
12 Steps to Destruction

Codependency/Recovery Heresies
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04 TWELVE-STEP PROGRAMS: SIN OR SICKNESS?

04.4 Is Disease the Answer?

In an essay published by Harvard University, Fingarette asks, "Why do heavy drinkers persist in their behavior even when prudence, common sense, and moral duty call for restraint?" Then he says:

That is the central question in debates about alcohol abuse. In the United States (but not in other countries such as Great Britain) the standard answer is to call the behavior a disease, "alcoholism," whose key symptom is a pattern of uncontrollable drinking. This myth, now widely advertised and widely accepted, is neither helpfully compassionate nor scientifically valid. It promotes false beliefs and inappropriate attitudes, as well as harmful, wasteful, and ineffective social policies.¹

Elsewhere he says:

When the facts are confronted, what seems to be compassion done in the name of "disease" turns out to subvert the drinker's autonomy and will to change, and to exacerbate a serious social problem.

¹ Herbert Fingarette, "We should Reject the Disease Concept of Alcoholism." The Harvard Medical School Mental Health Letter, Vol. 6, No. 8, February, 1990, p. 4.

...Certainly our current disease-oriented policies have not reduced the scale of the problem; in fact, the number of chronic heavy drinkers reported keeps rising.²

Peele says:

In the area of addiction, what is purveyed as fact is usually wrong and simply repackages popular myths as if they were the latest scientific deduction.³

An example of repackaging popular myths can be seen in books written for the Christian audience. In their book *Dying for a Drink*, Dr. Anderson Spickard and Barbara Thompson attempt to distinguish between an “alcohol abuser” and an “alcoholic.” They say:

While the alcohol abuser chooses to get drunk, the alcoholic drinks involuntarily. His will power is in service to his addiction and he cannot resist his craving for alcohol.⁴

By such a distinction, they think that they can say that “alcoholic abuse, or drunkenness, is clearly immoral” and that “the Bible forbids drunkenness altogether” and still maintain the idea that the alcoholic has a disease which must be treated. This idea is echoed by Overcomers Outreach (a Christian copy of AA). In one of their pamphlets, the directors, Bob and Pauline Bartosch, say:

Though there are references to “drunkenness” in the Bible, nothing is ever mentioned about “addiction” or “alcoholism.” Neither are there references to “cancer,” “diabetes,” or “heart disease,” yet these brutal killers must be dealt with vigorously or the victim will die.⁵

This makes as much sense as saying that taking poison is a disease since the ingestion of the substance may cause death.

In attempting to distinguish alcoholism from drunkenness, they also attempt to remove it from the category of sinful behavior and put it in the same category with cancer. Like Spickard and Thompson, the Bartosches do this by distinguishing between an “alcohol abuser” who “chooses to get drunk” and the “alcoholic” who “drinks involuntarily because his willpower is in service to his addiction and the craving is so overwhelming that he *can't not drink*.”⁶ (Emphasis theirs.) **Does this mean that anyone who is under the domination of repeated sin in his life has a disease?** Neither the Bible nor the rigors of scientific investigation have indicated that there is a difference between the sin of drunkenness and alcoholism or that alcoholism is a disease or even that an alcoholic “can't not drink.” It may feel that way to habitual alcohol abusers who are under the domination of their own sin, but the research evidence does not support those myths.

² Fingarette, “Alcoholism: The Mythical Disease,” op. cit., p. 64.

³ Peele, “Control Yourself,” op. cit., p. 25.

⁴ Anderson Spickard and Barbara Thompson. *Dying for a Drink*. Dallas: Word Publishing, 1985, p. 41.

⁵ Bob and Pauline Bartosch. *Alcoholism...Sin or Sickness?* La Habra, CA: Overcomers Outreach, 1987, p. 1.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 1-2.

While the myths of alcoholism-as-disease continue to parade as facts, Dr. Herbert Fingarette reports:

The United States Supreme Court, after reviewing detailed briefs pro and con, has consistently held in favor of those who say that alcoholics are responsible for their behavior, and has concluded that medical evidence does not demonstrate their drinking to be involuntary.^{7 8}

In view of the research he says:

Alcoholics do not “lack control” in the ordinary sense of those words. Studies show that they can limit their drinking in response to appeals and arguments or rules and regulations. In experiments they will reduce or eliminate drinking in return for such rewards as money, social privileges, or exemption from boring tasks. To object that these experiments are invalid because they occur in protected settings is to miss the point, which is precisely that the drinking patterns of alcoholics can vary dramatically in different settings.⁹

Nevertheless, strong proponents of AA firmly believe they are not responsible for their drinking because they have a disease and that their Twelve-Step program is essential to sobriety.

04.5 Is There an Addictive Personality?

Since no “allergy” or any other physical agent or other malady has been proved to cause habitual drunkenness, other theories have been developed. One of them is that there is an “addictive personality.” There have been mixed results on research about the so-called addictive personality, but the bottom line is this: “there’s no such thing as an addictive personality.”¹⁰

The Harvard Medical School Mental Health Letter says:

Now it has become clear that there is no single type of addictive or dependence-prone personality, and no personality traits that reliably indicate in advance who is likely to use or misuse drugs.¹¹

The report continues:

According to the most reliable studies, the great majority of alcoholics do not develop the disorder because they are anxious, depressed, victims of child abuse, or emotionally unstable. They tend to be active and self-confident as children and adolescents. Most alcoholics have no personality disorder or other psychiatric disorder before they become dependent.... Depressed people in general do not have a high rate of alcoholism.¹²

On the other hand, a study of Swedish children examined at age 11 and again at age 27 indicated that “the children most likely to become alcohol abusers are relatively fearless, constantly in search of novelty, and relatively

⁷ Fingarette, “We should Reject the Disease Concept of Alcoholism,” op. cit., p. 6.

⁸ Did this issue go all the way to the Supreme Court?

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Deborah Franklin, “Is There an Addictive Personality?” In *Health*, November/December 1990, p. 44.

¹¹ “Alcohol Abuse and Dependence,” op. cit., p. 1.

¹² Ibid., pp. 1-2.

indifferent to other people's opinions of them."¹³ This seems to fly in the face of the prevalent myth that people become addicts because they have low self-esteem.

04.6 Is Alcoholism in the Genes?

Even though there is no "addictive personality," could alcoholism be inherited? Peele says:

In the case of alcoholism, the inability to control one's drinking is today described as an inherited trait. This is wrong. In fact, even biologically-oriented research has shown that loss of control is not an inheritable trait, as A.A. originally claimed. Rather...researchers see alcoholism as the cumulative result of a long history of drinking.¹⁴

Many believe that it's all in the genes. Because research was being conducted, people assumed there was a link. Unfortunately too many people stated the possibility as a fact. For instance in her book *Can Christians Love Too Much*, Dr. Margaret Rinck states decisively (but erroneously):

In the case of alcoholism, there is a clear genetic predisposition which sets people up for this problem.¹⁵

As with many authoritative-sounding statements she makes, Rinck gives no research evidence, **because there is none**.

While there has been research into the possibility of genetic involvement in alcoholism, nothing had been conclusive until recently. But now the research results are in and they do **not** reveal any genetic involvement in alcoholism! An article in *Psychiatric News* sums up the research conducted by the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism:

Contrary to data reported last April, the new study revealed no significant difference in the number of alcoholics or nonalcoholic control subjects who carried the A1 allele, the form of the dopamine receptor gene touted as the genetic link to alcoholism in the earlier study.¹⁶

The researchers concluded: "This study does not support a widespread or consistent association between the D2 receptor gene and alcoholism."¹⁷

In spite of those clear results, many people will continue to believe the gene theory. Whenever research is being done to support an already held belief, many jump to conclusions too fast. And that is what happened in the early

¹³ "Children at Risk for Alcoholism." The Harvard Medical School Mental Health Letter, Vol. 6, No. 2, August 1989, p. 5.

¹⁴ Peele, "Control Yourself," op. cit., p. 23.

¹⁵ Margaret Jesus. Rinck. *Can Christians Love Too Much?* Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989.

¹⁶ "Genetic Link to Alcoholism Refuted," *Psychiatric News*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 18 January 1991, p. 1.

¹⁷ Annabel M. Bolos et al, "Population and Pedigree Studies Reveal a Lack of Association Between the Dopamine D2 Receptor Gene and Alcoholism." *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol. 264, No. 24, December 26, 1990, p. 3156.

genetic research having to do with alcoholism. Later follow-up research simply does not support the earlier claims.

Dr. Richard J. Frances, member of the American Psychiatric Association Council on Addiction Psychiatry, urges researchers to exercise caution in even talking about their research before the results are established. He says that "we are in danger of losing our credibility when findings are rushed into print without sufficient review."¹⁸ But, he may have little to worry about since news coverage is usually minor when such widely believed myths are exploded by follow-up research. Only his colleagues who read the professional journals might notice the scandal. By now nearly everyone erroneously believes there is some genetic link to alcoholism vulnerability. To refute that belief will take more than extensive scientific research. It will require a giant shift in faith.

04.7 Dangers of Calling Behavior a Disease

04.6 Discussion Questions

1. Was the following said of the pandemic or alcoholism as a disease? "This myth, now widely advertised and widely accepted, is neither helpfully compassionate nor scientifically valid. It promotes false beliefs and inappropriate attitudes, as well as harmful, wasteful, and ineffective social policies."
2. Did this issue go all the way to the Supreme Court?

¹⁸ "Genetic Link to Alcoholism Refuted," op. cit., p. 18.