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ALCOHOL ABUSE AND FAMILY VIOLENCE*

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Drunkness, like mental illness, is one of society's conventional wisdoms or folk truths used to explain both wife-beating and child abuse. A 1978 Gallup Poll found that almost one in four of those interviewed believed alcohol was the cause of family trouble (Gallup, 1978). However, the Gallup survey provides no information on what proportion of the "family trouble" involves violence. As we shall see later, while there may be some basis for the belief that alcohol use is related to abusive acts, like many popular beliefs there are misconceptions, especially when we ask why an individual who is drunk is also abusive.

THE EMPIRICAL ISSUE

Despite the frequency with which alcohol use is cited as a factor contributing to family violence, including child abuse and wife-beating, there are no accurate estimates of the extent to which physical violence is related to alcohol use in a representative sample of families. It is true that there has been considerable research on the relationship between alcohol use and violence, including a few studies of family violence. However, although these studies seem to answer the empirical question of whether alcohol use is associated with high rates of violence, such a conclusion is questionable because of the methodology used in those studies.

Alcohol and Non-family Violence

Shupe (1954) studied alcohol use by 882 persons arrested during or immediately after the commission of a felony in Columbus, Ohio. Eighty-three percent of those arrested for homicide had some trace of alcohol in their urine and 67% had substantially more than a trace of alcohol in their urine. Wolfgang (1958) studied the presence of alcohol in both the offender and victim (N=586) where homicides had occurred in Philadelphia. He reports that the offender had been drinking in 54.5% of the homicides. In a study carried out in North Carolina on 307 males convicted of serious assaultive crimes, Mayfield (1972) concluded that 42% were not sober during the commission of the crime. Pernanen (1976) reviewed findings of ten studies by MacDonald (1961) and estimated that alcohol was present in 50 to 60% of the studies where the sample size was 200 or greater. These studies appear to confirm the empirical relation between alcohol and violent crime. However, as both Shupe (1954) and Pernanen (1976) point out, offenders who are drunk are more likely to be apprehended than those who are sober. If they are alcoholics, they are more likely to be known to the police than nonalcoholics. These factors could bias the findings and overestimate the relation between alcohol and violent crimes.

Alcohol and Family Violence

The conception of alcohol as a prime cause of interpersonal violence in the family, especially in the more extreme forms of wife-beating and child abuse, is frequent in the family violence literature (Hindman, 1977). A national television dramatization of the difficulties faced by battered wives in September 1978 portrayed the lives of four women who were beaten on several occasions by their husbands. Alcohol consumption, in most cases excessive, immediately preceded the beatings in seven of the episodes. It is unfortunate that alcohol was portrayed as playing such a direct and crucial role in provoking the abuse because the actual research is, in fact, quite equivocal.

A number of studies do find an association between drunkenness and family violence. Langley and Levy (1977) reviewed several of these studies and estimate that 40 to 95% of the spouse abuse cases are directly linked to alcohol abuse. Mayer and Black (1977), in a review of the few studies available on child abuse and alcoholism, conclude that from 32 to 62% of the families where child abuse occurred also had a parent who used alcohol dysfunctionally.

There are several reasons to believe that statistics such as these are unreliable. Typically, studies which report figures on alcoholism and child or spouse abuse come from samples where families have been identified as either alcohol abusers, or child abusers. If alcohol abusers are studied, questions about child abuse are asked and many instances brought to light. However, as Straus, Gelles and Steinmetz (1979) have shown, if one studies a random sample of parents, very high rates of child abuse are also found. Where physical abuse has occurred, high rates of alcohol abuse are found, but high rates of alcohol abuse also characterize the population in general (R. Straus, 1976). Moreover, families receiving treatment for either alcohol or child abuse are only a small, and possibly unrepresentative, part of the total number of child or alcohol abusers.

In addition to these cautions, the available studies are by no means consistent in showing a link between alcohol abuse and physical abuse. Steele and Pollack (1968) in fact, report no incidence of alcoholism in a study of 60 families in which child abuse had occurred. Similarly, Bard (1974) examined police records from 962 families where the police were called in on 1388 occasions. Data from this study suggested that only six percent (15) of the cases involved a spouse who was both drunk and assaultive. From this, Bard (1974) concludes that alcohol use and interpersonal violence may be spuriously associated. He suggests that alcohol may have a calming effect and reduce the probability of family violence. Smith (1975) and Simons et al. (1966, as cited in Maden and Wrench, 1977) found alcohol use as common in a general population sample as in a

sample of abusing parents. Gelles studies a sample of 80 families. In the 44 families where violence had occurred, drinking accompanied the violence in 21 cases, or 48 percent. However, Gelles does not indicate the extent of alcohol abuse in the non-violent families, and without this figure it is difficult to come to any firm conclusion about the causal role of alcohol abuse.

On the one hand then, there are studies of alcohol abuse and violence which seem to confirm an empirical relationship, although the statistics may overestimate the rates because of sample selectivity. On the other hand, there are at least two studies which found little or no link between alcohol use and family violence. Finally, no studies which we could find investigated the degree or severity of alcohol abuse (i.e., occasional drunkenness to full fledged alcoholism). This is a critical factor in the relation between alcohol abuse and family violence which will be examined in this paper.

THE THEORETICAL ISSUE

Even if we conclude that there is an empirical relation between alcohol and violence, this does not answer the more fundamental question of which theoretical model explains the alcohol-violence link.

The data available for the analysis are primarily useful for answering the question of the extent to which alcohol use is associated with family violence. However, the findings also provide some indirect information bearing on the disinhibition and deviance disavowal theories.

Disinhibition Theory

The literature on alcohol and aggression frequently assumes a direct causal and physiological relation between the two variables. This is often called the "disinhibition" theory. For example, Cameron (1963, as cited in Shuntich and Taylor, 1972) states that opiate addiction differs fundamentally from alcohol addiction because it does not "release criminal aggression or anti-social acting out the way alcohol often does." Similarly, Tucker (1970:93 cited in Shuntich and Taylor 1972), states that "alcohol is a well known releaser of inhibitions... some individuals become disoriented, hallucinated, confused and even violent with a moderate amount of alcohol consumption."

Disinhibition theory assumes that the chemical content of alcohol has a direct effect on the central nervous system resulting in "the lower brain centers being released from higher brain controls. This reduces inhibitions, and behavior which is untoward when the individual is sober

becomes acceptable" (Chafetz and Demone, 1962). The degree to which this belief is an accepted social norm is reflected in American and Finnish criminal law. If the offender is drunk, there is a greater probability that a homicide will be classified as manslaughter (Pernanen, 1976).

Learned Behavior Theory

Alternatively, some have explained the violent behavior of individuals who have consumed alcohol as behavior which has been learned or acquired because of the social meaning attached to alcohol (Carpenter and Armenti, 1972; Lang et al., 1975). This explanation differs considerably from disinhibition theory because it includes sociological and psychological factors which determine an individual's behavior under the influence of alcohol. The basic premise of the learned behavior approach is that there are cultural norms which prescribe appropriate behavior while drinking and these norms vary according to the context in which alcohol is consumed. For instance, the same amount of alcohol may be consumed in the context of a religious ceremony, a cocktail party, or in a bar, but behavior in these social settings will vary as the context does.

Deviance Disavowal Theory

The idea of "alcohol as releaser of inhibitions" is a fundamental part of the social meaning of alcohol. In American society, people learn that their behavior while drunk will generally be attributed to the effects of alcohol and not to social or personality characteristics. Individuals do not want to view themselves as deviant. They need some explanation (for themselves and others) to account for unacceptable behavior. By attributing this behavior to the effects of alcohol, their own self image as normal individuals is maintained, and their actions explained (Gelles, 1974; McCaghy, 1968).

Those who beat a spouse while drinking can continue to maintain a definition of self as normal by attributing their actions to the effect of alcohol. Although their behavior while drunk may be considered deviant, they, as individuals are not deviant. Rather, it is presumed that the alcohol they consumed prompted them to commit acts they otherwise would have suppressed. Deviance is thus disavowed. McCaghy (1968), for instance, reports that 32% of the men he interviewed who were incarcerated for sexually assaulting children believed alcohol was responsible for their behavior. Similarly, interviews by Gelles (1974) consistently reveal that in many families where both drinking and abuse occur, the victim considers drinking the major family problem.

Drunkenness, then, can provide a "time out" period, when the norms regarding appropriate behavior can be disregarded (Bruun, 1959; MacAndrew and Edgerton, 1969). Gelles (1974:114) suggests that the definition of alcohol as "an agent that causes 'out of character' behavior is a definition that serves to justify family violence by relieving the individual from responsibility for his actions." Furthermore, "this definition could promote the behavior by providing in advance a socially approved excuse for violent behavior." Following this argument, individuals do not become violent because they are drunk, but get drunk so they may become violent.

In summary, disinhibition theory states that one may become aggressive because of the alcohol consumed, social learning theory states that people learn how to react to and behave under the influence of alcohol, and deviance disavowal and "time out" theories state that an individual may drink so he or she can aggress. What do the studies show?

RESEARCH ON THE THEORETICAL ISSUE

Three types of studies have been used to explore the disinhibition theory: (1) shock paradigm experiments, (2) small group observation experiments, and (3) indirect measurement of aggression. In each of these designs, a group consuming alcohol is compared with a control group.

Shock Paradigm Experiments

A confederate and a subject participate in a learning task. Alcohol is given to the subjects. When the confederate incorrectly responds to the learning task, the subject may deliver a range of electrical shocks to the confederate. Aggression is measured by the intensity of the shock delivered. Studies by Bennett, Buss and Carpenter (1969) and Buss et al. (1970) revealed that alcohol ingestion did not affect the level of shock delivered to the confederate.

Small Group Observation Studies

Social situations are simulated by two methods. Subjects are given alcohol and observed either (a) in a setting where one subject interacts with several experimenters or (b) a setting where several subjects in addition to several experimenters are present (Hartocollis, 1962; Takala, Pihkanen and Markkanen, 1957, in Pernanen, 1976; Boyatzis, 1974). Behavior is observed or videotaped. These studies found more aggressive behavior in the setting where several subjects who had been given alcohol were

present than in the setting where only one individual who had been given alcohol was present.

Indirect Measures of Aggression

The dependent variable in this type of study is measured by indirect measures of aggression such as projective techniques (Kalin et al., 1965). These experiments produce different results depending on whether the alcohol is consumed in a relaxed discussion group, a fraternity party, or a small groups laboratory.

In the relaxed discussion group there was no increase in aggression as measured by the Thematic Apperception Test. In the fraternity party situation, alcohol produced an increase in physical aggression in TAT stories. However, the control group which received no alcohol scored as high on physical aggression as the experimental group. Kalin et al. (1965) attributes this to anger experienced by the control group when they found they were to receive no alcohol. In the small group laboratory setting, physical aggression was not affected by the alcohol.

Aggression restraint, defined as "anything that involves an avoidance reaction to aggression" i.e. fear, regret, guilt, was also measured in each of the three social settings. Kalin found no decrease in aggression restraint in the relaxed discussion group, but a significant decrease in restraint was evident in the fraternity group and small group laboratory setting.

These experiments show the importance of the social setting in the production of aggressive behavior. Where a relaxed friendly atmosphere prevailed, there was no increase in aggression. Where a fraternity party atmosphere was created, aggressive behavior, as measured by the TAT, was more evident.

Expectancy Factors

The aggressive behavior expressed by the fraternity party control group, where no alcohol was served, deserves further attention. The authors attributed high aggression scores to anger on the part of the control subjects because they did not receive the alcohol they expected. Alternatively, their high physical aggression score could indicate their expectation of the effects of alcohol consumption, that is, it may reflect the social meaning attached to alcohol use.

An excellent study by Lang et al. (1975) points out the role of expectation of alcohol consumption on aggressive behavior. This study used a 2x2x2 factorial design.

Alcohol content was manipulated so that one half of the subjects who expected to receive alcohol received tonic and one half of those who did not expect alcohol received it. The alcohol/tonic drinks were prepared such that subjects could not detect the presence or absence of alcohol (vodka) at a better than chance rate.

Half of the subjects in each treatment group were provoked by a confederate prior to assessing aggressive behavior. The provocative manipulation consisted of such things as insults, belittling remarks, and questioning the subjects' intelligence regarding a difficult tracing/drawing task which both the subject and the confederate completed.

Aggression was measured by the intensity of electrical shocks delivered by the subject to the confederate in a subsequent learning task similar to that of Buss (1970). This design permitted an evaluation of two competing theoretical assumptions: (a) Disinhibition theory: "If the physiological effects of alcohol are primarily involved in the facilitation of aggression, then subjects who actually receive alcohol (regardless of their expectations) will behave more aggressively than subjects who do not receive alcohol." (b) Social learning theory: "If expectations that alcohol will lead to more aggression is the major determinant of subsequent aggression, then subjects who expect that their drinks contain alcohol (regardless of the actual content of their drinks) will act more aggressively than subjects who do not expect to receive alcohol." Lang et al. concluded "that differences in the level of aggression observed were determined largely by the subjects' expectations or beliefs about the content of the beverage they had consumed. Those who thought their drinks contained alcohol, regardless of the alcohol content, gave more intense and longer duration shocks to their partners than those who believed they had consumed only non-alcoholic drinks."

Status of the Disinhibition Theory

From the studies reviewed, several factors appear to cast doubt upon the disinhibition theory. First, for alcohol to be a disinhibitor due to chemical action, subjects in all experiments regardless of the social setting should have scored higher on aggression when compared to those who received no alcohol. Instead, aggression varied with the type of social setting. Second, the work by Lang et al. pointed out the importance of expectancy factors in the production of aggressive behavior. Those who only thought they received alcohol behaved in much the same way as subjects who did receive alcohol.

Our view on these issues combines the learned behavior and the deviance disavowal theories. Alcoholic behavior is learned behavior. In addition, because of social expectations regarding the use of alcohol, drunkenness provides a "time out" period, during which the normal rules governing proper conduct can be disregarded. Rather than violence occurring because the alcoholic individual loses inhibitions while drinking, we suggest that violence occurs because people have learned that it is excusable to attack another individual, especially a family member, while drunk.*1

METHOD

Sample

The data to be presented come from personal interviews with a nationally representative sample of 2,143 American couples. Interviews were conducted with the husband in a randomly selected half of the families and with the wife in the other half. One or more children were present in the home in 1,146 cases. (See Straus, Gelles and Steinmetz, 1979 for a more detailed discussion of sampling method and sample characteristics).

Alcohol Abuse

The primary focus of the study described above was not on alcohol abuse. As a result only very limited data is available on this variable. Specifically, it is the respondent's report of how frequently he or she "gets drunk." Six choices were available to the respondent--never, rarely, occasionally, often, very often and almost always.

Alcohol abuse, alcoholism, and drunkenness are terms used in many different ways by different investigators. Consequently it is difficult to know how to label our measure. Because we used self reports, social desirability factors no doubt affect the frequencies. The rates we report should perhaps be considered underestimates of the rate of alcohol abuse. Despite the limitations of this measure of alcohol abuse the analysis to be presented seemed worth pursuing because of the importance of the issue and the absence of other studies based on a representative sample of families.

Violence

Violence is defined as "an act carried out with the intention of, or perceived intention of, physically hurting another person" (Gelles and Straus, 1978). A series of questions called the "Conflict Tactics Scale" (CTS) measure the level and incidence of violence (Straus, 1979). Of the 18 items in the scale, eight refer to the use of physical force and violence. These range from pushing or shoving a spouse or child to the use of weapons such as guns or knives. We report rates of both "severe violence" and "all violence" that occurred in the prior years. Severe violence

refers to kicking, biting, punching, hitting with something, beating up one's spouse, threatening with a knife or gun, and using a knife or gun. The severe violence index is our operational definition of child abuse and spouse abuse. The general measure of family violence includes pushing, grabbing, shoving and slapping the spouse or child in addition to the severe violence acts listed above.

Underreporting physical violence may bias the results of this research because we rely upon self reports of behavior by the respondents. However, although the true rates are no doubt even higher, even these minimal rates show an astoundingly high frequency of violence within the family (Straus, Gelles and Steinmetz, 1979).

A more serious limitation of this research is that we do not have data on the physical violence that occurs while the husband or wife is drunk. Instead, the data report the level of violence in the home and the frequency of alcohol abuse by the violent spouse during the previous year. The findings therefore only indirectly relate violence to the presence (or absence) of alcohol.

CLASS, SEX, AND DRUNKENNESS

Before getting to the question of whether drunkenness is associated with violence in the family, we need to consider the data on drunkenness itself. Table 1 gives the frequency of self-reported inebriation, and also whether there are important social class and sex differences.*2

Cahalan (1970, as cited in Bourne and Fox, 1973), concluded from a national survey that individuals in the higher SES groups drink more frequently than those in the lower SES groups, but that drinking to excess occurs more often among the lower SES group. The measure of alcohol use in Table 1 refers to the latter, specifically, the respondents report of how often he or she gets drunk. To the extent that Table 1 shows any class difference, it indicates slightly higher rates for the blue-collar husbands in the sample. However, we think it is more appropriate to say that Table 1 shows no difference between SES groups.

(Table 1 about here)

In contrast to the minimal differences between social classes, Table 1 shows large differences between men and women. Far more women describe themselves as having never been drunk in the past year (roughly 80 percent of the women versus 60 percent of the men). At the other end of the continuum, the differences are even greater. Among those who report often, very often, or almost always being drunk in the previous year, the rate for blue-collar men is four times greater than for women married to blue-collar men.

Table 1. Frequency of Drunkenness by Social Class

Frequency of Being Drunk	Blue-Collar (% of 1,124)	White-Collar (% of 928)
Husband*		
Never	60.8	59.2
Rarely	22.6	25.4
Occasionally	12.0	13.5
Often	2.7	1.2
Very Often	0.9 16.7	0.3 15.4
Almost Always	1.1	0.4
	Blue-Collar (% of 1,116)	White-Collar (% of 926)
Wife		
Never	82.7	78.0
Rarely	13.2	17.3
Occasionally	3.4	3.9
Often	0.3	3.9
Very Often	0.4 4.2	0.2 4.7
Almost Always	0.1	0.1

*p ≤ .01 for class difference in husband's drunkenness

VIOLENCE

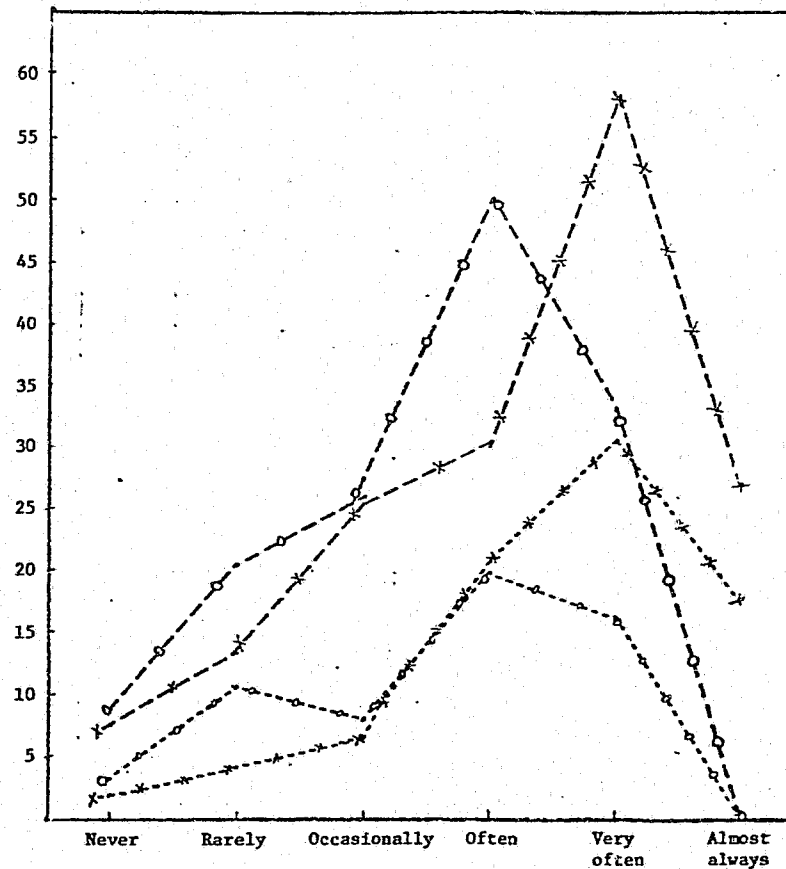
RATE

PER

HUNDRED

COUPLES

X—X—X—X Overall Violence } Males
 X—X—X—X Severe Violence }
 O—O—O—O Overall Violence } Females
 O—O—O—O Severe Violence }



DRUNKENNESS IN PAST YEAR

Figure 1. Alcohol Abuse and Spousal Violence

For white-collar men, the rate is just over three times greater than the rate for women married to white-collar men. The importance of these sex differences is not as new information, since they are generally consistent with previous studies (Bourne and Fox, 1973; Straus, R., 1976; Ullman, 1962). In the context of this paper, the sex differences are important because they indicate that, crude as is our measure of alcohol abuse, at least in this respect the results are consistent with data gathered by other methods.

ALCOHOL ABUSE AND SPOUSAL VIOLENCE

(Figure 1 about here)

Figure 1 shows that as the frequency of drunkenness goes up, so does physical violence.^{*3} However, when alcohol abuse is extreme physical violence declines. For example, the severe violence rate is shown by the small dashed lines in Figure 1. For husbands who were never drunk during the year, the rate is 2.1 per hundred; for those who were drunk very often the rate jumps to 30.8. Thus husbands who report they were very often drunk are 14.7 times more likely to have severely abused their spouse than those who report they never get drunk. But the violence rate then drops by almost half (to 17.6) for men who are "almost always" drunk. Similarly, wives who report being drunk even occasionally or more were from 2.5 to six times more likely to have severely abused their spouse than those who report never being drunk during the year. But then the rate drops off for women who were "very often" or "almost always" drunk. We will return later to possible reasons for the decrease in violence among those who are most frequently drunk.

Sex Differences

Women who are drunk rarely or occasionally are much more likely to be violent than males at the same frequency of alcohol use (2.5 times more likely for severe violence and 1.2 times for all violence). But among those who are drunk "often" or more, males are more violent than women. However, the small number of women who get drunk this often makes it difficult to interpret. Combining the results shown in Table 1 and Figure 1 leads to the conclusion that men get drunk more often than women and more violence is reported among men who get drunk more frequently.

Table 2. Spousal Violence by Frequency of Drunkenness by Social Class

Husband Drunk	Husband-to-Wife Violence					
	Rate for Severe Violence		Rate for All Violence		N	
	BC*	WC	BC*	WC	BC	WC
Never	2.1	2.2	7.2	7.9	665	544
Rarely	6.3	1.7	18.0	8.8	252	229
Occasionally	10.7	2.4	36.2	13.1	131	123
Often	26.9	9.1	34.6	27.3	26	11
Very Often	40.0	0	66.7	33.3	10	3
Almost Always	25.0	0	41.7	0	12	3

Wife Drunk	Wife-to-Husband Violence					
	Rate for Severe Violence		Rate for All Violence		N	
	BC**	WC**	BC**	WC**	BC	WC
Never	4.2	2.1	10.5	6.8	903	708
Rarely	13.7	7.6	23.4	17.2	146	157
Occasionally	13.5	2.9	30.6	20.0	37	35
Often	66.7	0	66.7	60.0	3	5
Very Often	25.0	0	50.0	0	4	1
Almost Always	0	0	0	0	1	1

* $p \leq .0001$; ** $p \leq .02$

Table 3. Parent-to-Child Violence

Father Drunk	Father-to-Child Violence			
	Rate of Child Abuse	N	Rate of All Violence	N
Never	9.9	292	53.8	290
Rarely	7.4	135	62.7	134
Occasionally	18.1	72	68.1	72
Often	0	5	60.0	5
Very Often	0	2	100.0	2
Almost Always	0	1	100.0	1

Mother Drunk	Mother-to-Child Violence			
	Rate of Child Abuse	N	Rate of All Violence*	N
Never	16.2	481	65.5	478
Rarely	23.1	91	80.2	91
Occasionally	27.3	22	77.3	22
Often	40.0	5	40.0	5
Very Often	0	2	100.0	2
Almost Always	0	1	100.0	1

*p ≤ .03

Table 4. Parent-to-Child Violence by Social Class

Father Drunk	Father-to-Child Violence					
	Child Abuse Rate		Rate for All Violence		N	
	BC	WC	BC	WC	BC	WC
Never	11.5	7.8	53.0	57.3	183	103
Rarely	7.4	7.6	58.2	66.7	68	66
Occasionally	23.3	12.2	76.7	61.0	30	41
Often	0	0	66.7	50.0	3	2
Very Often	0	0	100.0	100.0	1	1
Almost Always	0	-	100.0	-	1	0

Mother Drunk	Mother-to-Child Violence					
	Child Abuse Rate		Rate for All Violence		N	
	BC	WC	BC	WC*	BC	WC
Never	19.3	12.3	70.4	58.8	259	211
Rarely	31.1	16.3	77.8	83.7	45	43
Occasionally	20.0	33.3	80.0	75.0	10	12
Often	0	50.0	0	50.1	2	2
Very Often	0	-	100.0	-	2	0
Almost Always	0	-	100.0	-	1	0

*p < .01

Social Class

(Table 2 about here)

The link between alcohol use and family violence may be confounded with social class differences. Table 2 therefore looks at this link separately for families with a blue-collar husband and for families with a white-collar husband. The data indicate that while there may be a class difference in rates of spousal violence, alcohol abuse is associated with violence for both blue-collar and white-collar workers. As alcohol abuse increases, husband-wife violence also increases. There are however some differences. First, the association is strongest in blue-collar husband families. Second, within the white-collar group, the association between drunkenness and violence is greater for the overall violence index as compared to the severe violence.

ALCOHOL ABUSE AND PARENT-CHILD VIOLENCE

Mayer and Black (1977) studied 100 alcoholics with children under 18 years of age. They found that while the majority of them have difficulty in childrearing, not all alcoholics neglect or abuse their children. They reported adaptive mechanisms such as limiting drinking to times when the children are absent from the home, or deliberate decisions to avoid potential abuse by not disciplining their children while drinking. However, these data are completely ambiguous. A majority of any group of parents is likely to report "difficulty in child-rearing." And since the rate of child abuse in the general population is high (Gelles, 1978; Straus, 1978), in the absence of a comparison group, one does not know how to evaluate the rate of child abuse in Mayer and Black's sample of alcoholics.

The data for our study, although it has its own set of limitations, at least avoids the fundamental methodological problems which beset the Mayer and Black and other similar studies because we can compare the violence rate for parents who are frequently drunk with those who are not.

(Table 3 about here)

Table 3 shows that fathers who get drunk on more than a rare occasion have double the rate of child abuse as compared to fathers who are never or rarely drunk. The same findings hold for mothers, except that even mothers who are only rarely drunk have a higher rate of child abuse than mothers who are never drunk. The rate of child abuse then drops sharply for both the fathers and the mothers who are most often drunk.

(Table 4 about here)

Table 4 repeats the analysis separately for blue-collar and white-collar husband families. There does not seem to be any clear difference between the two occupational class groups. However, although the relationship between alcohol use and child abuse is similar for both occupational class groups, it is important not to overlook the fact that among the parents who report no drunkenness during the past year, the blue-collar parents have a higher rate of child abuse. Reasons for this class difference in child abuse rates are explored in another paper (Straus, 1978).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In general, alcohol abuse is more clearly associated with violence in the husband-wife relationship than in the parent-child relationship. The most clear association is for violence by blue-collar husbands against their wives.

Previously, "social learning" and "deviance disavowal" theory was suggested as an explanation of the relation between alcohol abuse and violence. This explanation seems particularly applicable in the context of spousal violence. By observing parents who behave violently or otherwise while drunk, we learn what is accepted, or at least "excused." Given the frequent occurrence of husband-wife violence (Straus, 1977) there is ample opportunity to observe and learn. Despite the frequent occurrence and the covert norms tolerating violence between spouses, such acts are far from the preferred methods of settling intrafamily conflicts. Excessive drinking, however, provides an excuse for violence.

Although the conclusion just stated is plausible, the data available do not provide any direct evidence that it is correct. It can be argued that physiological disinhibition fits the fact as well as the explanation we prefer. That would be correct, except for the fact that violence rates drop off among those who are most often drunk.

If the link between alcohol use and violence is based on the disinhibiting effects of alcohol, violence should be greatest among those who come closest to the usual conception of an alcoholic. But this study, as well as an unpublished study by Steinglass (1978) shows almost no violence among the most alcoholic group. Our interpretation is that true alcoholics, rather than being disinhibited by alcohol, are in effect anesthetized. They use alcohol to block out a world which, in one way or another, is too painful to bear. On the other hand, among those who get drunk from time to time, the subjective meaning of inebriation is quite different. These people are not seeking an escape from an intolerable existence. Rather, whether consciously or unconsciously, they use alcohol as a means of engaging in behavior, which without the excuse of

being drunk, would be unacceptable to themselves and others.

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FOOTNOTES

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1. Our doubts about the inherent disinhibiting effect of alcohol are not meant to imply that alcohol has no physiological effect. If that were the case, no one would drink. Our position is simply that people come to attach meaning to these physiological effects by the way others react to them when under the influence of alcohol, and through the learning of various conventions and rules concerning how to behave when drinking. This same process has been well demonstrated for other drugs by Schachter (1962).

2. The use of the husband's occupation as the means of establishing the socioeconomic status of the family is based on the fact that for this sample, as well as in many previous studies (see for example, Kahl and Davis, 1955) occupation is the most powerful single indicator of position in the status hierarchy of an industrial society. An alternative is to compute a socioeconomic status index. This could have the advantage of also taking into account the characteristics of the wife as determinants of the socioeconomic status of the family. However, an empirical study of this issue (Straus and Urban, 1978) revealed that including the wife's characteristics in a family socioeconomic status index improved the explanatory power of the measure only slightly. This fact, and the fact that any such index would have to be dichotomized on a relatively arbitrary basis for use in this paper (as compared to the known meaning of blue-collar versus white-collar occupation), led to the decision to use the occupational class of the husband as the indicator of socioeconomic status.

3. The N's for the rates given in Figure 1 are (the first figure is the number of men and the second figure is the number of women in each drunkenness category): Never: 1,247, 1,655; Rarely: 489, 309; Occasionally: 259, 74; Often: 38, 10; Very Often 13, 6; Almost Always: 17, 2.

END