

A Comparison of Alcoholics and Non-alcoholics Charged With Rape

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In the last decade a growing body of research has called attention to the consumption of alcohol as a factor contributing to the commission of rape. Rada, Amir, and Gebhard *et al.*, have stressed the association between rape and alcoholism, although the estimated strength of that association (correlation) has varied widely.^{1,2,3,4,5} The purpose of this paper is to assess the contribution of alcoholism and alcohol use to the occurrence of rape, through examination of the life histories of alcohol use in prisoners who have been charged with rape.

Rada has proposed three mechanisms for the contribution of alcohol consumption to the act of rape. First, the consumption of alcohol may lower an individual's inhibitions against rape and may contribute to his sense of power. Second, an alcoholic may commit rape as "one of a series of maladaptive and self-destructive behaviors resulting from personality deterioration secondary to 'alcohol' addiction," with the addiction dynamic being the primary problem. Third, alcohol may chemically trigger in some individuals a process producing sexual and aggressive fantasies, desires, and sensations, which in turn lead to rape.

In a series of reports, Rada and his colleagues have examined seventy-seven rapists being treated at a facility for mentally-disordered sex offenders. They found these patients to be alcoholic according to the criteria of Selzer and the National Council on Alcoholism;^{6,7} however, they were unable to find clear-cut support for their typology among the psychosocial characteristics of these rapists. They concluded that the main difference between alcoholic and non-alcoholic rapists was the addiction to alcohol.

Wilson has proposed a contrasting theory which emphasizes social learning as the primary mechanism for alcohol's contribution to rape.⁸ He argues that alcohol consumption has learned and socially-defined effects which are differentially reinforced by cognitive and modeling experiences rather than by biochemical action. It is in a social context of alcohol use that individuals learn to engage in actions for which they assume no

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personal responsibility. This contrasts with Rada's view which sees alcohol as primarily a biochemical disinhibitor for fully internalized norms against rape. Therefore it is a major issue whether alcohol acts primarily through social or through biochemical mechanisms.

The above theories suggest mechanisms by which alcohol can contribute to rape, but they do not provide an explanation for why alcohol is not a sufficient condition for rape or criminal behavior. As Smith points out, although a high proportion of criminals have abused alcohol, the vast majority of alcoholics and alcohol users do not engage in any criminal acts.⁹ Therefore we must consider an additional view, that an individual with a longstanding career of deviance may exhibit a range of antisocial behaviors including, in some instances, both alcohol abuse and violent sexual assault.

In the above discussion we have identified four basic models for the contribution of alcohol to the act of rape:

1. Alcohol pharmacologically releases an individual from his usual constraints, thus permitting rape as one of many possible antisocial acts.
2. Alcohol provides a psychological and social context in which the usual restraints on deviance are not considered relevant.
3. Chronic alcoholism produces psychological and social disorganization in the individual which may result in sexual violence.
4. A person with a deviant personality structure may engage in a wide variety of sociopathy including, but not restricted to, disturbed interpersonal relations, sexual violence, and alcohol abuse.

While these models can be regarded as mutually exclusive competing explanations, they can also be seen as complementary perspectives. Thus Rada's criteria guide our differentiation of the alcoholic from the non-alcoholic. Wilson's ideas underscore the social definitions and conditioning of the event itself, and Smith reminds us to consider other factors which might simultaneously produce both alcoholism and violent sexual assault. In attempting to sort out these background factors we will utilize a life history approach and attempt to identify evidence of sociopathy which may precede or develop concurrently with the abuse of alcohol.

Methods

Over the last nine years the medical author has conducted psychiatric evaluations for the courts in North and Central Florida. These evaluations were based on a semi-structured psychiatric interview which produced both a formal report and informal interview notes. A review of these records identified 88 prisoners who had been charged with rape. A formal coding process was used to excerpt data from these prisoners' records and make them available for statistical analysis. Specific information coded includes family background, school, job and military history, marital adjustment, criminal record, and medical history, including alcohol and drug usage, as well as psychiatric treatment.

Complete data were available on eighty-two of these prisoners.

Individuals were categorized as alcoholic and non-alcoholic following Rada who defined alcoholism as direct admission of alcoholism or the presence of any three of the following: "(i) previous arrests resulting from drinking and/or intoxication, (ii) a history of arrests for driving while intoxicated, (iii) admission of a history of heavy drinking with concomitant interpersonal and social maladjustment, (iv) a history of delirium tremens or blackouts, (v) heavy drinking at the time of the commission of the offense, (vi) a history of seeking help or hospitalization for drinking problems."²

Rada further distinguished heavy drinking on the day of the offense as the equivalent of ten or more beers, moderate drinking as five to nine beers, and light drinking as one to five beers.²

In addition to the coding of single items, the senior author, a psychiatrist, rated the overall level of disturbance for each of eleven background areas, for mental status, and for the degree of disturbance shown in the rape event. These ratings were made prior to the subjects' being classified into the alcoholic and non-alcoholic categories. A value of zero was assigned to "no disturbance," with the values one to three assigned to intermediate levels of disturbance.

Results

When Rada's criteria for alcoholism were applied to each of the prisoners, twenty-seven per cent (N=22) met the criteria to be classified as alcoholic. Forty-seven per cent (N=39) partially met the criteria, and twenty-six per cent (N=21) met none of the criteria; therefore, seventy-three per cent (N=60) were classified as non-alcoholic.

The alcoholics, somewhat older than the non-alcoholics, had ages ranging from 17 to 52 with a mean of 32.4 years; for the non-alcoholics, the ages ranging from sixteen to sixty-eight with a mean of 27.1 years. This difference is significant at the $p < .05$ level. The racial characteristics of the two groups were not significantly different, although only 14 per cent of the alcoholics and 30 per cent of the non-alcoholics were black.

The first factor considered in the histories of the offenders is disturbance of orientation in their families. Both alcoholic and non-alcoholic groups had high levels of family disturbance as measured by loss of parents through divorce, separation, or death. Thirty-six per cent of the alcoholics experienced parental separation before the subject was eighteen years of age as compared to 43% for the non-alcoholic subjects. Before they had reached eighteen years of age, 18% of the alcoholics and 13% of the non-alcoholics had lost their fathers through death; in each group, twice as many fathers as mothers had died. As noted by Newman and Denman, these early losses are possible causes of later sociopathy.¹⁰

The educational setting provides a second arena in which deviance or sociopathy might be seen prior to onset of alcoholism. The mean highest

grade of school completed was the seventh grade for the alcoholics and the eighth grade for the non-alcoholics. Only 9% of the alcoholic group completed tenth grade. The mean age at which the formal education ended was 14.8 years for the alcoholic group and 16.3 years for the non-alcoholic group. Only three of the non-alcoholic subjects started college, while none of the alcoholics attended college, and only two completed high school. Failure to pass one or more grades of school was reported by 80% of the alcoholics and 76% of the non-alcoholics.

It appears that patterns of alcohol use were initiated before the subjects dropped out of school. Although we cannot date the onset of alcoholism, those prisoners classified as alcoholics said they began to drink early, at an average age of 13.9 years, which is typically before leaving school. In contrast, the non-alcoholics began drinking later, at an average of 16.2 years. This difference is significant at the $p < .05$ level. However, we cannot demonstrate whether the drinking caused the school dropout or whether both are simultaneous manifestations of a more general pattern of disturbed behavior.

Further evidence of disturbance in the lives of these individuals is seen as they encounter military service. Of the subjects actually called for military service, 69% of the fifteen alcoholics called and 49% of the thirty non-alcoholics called were either rejected at entrance or given a less than honorable discharge. Additional anecdotal information indicates a high level of interpersonal conflict with both peers and superiors for those who did spend time in the military. When work history is examined, the conflicts seen in the military are continued with frequent job changes due to the subject impulsively quitting or being fired.

Both alcoholic and non-alcoholic defendants show disturbance in their marital relationships. Eighty-two per cent of the alcoholics married at some time, but only 27% of the total were married at the time of the offense. Fifty-three per cent of the non-alcoholics had been married, but only 23% were married at the time of the crime. Even this understates the amount of disturbance because some respondents remarried after earlier difficulties. The lower percentage of marriage in the non-alcoholic group is partially attributable to their younger age. Both groups reported high levels of conflict with spouse during their marriages with a substantial proportion of that attributed to alcohol use and physical abuse. It was not uncommon for wives to initiate the separations due to alcohol abuse.

Prior to the present offense, all of the alcoholics and 87% of the non-alcoholics reported at least one prior arrest with the mean number of arrests being 4.68 for the alcoholics and 2.50 for the non-alcoholics. The excess number for the alcoholics is significant at $p < .001$.

Table 1 shows that high percentages of both alcoholics and non-alcoholics had previously been charged with rape, other sex offenses, or assault. The differences between alcoholic and non-alcoholic rapists were not significant for these major offenses. Significant differences were found in charges of violence other than assault for alcoholics, and more

charges unrelated to alcohol, sex, or violence were found in the non-alcoholics. Thus we have seen a progression of disturbed social behavior leading up to the time of the offense for which the subjects are currently charged.

TABLE 1
PREVIOUS CRIMINAL RECORDS OF RAPE DEFENDANTS:
A COMPARISON OF ALCOHOLIC WITH NON-ALCOHOLIC

	Alcoholic N=22		Non-alcoholic N=60		Significance
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	
Alcohol Charges	15	68	4	7	p < .001
Rape Charges	5	23	8	13	N.S.
Other Sex Charges	3	14	10	17	N.S.
Assault Charges	8	36	11	18	N.S.
Other Violence Charges	10	45	8	13	p < .01
Non-Alc., Non-Sex, Non-Viol	1	5	18	30	p < .05
*Any Criminal Charge	22	100	52	87	p < .10
*Sex or Violence Charges	16	73	30	50	p < .10
*Sex and Violence Charges	7	32	6	10	p < .05

*These represent combinations for separate offenses.

TABLE 2
A COMPARISON OF DRINKING AT THE TIME OF ALLEGED CRIME
BY ALCOHOLIC AND NON-ALCOHOLIC DEFENDANTS

	Alcoholic N=22	Non-alcoholic N=60
Heavy	13 (59%)	18 (30%)
Moderate	5 (23%)	3 (5%)
Light	3 (14%)	11 (18%)
Not at all	1 (4%)	28 (47%)

$\chi^2 = 17.07$, $df = 3$, $p < .05$

Patterns of disturbance continued to be observed in the defendant's use of alcohol on the day of the crime. Table 2 shows that almost all of the alcoholics and over half of the non-alcoholics reported drinking at the time of the crime. Furthermore, 59% of the alcoholics and 30% of the non-alcoholics were drinking heavily. The difference between the groups is significant at the $p < .05$ level. Those heavy drinkers who reported blackouts on the day of the offense ($N=17$) were unable to supply further details about the context of the offense.

Use of drugs other than alcohol not accompanied by use of alcohol on the day of the alleged offense was not reported by any of the alcoholics and by only one of the non-alcoholics. The use of a combination of drugs and alcohol on the day of the offense was reported by 5% of the alcoholics and 10% of the non-alcoholics. Some form of previous drug use was admitted by 59% of the alcoholics and 48% of the non-alcoholics. For 27% of the alcoholics and 25% of the non-alcoholics this prior drug use was of more than one kind of drug.

TABLE 3
RELATIONSHIP OF DEFENDANT TO RAPE VICTIM:
A COMPARISON OF THE ALCOHOLIC WITH THE NON-ALCOHOLIC DEFENDANT

	Alcoholic N=22	Non-alcoholic N=57
Relative	7 (32%)	6 (11%)
Acquaintance	9 (41%)	16 (28%)
Stranger	6 (27%)	35 (61%)

$X^2 = 8.76, df = 2, p < .05$

Table 3 shows the relationship of the defendant to the victim. In the alcoholic group, seven (32%) selected relatives as victims; all but two being either natural or step-daughters. Only six (27%) allegedly assaulted strangers. In contrast, thirty-five (61%) of the non-alcoholics selected strangers as targets while only six (11%) chose relatives. The remainder of the victims were acquainted with the assailant in some manner. One non-alcoholic, not counted above, attacked both an acquaintance and a stranger. The relationship was not known for two additional defendants. Under Florida statutes a male can be a rape (sexual battery) victim, and this was the case for two of the alcoholics and eight of the non-alcoholics.

The age of the victims of alcoholics ranged from two to eighty-one years with a mean of twenty-five. For the non-alcoholics, victims ranged from six to ninety-one years with a mean of twenty. Most of the incidents involved victims of the same race as the assailant. Within the alcoholic group, nineteen (86.4%) offenses involved only whites, two (9.1%) involved only blacks and one (4.5%) involved a black defendant attacking a white victim. For the non-alcoholics the pattern was similar with forty-three (72.9%) involving only whites, seven (11.9%) involving only blacks and nine (15.3%) involving black assailants and white victims.

Because these data were collected as part of a psychiatric evaluation, it is possible to go beyond the social history discussed above and to consider medical and psychiatric factors having an influence on the defendant. A high proportion of the alcoholic and non-alcoholic defendants had anomalous medical and psychiatric histories. Seizures were reported by 18% of the alcoholic group but only 3% of the non-alcoholics. Loss of consciousness after receiving a blow to the head was reported by 45% of the alcoholics and 35% of the non-alcoholics. Prior psychiatric hospitalization was indicated by 36% of the alcoholic group and 30% of the non-alcoholics. Eighteen per cent of the alcoholic subjects and 20% of the non-alcoholic subjects reported prior outpatient psychiatric treatment. Past attempts of suicide were made by 32% of the alcoholics and 20% of the non-alcoholics.

A mental status exam was conducted as a central part of the interviews with defendants, having as its goal determination of the defendant's sanity at the time of the offense and his competency to assist counsel in preparation of his defense. Nearly all of the respondents were judged to have been sane at the time of the offense and were judged to be competent for the purpose of standing trial. None of the alcoholics was considered

insane, and only one was not competent. Four of the non-alcoholics were considered insane, and they remained incompetent to stand trial. When broader psychiatric diagnostic criteria were applied, five of the alcoholics were considered to have borderline or mild mental retardation, three had evidence of an organic brain syndrome, and one was psychotic. On the other hand, sixteen of the non-alcoholics showed intellectual deficit, two had evidence of organic brain syndromes, and one had evidence of psychosis (schizophrenia). Although not diagnostically categorized, most of the remaining subjects in both the alcoholic and non-alcoholic groups had many of the characteristics of personality disorder.

A very high percentage of the defendants denied that the act of rape had occurred. Sometimes this denial was maintained after a plea of guilty or *nolo contendere* was entered. Only one (5%) of the alcoholics admitted to rape, and seventeen (21%) of the non-alcoholics made this admission. The difference between groups was significant at the $p < .05$ level.

As indicated above, each prisoner was rated for degree of disturbance in each of thirteen areas of life history. Moderate levels of disturbance were shown by both groups in nearly all areas. The exceptions were the absence in both groups of strong drug abuse, the relatively low level of sexual dysfunction as reported by the alcoholic group, and the infrequent treatment for psychiatric problems in the non-alcoholic group. Overall, the alcoholic group had higher disturbance scores with significance being reached for military adjustment, previous criminal activity, alcohol abuse, and medical problems. The non-alcoholic group had slightly higher levels of disturbance in work performance, sexual dysfunction, mental status, and the character of the rape event; although none of these reached significance.

Summary and Conclusions

The primary purpose of this paper has been to assess the contribution of alcohol abuse to rape. Through examination of life history materials and the circumstances surrounding the rape itself, it appears that alcohol does contribute to rape, both through its use at the time of the crime and through its association with disturbance in the lives of the rapists. However, it appears that alcohol alone is not a sufficient explanation for most of the instances of rape considered. For both the alcoholic and non-alcoholic prisoners, long standing and multifaceted histories of disturbed behavior were recorded. It appears therefore that alcohol abuse is but one part of the picture, with sociopathy and other forms of interpersonal disturbance contributing to the criminal act. These in turn appear to have arisen from social and psychopathological developmental factors, including early family dissolution through parental separation and death, and early failures in school performance. Their adult life experiences show disturbances in military, occupational, and marital adjustment.

The alcoholics stand out as more severely disturbed than the non-alcoholics both in the amount and pattern of deviant behavior. The most

pertinent difference is found in the alcoholics' larger number of past criminal charges for violence, whether related to sex or not. This is consistent with current views that rape should be seen more as an act of violence than as sexual gratification. As expected, the alcoholics were more likely to be drinking heavily at time of the offense than the non-alcoholics, although, in fact, over half of the non-alcoholics were drinking at the time of the offense. It also appears that the problems of the alcoholics began earlier than for the non-alcoholics, as evidenced by their earlier onset of drinking and the earlier ages at which they dropped out of school.

Although we have demonstrated some association of alcohol abuse with both current acts of rape and past histories of violence, the evidence available does not distinguish cause from effect. Rada agreed that the alcohol chemically produces changes of a complex psychological nature which in turn promote rape.¹ The evidence presented does not refute Rada's argument or Wilson's arguments that the effect of alcohol is primarily a learned social and psychological response.⁸ On the other hand, the data suggest that such immediate effects of alcohol are not sufficient to account for the observed cases of rape which arise out of long-standing patterns of deviance. The early and continued disturbance observed in the lives of the alcoholic rapists is more consistent with the argument of Smith that there is a "criminal subset" of drinkers who repeatedly commit criminal acts.⁹ Furthermore, our data are consistent with the findings of Robins that sociopathy begins as early as childhood, and, once established, is likely to remain through adulthood and to be associated with high degrees of alcoholism and arrests for assaultive behavior.¹¹

If left to its natural course, this longstanding pattern of sociopathy and alcoholism provides a pessimistic prognosis for these offenders. Therefore, we must ask whether some form of intervention could provide a more favorable outcome. While one cannot easily remake the lives of these individuals and undo previous conditioning toward criminal activity, one can provide an intervention designed to reduce the probability of repeated and more extreme criminal acts. Through a collaboration between the judicial system and court appointed psychiatrists, a program could be established to identify repeat offenders who are alcoholic and have at least one prior conviction for violence against persons. Offenders meeting these criteria are considered to be at risk for subsequent violent and sexual offenses.¹² Intervention programs for these offenders should address both their alcoholism and any proclivity to respond to frustration with aggressive behaviors.

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