

BOOK REVIEWS

It is Journal policy to review books that we can recommend to our readers.

Alcohol: The Ambiguous Molecule, by Griffith Edwards. London, England: Penguin Books Ltd, 2000, 230 + vii pages, £7.99 (paper).

Throughout history alcohol has played a significant role in religious and social events and celebrations, and it has caused or exacerbated tragedies too numerous to list. Alcohol has played multiple roles within the world's cultures, many of them contradictory. For example, wine is consumed in Christian church rituals as a symbol of Jesus Christ's blood, yet many within the Christian church believe that alcohol consumption is sinful. Also, recent research has shown that relatively small amounts of alcohol ingested daily may have some long-term health benefits, a view that is in sharp contrast to the over 200,000 alcohol-related deaths each year in the United States and the untold number of pregnancies that are compromised or put at risk because of alcohol consumption. The contrasting roles of, beliefs about and views of alcohol over time is the focus of this book, a fascinating look at the complex and sometimes contradictory history of alcohol.

The book progresses, more or less, on a historical framework. The first four chapters examine alcohol use from its first known use until the late 1800s. The author provides a fascinating account of society's changing views of alcohol use over time. Especially interesting is his description of the use of alcohol from a religious perspective and how the view of alcohol has changed within the major religious belief systems through the years. Also in these chapters is a review of how alcohol use and even various classes of alcoholic beverages (i.e., wine, beer, spirits) were regarded differently within and between different social classes.

In chapter 5, a more current view of alcohol use is presented, and the problem of alcohol dependence is discussed. It is in this chapter that the book's most glaring weakness lies. When describing alcohol dependence, Edwards presents four hypothetical case examples that are occasionally referred to in later chapters. The case examples clearly show the consequences of alcohol dependence in many areas of people's lives, including work, financial, health and family. Unfortunately, the case examples are such severe illustrations of alcohol dependence that the examples may reinforce stereotypes of alcoholism and may lead a naive reader to discount less severe examples of alcohol abuse and dependence. Chapter 6 provides a brief review of the prohibition experiment placed in the appropriate historical context of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Edwards describes the social milieu, the economic and political conditions and the changes in these circumstances that led to the repeal of the experiment.

Although alcohol treatment is touched upon in earlier chapters, this issue is fully addressed in chapters 7 through 11. Chapter 7 discusses alcoholism as a disease versus alcoholism as a moral weakness. Lest anyone think that the disease concept of alcoholism is a relatively recent phenomenon, a proper historical framework for this "new" conceptualization is provided. Chapter 8 provides a brief history of Alcoholics Anonymous and chapter 9 describes early attempts by professionals to treat alcoholism. In chapter 10, Edwards attempts, through analysis of a hypothetical doctor-patient exchange and a review of recent research findings (i.e., Project MATCH), to distill the essence of good alcoholism treatment and identify the missteps that some treatment providers make. In chapter 11, the controlled drinking controversy is presented and the contrasting views of AA-like (e.g., once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic) and behavioral (e.g., learned behavior can be modified) thinking are discussed. The Sobells' work (Sobell and Sobell, 1973, 1976) and Pendery et al.'s (1982) critique of their findings are presented briefly, along with the scientific furor that was created then and is still discussed today.

Chapter 12 reviews the paradox of alcohol as medicine and chapter 13 discusses the eternal conflict between short-term benefit (i.e., relaxation) and long-term risk (i.e., alcoholism) that every individual who consumes alcohol faces. In the final chapter (14), the future of alcohol and other recreational drugs is presented.

This book has many potential audiences. First, it would be appropriate for anyone interested in alcohol use and dependence, but would be especially useful to graduate students interested in the field of addictions. It would also be appropriate for advanced undergraduate courses on alcoholism and addictions and would likely spark interesting classroom discussions at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Although the book provides too brief a survey of the field to serve as a primary classroom text, it would be ideal as an adjunct text in a course on addictions. Second, the book provides an instructive review of the changing alcohol policies in the Western world and, therefore, policy makers may also find it useful. Third, the book provides an interesting historical survey of alcohol consumption and of fluctuating societal views of alcohol that may interest both historians and sociologists.

In sum, *Alcohol: The Ambiguous Molecule* offers a fascinating and paradoxical look at alcohol consumption, abuse, dependence, treatment and policy. It provides a balanced historical review of alcohol issues presented in a well-written and accessible manner. I will strongly recommend this book to students and colleagues alike.

References

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Happy Hours: Alcohol in a Woman's Life, by Devon Jersild. New York: Harper Collins, 2000, 380 + xv pages, \$25.00 (cloth).

This is a well-written book that interweaves the stories of 40 women recovering from alcohol dependence with a thorough overview of research on women's alcohol abuse and dependence. In the introduction, the author describes herself as a "layperson, with no scientific expertise" but with a strong motivation to "understand how alcohol takes over a woman's life" because of her connection to her alcohol dependent sister. The book is easy to read and reflect on in a very personal manner. As Jersild says, all of us know someone who we believe has or may have a problem with alcohol, whether she is a sister, mother, friend, co-worker or acquaintance.

The stories of the recovering women are used to emphasize the differences in women's experiences of alcohol compared with those of men and the similarities among women's experiences. Jersild emphasizes the lack of understanding about, and lack of approaches currently available for, identifying and providing care that addresses issues unique to the alcohol dependent woman (e.g., concomitant depression, partner violence, history of sexual abuse). Her description of the negative manner in which women who misuse or are dependent on alcohol are viewed in comparison to men is familiar to researchers in this area. Alcohol dependent women are seen as more sexually available, sloppier, and less able to hold their liquor compared with men. Treatment approaches often have been developed based on the needs of men; for example, Jersild describes the development of the AA treatment approach around men and how the theme of powerlessness might not be as appropriate or effective for women, particularly women who have been abused and controlled by men.

The book comprises 12 chapters organized into four parts. In each chapter stories from the recovering women are interspersed with well researched information on the etiology of women's alcohol problems. Findings from respected researchers in the field of women's alcohol dependence, such as Sharon Wilsnack and Sheila Blume, are presented. Jersild clearly relied on experts in

the field for help in understanding the current state of our knowledge in this area.

Part I, *The Impact of Alcohol*, provides statistics on women's alcohol consumption, the differences in consumption and health risks to women compared with men, prevailing stereotypes about women who drink and a brief historical overview of women's alcohol use and misuse. The integration of women's stories and the statistics about specific risks to women for developing alcohol problems will be informative for clinicians as well as lay people.

Part II, *On the Job and in Families*, describes the influence that personal relationships (e.g., male partners and mothers) have on a woman's pattern of alcohol consumption and the development of dependence. Jersild presents a balanced view of the research. For example, in chapter 3 she discusses the predominant belief that a woman's drinking is largely influenced by her partners' drinking and more recent findings from longitudinal research that this is not the case. Indeed, as she explains, this newer research suggests that women who drink heavily tend to marry men who drink heavily and "female alcoholics are much more likely than male alcoholics to have a spouse who drinks." This is just one instance of Jersild's ability to synthesize disparate findings in the research literature and make them easily understandable to the reader.

Part III, *Take Two at Bedtime: Drinking as Self-medication*, explores several common themes in the experiences that precede alcohol problems among women, such as loneliness, loss and sexual abuse. The stories of the women are particularly striking in this section, and Jersild does an excellent job of balancing research findings with illustrative stories.

Part IV, *Women's Paths in Recovery*, describes how alcohol problems and dependence often go undetected in women. Special attention is given to issues that are unique to minority women and to treatment programs that have been developed for Native American and black women. The final chapter describes pathways to, and motivations for, recovery among women (e.g., connecting with a supportive family member, getting sober for their children).

This book is appropriate for clinicians, educators, service providers and graduate students (e.g., social work, psychology courses). It could be used as reading material for a client who is questioning her own or another's drinking patterns or as a supplement to textbook reading in a course on women's issues or substance abuse or dependence. I believe that anyone who has contact or works with women with substance use disorders will gain some benefit from the overview of research and the striking personal stories from alcohol dependent women provided in this book.

The strength of this book lies in the synthesis of research findings and personal stories from women. The latter are presented in an empathic manner that emphasizes the inherent dignity and strength of the women who were willing to talk about their experiences. I was left feeling that, despite my own research emphasis on women's substance use, I had a more complete understanding of the current state of our research knowledge and the actual experiences of alcohol dependent women.

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