious signal but everyone seems to know exactly when it is time to leave for the party proper. On the way there, they will sometimes continue to drink beer and in general behave boisterously, tearing down posters, stopping every now and then for a pee in a doorway. When they eventually arrive at the party, they carry out various kinds of rituals to demonstrate that they are now at a party and to demonstrate their mutual solidarity. One example of these activities is toasting, which marks their togetherness and their masculinity, another their (often sexist) joking.

At a certain stage of the party, once a certain number of rituals have been performed, the partygoer reaches a point that the young politicians describe as "cutting loose" or "breaking away". Sometimes they will say they would have needed one more beer to break away. What exactly does this mean? Breaking away means reaching a point of total disregard for one's own demeanour; the actor could simply not care less what he or she looks like or does. It also allows the actor to approach other people without having to fear that they may be offended. Breaking away implies a sense of freedom and detachment from different kinds of cultural norms and ideals.

The only girl in the smaller group of politicians regards alcohol as a relief from constant self-reflection. She puts this in metaphorical

terms, saying that every now and then it is important to "hit the pause key". The other members of the group have similar descriptions. What, exactly, are they taking a pause from? My interpretation of this is that the group members are taking relief from the state of attention that pervades their everyday life and the sense of having constantly to reflect on their demeanour and on how their actions and behaviour are understood by other people. In short, they are moving into another state of attention where the paramount everyday reality is pushed to the sidelines. Alcohol, in my view, marks a transition to this "other state of attention" where bodily instinct takes over from rational logic.

The invincible group

The platform for the process of breaking loose is provided by the group. The entry into liminality occurs with the help of rituals. Alcohol is the symbol that most clearly marks differences towards the paramount everyday reality (cf. Gusfield 1987). Alcohol-related actions within the group give rise to strong feelings of solidarity. These young politicians shared a masculine culture, and as I see it alcohol consumption was the strongest marker of masculine solidarity and sovereignty. "Breaking away" provides the courage to make contacts one otherwise would not make. One's own group is experienced as superior, built on a solid foundation of solidarity. This solidarity gives the young politicians a sense of being invincible. The toasting and the singing and the sexism all serve to strengthen the sense of superiority. The togetherness and collaboration within the group thus provides a major boost to the self-esteem of the group and its individual members. Once the faith in the superiority of one's own group is strong enough, the individual will break away and stop reflecting on his or her actions. Breaking away is thus characterized by unconcern,

which comes from the belief that one is sovereign and superior.

The young politicians can be seen as travellers between structure and liminality/carnival where alcohol assumes magical and holy qualities, allowing for a strong sense of solidarity, sovereignty and transgression. In this sense alcohol-related actions can be regarded as rites of passage. As the actors believe in alcohol's symbolic meanings, that means it can also be used for the transition from one reality to another. Breaking away thus involves an experience that the paramount everyday reality has been pushed to the sidelines and that it has been superseded by another reality. Previously filled with demands and frustrations, life has now become a party brimming with feelings of solidarity and masculine sovereignty, just as the National theatre says in the lyrics of *Livet är en fest* (Life is a party), another popular record in the political organization: "Greven, Plast and I" have a few drinks and want to go dancing, they are hot for women; life is a party but if it's a pest – all you can do is go and get pissed (Nationalteatern 1972).

The liminal state, as it is portrayed by our young politicians, is characterized by masculine solidarity and a complete absence of any necessities and requirements. In liminality, one's own superiority and sovereignty is so overwhelming, so firmly anchored that the actor believes that the rules which govern everyday life no longer apply. Indeed in liminality it is normal to deviate from the rules of the everyday. The perverted, deviant and obscene are celebrated rather than suppressed and rejected. In other words liminality can be regarded as an inverted structure of everyday life. It is wrong, therefore, to suggest that liminality lacks structure; it does have a structure, but it is an alternative structure, one which deviates in different ways from the structure of the paramount everyday reality.

When the night is gone and the party is over, the reality traveller wakes up in the paramount

everyday reality, possibly to a feeling of anxiety and a hangover. This is not, I would suggest, a strictly chemical effect of the processes occurring in the human body, but also induced by the sharp contrast and discrepancy between the different worlds through which the traveller has past during the previous evening. Last night the traveller was invincible, riding high on a strong sense of solidarity, which made it possible to do all sorts of taboo things.

It was not uncommon for the young politicians to contact one another the day after the party to talk about what had happened and to establish exactly what had happened. This exercise of mutual reassurance that what happened was good for the group, and can help to moderate the discrepancies between the different worlds and to make the deviations from the paramount everyday reality seem less dangerous – in other words, the transgressions are deconstructed. The group had together braved a whole range of taboos and were fascinated. By recapping all the events of the previous evening into format of a legend, the participants poststructured the deviations and made them compatible with the group's culture.

Transitions between different states of attention were thus far from unproblematic and had to be restructured after the event. One common way of doing this was to explain that event by saying that the people concerned had been drunk, implying that they were not responsible for themselves when they were drunk. In other words, to deal with the relationship between the different states of attention, they divided themselves into two parts. The actions of the person who was sober were worthy of being taken seriously, the actions of the person who was drunk were less significant and not really worthy of being taken seriously. This same pattern was repeated party after party: slipping back and forward between different states of attention and between transgression and adaptation to society's taboos and rules.

In conclusion

The two examples discussed at the beginning of this paper — the Perverse politician and the vacuum cleaner prank — clearly highlight a central feature of the culture of these young people: they want to transgress the culturally legitimate and move towards an unrestricted, liminal state — towards what Freud called the oceanic state. They can do this at parties, with the help of alcohol and support from other members of the group who will help to pre-structure the transgressions in advance and destructure them afterwards.

I would imagine that by now the reader is asking: Was liminality made possible by rituals and by the symbolic meanings that they carried for the actors involved, or was liminality a consequence of a “blurred” consciousness, i.e. drunkenness? I would suggest that both drunkenness and different kinds of rituals play an important part in bringing out the liminal state. And as Alasuutari (1992) and Douglas (1987) argue, drunkenness is itself something that is interpreted. I believe, therefore, that the actions which take place “under the influence of alcohol” are both an effect of the chemical changes induced in the system and an effect of the individual’s belief in the rituals and symbols perceived by those involved.

The thrust of my argumentation in this paper has been towards suggesting that alcohol can be understood as a symbol that people use in rites of passage from one reality to another. However, not all people use alcohol in the same way as these young politicians. No doubt for some people the actions described in this paper are quite outrageous. Women have traditionally been expected to “look after themselves and the home”, whereas men have enjoyed greater freedom from responsibility and the paramount everyday reality. For men, alcohol has also symbolized the “wild and natural”, as in the lyrics of the very popular rock

ballad *Öppna landskap* (Open landscapes) by the Swedish artist Ulf Lundell: he distils and flavours his own spirits in the open landscape near the sea, where he likes it best and where he can let his soul fly free (Ulf Lundell 1982).

Men have had greater freedom to transgress the culturally accepted than women. Wild and uncontrolled are traditionally seen as male qualities. Alcohol has come to symbolize male strength and determination. Heavy drinking and drunkenness in women have been seen as quite extraordinary aberrations (see Ahlström 1983; Järvinen & Rosenqvist 1991). Women using alcohol for the explicit purpose of getting heavily drunk have been described as frivolous and irresponsible.

Perhaps it is the sense of unrestrained freedom that so many people feel when they get drunk and the rituals that take place at parties, perhaps this is why so many people always want to go back. Any why not; who would not want to get the better of the demons haunting them, to experience what the young politicians describe as “breaking away”?

It is clear that far from all people regard heavy drunkenness or different kinds of rituals that are taboo in everyday life as acceptable. Likewise, far from all people dare to face drunkenness or what happens at parties; some are afraid of what happens under the influence of alcohol. Not all people consider it appropriate to use alcohol as a transport medium in reality tripping. Alcohol is not the only road to no restraints, to breaking away from the paramount everyday reality. There are also other ways to get there: dance, primal therapy, aerobics, mountaineering, advanced sex... In the Nordic countries, however, it seems that alcohol is a culturally established avenue to a no-restraints situation and to transgression, particularly for men.

Translation: David Kivinen

NOTES

1. The project (which I call "Spirit in the Bottle") started up in summer 1992 and consists of a series of ethnographic studies with three youth groups: a group of teetotallers, a group of alcohol romantics and a group of moderate consumers. (The group described in this article belongs to the second category of romantics; this group as well as the group of teetotallers are described and analysed in Lalander 1997.) The aim of the project is to analyse the symbolic meanings of alcohol in connection with the process of identity-formation. The groups were studied in 1994 and 1995. The final report, which is at once my doctoral thesis, is due to be completed in spring 1998. The project is largely financed by the Swedish Folkhälsoinstitutet.

2. I never observed this vacuum cleaner ritual, and I'm not certain about how often it occurred. Different informants in the organization have however told me about it as something real. One of them was once the target of the ritual and could give me some details. But, as I see it, it probably doesn't take place very often, although it's very real, as a legend in the organization.

3. Rites of passage "indicate and constitute transitions between states" (Turner 1967/1989, 93). Examples of more official rites of passage include weddings, indicating a transition from youth to adult or single to married. Other rites of passage may have a more diffuse nature. For instance, the first time a youngster gets drunk can be seen as a symbolic transition from child to adult or from child to youth. I use the concept of rite of passage to highlight the use of symbols that indicate the transition from a social state or situation to another, which clearly differs from the previous one. I further assume that different social contexts involve different norms and provide different opportunities for actors to act.

4. The concept of "the oceanic" was coined by Freud in his treatment of primary narcissism. It refers to the state in which the child has as yet no self-consciousness and still feels to be part of his or her mother. Since the subject at this stage has not yet drawn any boundaries between the self and the surrounding world, the experience of existence is unrestricted, oceanic (see Johansson 1996).

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LYRICS

Ebba Grön (1980): *Pervers Politiker*, from the LP *We're only in it for the drugs*, Mistlur Records

Lundell, Ulf (1982): *Öppna landskap*, from the LP *Kär och galen*, Sweetheart/EMI

Nationalteatern (1972): *Livet är en fest*, from the LP *Livet är en fest*, MNW

Summary

Philip Lalander: *Beyond Everyday Order; Breaking Away with Alcohol*

Based on an ethnographical study of a group of young Swedish politicians, the author carries out a discussion concerning two major questions: How can one understand and interpret orgiastic behavior at parties? In what way does the use of alcohol make orgiastic

behavior legitimate at parties? The author claims that the use of alcohol in different types of rituals may be seen as a way to travel beyond the structures of everyday life into another reality, in which certain interaction and self-presentation norms become less important and less used. Alcohol is thus used as a symbol in a rite of passage. Using the anthropologist Turner's words, this other reality can be seen as liminal. The individual who enters this reality can do things which she would otherwise find taboo or inconvenient. The body is central in this liminal and carnevalistic reality and the individuals can play with different forms of taboos. The party may thus be seen as an escape zone for people who discipline themselves in their everyday life. The group is of major importance in the transgression. Through rituals in the group, the transgression becomes legitimate. The group also helps the individual to come back to everyday life.

Key words: Alcohol, rite of passage, liminality, transgression, carneval, taboo, group