

## FAMILY ASPECTS

### THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY CONTEXT IN ALCOHOLISM

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**Abstract** — In the present study, 56 chronic alcoholics were compared with 56 controls with no excessive drinking habits, all of them male. The drinking habits of their parents were studied, as were parental rearing, dyadic relations with the spouses, attachment to significant people, and the education they gave to their own children. It was noted that the alcoholics' parents had heavier drinking habits and could have acted as learning models. As regards the other characteristics, the dyadic cohesion, the global score of the education received from the father and the personal style of criticism/rejection in the education of their own children were underlined.

#### INTRODUCTION

Studies of alcoholics' families have revealed important data. Alcoholism is usually recognized as a factor of family disaggregation. Children of alcoholic parents often describe a family with a lesser cohesion, a larger number of conflicts and less enhancement of moral/religious matters (Yama *et al.*, 1992). According to Carvalho *et al.* (1995), family violence is usually associated with alcohol and drug consumption. According to Bergman and Brismar (1992), mistreated women and the men who mistreat them often come from violent families, in which the father was an excessive drinker. When there is a positive family history of alcoholism, this fact influences the drinking habits of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd degree descendants (Dawson *et al.*, 1992).

Furthermore, a family history of alcoholism is likely to leave biological marks. Thus the children of alcoholics tend to be born with a lower weight and to grow up shorter (Dobkin *et al.*, 1994). They also experience more difficulties in visuo-spatial, memory and attention tasks than the children of non-alcoholics (Ozkaragoz and Noble, 1995). We can state, in brief, that the alcoholic's family is

dysfunctional, influences the presence of alcoholism in its descendants, and determines biological marks which have repercussions in the individual's behaviour.

The objective of the present paper consisted in studying the differences between chronic alcoholics and non-alcoholic individuals from the general population with respect to: (a) the parents' drinking habits; (b) memories about parental rearing; (c) the dyadic relations with the spouse; (d) the relationship with the children; (e) the ways of attachment to significant people.

It was established as a previous working hypothesis that alcoholics are characterized by more negative aspects of these features than the non-alcoholics. Our aim was to undertake, at the same time, a vertical study: the alcoholic's connections with his parents and his own children (thus involving three generations); and a horizontal study: his relationship with his spouse and the ways of attachment to the others.

#### MATERIALS AND METHODS

##### *Design of the study*

The general layout of our study is schematized in Fig. 1. It should be pointed out that not all of the initial elements in the questionnaires were com-

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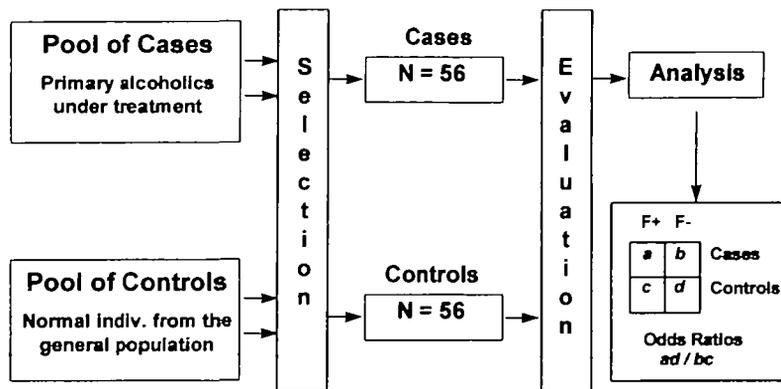


Fig. 1. Design of the study.

pleted adequately, which means that the totals shown for some of the analysis are variable.

#### Study sample(s)

The characteristics of the study groups are shown in Table 1. The sample comprised exclusively male individuals, in a total of 112. Out of these, 56 were cases of chronic alcoholism, either interned in the Regional Alcoholology Centre of Portugal's Central Region or in the Psychiatric Clinic of the Hospitals of the University of Coimbra. For the control group, 56 male individuals were interviewed, having no presence of excessive drinking habits in their personal history

and having had no need to be treated for abuse of alcoholic drinks. In order to make the groups more comparable, a frequency matching on age and educational level was made.

#### Evaluation instruments

*Parents' drinking habits.* Each respondent was asked to mention four separate points about their parents: whether they both drank, the father only drank, the mother only drank, or whether they were teetotalers.

*Evaluation of parental rearing.* In order to evaluate the memories about the educational practices during the individual's childhood and adolescence, regarding the father and the mother, we utilized the EMBU. The first version of this scale, with 80 questions, was constructed by Perris *et al.* (1980), the original being in the Swedish language. The acronym corresponds to the initials of the Swedish original, which, translated, means: 'Inventory for Assessing Memories of Parental Rearing Behaviour'. It is a Likert-type scale in which each question is classified in four points, ranging from 'No, never' to 'Yes, most of the time'. The version utilized in the present research corresponds to a shortened version of the inventory, with 23 items, developed by Arrindell *et al.* (1994), and translated into Portuguese and validated by Cristina Canavarro (1998). In addition to a global score, it enables the evaluation of three major dimensions — support, criticism/rejection and overprotection — as regards the father and the mother.

Table 1. Characteristics of the study groups

Parameter	Alcoholics (n = 56)	Controls (n = 56)
Age [years, mean (SD)] <sup>a</sup>	38.0 (9.2)	37.5 (9.9)
Civil state <sup>b</sup>		
Single	3	10
Married	43	39
Other situation	10	7
Total	56	56
Level of education		
Basic	47	47
Secondary	4	4
University	5	5
Total	56	56

<sup>a</sup>t = -0.30 (frequency matched; not significant).

<sup>b</sup>χ<sup>2</sup> = 4.50 (frequency matched; not significant).

*Dyadic Adjustment Scale.* This scale, developed by Spanier (1976), was constructed for the purpose of evaluating the degree of adjustment of a couple (legally married or sharing a daily routine). The scale comprises 32 items, about which a factorial analysis revealed the following underlying dimensions:

- Dyadic consensus: which evaluates the couple's agreement about important aspects of the relationship.
- Dyadic cohesion: which corresponds to the joint activities of the couple.
- Dyadic satisfaction: which relates to the way in which the couple is satisfied with and committed to the form assumed by their relationship.
- Expression of affection: which relates to the expression of emotions and sexual activity, within the context of the relationship.

*Parents' attitudes in child rearing.* These were evaluated through a Likert-type scale, constructed by Easterbrooks and Goldberg (1984), with 51 items which can be classified in six different categories ranging from 'I strongly disagree' to 'I strongly agree'. A factor analysis of the various questions revealed four underlying dimensions which, according to the authors, reveal attitudes of criticism/rejection, rigidity, support and encouragement of autonomy.

*Attachment to significant people.* This was evaluated by the Adult Attachment Scale-R (RAAS), constructed by Collins and Read (1990). It is a Likert-type scale comprising 18 questions, graded into five points, from 'Not at all typical of me' to 'Extremely typical of me', which tries to identify the kind of attachment which the adult individual establishes with the others, according to three patterns: secure, avoiding and anxious.

Table 2. Results of two group comparisons between alcoholics and controls

Dimension/factor	Alcoholics		Controls		<i>t</i> (d.f.)	<i>P</i>
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Perceived relationship with mother						
Support	18.7	4.8	18.6	4.3	0.04 (109)	n.s.
Critic/rejection	14.3	4.1	12.6	3.5	-2.37 (109)	0.019
Overprotection	16.6	3.2	15.0	3.3	-2.65 (109)	0.009
Global score	49.8	7.0	46.1	6.2	-2.95 (109)	0.004
Perceived relationship with father						
Support	17.8	4.9	16.9	4.7	-0.89 (107)	n.s.
Critical/rejection	12.4	3.3	10.9	2.9	-2.54 (107)	0.013
Overprotection	16.0	3.0	13.9	3.0	-3.57 (107)	0.000
Global score	46.1	6.5	41.8	6.1	-3.61 (107)	0.000
Dyadic relationship with own wife						
Consensus	52.2	9.7	51.5	6.5	-0.38 (110)	n.s.
Cohesion	15.8	5.2	18.2	5.4	2.08 (110)	0.041
Satisfaction	35.8	6.0	39.9	4.9	3.43 (110)	0.001
Expression of affection	9.6	2.2	10.1	1.5	1.37 (110)	n.s.
Global score	113.2	17.7	117.4	20.9	0.99 (110)	n.s.
Education of own children						
Critical/rejection	51.0	9.9	40.8	9.2	-4.74 (110)	0.000
Rigidity	54.4	9.8	50.7	10.2	-1.64 (110)	n.s.
Support	49.2	9.4	53.0	40.5	2.27 (110)	0.026
Autonomy reinforcement	36.4	8.6	43.0	5.2	4.15 (110)	0.000
Global score	190.9	25.3	187.5	17.0	-0.71 (110)	n.s.
Bonding to significant others						
Anxious	18.3	5.6	15.4	4.7	-2.93 (110)	0.004
Secure	15.2	3.2	16.2	3.3	1.75 (110)	0.083
Avoidant	11.9	3.0	11.5	3.1	-0.74 (110)	n.s.
Global score	45.4	8.8	43.2	6.5	-1.52 (110)	n.s.

n.s. Denotes not significant.

## RESULTS

*Parents' drinking habits*

Of the alcoholics, 57% stated that only the father drank, against just 12% for the non-alcoholics.

*Perceived relations with the parents*

Among the alcoholics, the presence of criticism/rejection, as well as overprotection, was more noticeable, with the father as much as with the mother. For both parents, the differences in the global scores were equally significant, always with higher levels among alcoholics (see Table 2).

*Dyadic relations with the wife*

The results in Table 2 show a tendency for lower values in the alcoholics, which suggests a poorer adjustment of the couple. However, only lower cohesion and satisfaction were found to be statistically significant between alcoholics and controls.

*Child rearing*

The alcoholics showed significantly more criticism/rejection, more lack of support and more lack of encouragement for autonomy, in the education of their own children (Table 2). Furthermore, they tended to be more rigid towards their children, although differences from controls were not statistically significant.

*Attachment to significant people*

As far as the bonding to the others is concerned, there was a predominance of the style of anxious

attachment on the part of the alcoholics. Their relationships also seemed to be less secure.

*What is more important?*

To find out which are the most significant factors in the discrimination of the alcoholics, a stepwise logistic regression analysis was undertaken (Table 3). We noted that, from a predictive point of view, the most important factors were: dyadic cohesion, global score of education received from the father, and the personal style of criticism/rejection in rearing their own children. The area under the non-parametric receiver operating characteristic curve corresponding to the final model, with three factors, was 0.856.

## DISCUSSION

The results of the study led to the following conclusions. (1) Regarding the drinking habits of most non-alcoholics, both parents drink, whereas with alcoholics the father is usually the only drinker, a behaviour which can become a model for the alcoholic individual. (2) Regarding the relations established with the parents, the position of the father and the mother as critical/rejecting and overprotective of the child is demonstrated. (3) The dyadic relationship of the alcoholic with his wife shows a poor adjustment, with a lesser degree of cohesion and satisfaction of the couple, compared with the non-alcoholics. (4) The alcoholic is prone to being critical and rigid in child-rearing, neither giving support nor encouraging autonomy. (5) The way of attachment to other people is subordinated to an anxious and insecure

Table 3. Stepwise logistic regression analysis

Retained factors (only)	Coefficients	Odds ratio	95% confidence interval	P
Constant	-5.632	-	-	0.0001
Dyadic cohesion	-0.159	0.85	0.738-0.984	0.030
Global score of education received from the father	0.134	1.14	1.043-1.254	0.004
Personal style of criticism/rejection in rearing their own children	0.119	1.12	1.047-1.211	0.001

Dependent variable: case = 0, control = 1; stepwise parameters: *P*-to-enter = 0.049; *P*-to-remove = 0.07; number of observations = 107.

Log likelihood = -32.418, model  $\chi^2 = 20.16$  (d.f. = 3), *P* < 0.0002; pseudo *R*<sup>2</sup> = 0.3303.

pattern.

If we wish to establish a synthesis of the results obtained, it could be stated that, in the present study, the alcoholic's family distinguishes itself from the non-alcoholic's family in that it receives from the parents critical and rejectionist education patterns which they eventually pass on to their own children.

The alcoholic, in his relationship with his wife, shows a poor adjustment, and there is a tendency on the part of the couple to become involved in few joint activities and to show dissatisfaction and disinterest in the assumed way of the dyadic relation. Despite the small numbers in our study, it is clear that the alcoholic's family shows the characteristics or dysfunctionality and poor adaptation predicted from the established working hypotheses.

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