

Alcohol and the Family

An International Review of the Literature with Implications for Research and Practice

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1. INTRODUCTION

In 1982 the present author wrote for WHO a paper entitled, “The Prevention and Management of Alcohol Problems in the Family Setting: A Review of Work Carried out in English-Speaking Countries.” This was subsequently published in *Alcohol and Alcoholism* in 1983 (Orford, 1983). The present chapter represents an update of that earlier paper with an extension to cover literature from other countries and literature written in languages other than English.

Work from Britain, the United States, Canada, and Australia has been excluded from this review unless (1) the work was published since the earlier review was being prepared *and* it added substantially to the earlier literature, *or* (2) it referred to the indigenous, or nonwhite, population in one of those countries, *or* (3) its inclusion in the review was necessary in order to make a point that could not be made easily in any other way.

Otherwise an attempt has been made to review comprehensively the literature on alcohol and the family from around the world. Although the review is based on a computer literature search of Psychological Abstracts, Sociological Abstracts, Social Science Research, Medline, Excerpta Medica, and Commonwealth Agricultural Bureaux, plus a personal search of a wide range of recent journals available at the University of Exeter, there is no doubt that some relevant literature has been missed. More serious is the possibility that a whole perspective on the subject is missing. The author is conscious of the fact that a variety of widely divergent perspectives on this subject can be adopted—the social and cultural view of Section 4 is very different from the family

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psychology and psychiatry perspective of most of Section 2, for example. An economist, historian, or political scientist might have written a review with a very different balance. No doubt a psychogeneticist would have tackled this task in yet a different way.

A number of non-English language papers were translated into English for the reviewer. These are indicated in the reference list. This review also draws on a helpful summary of Eastern European work prepared for WHO by Boyadjieva (undated). In the case of all other non-English language work, this review has had to rely on abstracts.

The organization of the review into four main subsections was dictated by the material available. The largest amount fell into the following two subsections: marriage in disorder and distress, and intergenerational effects. This reflects the predominance of Western models of research on the nuclear family, the recent expansion of interest in the intergenerational transmission of drinking problems, particularly in the United States, and the concern in Eastern European countries over the socialization of youth and the increasing rate of family breakdown. Section 4, on social and cultural studies, has a much more even worldwide coverage, with work from Africa particularly well represented. Nevertheless, the amount of material with an alcohol focus is relatively small. Once again, Section 5, on prevention and treatment in the family setting, is dominated by work from the West. In particular, this reviewer discovered next to no work on the prevention and treatment of alcohol problems in the family outside Europe or North America. The final section considers the implications for future intervention and research.

2. MARRIAGES IN DISORDER AND DISTRESS

This section examines the findings of research that has focused on marriages that are disordered or distressed as a result of, or in association with, excessive drinking. Most of this work is about the marriages of alcoholics or problem drinkers and is carried out within the Western tradition of family psychology, psychiatry, or social work. The section begins with those studies that most clearly view marriage partners as victims of the stress associated with excessive drinking in a family member. It considers the nature of this stress and focuses in particular on marital violence and on separation and divorce (child abuse and neglect, and stress on children, are considered separately, in Section 3). This section then considers what is known about how partners cope with excessive drinking. This leads to a consideration of those studies that have taken an interactional or systems, rather than stress victim, perspective on alcohol and the family.

Marital Hardship

For many years, studies from the United States (e.g., Bailey et al., 1962; Jackson and Kogan, 1963; Lemert, 1962; Moos and Moos, undated) and Britain (e.g., Orford et al., 1976) have been reporting that women married to men with identified drinking problems often describe a great deal of severe and long-lasting hardship (including economic insecurity, social embarrassment, reduction of social contact, failure of the husband to meet role obligations, rows and quarrels, a poor sex life and infidelity,