Alcohol Treatment and the Non-Traditional "Family" Structures of Gays and Lesbians*

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Introduction and Purpose

As attention to the family aspects of alcoholism and treatment increases, several salient issues emerge for the gay and lesbian population. Most of the literature and many of the programs devoted to the problem drinker's family emphasize the role of the spouse and children in the alcoholic's recovery. For many lesbian and gay alcoholics, however, such traditional family systems are not as common. Since so little is known about "co-alcoholism" and alternative family structures among the gay population, relatively little attention is devoted to these topics in alcoholism treatment and prevention programs.

Therefore, this paper will focus on the various family systems in which gay and lesbian people exist and how these relate to drinking behavior and its treatment and prevention. A sociological perspective is used, emphasizing the values, norms, and meanings held about drinking by gay and lesbian people. This allows us to view the subject from within, rather than imposing definitions and structures from outside the subculture. Instead of asking how gay people's lifestyles deviate from the norm, we can discuss how gay people define their experiences and roles. Their issues, their perspectives, and their values are the important dimensions. How they interpret their social relationships with various "families" and integrate these relationships into their lifestyle become the topics of analysis.

Several points need to be made to clarify the focus of this paper. First, this is not a discussion of all gay alcoholics. There is a diversity: some are "in the closet" maintaining heterosexual identities while engaging in occasional homosexual behavior; some are "out" and still adapting to their newly revealed identity; and others are openly and comfortably participating in a gay subculture. Second, not all gay people are involved in on-going relationships. Therefore, this paper will focus on only two types of gay people: those problem drinkers who are single yet active in a gay community and those who are committed to another person and identify as a couple. It is these people whose drinking problems immediately affect close significant others. Heterosexually-identified homosexuals and those alone and isolated from a gay community are subjects for another paper.

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Lesbian and Gay "Families"

Although most writings on families of alcoholics make reference to the spouse (and usually the wife), a more inclusive term, "significant other," is becoming more accepted. This phrase allows us to conceive of someone else besides the marital partner as a potential victim of a person's alcoholism. Don and Nancy Howard describe the concept well:

The significant others are the folks who pour liquor down the drain, clobber the drinker on occasion or want to clobber him, beg God on their hands and knees while they hold his head up above the toilet to deliver them from this misery, kiss the alcoholic and listen to his promise to change, and believe that he can, simply by wishing, praying, and moving out of the house for the night.¹

Using this concept, alcohol educators and professionals could well go beyond the limiting phrase of spouse and begin to conceptualize alternative "family" systems of numerous significant others. In so doing, outreach to close friends and relationships of an alcoholic can be made and treatment programs can be developed for them.

Such is the case for the non-traditional "family" systems of the lesbian and gay alcoholic. As more and more information comes out about gay people from gay people, more is understood about their unique needs and lifestyles. For many lesbians and gays, relationships with significant others and "extended families" are important to identity formation. Ignoring these aspects of their lifestyles ignores the full potential of treatment and prevention strategies.

There are three ways of conceptualizing lesbian and gay "families." There is the relationship with family of origin. How someone interacts with parents and siblings as a gay person and as a problem drinker is a salient dimension of treatment and prevention programs. Second, there is the "extended family" of close gay friends. Most gays who are involved in a gay subculture identify a group of close gay friends as their "extended family" with whom they celebrate holidays, anniversaries, and other social events. For many gay people, this group often becomes a major source of identity formation and maintenance. Third, there is the intimate, on-going relationship with another person. Perceiving themselves as a couple, these gay people often develop a committed relationship similar in some ways to that of a married couple, yet usually differing in gender role segmentation and other social and legal ways. How a gay problem drinker interacts with and affects others within these three "family" systems is the focus of this paper.

A Systems Theory Perspective

Systems theory views the family in terms of transactional patterns among roles, each person interacting with the other in a dynamic process. When change occurs in the structure, i.e., when patterns alter or roles become modified, all components of the system are affected. Thus, when problem drinking alters existing patterns because of the drinker's changed role, the roles and relationships of all the family members also change. Alcoholism begins to affect everyone in the system and the family members must begin to develop techniques to cope with the crisis and role changes. This conceptualization also applies to the non-traditional "family" systems of gays and lesbians.

Treatment of alcoholism and problem drinking has often focused just on the drinker. More and more, there is a recognition of the necessity to treat the entire family as part of a recovery strategy. Many articles and pamphlets have been written discussing the treatment programs and unique issues for the spouse and children of alcoholics. However, virtually nothing has been published on the significant others in the lives of gay and lesbian problem drinkers. While many of the issues and strategies offered for spouses also apply to the lovers and "extended family" members of gay people, there are several points unique to their lifestyles and family systems that need to be stressed. At center is the role of alcohol in the gay subculture and the responses of gays and lesbians to an often hostile and oppressive society.²

Gay and Lesbian Subculture

To understand problem drinking among gays and lesbians and its relationship to "families," a brief discussion of the meaning of alcohol within the gay subculture is necessary. Many have suggested that drinking has become a serious problem among gay people because of the emphasis on bars in their lifestyle. The emergence of bars as the meeting place for gay people reflects several historical points. As a response to a society which oppresses people whose lifestyles differ from the perceived norm, bars serve as a secure and permissive place. They also stress anonymity, leisure time, and community. For many who are just "coming out," bars aid in the development of a gay identity. However, some do get swept up in the pleasure-reinforcing dimensions of a drinking-oriented subculture, viewing alcohol and drug consumption as a necessary component for a gay identity.

A relationship between alcohol use and homosexuality can also be traced to oppression. For some gay people, coping with the psychic stress and anxiety generated by an intolerant society is accomplished by means of the device most accepted by our American culture, namely alcohol. A society which does not allow some people the right to express their true identity of feelings and encourages, through media and other norms, the drinking of alcohol, can only expect to have significant problems with alcohol abuse among its oppressed citizens.

It is within such a society that gay people must create their own roles and relationships since there are few visible, socially-sanctioned role models of gay relationships and norms. These must be created by gays and lesbians in the face of social rejection and, in many states, legal sanction. In this context, then, gay relationships are formed which take on characteristics different from equivalent relationships among heterosexuals.
For one, the nature of relationships with parents and siblings may severely alter once gay identity has been formed. Opening up to parents will certainly change the situation, in some cases positively, in others negatively. It cannot go on as it did before disclosure. Recognition of a gay person's new role in the family of origin system by parents and siblings induces change. How the family members respond to the new role will have impact on the gay alcoholic's drinking and recovery behavior.

The gay experience in a heterosexual world also leads to the formation of a network of close gay friends who aid in the development and maintenance of gay identity. Unlike a group of close heterosexual friends for the heterosexual, this gay "extended family" arises out of a need to find role models and identity in an oppressive society. The heterosexual friendship group for heterosexuals may be close and important, but it occurs as an option in the context of a heterosexually dominant society. However, the gay person must create, out of necessity, a meaningful friendship group to cope with threats to identity and self-esteem in a world of heterosexual work situations, traditional family systems, and stereotyped media images. In this context, it becomes an intense friendship group contributing importantly to gay identity formation and maintenance. How members of the "extended family" define drinking practices and evaluate drunkenness will have an impact on a person's problem drinking behavior and recovery.

Finally, the nature of intimate, dyadic relationships among gays and lesbians is often different from heterosexual marriages or cohabitation relationships. Most important is the absence of traditionally defined roles based on gender. In a relationship of two women or of two men, parity of role responsibilities is more likely to occur. Gay relationships are rarely divided along masculine/feminine roles; one does not play the "husband" while the other plays the "wife." However, this may also lead to more conflicts revolving around power and equality issues than a heterosexual relationship based on traditional gender roles. In addition, the absence of legal and social norms regulating gay relationships often makes it easier to create one's own rules and roles while also making it easier to dissolve relationships when problems arise. How the gay subculture regulates and supports intimate relationships will have an impact on a couple's responses to alcohol abuse. Definitions concerning sexually open or monogamous relationships also contribute to the nature of gay relationships and the impact of alcohol problems.

In sum, the responses of gay people to oppression have led to a variety of personal and structural outcomes. Gay bars, "extended families" of close gay friends, personal psychic stress and anxiety, self-defined relationships, and alcohol abuse are a few of the numerous responses by lesbians and gays to an often hostile social environment. Understanding the nature and history of the gay experience, as told by gay people, contributes a sharper insight into the relationship between problem drinking and the role of "families" for gays and lesbians.

Co-Alcoholism in Gay and Lesbian "Families"

Much of the literature on family impact describes the spouses as becoming ill along with the alcoholic. Often described as "co-alcoholism," symptoms include denial of the alcohol problem, guilt, helpless feelings, anger, sexual problems, mental conflict, role reversals, social isolation from others, doubt, and neglect of self. Deterioration of spouses' and children's mental and physical lives parallels the alcoholic's decline. Since the family system has dramatically altered in its role and relationship structure to cope with the alcohol problem, treatment of the problem drinker alone is not sufficient. Analysis of the family system and how it can accommodate to sobriety in the problem drinker must occur for treatment to be successful.

As it does with any traditional family, alcohol abuse among gays and lesbians negatively affects their "families" also. The nature and structure of these "family" systems, in turn, contribute to the impact of alcohol on the individual. However, the nature of gay "families," structured to respond to a non-supportive society, raises additional concerns regarding co-alcoholism in each of the three "family" systems.

For the family of origin, denial of a son's or daughter's drinking problem is not uncommon. When the son or daughter comes out to the family as gay or lesbian, additional barriers to recovery can emerge. Sometimes the parents will invoke a traditional psychoanalytic perspective and point to the "disease of homosexuality" as a cause of the alcoholism. Other times, they will focus on their own perceived failures in raising not only an alcoholic but also a homosexual. Not understanding the nature of homosexuality, parents can condemn themselves for their children's sexual and drinking behavior. Until they receive counseling about alcoholism and homosexuality, parents might create added tension in their relationships with their offspring, thus contributing to continuation of the drinking problem and their own psychic confusion and guilt.

However, relatively little is known about the family of origin's role in the alcoholic's treatment. For most heterossexuals, their current family is the issue and the literature reflects this. But for many homosexuals, relationships with parents, even in adulthood, often continue to revolve around issues related to their sexual identity. Coming to terms with a drinking problem in the context either of having concealed their true identity from their parents or of facing hostile parents not supportive of newly disclosed information presents unique problems for gay and lesbian alcoholics. Involving members of the family of origin in treatment programs and, at the least, assessing the nature of the relationship between the problem drinker and the family are important components of a successful recovery or prevention program.

Additional barriers to recovery are also present in the "extended family" of gays and lesbians. Since contact with these close gay friends often occurs in the context of the gay subculture, the norms and values toward alcohol and drug use dominate. Denial of drinking problems is common among the gay subculture. Viewing it as an acceptable response to oppressive society.
many gay people indirectly, and at times directly, encourage heavy drinking. Furthermore, interactions with members of the gay "extended family" usually occur in bars, at parties, or at dinners, i.e., when alcohol is present. This reinforcement of the leisure time aspects and hedonistic dimensions of a gay lifestyle may contribute to the development and maintenance of a drinking problem.

Thus, association with close gay friends, aided with alcohol, can lead to situations which minimize the seriousness of drinking problems and reinforce the acceptability of drunkenness. Admitting to a group of friends, who congregate around alcohol, that one has a drinking problem is very difficult for someone attempting to solidify sexual identity and to be accepted by similar others. This "family" has allowed the person to be oneself, to be gay. How is the problem drinker now going to admit to them that he or she cannot drink like them; that he or she must reject one of their norms? Successful treatment of the gay problem drinker depends on restructuring the norms and roles of the "extended family" system. Remembering that this close group of friends are not "just friends" but, from the gay person's perspective, a major source of identity formation and maintenance will aid in developing meaningful treatment and prevention programs for both the drinker and the "extended family" members.

The most immediate impact of problem drinking is on the significant other. For gays and lesbians, this is someone of the same sex, intimately involved in a relationship unrecognized and not sanctioned by society. Difficult as it is to maintain such a socially disapproved "family" relationship, the introduction of a disruptive behavior, such as problem drinking, only exacerbates the situation.

As with spouses in heterosexual marriages, the significant other in a gay relationship also goes through role reversals, guilt, denial, and other emotional and physical changes. However, most gay relationships are free from traditional gender role differences in power and control. In fact, many of these relationships conflict over the struggle to define who is in control or power. Introduction of alcohol abuse may severely alter the potential parity situation of gender roles, bringing power shifts not anticipated and threatening to both. What may once have been a relationship built around egalitarian roles and a fear of giving up power may become an asymmetrical relationship of power imbalances. As the lover becomes more comfortable with power shifts and the relationship simics the role differences of heterosexual relationships more and more, behaviors may emerge which perpetuate the situation. This ensures continued control by one partner. The lover, thus, begins to exhibit "enabling" behavior and signs of co-alcoholism.

Treatment of lesbian and gay problem drinkers needs to involve their lovers. Resources and materials available for heterosexual spouses must broaden to include recognition of the unique issues found in gay relationships. The absence of legal and social recognition supporting the relationship, the meaning of alcohol within the gay subculture, the absence of gender role segmentation, the same sex aspects of the relationship potentially generating parity of power and control, and how the couple interacts with families of origin and "extended families," are some of the aspects which make an intimate dyadic gay relationship different from a heterosexual one. Consideration of these along with the usual significant other issues will contribute to more successful treatment and prevention strategies for lesbians and gays.

Conclusion

Despite the attention by alcohol professionals to family systems in the lives of alcoholics, little is given to the non-traditional "families" of gay and lesbian problem drinkers. While many of the same issues of "co-alcoholism" and enabling behaviors among spouses apply to lovers in gay relationships, significant differences occur to warrant further investigation and analysis.

One is the meaning alcohol has within the gay subculture. Whether as a response to an oppressive society or as a cornerstone of gay social functions, alcohol use is seen as a necessary component of the lifestyle. Second, the nature and types of gay relationships, often formed in reaction to heterosexual society and without social and legal recognition, create unique dynamics and structural issues. Relationships and roles enacted in family of origin systems, "extended family" systems of close gay friends, and same sex couple systems provide contexts significantly different from traditional heterosexual family systems. Understanding how gays and lesbians define their lifestyle, create meanings for alcohol use in their subculture, and negotiate the unique demands of alternative "family" structures is essential for achieving comprehensive and successful prevention and treatment programs serving lesbians and gays.

References