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Brief Reports

Why Teetotallers Abstain

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Summary: Drinking practices and attitudes to alcohol among the members of a Southampton church were investigated by questionnaire (602 subjects) and by interviews (126 subjects). Teetotallers were older than drinkers, and included a higher proportion of women. They perceived their childhood upbringing and the teaching of the Bible as the main factors influencing them to abstain. Both teetotallism and alcoholism were more common among relatives of teetotallers than among relatives of social drinkers.

Extensive research on excessive drinking has been carried out in Britain, but scant attention has been paid to the inverse phenomenon of teetotallism, and the question of whether there is a link between the two.

The Bible does not condemn the drinking of alcohol, except in excess (Psalms 104 verses 14–15; Ephesians 5 verse 18). Yet the nonconformist church was the prime influence in the development of the temperance movement in the nineteenth century, and continues to promote teetotallism today. Parental example is another likely influence on drinking practice, and a tendency for teetotallers to come from teetotal homes has been shown both in Norway (Wallace *et al*, 1972) and in America (Goodwin *et al*, 1969).

The aims of this study were to investigate the origins of total abstinence in a group of practising Christians in England, with special reference to the transmission of knowledge, attitudes, and practices about alcohol from one generation to the next.

Method

Subjects were recruited from an Evangelical church which, although not forbidding drink, has a high percentage of teetotallers among its congregation. A questionnaire requesting information on age, sex, drinking habits, and asking whether the subject was willing to be interviewed was distributed in the church one Sunday. A copy of the questionnaire was placed in each hymn book before both morning and evening service, and the Minister asked everyone present to complete one.

For the purpose of this study, a 'teetotaller' was defined as someone over 20 years of age who had not drunk any alcohol for at least five years. All teetotallers identified from the questionnaire were approached by letter requesting a home interview, if they had indicated themselves willing. An equal number of 'moderate drinkers', i.e. people who drank alcohol but not more than an average of two drinks per day, were also approached. The moderate drinkers were matched with the teetotallers for sex. Exact matching for age proved impossible, because the teetotallers were older.

Following hour-long pilot interviews with five of the teetotallers, a structured interview lasting 20–40 minutes was devised. This covered the following areas: knowledge and opinions about alcohol in society, e.g. drink and drive laws; attitudes towards problem drinkers; drinking habits of subjects' parents, and what their parents had told them about alcohol; drinking habits of subjects' spouses and children; the influence of the church on their drinking habits, and what they considered the most important influences contributing to their abstinence. As it seemed likely that subjects' interpretation of certain terms would vary according to the strictness of their moral views, the interviewer (MS) took care to explain such terms, using practical standard definitions. 'Alcoholics' were defined according to the World Health Organisation's criteria as 'those excessive drinkers whose dependence upon alcohol has attained such a degree that they show a noticeable mental disturbance or an interference with their bodily or mental health, their interpersonal relationships and their smooth social and economic functioning'.

Results

Six hundred and two people completed the questionnaire. This was clearly a high response rate (a precise response rate was impossible to calculate, because some of the congregation would have been present at both services).

One hundred and thirty-seven respondents (56 men, 81 women) reported they were teetotal; 465 (215 men, 250 women) reported they did drink alcohol, in most cases less than once a week.

Seventy-five of the teetotallers, and 271 of the drinkers expressed themselves willing to be interviewed. Five teetotallers took part in the pilot study, four were lost through ill-health, work commitments or change of address, so 66 (33 men, 33 women) were interviewed for the main study. Seventy of the moderate drinkers were approached as a comparison group, and 60 of these (29 men, 31 women) were finally interviewed, ten being lost for various reasons as above.

The final groups of teetotallers and drinkers did not differ significantly in marital status, or social class: 80% of both groups were from social classes I or II. The mean age of the teetotallers was 55, and that of the drinkers was 47.

Forty-four of the teetotallers had been teetotal all their lives. The other 22 were former drinkers, and two of them said they had previously had a drinking problem. The lifetime and non-lifetime teetotallers were considered separately in the analysis of results.

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The chi^2 test was used in analysis except where otherwise stated.

Families

Most lifetime teetotallers had teetotal mothers (89%), teetotal fathers (73%), and one or more other teetotallers in their family of origin (89%). They had usually been 'very close' to their parents in childhood, especially to the mother (80%), had received parental warnings about the dangers of drink (59%), been forbidden to drink when they were growing up (79%), and considered their parents had exercised an enduring influence on their drinking habits (84%). Lifetime teetotallers were also likely to have teetotal spouses (81%), and if they had adult children, to report that they also were teetotal (65%). Statistically, the lifetime teetotallers were significantly different from the moderate drinkers as regards all these characteristics.

The non-lifetime teetotallers closely resembled the moderate drinkers in the characteristics of their families of origin, but like the lifetime teetotallers they tended to have teetotal spouses (71%).

Blood relations with alcohol problems were reported by 54% of both lifetime and non-lifetime teetotallers, in contrast to 33% of moderate drinkers (NS). Lifetime teetotallers were more likely than either of the other groups to report drinking problems among their adult children, though the number who had adult children was rather small to permit valid comparison.

Alcohol and religion

All subjects said they were Christians and believed the Bible was true, but the groups gave different interpretations of Biblical teaching on alcohol. Seventeen (26%) of teetotallers believed the Bible says all drink is wrong, but all the drinkers believed the Bible permits drink in moderation ($P < .001$). Lifetime teetotallers were significantly more likely to have had Christian parents than the other groups.

Twelve (55%) of non-lifetime teetotallers said their conversion to Christianity had been their main reason for giving up drink. There was a strong correlation between the number of years as a Christian and number of years as a teetotaller for this group (Pearson's $r = 0.8$, $P < .001$). Fifty-five (83%) of all the teetotallers thought their Christianity had at least some influence on their decision to abstain, but the lifetime teetotallers usually considered this intimately linked with the influence of their parents.

Main reasons for abstinence

Religion and parental influence, or a mixture of the two, were by far the most common factors leading teetotallers to abstain. Other reasons, including health, the cost of alcohol, seeing the adverse effects of drink on others, the taste of alcohol, and the availability of cheaper insurance for teetotallers, were each cited by a small proportion of subjects.

Attitudes towards alcohol and alcoholics

Over 95% of all subjects thought alcohol was being misused in modern Britain and too much of it was consumed.

Teetotallers were more likely than drinkers to support stricter drink-and-drive laws and harsher penalties for drunken drivers, and were less likely to have alcohol in their homes. Non-lifetime teetotallers had the strictest views.

Over 80% of all subjects said that pity was their predominant emotion towards alcoholics. A few of the teetotallers reported feeling hatred or disgust, but few subjects regarded alcoholism as an illness. The majority blamed the alcoholic himself for his condition, and this was especially true of the non-lifetime teetotallers.

Tea, coffee and cigarette consumption

All but one of the subjects drank tea and coffee regularly; 42 (64%) of the teetotallers, in contrast to 28 (47%) of the drinkers, drank more than five cups per day.

Only one (1.5%) of the teetotallers and five (8%) of the drinkers smoked cigarettes. Approximately one-third of the general population smoke.

Tables showing exact responses to the questionnaire are available from the authors.

Discussion

Our sample is not typical of the general population, since it consists of regular churchgoers, mostly belonging to social classes I or II. How far it is representative of this country's population of teetotallers is not known. Under 10% of the general population in Southern England is teetotal (Wilson, 1980), so the limited time and money available for this project rendered it impractical to seek subjects via a general population survey. The church was chosen because we knew it would provide a reasonable number of subjects for a preliminary investigation, and the use of a comparison group of moderate drinkers from the same source should demonstrate those characteristics peculiar to teetotallers.

Only just over half the questionnaire respondents volunteered to be interviewed, but as this proportion was the same for each of the drinking categories, it seems unlikely that the volunteers differed consistently from the rest as regards their views about alcohol. A higher proportion might well have agreed to the interview if encouraged to do so, but the church officials were unwilling for us to apply any pressure.

Transmission of attitudes from one generation to the next appeared to have been very influential for those subjects who had been teetotal all their lives. Most of this group came from teetotal backgrounds, felt emotionally close to their parents and accepting of their views, had married other teetotallers, and were bringing their own children up to be teetotal.

Drink problems were more common in the blood relatives of the teetotallers than in those of the drinkers. This trend was not statistically significant, but is interesting and merits comment. It suggests

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that some children brought up in homes where drink is strictly prohibited may rebel into alcoholic over-indulgence (Davies & Stacey, 1972), or alternatively, that the presence of an alcoholic in a family may lead some other relatives to eschew drink completely.

Religion was also an important influence for most of the teetotallers. Subjects who had been converted to Christianity in adult life had often given up alcohol at the same time, perhaps because they desired an outward expression of their faith. It was notable that the Bible's statements on alcohol were differently interpreted according to subjects' own views on drink.

Neither cost nor health were important as motives for abstinence. Perhaps these practical considerations influence people to cut down their drinking rather than to stop completely; the total abstainer tends to be motivated by moral or idealistic principles.

Our findings are in keeping with those reported in studies from Norway (Wallace *et al*, 1972) and the USA (Goodwin *et al*, 1969), which both found that the correlates of teetotallism included female sex, religious conviction, and teetotal parents.

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Attempted Infanticide

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Summary: The offence of attempted infanticide has hitherto been unknown in English Law. A case is here described in which a woman was convicted of infanticide, and attempted infanticide, having been charged with murder and attempted murder. The relevance of this is discussed, together with an aspect of infanticide previously unreported in the English literature, i.e. repetition of the offence.

The offence of infanticide was first introduced into the Law of England and Wales in 1922, and was further amended in 1938. The Law as it now stands makes provision for women involved in cases of homicide of their children aged under 12 months to be charged with the lesser offence, amounting in effect to manslaughter, "if . . . at the time . . . the balance of her mind was disturbed by reason of her not having recovered from the effect of giving birth to the child or by reason of the effect of lactation consequent upon the birth". The offence only applied to a period of one year following childbirth

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