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Perceived alcohol norm qualities of alcoholics in rehabilitation

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1. Introduction

Norm qualities are a relevant topic in sociological literature on deviant behavior including alcohol consumption. Attention has increasingly been focused upon the concomitants and consequences of deviance from various types of norms. Social norm qualities differed (see Mizruchi & Perrucci, 1962; Larson & Abu-Laban, 1968; Hanson, 1974, 1977) are (1) proscriptive (i. e., the extent to which norms direct people to avoid and reject specific behaviors), (2) prescriptive (i. e., the extent to which norms direct people to perform certain behaviors), and (3) nonscriptive normative conditions (i. e., absence of any directiveness) during socialization and in recent life. Most research involving such perceived norm qualities for alcohol consumption has been limited mainly to healthy samples. In the present study alcohol norm qualities during socialization and in recent reference groups of alcoholics just starting inpatient alcohol rehabilitation were analyzed and related to treatment outcome (one-year follow-up).

2. Method

Subjects were 185 West German alcoholics just beginning a six-week inpatient alcohol rehabilitation program. The sample consisted of 115 men and 70 women (mean age: 40.1 years, mean duration of alcoholism: 10.2 years). At the beginning of treatment the patients responded to a questionnaire measuring experienced norm qualities during socialization (reference groups: parents, peers during adolescence, former colleagues, clergymen/religious norms) and in recent life (reference groups: immediate family, close friends, recent colleagues, friends in clubs/associations). For each reference group the patients were asked to rate whether prescriptive, proscriptive, or nonscriptive norms of alcohol consumption were/are supported. One-year follow-up data from 89 former patients and their family doctors indicate that 69 of them are still abstinent.

3. Results

Table 1 shows the percentages of the sample agreeing with the alcohol norm qualities regarding the eight different reference groups. Examination of this table reveals that prescriptive normative conditions dominate during socialization and in the recent life of alcoholics, a result which is in agreement with data from healthy samples (e. g., college students; see Hanson, 1974). During socialization and in recent life above all peers and colleagues are perceived to intercede for a nonscriptive alcohol norm quality. In contrast to this parents and the immediate family are perceived to have proscriptive norm orientations. This is distinctive evidence for the normative stress alcoholics experience in their close social environment.

Table 1: *Percent agreeing with each alcohol norm quality (N = 185)*

Reference Group	Norm Quality			
	Proscriptive	Prescriptive	Nonscriptive	
Own parents	47	46	7	
Peers during adolescence	10	43	47	
Former colleagues (at work)	7	49	44	
Clergymen/religious norms	43	40	17	
Immediate family	63	29	8	
Close friends	18	50	32	
Recent colleagues (at work)	17	48	35	
Friends in clubs/associations	17	49	34	
	\bar{x} (%)	27.8	44.2	28.0

To study the relationship between the alcohol norm qualities of alcoholics starting inpatient treatment to rehabilitation outcome (one-year follow-up) a scale score was computed (proscriptive norm = 1 point, prescriptive norm = 2 points, nonscriptive norm = 3 points) indicating very restrictive (minimum: 8 points) versus very liberal, nonscriptive (maximum: 24 points) perceived normative conditions during socialization and in recent life. Internal consistence (Cronbach's alpha) of this scale is $r(tt) = .73$. The mean score of men ($\bar{X} = 18.34$) is significantly higher than that of women ($\bar{X} = 16.25$; $t(183) = 4.22$, $p < .001$). Men experience more nonscriptive normative conditions regarding alcohol consumption than women. The follow-up data show that former patients who are still abstinent have on an average significantly lower scale scores ($\bar{X} = 17.3$) than those who drink again one year after rehabilitation ($\bar{X} = 20.1$; $t(87) = 2.87$, $p < .01$). Thus perceived pro- and prescriptive normative conditions during socialization and in the recent life of alcoholics are related to a favorable prognosis, whereas experienced nonscriptive norm qualities are related to a less favorable treatment outcome.

4. Discussion

The results presented confirm the relevance of different social alcohol norm qualities alcoholics experience during their socialization and in their recent life for rehabilitation and treatment outcome. Attention is especially drawn to the conflicting norm qualities which alcoholics perceive different reference groups to propagate. Pro-, pre- und nonscriptive normative statements and their explications as well as subjective explanations should be considered in the treatment and rehabilitation of alcoholics. Because the reference groups of the patients and thus the normative conditions surrounding the alcoholic can be modified in rehabilitation only in part, clarification, discussion, and treatment of those normative conditions in rehabilitation is essential for positive transfer and long-term success of rehabilitation measures.

5. References

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