

SECONDARY DEVIANCE ASPECTS OF THE ALCOHOLIC CAREER

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METHODS

Most studies on alcoholism focus on properties of the alcoholic and alcoholism, but neglect secondary deviance such as that resulting from the gradual erosion of the alcoholic's membership in conventional social networks (Lemert 1951, 1972). Social networks include those of family, occupation and friendship associations. According to the labeling school of deviant behavior, deviance is an outcome of a *process of interaction* between the rule violator and an audience (Becker 1963, 1964; Erikson 1962, 1966; Kitzuse 1964; Lofland 1969; Scheff 1966; Schur 1971). Such an approach can readily be applied to the career of the alcoholic.

Grounded theory methodology (Glaser, Strauss 1967) was applied through intensive interviewing and participant observation, from February 1972-1973, recorded in field notes for the initial source. The second source consists of interviews by Warren Breed and Lester Cohen, with verbatim detail of direct transcriptions. Respondents were mainly male clients of alcoholic rehabilitation agencies.

THE DISENGAGEMENT PROCESS

Alcoholics, defined as *excessive drinkers* tend to amplify their deviance as they become disengaged from participation in normal social networks. There are two component processes: 1) being eased out; 2) erosion of controls. The alcoholic is eased out of specific social nets as tolerance of the drinking behavior gradually diminishes. The drinker is more and more excluded from ongoing affairs in the network. He may be eased out of family activities long before he is eased out of his occupation, and there may be much less tolerance for one drinker than for another in similar circumstances. Some alcoholics may have enough power to resist being eased out, as with the alcoholic owner of a company. Those who go through the alcoholic career may not be those with the most abusive level of drinking behavior, but those who lack power, and those whose normal social networks have lower tolerance for drinking behavior.

Erosion of controls refers to the process

in which external and internal restraints on a the alcoholic's behavior gradually disintegrate. Then the drinking is likely to increase. Being eased out generally precipitates the erosion of controls, and the two processes interact in an accelerating pattern in which each promotes the other.

BEING EASED OUT

The easing out process is initiated by violations of prescriptive and proscriptive expectations, by not meeting the requirements of full participation in a social network, or by drink-related behaviors considered reprehensible.

Membership in a social network includes responsibilities, tasks, and obligations. When these are not fulfilled according to the other members' expectations, thoughts about reducing or ending the violator's membership arise, especially if the alcoholic's behavior tends to disrupt normal activities in the network. Heavy drinkers who develop a record of tardiness, absenteeism or mistakes on the job often have their responsibilities and functions reduced, or they may be fired. For those who neglect family responsibilities by spending long periods away in bars with alcoholic associates, marital discord, separation from spouse, and divorce are likely outcomes.

Improper behavior leading to the easing out process may arise from a buildup of displeasing incidents and actions, or as the consequence of one intolerable act. Incidents mentioned by respondents include physical or verbal abuse of spouse or children or friends or coworkers while drunk, arrest for an alcohol related offense, acting belligerently or *making a fool of oneself* on social occasions, upsetting the family budget by spending on drinking activities. Such actions are embarrassing and costly to others.

In the early phases of the easing out process a drinker's behavior may be disapproved but tolerated more to maintain social harmony than to accommodate the drinker. Often the drinker promises to control or abstain from the drinking behavior to forestall expulsion. As the drinker's contribution to the social net diminishes, there may be adjustments by associates. The alcoholic's wife may begin to

assume more responsibility for financial support and social control in the family, or the employer may assign lighter tasks and less responsibility on the job. Finally, he may be unable to get any employment.

My boss called me in: "John, I think you better take a lighter job. I suggest that you go over and work for Art Johnson ... they have a smaller firm and the load won't be so large on you. It would involve a salary cut, but you know everybody there and they are fine people."

In two years I'd gone from having a pretty good reputation as a bartender to having a pretty bad reputation. I was doing more drinking while I was working because I didn't give a damn about the job. The last one was a real dive, and I got fired from there, so I just about worked my way out of the country

A drinker may be relegated to the position of *occupant* without participation in his normal social networks (Sampson, Messinger, Towne 1962). At home he may be denied sex, be excluded from decision making, and be relieved of rights, privileges and responsibilities in the daily affairs of family life, so that his family is living without him despite his sporadic physical presence. As important others begin to perceive the drinker's behavior as part of an irreversible pattern, or grow weary of the problems generated by his behavior, he may be denied all membership functions including his physical presence.

Initially, being eased out of normal social networks may not distress the drinker, since he is relieved from negative reactions and pressures from those associates whom he sees as naggers, preachers, critics, and complainers. He may see his present plight as unfairness and intolerance from others, rather than as a consequence of his drinking. He may welcome the opportunity to drink and spend time in bars without restraint. In fact some drinkers voluntarily withdraw from normal social networks, either to escape the social pressures against their drinking, or to relieve others from pain and embarrassment. All concerned may welcome the separation of the habitual alcoholic from normal social networks.

EROSION OF CONTROLS

Normal social networks play basic governing functions by prescriptive and proscriptive behaviors in daily routines, demands,

activities and attachments (Gerth, Mills 1953; Shibutani 1961). There are behavioral boundaries which may not be crossed without risking negative consequences. Such boundaries are not always clear, and are often rather flexible, but they exist in the minds of network members. As long as the individual remains active in normal social nets, their controls have substantial influence over behavior. Much of the average person's time is spent in occupational and family networks, and for most, these two networks constitute probably the most basic limits on daily activities and behavior. Spouses, employers, and work mates exercise more control over the individual than formal control agents such as police and judicial authorities.

Besides the moderating effects of membership requirements, normal social nets also moderate drinking behavior by defining limits for drinking itself. One is expected to avoid certain alcohol related behaviors, such as not to arrive for work drunk or with a hangover severe enough to affect job performance. One is expected not to drink heavily at home or in front of children. Drinking is supposed to be confined temporally, as on weekends or on special occasions such as parties. These restraints vary from one social network to another from intolerance of any drinking to insistence on periodic drinking (Haer 1955; Price 1945; Trice 1945; Wellman 1955).

INTERACTION

Once this process of interaction between being eased out and erosion of controls in the social networks is set in motion, it becomes self-sustaining. The drinker is more and more excluded from ongoing affairs of his normal social nets. What is applied to the drinker as a control sanction has the opposite effect of releasing social controls. His responsibilities as well as his privileges as a member are gradually reduced and finally are withdrawn altogether. As the controls erode and disappear, drinking behavior will likely increase or become more blatant. These responses accelerate the cycle.

The erosion of controls in one social network may affect those of other networks so as to prompt a similar disengagement cycle there, because social networks for an individual are interdependent. Loss of employment affects

family responsibilities and functions, and conversely, the breakdown of engagement in the family reduces the supports and incentives for work, and the drinker ousted from his family has little reason to work steadily.

... It's rather simple. Say when I got off work at six in the evening, I'd stop at some bar and have a few drinks, and then I'd go home, cause I was supposed to go home. Having a home and supposed to go there did keep certain amount of control over me. Once I was on my own and I went in a bar and had a few drinks, I didn't have to go home at any particular time. Nobody cared whether I went home or not, so I started sitting around drinking more and association with people that didn't have to go home either. Same thing if I woke up in the morning and had a little hangover I got up and went to work. My wife went to work. But I thought, "Oh, to hell with it, I don't want to go to work!" So I'd take three, four, five days off and I'd lose my job. I had enough money, I had a place, and the pattern just evolved around working to get enough money to drink. It was just a gradual downhill; I'd do more drinking and less working."

The strongest internal controls are what might be called *self-respect thresholds*. A self-respect threshold is the point where one draws the line on permissible behaviors, beyond which there is damage to one's self-respect. Such behaviors often mentioned by drinkers include bumming, stealing, drinking fortified wine, drinking on the job, or in the presence of children. These self-respect thresholds may be undefined until they are threatened, but many drinkers consciously hold to them, saying, "I may have done some terrible things, but at least I haven't done that.

If frequent opportunities for violating these standards present themselves, they are apt to be violated and to elicit two responses: 1) the self-respect threshold is shifted inward, or 2) it is damaged or destroyed. In both cases their effect is eroded. As the drinker is eased out of normal social networks and released from their controls the thresholds of self-respect and other internal controls are also affected. The drinker who has lost his job may have to resort to fortified wine as a less costly drink. After a time he may define this cheap drink as appropriate, shifting his self-respect threshold inward. Loss of family and job connections may lead to depression, guilt, boredom and other mental states which may soften internal controls to a feeling of "Why should I care" This may lead to a cycle of

increased drinking which triggers further problems which brings on more drinking (Expert Committee on Mental Health 1952).

Weakening of internal controls may further weaken whatever external controls remain. Whatever the configuration and timing of the easing out of normal social networks and the erosion of controls over behavior which ensues, absence of restraint opens the door for rapid acceleration of drinking behavior. At this point major obstacles to increased drinking are removed. The result is markedly increased drinking and deeper involvement in an alcoholic career.

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