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THE WIFE OF THE ALCOHOLIC; SEXIST STEREOTYPES
IN THE ALCOHOLISM LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Current alcoholism literature, alcoholism education, and alcoholism treatment suggests that the wife of the alcoholic is every bit as sick (physically, mentally, and spiritually) as her practicing alcoholic husband. How did we come to this view of the wife of the alcoholic?

This paper will review 1) how the wife of the alcoholic has been regarded over the years; 2) how these portraits of the wife of the alcoholic that appeared in the scholarly literature have influenced current thinking and treatment, and 3) how this body of literature and the popular concepts of the wife of the alcoholic that evolved from it, carry sexual biases and stereotyping that can potentially interfere with optimum treatment, full recovery, and effective marital and family functioning.

INTRODUCTION

Studies in the social science literature imply that whatever it is that woman is, she is not quite as healthy as man. Broverman (1972) asked a group of psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers to describe a healthy mature man, a healthy mature woman, and a healthy mature adult. Results revealed that clinicians have different concepts of mental health for men and women and that these differences correspond to current sex-role stereotypes. These findings suggest that clinicians accept stereotypic role definitions of women and in practice are likely to guide their clients toward acceptance of these "normal" female attributes, whether or not they are defined as desirable by women themselves and regardless of the price women must pay for "adjustment" and "normality."

This investigation began with the author's discovery of sexist statements in educational materials directed toward the wife of the alcoholic. The recognition of this phenomenon suggested that such attitudes might, in fact, exist in other literature concerning the wife of the alcoholic. Sexism in the literature would reinforce stereotypic role definitions for the wife of the alcoholic and influence practitioners to guide these clients toward these roles.

Of particular concern is the possible effect of sexually biased literature in the therapeutic relationships of clinicians with wives of alcoholics. The purpose of this study is to trace the historical view of the wife of the alcoholic as portrayed in the alcoholism literature with particular attention to the sexual biases which might exist in this literature.

THEORETICAL VIEWPOINTS

Disturbed-Personality Theory

The disturbed-personality theory was first postulated to account for abnormalities frequently seen in the wives of alcoholics.

In one of the first reports describing such abnormalities Lewis (1937) wrote that the relationship between an alcoholic and his wife is extremely complicated. Lewis believed that the wife finds an outlet for her aggressiveness in her marriage to a man who is dependent and who creates situations that force her to punish him.

Boggs (1944) stated that the wife ". . . knocks the props from under him at all turns, seemingly needing to keep him ineffectual so that she feels relatively strong and has external justification for hostile feelings."

Price (1945) described the wife of the alcoholic as a basically insecure person who brings to her marriage feelings of insecurity which she hopes will be met by her husband. These women then become hostile or aggressive toward their husbands because they too are dependent.

This dysfunctional personality theory continued to dominate the literature into the 1950's. For example, Futterman (1953), suggested that ". . . unconsciously because of her own needs, [the wife of the alcoholic] seems to encourage her husband's alcoholism." He further suggested that when the husband becomes sober the wife often decompensates and begins to develop symptoms of her own. Whalen (1953) concluded that, "generally speaking, the wife of the alcoholic has as poorly integrated a personality as her husband, even though she is usually able to function

more acceptably in the eyes of the community." Whalen labels four types of wives of alcoholics. "Suffering Susan" whose need is to punish herself, "Controlling Catherine" who marries an alcoholic to validate her distrustful, resentful attitudes toward men in general, stemming from her own inadequacies, "Wavering Winnifred" who searches out the weak and helpless with whom to form relationships, and "Punitive Polly" who marries an alcoholic because he is frequently vulnerable to her rivalrous, aggressive, and envious attacks.

Ruth Fox and Peter Lyon in Alcoholism: Its Scope, Cause and Treatment (1955) support the disturbed personality theory. In referring to the wife they state that the wife is "the protective, maternal kind of women who marries a man whom she knows to be an alcoholic, in order to, she thinks, help him over his addiction. But unconsciously she wants no part of his recovery. Her need is to dominate a weaker man; his recovery is an actual threat to her neurotic demand that he be weak, inferior, helpless, and dependent. . . . It may be the wife who makes sure the drinking problem remains insoluble."

Pursuing this theory of psychopathology, MacDonald (1956) stated, "an account has been given of 18 female patients who were admitted to a state mental hospital, all of whom were or had been married to alcoholics and in 11 of whom the mental disorder became manifest following a decrease in the husband's drinking. It is suggested that this decrease was a precipitating factor in the onset of the mental disturbance." Ballard (1959) asked the question, "Did his drinking drive her to nag or her nagging drive him to drink?" He then hypothesized that "the wives of alcoholics stood to gain unconscious vicarious gratification from their husband's asocial behavior, while gaining defensive reassurance by their overt castigation of it. This castigation provided some easement and externalization of the husband's super-ego conflicts . . ."

Kalashian (1959), also writing in support of the disturbed personality theory, implied that by being "needed" the wife is able to deny her own dependency needs. "By being the strong partner, she can keep from recognizing her own feelings of inadequacy as a woman. By insisting on the "weakness" of her husband, the wife of an alcoholic reveals her need for non-threatening partners toward whom she can feel superior. Such a wife seeks to handle her unresolved Oedipal conflicts through marriage to a man she can unconsciously regard as 'not a man.'"

This classical clinical description of the disturbed wife of the alcoholic was dominant in the literature from 1937 to 1959. It is interesting to note that in the late 1970's this theme re-appeared. Maxwell (1977) states that, [the wife of the alcoholic] "actually helps her husband to drink. Her actions are such that she herself becomes emotionally unstable and raises emotionally crippled children." Also see Estes (1977), Orford (1977), Neely (1982), Kellerman (1982), and Roth (1982).

Stress Theories

In an early attempt to describe wives of alcoholics from a situational point of view, Mowrer (1940) compared a sample of 25 alcoholics' wives with a group of 25 wives defined as "normal," i.e., being without any personality disorder. Mowrer discovered that the wives of the alcoholics had developed a vacillating attitude toward their drinking husbands, being inclined to criticize them while nevertheless

expressing sympathy and maternal feelings for them.

One of the earliest books on alcoholism (1949) which described the wife of the alcoholic is Alcohol--One Man's Meat by H. A. Streker and Francis T. Chambers (1949). She is mentioned only briefly when she is described as having trouble adjusting to her newly sobered husband and "finds herself at a loss as to how to cope with a newly matured husband. . . ." This does not seem to be in support of any particular view of the wife, but might possibly imply that she is reacting to the stress of the situation. There seemed no further interest in this point of view evident in the literature until Jackson's influential studies in the mid-1950's. Jackson (1954) was one of the first to adopt the stress theory to families. Between 1954 and 1962 she theorized that in their efforts to handle problems associated with alcoholism, family members came to feel guilty, ashamed, inadequate, and isolated from social support.

As an empirical test of her theory, Jackson (1954) studied fifty wives of alcoholics who belonged to Al-Anon over a three-year period. From this study she developed a seven stage process characterizing the reactions of families over-time to an alcoholic husband/father. In the beginning of the marriage according to Jackson, the drinking of most men is within socially acceptable limits, or, for a variety of reasons, the wife is not aware of the extent of the husbands' drinking and/or its implications.

In Stage 1 there are attempts to deny the problem. Incidents of excessive drinking begin. In Stage 2 there are attempts to eliminate the problem in the face of social isolation, alienation and the wife's feelings of inadequacy. Stage 3 is labelled "disorganization" in which the family accepts the husbands' drinking problem as permanent, gives up attempts to control his behavior and behaves in a manner geared to relieve tension rather than to achieve long-term ends. Stage 4 is characterized by attempts to reorganize in spite of the problems. The wife takes over many responsibilities which Jackson describes as the "husband and father roles." Jackson describes the roles as "manager of the home, discipliner of the children, the decision-maker" and states that the wife becomes "somewhat like Whalen's 'controller.'"

In Stage 5 efforts are made to escape the problem. The wife separates from her husband, if she can resolve the problems and conflicts surrounding this, in Stage 6. The wife is without her husband and must reorganize her family on this basis. In Stage 7 her husband achieves sobriety and the family which has become organized around the fact of an alcoholic husband must reorganize to include a sober one. Jackson states the the family experiences problems in reinstating the ex-alcoholic to his former roles.

Jackson concluded that the "clinical picture presented by the wife to helping agencies is not only indicative of a type of basic personality, but also of the stage in family adjustment which has been reached. The wives of alcoholics represented a rather limited number of personality type. This can be interpreted in two ways which are not mutually exclusive: a) women with certain personality attributes tend to select alcoholics or potential alcoholics as husbands in order to satisfy unconscious personality needs; or b) women undergoing similar experiences of stress within similarly unstructured situations . . . will emerge from this experience showing many similar neurotic traits. As the situation changes, some of these personality traits will also change.

Jackson viewed families as involved in a cumulative crisis in which all members (and especially the wife) behave in a manner which they hope will meet the crisis and permit a return to stability. "Wives," she states, "are at all times affected by their own personalities, their previous role and status in the family, the previous history of the present crisis and past effectiveness of their own actions." Thus, the behavior of the wives of alcoholics is described in large part as a function of changing patterns of interaction and not solely as a consequence of personality disturbances or personality type.

In support of the stress theory, Joseph Kellermann (1974) writes, "The usual situation is not an initial pathology that perpetuates the husband's alcoholism but the development of a pathology in mind and spirit from attempting to adjust and readjust to the crisis and deviant behavior which result from his pathological drinking." Other books concur with this assessment of the behavior of the wife and also state that the wife appears to be of no distinct personality type (Cohen and Krause, 1971; Kellermann, 1974; Hayman, 1966; Preston, 1968).

In an attempt to broaden the generalizability of findings about the wives of alcoholics, Lemert (1960) interviewed 116 families contacted through divorce courts, a public welfare agency, county commitments to state hospitals, police probation cases and an Al-Anon group. His conclusions indicated that more than one half of the women had married men for whom drinking was already a problem. In an effort to verify Jackson's findings of a common sequence of events in the wives' adjustment to the crisis of alcoholism, Lemert was generally unsuccessful. He found, instead, that adjustment events tended to cluster. The nature of that clustering, however, suggested only that there might be early, middle, and late phases in adjustment.

Beginning with Jackson in 1954, the trend in the studies of the wives of alcoholics was to question and criticize much of the earlier impressionistic clinical literature and to suggest concrete and testable hypotheses concerning the functioning of wives in these marriages. These studies set the stage for a fusion of competing theories and the development of the psychosocial perspective.

Psychosocial Theories

In 1961 Margaret Bailey published a review of the research and professional literature on alcoholism and marriage. In this paper she cites both of the general views of the wife presented and reviewed in this essay (personality dysfunction and stress theory), concluding that further research was needed to integrate the two hypotheses. She also recommended that future research be more rigorous in design than the majority of studies done in the past which had confined themselves to descriptive clinical observations.

It appears that, following Bailey's study, there was, indeed, an effort made toward a fusion of these ideas. Bailey, Haberman and Alksne (1962), for example, contributed to the psychosocial theory in a study which revealed a high level of psychophysiological symptoms in the wives living with drinking alcoholics; however, these separated from their alcoholic husbands showed fewer symptoms and those living with abstinent alcoholics showed the least. Although personality disturbance was evident in this study, the data clearly lend support to the stress theory.

Haberman (1964) did another study testing the wife's psycho-physiological disturbance. The results again did not support the early theories which emphasized the

wife's neurotic need for her spouse to continue drinking. However, his data did suggest that the less disturbed the wife, the more favorably she reacted to his achieving sobriety.

Another study by Bailey in 1967 represents the theory of neurotic complementarity prevalent during this time. This theory presumes that both the alcoholic and his wife choose each other as mates to fulfill their neurotic needs. Again, results did not support the theory that wives of alcoholics decompensate emotionally if the husband achieves sobriety. Bailey maintains that "the decrease in psychophysiological symptoms which accompanies the husband's lengthening sobriety does not negate the theories of neurotic complementarity on mate selection as proposed in the early literature supporting the wife's personality disturbance." However, she acknowledges that this fact does not uniquely define the alcoholic relationship: "Presumably all persons are influenced by unconscious needs in their choice of a marital partner."

Results from two Kogan and Jackson studies (1963 and 1964) support Bailey's suggestion that alcoholic marriages are no different than any other conflicted marriages. In fact, results of the study by Ballard (1959) even concluded from MMPI scores that wives of alcoholics were as well adjusted as, or better adjusted, than wives in the control group.

Another popular theory, that the wives of alcoholics have a personality type distinct from that of wives of non-alcoholics, has not been conclusively supported by current studies. Kogan, Fordyce and Jackson (1963) found that although a significantly greater number of wives of alcoholics than of non-alcoholics manifested some form of personality dysfunction, less than one half could be labeled disturbed on any one measure. The types of disturbances found were varied and showed no clear-cut pattern.

Corder, Hendricks, and Corder (1964) also used the MMPI, finding no significant difference in personalities between a control and experimental group (wives of alcoholics and wives of non-alcoholics). Rae and Forbes (1966) delineated two different groups in their study, characterizing one group as manifesting personality traits similar to the "classic wife" who used her husband's alcoholism as a neurotic defense. The second group appeared to exhibit normal personalities reacting to the stress inherent in marriage to an alcoholic.

A Kogan and Jackson study (1965) most clearly integrates the personality disturbance and stress theories as it compares life-history reports of wives of alcoholics to a matched group of non-alcoholics' wives. They found that those wives who reported having inadequate mothers and unhappy childhoods or who had experienced personal stress were more likely to have symptoms of personality dysfunction and that those women were disproportionately represented among the group of alcoholic's wives.

Since the middle 1970's, psychosocial theories in alcoholism have advanced the idea of co-alcoholism which views spousal behavior as enabling or supporting of alcoholic patterns in mates. In a pamphlet distributed by the National Council on Alcoholism in 1973, Ruth Fox describes the wife's personality disturbance as being "even more serious than her alcoholic husband's" and cites such researchers as Boggs (1944), Futterman (1953), and Whalen (1953) in support of her view. This description of the wife is supported with little variation in several other preceding and subsequent works: Pitman, 1967; Cantanzaro, 1968; Perry, 1970; Maxwell, 1979.

In 1977, Maxwell in her book The Booze Battle explains that the wife of an alcoholic's "actions are such that she herself becomes emotionally unstable and raises emotionally crippled children." Richard Roth in his article "Putting the Pieces Together" (1981) makes a point about treatment centers' philosophies when working with families of alcoholics: "The pathology of the family itself has long been suspected as a causal factor in some cases of alcoholism"; he goes on to state, "as one treatment center director puts it, sometimes the non-alcoholic spouse needs the alcoholic to be sick."

In the opening statement of Stephanie Abbott Leary's article "The Forgotten Man" in Alcoholism (1982), she states, "seeing wives who control and enable, researchers infer such wives need a weak husband." She goes on to state, "Other scientists observe passive wives enduring verbal and physical cruelty from alcoholic husbands and suggest these women suffer from such low self-worth that they court punishment."

The aforementioned theoretical viewpoints are vital to treatment with alcoholics. They not only advance underlying assumptions regarding normal behavior which wives should demonstrate but also lay out principles which therapists should use as guidelines to reconstruct family life. With this in mind let us now draw attention to the treatment arena.

TREATMENT VIEWPOINT

Lewis (1937), Barker (1945), Clifford (1960), Cahn (1970), Fajardo (1976), Maxwell (1977), Kellerman (1981), and Neely (1982) stated or implied that in order for the alcoholic to recover, the wife must relinquish control of the masculine roles, i.e., head of the household, breadwinner, disciplinarian, authority, etc. Clifford (1960) describes a pattern of "wifely behavior" which "renders unlikely rehabilitation of the male alcoholic." This pattern of wifely behavior was described as being the wage-earner, head of household, and decision-maker.

Sidney Cahn (1970) writing about the treatment of alcoholics and their families, stated that "clinics report that unless the wife relinquishes this dual role, i.e., dominant position in addition to the wife (inferior) role, her husband's recovery is likely to be only temporary." Neely (1982) writes about Bill and his spouse. Bill's ex-wife remarried. Her relationship with her new husband is almost identical to the one she had with Bill for twenty years. She still tries to control people and circumstances around her."

This treatment attitude has its roots in earlier articles. For example, Lewis (1937) writing in Family (now the Journal of Social Casework), recommended that "where the woman has been the wage earner and the man has been idle that this situation should be reversed and the man restored to some measure of economic masculinity."

A less obvious recommendation occurs in any literature which implies that the wife is deviant when she takes over or performs "masculine" roles. The implied recommendation to a professional working with the wife of the alcoholic is to urge her to modify or discontinue this "deviant" behavior.

Kellerman (1982), Roth (1982), Estes and Heineman (1977) demonstrate how treatment methods of past are still present in 1982. Roth (1982) makes an important point about the popular concept "co-alcoholic." "Should family members be called 'dry drinker' or 'co-alcoholic'? Isn't it insulting or demeaning, and doesn't it

distort the problem--the alcoholic disease? Ever heard of a co-diabetic?"

Irrespective of Roth's observation, treatment literature published and distributed by Al-Anon support the conceptual assumptions of co-alcoholism most strongly. "Living With an Alcoholic," (1966) describes the wife, in becoming the head of the household, as "strong, self-reliant, and aggressive." It goes on to say that "she may unconsciously be disappointed" in that she can "no longer lean on her husband for authority . . ." and "unwittingly she may be losing her femininity just as her husband may be losing his masculinity." "A Guide for the Family of the Alcoholic," (Kellerman, 1974) suggests that there are wives who need alcoholic husbands to gratify their own neurosis, and go on to describe them as being possibly masochistic, sadistic, neurotically dominating and controlling persons. Kellerman (1981) in describing a woman he interviewed explained that "She had been in continued therapy for over twelve years before someone sent her to Al-Anon, where she learned that the problem was her constant efforts to adjust to an alcoholic husband."

SEXIST LITERATURE AND IMPLICATIONS: Summary Discussion

Throughout the literature reviewed in this study, there appears to be a tendency to portray the wife of the alcoholic as dominating and controlling in her marital relationship, for whatever reason. In many instances, it was also implied that by taking this role, she was somehow losing her femininity and/or depriving her husband of his masculinity.

Although much of the literature reviewed described the wife of the alcoholic as dominant in her marital relationship, the term "dominant" was only defined in one study. In this study Lemert (1962), in objecting to the ambiguous use of the term "dependency," used frequently in previous studies on the alcoholic marriage, defined "norms of a typical American family." He defined dominance in terms of a deviation from the norms when the wife "1) controlled the finances, 2) disciplined the children, and 3) made major decisions, e.g., concerning job and residence changes, organizational memberships, etc." This seems to imply that a woman should not carry out these roles in a "typical American family" and that if she does, then she again, as in the aforementioned studies, is deviant.

Other literature suggests that often the wife of the alcoholic was forced, or chose to take over, some of the stereotypic male roles, such as working outside the home, disciplining the children, controlling the finances or making the major decisions for the family. In much of the literature this was seen as deviant for the wife, with the implied instruction that she must give this role up for her husband's sake. It was also suggested that some agencies continue to assign traditional sex-roles rather than to explore the human potential of clients.

This picture seems to be changing from that of an aggressive woman who married an alcoholic to fulfill her need to be dominant through that of one whose personality fluctuated with the stresses of marriage to an alcoholic, to that of a woman who may or may not have been experiencing personality dysfunction prior to her marriage and who may or may not react to the stress of her marriage with personality dysfunction.

Research on wives of alcoholics now seems to indicate that they are women who

have essentially normal personalities of different types, rather than of any one particular type. They may suffer personality dysfunction when their husbands are active alcoholics, but if their husbands become abstinent and the periods of abstinence increase, the wives experience less and less dysfunction. Concurrent with these personality fluctuations are changes in the wives' methods of coping with their husbands' drinking patterns and in the roles the wives play within the family. In all of this, these women seem much like other women experiencing marital problems.

Throughout the literature, regardless of the approach taken toward the wife's behavior, there is a complete disregard for the socialization process that a woman is exposed to as a female member of the species. From Inge Broverman's (1970) study, "Sex-role Stereotypes and Clinical Judgments of Mental Health," "it is clear that for a woman to be healthy she must adjust to and accept the behavioral norms for her sex even though these kinds of behavior are generally regarded as less socially desirable." It is clear that with this prevailing attitude, the wife of the alcoholic is in a "no-win" position. Her treatment may be analogized to the "victim blaming ideology" exposed by William Ryan (1971) in his study of poverty and its treatment in American society. He suggests that "the generic formula of Blaming the Victim--justifying inequality by finding defects in the victims of inequality--is applied to almost every American problem."

It is our position that alcohol workers and other human services providers should be aware of their own sexist assumptions and the resulting limitations they impose upon their clients. The past decade has seen redefinition of gender roles with general acceptance of compassionate responsibilities by spouses. Moreover, many family types currently in vogue, particularly dual-career families, do not confirm to traditional role definitions that stereotype male-female behaviors. It would seem appropriate, therefore, that efforts in theory building and treatment for alcoholics and spouses adapt to this socialization process.

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