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# Wives of alcoholics: Precipitating factors presented in a Family Service Agency

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WIVES OF ALCOHOLICS

Precipitating Factors Presented in a  
Family Service Agency

A THESIS

SUBMITTED BY  
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## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

This study was stimulated by the writer's observations that there are difficulties in establishing helpful relationships with the wives of alcoholics who apply to a family agency. Often these women come in during a time of crisis and do not return after the initial interview. The writer began to wonder why wives of alcoholics come to a family agency in the first place and if their reasons for coming did not in some way affect their not continuing the casework contact to termination. The writer decided to study the factors surrounding their decision to seek help at the particular time. These factors are called precipitating factors and are the immediate reasons causing people to come into an agency for help.

### Problem Formulation

A study was set up to explore the precipitating factors presented by the wives of alcoholics when they come to a family service agency seeking help. More specifically, a plan was formulated to study the case records of wives of alcoholics who applied to the Family Service Organization of Worcester, Massachusetts. Although it has been assumed by many, including some professional people in the field of human behavior, that the husband's alcoholism was the reason for these wives coming to the agency, the writer felt that this was not the case. The writer's assumption is that the husband's alcoholism is not in itself the reasons these wives

come for help, but rather an imbalance in the family situation has occurred causing the wife to seek help at this particular time. Case studies indicate that in almost all instances the husband had been alcoholic for many years and the drinking was no different now than it had been all along.

Margaret Lewis wrote, as a result of her study of wives seen at one of the family service agencies in Cleveland, that:

The majority of these wives had married their husbands knowing they were drinking men at the time; they would not object to certain amount of social drinking and it would be alright if the husband went out with the boys occasionally if he would only come home at the time he promised. An occasional binge would be understandable if not accompanied by abuse.

Consequently it seemed apparent that something other than the man's drinking had aroused unbearable tension and brought the wife to an agency for help. The threat seemed almost to involve a question of personal survival. These threats seemed to fall into four general areas: 1. economic debacle; 2. the resentment of the adolescent children and their loss of respect for both parents; 3. the strain on the woman's physical health; 4. fear of loss of her husband, which was possibly the deepest though not the most conscious threat.<sup>1</sup>

The writer would like to compare her findings with those of Miss Lewis. The writer would like to see if the wives studied come in because of a threat of personal survival, and if so, to see if these threats are the same as those found by Miss Lewis.

In evaluating Miss Lewis's study there was no discussion about how she determined that the husband was really an alcoholic. It is conceivable that a wife may distort the actual picture of her husband's

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1. Margaret L. Lewis, "The Initial Contact with Wives of Alcoholics," Journal of Social Casework, 35: pp. 9-10, January 1954.

drinking through some neurotic motivation of her own. There may be instances when the husband will take an occasional drink at a party or other social gathering, and the wife because of her own social familial background does not approve of the consumption of any alcoholic beverage. Because of her own standards against alcohol in any degree, the husband's occasional drink becomes distorted in her own thinking to alcoholism. As a result of this type of neurotic distortion the writer plans to study only those cases where the alcoholic problem has been substantiated as such by some other reliable source. The sources to be used as reliable include; Alcoholics Anonymous, Committee on Education of Alcoholism, alcoholic clinics and hospitals, psychiatrists and other medical practitioners, the police, and other social agencies.

#### Definition of Alcoholism

Gladys Price at the Washingtonian Hospital says in defining an alcoholic that;

The consensus of opinion seems to be that drinking is a problem when it interferes with the normal physical, psychological, occupational, and social activities of the person. It is an addiction, according to some physicians, when it is necessary to take a drink the next morning in order to get over a hangover, when the drinking is in control of a person rather than the person in control of the drinking. It is then that it becomes a problem.<sup>2</sup>

Francis W. McPeck defines the chronic alcoholic as;

one with little or no control left over either the occasions of drinking or the amount . . . the alcoholic

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2. Gladys M. Price, "The Alcoholic Patient Needs Social Service" - pamphlet, reprinted from the Trained Nurse and Hospital Review, February 1954 (location unknown).

has largely or wholly lost the power of choice. As long as alcohol is accessible to him, he cannot choose any longer to take it or let it alone. He resembles the slave.<sup>3</sup>

From these two writers we see that the alcoholic is one who is controlled by alcohol to the point where his social, physical, psychological, and occupational activities are interfered with.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the precipitating factors causing the wife of an alcoholic to come to a family agency for help. Precipitating factors were loosely defined in the introduction but for purposes of clarity the writer will again define precipitating factors as - one event, or a series of events causing a client to seek help.

#### Value of the Study

As previously stated it is often very difficult for caseworkers to establish meaningful relationships with wives of alcoholics who come into a family agency seeking help. In order to understand why this may happen the writer chose to study the reasons causing these wives to come in at a particular time. Through understanding what really upset these wives enough to seek help, we may be better able to see what help they really want. Perhaps the caseworker can better plan a method of treatment after an understanding of the motivations causing these wives to request agency help.

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3. Francis W. McPeck, "Alcoholism and Religion", Social Action, 16: pp. 14-15, April 15, 1950

### Scope

The writer plans to study twenty-two cases where the husband's alcoholism has been confirmed by his previous observation by Alcoholics Anonymous, Committee of Education on Alcoholism, the police, alcoholic clinics and hospitals, psychiatrists and other medical practitioners, as well as other social agencies.

The twenty-two cases have been the amount obtained of the wives of confirmed alcoholic husbands. These twenty-two cases included all applications of this type over a five year period. The five year period extended from January 1, 1949 to December 31, 1953. The reason for selecting this five year period was that the agency function had changed mainly from that of money giving to present day counseling. The writer also wanted to use closed cases as they were more accessible than more recent cases.

### Technique and Method

The method used for this thesis is the case study. In all cases the material obtained was from the testimonial of the wives. The opinion or feelings of the caseworker involved in each case was not utilized as the writer felt that the wives' verbal expression of their problem was the most important factor in this particular study.

The technique or tool used for this case study was a schedule. The twenty-two cases were reviewed against a schedule which is included in entirety in the appendix. One of the major areas sought was the wife's statement of what specific recent event or precipitating factor occurred

resulting in her application to the agency. The writer felt it was important to find out how long she knew of her husband's drinking problem, and how long they had been married. The number of times the wife came in for interviews before breaking contact, and any subsequent re-applications to the agency was also a very important area to examine.

The twenty-two cases separated into five categories, formed on the basis of precipitating factors for the wives' agency application. Five of these twenty-two cases, one for each category, were selected for presentation as being most representative of the five categories.

Limitations of Study

The findings in this study cannot be used to generalize about all wives of alcoholics but only for those who applied to the family agency whose records were studied in the five year period selected. The scope and function of the agency during the latter part of the five year period studied was undergoing a change from that of financial assistance to present day counseling services whereby financial assistance is used only in rare specific instances. This change in agency function then might serve to alter the results obtained from this study.

Casework techniques and methods have also developed considerably since this period. The field of casework has begun to rely more heavily on a diagnosis of the individual before treatment per se can begin. In this particular type of marital situation the wives' own part in the problem is better understood after a sound diagnosis. A better understanding of family relationships has also developed considerably since 1949. With

this increased understanding of family relationships, and increased use of sound diagnosis the results of this thesis might be different than they are.

In more recent years alcoholism has been found to be only a symptom of other more important personality disturbances. The focus has changed from directly attacking the symptom to examining more thoroughly the total family picture and personality of the wife as well as the alcoholic husband. The writer feels that if the same types of cases were to be examined with our present knowledge of family relationships and personality disturbances, especially in so far as looking at alcoholism as merely a symptom of other factors and not the only factor in itself, then the results and findings in this study would be different.

Psychiatric consultation in this agency is now more readily accessible and more readily used than it was previously. This would serve to aid in a more thorough understanding of clients seen at present.

Despite all the limitations mentioned the writer feels this study still serves some general usefulness, on the level of suggestiveness for more extensive and controlled research.

## CHAPTER II

### THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Although the literature on alcoholism is very extensive, very little has been written about the wives and families of alcoholics. In the survey by this writer only the few articles that are discussed here were found. This concentration of thought and effort upon the alcoholic reflects what is, perhaps, a narrow view of the problem of alcoholism. Modern dynamic thinking about, and knowledge of interpersonal relations has shown us the importance of considering pathology in relation to family structure. We know in general that neurosis is maintained through interlocking patterns of need gratification. This study applies this general principle to the problem of alcoholism.

Gladys Price, Director of Social Service at the Washingtonian Hospital did a study of twenty wives of alcoholics. The wives were seen for casework help, as an adjunct to the husband's treatment and rehabilitation. She said:

The fact that the family of the alcoholic patient must often be taken into consideration in diagnosing his problem and devising a therapeutic regimen has been mentioned frequently in the psychiatric literature. Except, however, for occasional references, usually in case reports, to the kind of relationship existing between some patients and particular members of their families, little has been reported thus far concerning the part the members of the alcoholic's family may play either in the background or in the immediate situation.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Gladys M. Price, "A Study of the Wives of Twenty Alcoholics", Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol, March 1945, 5: p. 620.

The situation in regard to the literature has not changed materially since then.

The community often looks upon the wife of an alcoholic as an innocent, helpless victim of circumstance. Implied in the community's attitude is the idea that the wife has little responsibility, plays no etiological role in the husband's alcoholism. While it seems true that the husband's alcoholism had its origins in factors which existed prior to the marriage, there is good reason to believe that the continuation, and sometimes the exacerbation, of the symptom is partly dependent upon the relationship with the wife.

Whalen, in discussing the wife's role and responsibility in marriage with the alcoholic, represents general assumptions made by most students of the problem. She says:

She sees herself and other people see her as someone who through no fault of her own and in spite of consistent effort on her part, is defeated over and over again by her husband's irresponsible behavior. This is certainly not true. It merely appears to be true. The wife of an alcoholic is not simply the object of mistreatment in a situation which she has no part in creating. Her personality was just as responsible for the making of this marriage as her husband's was; and in the sordid sequence of marital misery which follows, she is not an innocent bystander. She is an active participant in the creation of the problems which ensue.<sup>2</sup>

Whalen here describes and emphasizes the active aspect of the wife's involvement in the alcoholism.

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2. Thelma Whalen, "Wives of Alcoholics. Four Types Seen in a Family Service Agency." Quarterly Journal of Studies of Alcohol, 14: p. 634, December 1953.

Futterman, who investigated personality factors in the wives of alcoholics wrote from sources seen in social agencies, a mental hygiene clinic, and his own private practice. Summarizing his findings he said:

In summary, we may state that there is much clinical evidence pointing to the fact that in many instances the wife of an alcoholic unconsciously, because of her own needs seems to encourage her husband's alcoholism. On the basis of her own ego ideal formed from her identification with a dominant mother, the wife unconsciously feels inadequate and unable to live up to what she considers a wife and mother should be. She chooses as her foil a dependent, weak male with whom she can unconsciously contrast herself and upon whom she can project her own weaknesses, thereby denying their existence in herself.<sup>3</sup>

Both Whalen and Futterman show that the wife plays an important role in the marital situation. As Whalen has indicated, the wife is equally responsible with her husband in the creation and maintenance of the marital problem. The wife's awareness of the alcoholism before the marriage is a cardinal point for our contention. This awareness seems to indicate, despite the rationalizations which cover the real motives, the existence of purposeful, albeit unconscious, factors in the marriage.

There seems to be a lack of insight on the part of the wives into their own part in the marital difficulty and as Price says in her study of twenty wives of alcoholics in 1945:

Although the wives did not place full responsibility on their husbands for excessive drinking it was noteworthy that only three were ready to see that they themselves bore any responsibility in the situation. The recognition by

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3. Samuel Futterman, "Personality Trends in Wives of Alcoholics," Journal of Psychiatric Social Work, 23: pp. 40-41, October 1953.

the wives of their husbands' personality difficulties seemed to be only superficial and did not permeate to the extent that they were able emotionally to treat their husbands as sick people.<sup>4</sup>

Regensburg, in her article, devotes her attention to marital problems in general. She categorizes these problems into four main classes in the attempt to show patterns of adjustment which are helpful in family diagnosis. One of her categories, in which she feels that the marital tensions are gratifying seems quite similar to the pattern we find in marriages where the husband is alcoholic. She says:

In this category are found marriage relationships in which tensions are mutually gratifying, consciously or unconsciously or both. In these situations there seems to be a mutual dependency growing out of the support each spouse obtains for his unhealthy needs from the other spouse. The tension itself gratifies a neurotic need. In these marriages there has often been an unhealthy balance at some earlier period which at the time of application to the agency, is more overtly disturbed, impairing the functioning of the family unit and its members. The usual pattern in this kind of relationship seems to be one of living-in-conflict and the partners are ordinarily people whose ego maturity and integration are markedly inadequate but who desperately need each other.<sup>5</sup>

Regensburg thinks of the precipitating factors in applications to agencies as representing a change in the tension equilibrium. As she puts it:

There is not always a change from balance

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4. Price, op. cit., pp. 621-622.

5. Jeanette Regensburg, "Application of Psychoanalytic Concepts to Casework Treatment of Marital Problems", Journal of Social Casework, 35: p. 427, December 1954.

to imbalance . . . , but a change in the degree of imbalance which makes a hitherto tolerable situation, intolerable for one or both partners.<sup>6</sup>

It is our thesis that such changes in balance, in equilibrium, are the precipitating factors in the application of wives of alcoholics to family agencies. When some factor enters the situation in such a way as to upset the mechanisms and need gratifications which had been satisfying, the wife seeks agency help. Gladys Price, who has already been quoted, wrote at the conclusion of her study:

On the basis of conclusions drawn from the histories that these twenty women gave, the following social and psychological situations seem to have significance in terms of their development. The wife, a basically insecure person, brought to her marriage feelings of insecurity which she hoped would be met by her husband. She expected him to be a strong, dependable, responsible person. As his responsibilities increased, however, he proved to be likewise a dependent person, unable to bear his wife's insecurities because he himself needed someone on whom he could lean. As he failed to be a strong supportive person, able to manage the family responsibilities and meet his wife's needs, she felt unloved, resentful, and aggressive. She therefore put more demands on her husband and, as a result, he was less and less adequate. Thus the vicious circle began. When the wife felt unloved because her husband was unable to let her be the dependent person, she became hostile and aggressive, and strove to prove that he was inadequate in order to justify his seeming lack of love for her. The wife found some outlet, frequently using the children as a focal point of the difficulties between them. In some instances she went out to work, and sometimes she found satisfaction in being able to perform in other areas. The strain, however, continued to exist and, unconsciously and perhaps even consciously, she fought

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6. Price, *op. cit.*, pp. 623-624.

treatment for her husband because she used his drinking as one more way in which she could prove him and keep him inadequate.<sup>7</sup>

Miss Price, in essence, has said the same thing as the other writers. She also indicates that the wife did find some satisfaction in the marital relationship, to the extent that she fought treatment for her husband. To extend her idea even further we can assume that by keeping her husband inadequate the wife appears to be even more adequate in the eyes of the community.

Samuel Futterman, in the article mentioned previously, wrote about the wife's own resistance and anxiety about becoming involved in therapy. Explaining why the wife reacted this way, he said;

In the case material reviewed there was uniformly an initial resistance on the part of the wife to her involvement in therapy. The reason for this appears to be the need to defend herself against admitting any emotional instability on her part, particularly because of the fact that her husband's alcoholism rightfully indicated his serious emotional incapacity over a long period of time.

Dr. Futterman, in this quotation, has again expressed his view that while the husband is emotionally unstable, so too is the wife.

Margaret Lewis, on whose study this writer has patterned her own, writes:

Although the alcoholic man himself rarely asks for agency help with the social difficulties that his drinking has brought upon himself or his family, his wife often seeks help from family or other social agencies. She often presents critical social problems and, in the solution she suggests,

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7. Ibid, p. 45.

8. Futterman, op. cit., p. 37.

she manifests strong ambivalence about her husband and about her wish to use casework help. Typically, she is insistent that something be done to change, her husband or to change the situation, by such means as a separation, but at the same time she is resistant to steps that might change the status quo. Although she may have tried to get her husband to join Alcoholics Anonymous, may have considered divorce, or may have used a variety of threats and punishments, she somehow has not been able to follow any consistent plan of action with confidence or determination.

This same wavering is often shown in her use of casework help. Even though she may be distressed in the first interview and her situation undoubtedly remains unchanged, she frequently either breaks her second appointment or reports that everything has quieted down, and she wants to let things ride for now. Subsequently she may come back with much the same problems, except that they probably are worse.<sup>9</sup>

The quotation from Miss Lewis's article would also seem to agree with the previous writers that have already been quoted. She said the wife is insistent about changing the situation but at the same time she is resistant to any steps to actually change the status quo. It would therefore seem that there is agreement among all the writers used in this thesis, that the wife of an alcoholic gains some satisfaction from her marital situation. Miss Lewis notes that the wife may actually be very upset in the first interview but she often breaks her second appointment. She is ambivalent about doing anything definite to change or better her marital situation. This is evident by her attempt to do something constructive (e.g. - getting him to join Alcoholics Anonymous, etc.), but at the same time we notice that she does not follow through with whatever plan she

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9. Lewis, op. cit., pp. 8-9.

might have initiated.

### CHAPTER III

#### DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS OF CASE MATERIAL

In each of the twenty-two cases studied the writer found that the reasons the wives of alcoholics came to the agency involved in a recent disturbance other than drinking in the family structure. The husband's alcoholism was a common factor in all of the cases; however, the drinking was found to be no different than it had been for many years. Therefore, it seemed obvious that something else had occurred upsetting the usual equilibrium.

The writer found that the precipitating events expressed by these wives seemed to involve a threat to the wives' personal survival; while only two applications were caused by pressure from relatives.

The five groupings found were: 1. financial upheaval; 2. disturbances involving the attitudes and well being of the children (causing the wives to fear the children's loss of love and respect for either or both of the parents); 3. the threat or fear of losing her husband; 4. the threat to her physical health; 5. other factors caused by pressures from relatives (e.g. - direct pressure by relatives brought to bear on the alcoholic's wife to seek help.

The writer felt she might point up more clearly these five categories by presenting a short summary of one case in each group. The five case summaries selected for presentation were most representative of each of the categories.

SOME GENERAL STATISTICAL TABLESTABLE I

Distribution of Twenty-Two Wives of Alcoholics Seen in a Family Service Agency, According to Precipitating Factors (As Presented by Them) and Whether They Knew of Drinking Problem Prior to Marriage.

Precipitating Factors	No. Who Knew of Drinking Prior to Marriage	No. Who Did Not Know of Drinking Prior to Marriage	Total No. of Wives Applying
Financial debacle	6	3	9
Crises with children	3	1	4
Fear of losing husband	1	3	4
Fear for her own physical health		3	3
Pressure from relatives	<u>2</u>	<u>—</u>	<u>2</u>
Totals	12	10	22

TABLE II

Wives of Alcoholics Seen in a Family Service Agency According to the Number of Interviews Held Before Breaking Agency Contact.

No. of Interviews Held	No. of Wives of Alcoholics Seen
1	12
2	8
10	1
20	<u>1</u>
Total	22

GROUP I: FINANCIAL UPHEAVALTABLE III

Some Factors in Nine Cases of Wives of Alcoholics Where the Precipitating Problem Concerned Financial Difficulties: Length of Marriage, Length of Husband's Drinking, Number of Reapplications and Precipitating Factors in Each, Number of Interviews on Reapplication.

Length of marriage (years)	Length of husband's drinking (years)	Number of interviews	Reapplications and precipitating factor in each reapplication	Reapplication number of interviews
21	18	1	1 (financial)	1
18	19	2	-	-
16	15	1	-	-
15	10	1	1 (children)	1
13	14	1	1 (financial)	1
10	12	2	2 (financial)	1
8	10	2	1 (financial)	1
4	5	1	-	-
1	8	1	1 (financial)	1

Financial upheaval is the first and largest group to be presented. Nine of the total twenty-two wives of alcoholics came into the agency for help as a result of a sudden financial debacle. The following summary is

an example of a case in this group.

Mrs. J., who was a forty-two year old wife and nine years older than her husband, came into the agency seeking help with a difficult marital situation. Mrs. J. and her husband had been married thirteen years and had three children. She admitted knowing Mr. J. was a heavy drinker before marriage; now, however, he has become alcoholic. Although he was a member of Alcoholics Anonymous for a short time some years ago, he has since refused to return to the organization. When drinking, he has often become abusive to his wife and children.

He had not worked the weekend prior to Mrs. J's application to the agency and the family was without food or money. She asked the agency to give her money for food. A food grant was given and casework help was offered as she mentioned wanting help with her marital situation also. Although an appointment was scheduled for the following week, Mrs. J. did not return. The caseworker telephoned her soon after to schedule another appointment, but Mrs. J. said her husband had returned to work and she no longer felt the need to return to the agency.

Two months after the case was closed, Mrs. J. reapplied, saying her husband had once more stopped working and the family was again without food or money. Casework help was offered as with the first application, but no money was given. Mrs. J. did not return to the agency.

This case illustrates a typical example of a wife of an alcoholic who comes to the agency in time of crisis. She admitted knowing her husband drank heavily prior to marriage, but she married him despite this factor, which could raise some speculative ideas. Unfortunately in such a short contact with a client it was not possible to obtain enough of a diagnostic picture to understand her reasons for marrying a man almost ten years younger than she was, who also had a drinking problem. Marrying a younger man than oneself is not, in itself, a significant factor but marrying one with disturbances of such a nature that he must resort to alcohol does definitely indicate something. The writer, therefore, would like to

speculate, in conjunction with psychoanalytic theory that Mrs. J. was looking for a man she could mother. Along with this maternal desire goes another theory whereby she probably had the need to be the more aggressive partner in any marital situation and by marrying such a weak man is better able to maintain this position.

Mrs. J. stated that her husband was frequently abusive after drinking. The abuse was not enough to motivate her to seek help. Not until her economic security was threatened did she feel the need to come to an agency. We can see that although she said she wanted help with the marital situation, she did not return. When her husband began working again the family equilibrium was restored and she no longer felt the need to continue agency contacts. We see also that when her husband again ceased working and the financial security was once more threatened, Mrs. J. re-applied to the agency. The writer wishes to speculate that Mrs. J. did not really want help with the marital situation itself, but only wanted financial assistance from the agency.

#### ANALYSIS OF GROUP I

There were nine cases of wives who came in for help as a result of financial upheaval. These nine women ranged from twenty-three to forty-five years of age. They had been married from one to eighteen years.

In three cases the drinking began from one to five years after marriage. In the remaining six cases the wives admitted knowing their husbands had a drinking problem before marriage.

This might seem to substantiate the writer's feeling that the majority of wives of alcoholics knew there was a drinking problem before marriage

but this ratio is too small to definitely substantiate this theory.

As can be seen in Table III, none of the wives in this category came for more than two interviews even though casework help was offered in each of the nine cases. In this category there were more reapplications than any other. Six out of the nine wives reapplied after the case was closed. Five of these reapplications were again precipitated by financial upheavals. The other wife who reapplied came back as a result of her husband's extreme cruelty to one of the children. This one case was referred to the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children but a later investigation showed that she never kept the appointment made there. In none of the six reapplications was there more than one interview as indicated by Table III. In one case the wife reapplied twice after the case was closed with financial upheaval as the same precipitating event in each reapplication.

We see that one significant thing in this group is that the wives, although offered casework services around the pathological family situation, did not return. If they did return it was again for financial assistance, or in one case for overt cruelty to a child. We also know from this group when financial assistance was offered, they still did not return for casework services. It would therefore seem appropriate to assume that these wives were only able to see the family problem as being tied up with financial stress at the time of application.

This would certainly point up a cleavage between the caseworker's conception of what the problem is, and the wife's own conception of the problem.

It would seem that this would certainly leave room for speculation as to the dynamics involved in the family pathology. The possibilities for this are manifold. However, it is certainly obvious that the change in the financial security of the family creates an anxiety within the wife to seek out an agency asking for help with the situation. However, when the agency attempts to help with something other than what the client is asking for (namely, financial assistance), and even when financial assistance is given and other services offered, the wife withdraws. Therefore, it might be safe to assume that ~~these women are~~ essentially satisfied with the status quo of the marital situation. This does not necessarily mean they are happy with the situation, but rather, there is something within the situation that would make a separation from the status quo of the marriage more dissatisfying.

In summary it was seen that all the nine wives in this group did not try to seek help until the financial situation was threatened.

#### GROUP II: PROBLEMS AFFECTING CHILDREN

See Table IV on Page 23.

The second group of wives were those that came to the agency as a result of some crises involving their children. There were four wives in this category. The following case is an example of a problem in this group.

Mrs. B., a thirty-nine year old woman came into the agency seeking help. Her husband had been a confirmed alcoholic

TABLE IV

Some Factors in Four Cases of Wives of Alcoholics Where the Precipitating Factor Concerned Problems Affecting Children: Length of Marriage, Length of Husband's Drinking, Number of Interviews.

Length of marriage (years)	Length of drinking problem	No. of Interviews
8	11	2
10	11	2
11	13	20
14	2	2

for almost eleven years. They had been married ten years and have a nine year old daughter.

Mrs. B. complained that her husband had been drunk and abusive every night for most of their married life. She had threatened to leave him on three different occasions and in the past had called the police when he became excessively abusive. Four years ago he threatened her with a knife if she called the police, and three years ago the neighbors called the police because he was creating such a disturbance.

A few days before applying to the agency, her nine year old daughter ran screaming hysterically out of the house when her father approached her. The child told her mother that she was afraid of Mr. B. and did not like her mother for staying with him.

Mrs. B. stated that she did not want to separate from him without first trying to improve the situation so that they could live together as a happy family unit.

She came for two interviews, each time criticizing her husband but when the caseworker tried to explore her

own role in the marital situation, and to discuss ways of handling the problem, Mrs. B. did not return. She telephoned to say that conditions at home had improved and if she wanted further counseling services she would contact the agency at a later date.

Mrs. B. had undergone a great deal of punishment for most of their ten years of marriage. Mr. B. had a drinking problem before they were married and the drinking as well as abusiveness was prevalent throughout. Whenever the abusiveness became more than she could bear, she called the police until he threatened her with a knife if she contacted the police again. Even before the knife threat, Mrs. B. never really sought help, always going back to the same situation after each incident. We noticed that she never left her husband or tried to do anything to alleviate the situation until her daughter began to turn against her. Her daughter's loss of respect for her was more punishment than she could bear so she came seeking help. We see, however, that when the caseworker went beyond just letting her complain about her husband and offered her tangible help in ways to handle the situation, Mrs. B. did not return.

We can assume that the dissatisfaction with the marital situation was not directly tied up with the wife - husband relationship but was rather related to the father's overt mishandling of the child. This was too great a threat to Mrs. B. for various reasons but would certainly seem to be tied up with her daughter's overt criticism of her. After this initial tension had been dissipated in some way and some semblance of the status quo was returned, Mrs. B. was then able to return to the situation and no longer felt the need for casework services.

ANALYSIS OF GROUP II

There were four cases out of the twenty-two studied where the precipitating problem was caused by concern for the children's attitudes and well being.

The wives in this group ranged in age from thirty-four to forty-two years of age. As indicated by Table IV, three came for two interviews only and did not return when the caseworker began to explore the wife's own role in the problem. One wife continued coming for many interviews and her husband also became interested and came in for help himself. The combined number of interviews for both husband and wife was found to be over twenty at the close of the case.

In the case where the wife and husband came for twenty interviews they were thirty-four and thirty-seven years of age respectively. They had been married eleven years and the husband had a drinking problem for thirteen years. When the case was terminated the husband was an active member of Alcoholics Anonymous and the wife had become strengthened and better able to help her husband control his drinking. She left with a better understanding of herself and how she had helped contribute to his drinking problem. The writer is unable to determine exactly what it was that caused this wife to continue the agency contacts. However, the writer felt that the casework method of exploring her own role was more focused in this situation than that done with the other wives. Perhaps also in this case the wife was more strongly motivated by a real desire to better the marital situation.

Two cases involved the child's attitude toward the parents. In both cases the children's loss of respect was more upsetting to the wife than anything else in the family situation and she rushed to an agency for help. In both of these cases the wife came for two interviews and did not return.

In the other two cases the wife complained of the husband's handling of a child. One came for only two interviews and broke treatment, saying everything had gone back to normal and she did not feel she needed any more help. The other wife was the one mentioned previously who came for many interviews along with her husband.

There were no reapplications in any of the cases in this group. Three of the cases the wife admitted knowing that the husband had been drinking before marriage and in the other case the husband had only become alcoholic two years prior to agency application. (see Table IV)

It is possible that in the cases in this category the child's problem was really just an admission ticket for the wife's seeking help for herself. It was observed in studying the case where the mother continued for twenty interviews the worker at the beginning contacts was less direct about the children and initiated more discussion about the mother and her own problems.

In each of the cases in this group the wife came for help presenting some problem with one of their children. There was no indication that they had ever sought help with their marital situation previously.

GROUP III: FEAR OF LOSS OF HUSBANDTABLE V

Some Factors in Four Cases of Wives of Alcoholics Where the Precipitating Problem Concerned the Fear of Losing Their Husband: Length of Marriage, Length of Husband's Drinking, Number of Interviews.

Length of marriage (years)	Length of drinking (years)	No. of interviews
13	6	1
18	13	1
18	15	1
20	21	1

There were four wives in this group where the threat or fear of losing their husband was the factor motivating them to seek help from an agency. The following summary is an example of one of the cases in this category.

Mrs. D., age forty-two years, applied to the family agency very much concerned about her marital difficulties. She had been married thirteen years and her husband had been an alcoholic for the six years prior to her application at the agency. She described Mr. D's drinking as being heavy, stating that he drank away from home a great deal. Three years previous to agency application, Mr. D. had attended an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting at his wife's insistence, but he never returned.

Mrs. D. described some of the difficult situations incurred as a result of Mr. D's drinking. She spoke of his periodic unemployment, his spending the family savings on liquor, and his verbal abusiveness of her when he was drunk.

Mrs. D's making application was precipitated by her fear that Mr. D. was seeing another woman and her expressed concern that her marriage would end. She had found keys to another apartment in her husband's pocket and she was also concerned about extra money he seemed to have. She felt Mr. D. was a good man and was in conflict as to what to do about her marriage.

Casework help was offered, and another appointment was made, but she did not return to the agency. When later contacted by the agency, she said she no longer felt the need for agency help since she had learned that her husband was not seeing another woman.

In this situation it is clear that the alcoholism was not the precipitating factor that brought Mrs. D. to the agency for help. Mr. D. was described as being an alcoholic for the past six years. The marriage had continued under its usual pattern until a new factor entered to upset the family equilibrium—namely, Mrs. D's fears of the loss of her husband.

Even though Mrs. D. applied to the agency she never asked for, or seemed to desire help for her husband's alcoholism. This obviously was not upsetting enough for her to seek help. The marriage offered some satisfaction to her, and she was content to continue the marriage as it had been for many years. As soon as the status quo was threatened by the possibility of another woman, Mrs. D. felt motivated to ask for help, but not for the problem of alcoholism. When she no longer felt the threat of losing her husband and the status quo of the marriage was restored, she did not return to the agency.

#### ANALYSIS OF GROUP III

Four out of the total of twenty-two wives came in as a result of a precipitating factor of a threat or fear of losing their husband.

As can be seen in Table V, these four wives had been married between

thirteen and twenty years. In one case the husband had been known to be a heavy drinker before marriage while in the other three cases the drinking problem began from three to seven years after marriage. The writer would like to speculate that the wife through her own insecurity helped "drive the husband to drink." Perhaps the fear that she might at some time lose him caused the wife to be suspicious, over-protective, over-concerned and nagging to the point whereby her husband sought refuge in alcohol.

In each of the four cases there was only one interview, as indicated by Table V. In only one of the four cases was there a reapplication. This reapplication was a result of a daughter's impending marriage. The wife came in asking the agency's help in keeping her husband sober for the wedding. There were only two interviews in this reapplication and then the husband died of a heart attack aggravated by alcoholic over-consumption.

Another wife in this group came in to the agency after having been told by the doctor that her husband had to stop drinking as his life was being impaired by the drinking since he had a serious liver condition. She came for the initial interview and called to cancel her next appointment, saying her husband's condition had improved and she needed no further help.

The fourth case was similar to the case of Mrs. D. (summarized above) in that the wife feared losing her husband to another woman. She also came for only one interview and gave no reason for not continuing except that she was staying with her husband and no longer wanted agency help.

The wives in this group ranged from thirty-eight to forty-three years of age, while their husbands ranged from thirty-eight to fifty-eight years

of age.

In all cases in this category the wives had not applied for help with their husband's drinking problem until there was a threat of losing their husbands.

GROUP IV: FEAR FOR WIFE'S OWN PHYSICAL HEALTH

TABLE VI

Some Factors in Three Cases of Wives of Alcoholics Where the Precipitating Problem Concerned the Wives Fear for Their Own Physical Health: Length of Marriage, Length of Husband's Drinking, Number of Interviews.

Length of marriage (years)	Length of drinking (years)	No. of interviews
9	5	1
17	6	2
29	27	10

In this category there were three wives of the twenty-two studied, where the precipitating factor was the wife's fear regarding her physical health. The following summary is an example of one of the cases in this group.

Mrs. B., a thirty-four year old woman, applied to the family agency for help in reaching a decision about her marriage. She wanted to decide whether to stay with or separate from her husband.

They had been married seventeen years and had a sixteen year old daughter. Mr. B. had been alcoholic for the past six years and had several arrests for drunkenness and disorderly conduct. Mrs. B. stated that their life together had been one of poverty and suffering. She did not think she could continue the marriage any longer.

She had just discovered that her husband had had sexual relations with a prostitute two nights prior to her application to the agency. She feared her husband might have contracted a venereal disease and she would get the disease from him.

Mrs. B. came to the agency for two interviews and discussed her indecision about staying with her husband. She telephoned the agency after the second interview saying that she had proof that her husband did not have any venereal disease and no longer felt the need of continuing the agency contacts.

We see here a woman who has lived with her husband through six years of alcoholism and poverty. The fear of contracting venereal disease disturbed the status quo of the marital situation and Mrs. B. came to an agency for help in reaching a decision about separating from her husband. When her physical health was no longer in danger she returned to the previous marital situation.

The threat to her physical health seemed the only new factor in the marriage. When this factor was no longer a threat, Mrs. B. decided to continue with the previous status quo of her marriage.

#### ANALYSIS OF GROUP IV

The ages of the wives in this group ranged from thirty-three to forty-nine years, while the husbands ranged from thirty-three to fifty-one years of age. As seen in Table VI, the couples had been married from nine to twenty-nine years and the drinking problem began after the marriage in each case. The drinking problem in this category began from two to four years

after the marriage.

Perhaps we could speculate from this that the wives became more and more concerned with their own physical being and less attentive to their husbands. The husband's underlying problems had perhaps become so threatened by the wife's concern over herself and consequently lessening of attention to him that he sought alcohol as an escape. Although the writer has no proof of this she would like to speculate that prior to marriage the husband was very much tied to, and receiving a great deal of love from his mother, and when this love was no longer forthcoming from his wife in his marriage he began to drink. Eventually he became an alcoholic which was a symptom of his excessive need for love and attention.

In one case the wife continued with the agency for ten interviews, one wife returned for two interviews, and the third wife never returned after the first interview. There were no reapplications in any of the three cases after the cases were closed.

One wife was sick with heart and kidney disease. Her husband was extremely abusive to her until she had a heart attack the day prior to agency application. She rushed to the agency for help in reaching a decision about separating from him. She came for ten interviews and then terminated the agency contact as she decided she wanted to stay with her husband. It was interesting to note in this case that the caseworker was extremely permissive and did not focus on the husband, rather the caseworker expressed interest and concern about her health and allowed her to talk about her health as much as she wished. She talked about her physical ailments throughout the agency contact and at the end decided to stay with her

husband. It was apparent that she wanted to discuss her physical condition with some objective person and when she had discussed enough so that she felt more comfortable and less tense, she was able to return to her husband and terminate with the agency. It was evident throughout the record that she did not seriously plan to leave her husband nor was she really interested in changing him, but rather she was concerned and worried about her physical condition.

Another wife came to the agency for help after having been severely beaten by her husband the previous night. She came for one interview, decided to cease agency contacts, and she continued living with her husband as he had apologized for having beaten her.

In each case in this group, the drinking problem on the part of the husband had continued over a period of years. It was not until the wife's concern about her own physical condition materialized that she applied for help.

#### GROUP V: PRESSURE FROM RELATIVES

See Table VII on Page 34.

In this group there were two cases involving precipitating problems that were classified as factors caused by pressure from relatives. An example of this group is the case presented below.

Mrs. P., age thirty-three years, came to the family agency complaining of a "desperate" situation related to her husband's drinking. She described her husband as being a heavy drinker for most of the fifteen years of their marriage.

Most of the time Mr. P. stayed over weekends on drunken

TABLE VII

Some Factors in Two Cases of Wives of Alcoholics Where the Precipitating Factor Concerned Pressure from Relatives: Length of Marriage, Length of Husband's Drinking, Number of Interviews.

Length married (years)	Length drinking (years)	No. of Interviews
11	12	1
15	16	2

binges. He withholds money from her so that she has been completely dependent on him for everything since they were first married.

Her husband had been arrested many times for drunkenness and in one nine-month period had been imprisoned six different times. She expressed fear of him as he has been extremely abusive to her and their four children, especially after a drinking spree. She has worried throughout the marriage to provide clothing for herself and the family.

A few days prior to applying to the agency, her sister had come from another state to spend some time with the family. Her sister had seen so much misery in the home that she refused to return home until Mrs. P. came to the agency for help. The sister even came to the agency with Mrs. P.

Mrs. P. expressed the feeling that Mr. P. would not care if she did separate from him. She has told him many times that she was going to separate from him but he replies only that she is "all talk."

Mrs. P. came in for a second appointment and said her sister had given Mr. P. a "real good sermon" and he had not been drunk for the past two days.

She had often thought of breaking up her home but did not do this because of the children.

Mrs. P. felt that since her husband had been sober for two days and her sister had left the home, she no longer needed agency help. She did not return though casework help was offered.

Mrs. P. applied to the agency through the pressure and insistence of her sister. The drinking problem had persisted for most of their married life, but Mrs. P. had never attempted to do anything before about getting help for the problem.

In assessing the marital situation, the writer felt that Mr. P. had not contributed much in a positive sense to his marriage. His alcoholism, in itself, was not the only negative aspect of his behavior. Besides the alcoholism, Mr. P. was abusive to his wife and children. Further, he withholds money so she has had to work to clothe the family, and he has been frequently arrested. It would seem that there is very little if anything in the relationship for Mrs. P. that would be satisfying. Obviously, however, she continued in the same neurotic marital situation for fifteen years and only sought help when forced to do so by her sister. It would, therefore, seem that something in the relationship was satisfying in some way for Mrs. P.

#### Analysis of Group V

There were two wives in this group who came in as a result of precipitating factors of other than the previous four groups mentioned. These factors were caused by pressure from relatives.

The wives' ages were thirty-one and thirty-three years, while their husbands' ages were thirty-two and thirty-three. Both couples had two or more children.

The two wives in this group had been married for eleven and fifteen

years, respectively. Both husbands had a drinking problem prior to marriage, as shown in Table VII.

The two cases in this group did not involve a definite crisis causing the wife to apply for help. There were similar precipitating factors in each case related to the wives deciding to apply for help at the time they did.

One of the wives had come at her mother's insistence. Her husband had come home drunk a few days prior to agency application, and he began using profane language. His mother-in-law was present at the time, and she began lecturing him. He became angry with her and struck her. As a result of this occurrence, his wife came into the agency along with her mother who insisted she come for help with her husband's drinking. Although casework help was offered and a second appointment made, the wife called to say everything was fine at home and she no longer wanted agency help.

It would seem that in both of these cases the wives did not really want to change their marital situations. There was not even a crisis severe enough to make them seek help. They both came only through someone else's insistence and ceased agency contacts as soon as they could. They felt no need to change their marital situation and in both cases seemed satisfied with the status quo of the marriage. The writer feels that in both cases the marriage answered some need in both partners, no matter how neurotic, that caused the marriage to stay as it was. They had never asked for help with their marital situations before being driven into a family agency by relatives.

## CHAPTER IV

### Summary and Conclusions

This thesis proposed to study the precipitating factors presented by the wives of alcoholics when applying to a family service agency for help. Factors considered were the actual precipitating factors, the length of the husband's drinking problem, and the length of the marriage. Also considered were the ages of the couple, the number of interviews with the wife, the number of reapplications to the agency, and the precipitating factors in each reapplication, and the number of reapplication interviews.

Twenty-two cases were used and were the total found in the agency during a five year period, from January 1, 1949 to December 31, 1953. In all the cases used, the alcoholism of the husband was confirmed by a reliable outside source. The sources include Alcoholics Anonymous, The Committee on Education of Alcoholism, various alcoholic clinics and hospitals, psychiatrists and other medical practitioners, the police and other social agencies.

The ages of the wives ranged from twenty-three to forty-nine years. The ages of the husbands ranged from twenty-six to fifty-four years. It was felt, however, after the study was completed, that the age range was too wide and varied to offer significant conclusions. It was found that out of the twenty-two cases studied, six wives were the same age as their husbands, and four were older than their husband. Thus, ten out of the twenty-two wives studied were the same age, or older, than their alcoholic husbands. However, this ratio is too small to allow significant conclusions.

The length of marriage of these couples ranged from one to twenty-nine years, while the drinking problem had begun from two to twenty-seven years prior to the agency application, as can be seen in Table II. Twelve wives out of the twenty-two studied admitted knowing their husbands had a drinking problem prior to marriage. This total means that one more than one-half of the total studied admitted knowing of their husband's drinking problem before marriage but married him in spite of the knowledge. While this ratio is rather small, it does seem important as some wives might not have felt comfortable enough to tell the caseworker of their pre-marital awareness, especially in only one or two interviews. It usually takes a client more casework contacts than this small number to build up sufficient trust and confidence in the caseworker.

The writer speculates that perhaps even more wives knew of their husband's drinking problem before marriage and would have been able to verbalize this knowledge with longer casework contacts.

The writer would also like to speculate from the small ratio actually obtained, that this might mean that the wives, nevertheless, entered the marriage, knowing the possible implications of their husband's drinking because of their own unconscious needs. This writer's results and conclusions bear out some of the findings of authors previously mentioned in Chapter II; i.e., the marriage satisfies some needs of the wives.

The precipitating factors were categorized in five groups. Margaret Lewis, upon whose work this writer has patterned her own study, listed and found four categories of precipitating factors. This writer, however, discovered a fifth group of factors precipitating agency application. The

factors found by this writer in common with Margaret Lewis were: 1., financial debacle; 2., crises involving children; 3., fear of losing the husband; 4., a threat to her own physical health. The fifth one found by this writer was the one category not found in common with Miss Lewis. This factor was pressure from relatives (number 5.). As can be seen in Table I, the largest number of wives, totalling nine, came to the agency through factors precipitated by financial debacle. Four each came for crises involving children, and the fear of losing the husband. Three wives came as a result of a threat to her physical health, and two came to the agency because of pressure from relatives. These figures would seem to indicate that there is a definite crisis or precipitating factor causing wives of alcoholics to seek agency help.

Table II indicates that twelve, or one more than one-half, came for only one interview. Eight wives came for two interviews. Only two wives continued for more than two interviews and one of these came for ten interviews, while the other wife came for twenty interviews. From these statistics we see that twenty of the total of twenty-two wives came for no more than two interviews. These twenty wives, although offered casework help, returned to the previous status quo of the marriage as soon as the crisis, upsetting the usual family equilibrium, had abated somewhat. This might seem to indicate that they did not really want casework help with the drinking itself, but rather with the crisis that precipitated the agency application.

It is true in general, that people who apply to a family agency for help are usually most concerned with the precipitating factor that brought them in. They do not recognize so easily the total extent of the problem.

It is the writer's impression however, that the wives of alcoholics seem less willing to want to recognize the total extent of the problem or their involvement in it than others who apply to the family agency. We might speculate from this that the marriage offered basic satisfactions of unconscious emotional needs of the wife. What these satisfactions and needs may be is not clear to this writer as not enough information about personality factors and social-familial background was gathered in the short agency contacts.

Seven wives reapplied as can be seen by Table IV. Six reapplications were by wives who had originally applied because of financial crises, while one wife reapplied who had originally applied out of fear of losing her husband. In the reapplications it was found that there was again only one or two casework interviews and the wife again ceased the agency contacts.

Educational background seemed to have no bearing on the wives' wanting help or on her capacity to assume some responsibility for her husband's drinking.

One of the most important findings was that the wives were hesitant to admit that they had any responsibility in the marital problem. If they did verbalize the possibility that they had shortcomings, especially with regard to the possibility of their being "nagging" wives, they quickly explained that it was caused by the nature of the situation.

Usually in other situations of marital stress the mate applying to an agency is aware, perhaps subconsciously, that he does have a responsibility in the marital problem. While he is usually hesitant to admit this responsibility in the initial interview, through skillful casework handling it

should be expressed in subsequent interviews. It is important for the wives in this particular study to leave the initial interview with the feeling that there is more to the problem than her husband's alcoholism. However, it is the writer's impression that this initial hesitancy is more prevalent among the cases involving wives of alcoholics than in those with other marital problems.

This writer feels it is safe to speculate that the twenty wives who came for one or two interviews wanted only to be helped with the specific crisis causing them discomfort at the time of agency application. This could be seen particularly in the category where financial debacle was the precipitating factor. Whether money was given or not made no difference to these women, as they did not return more than once in any case. As soon as the alcoholic husband returned to work or the financial crisis had lessened, the wives broke agency contacts.

In twenty of the cases studied the writer felt that the caseworker concerned herself with the husband's alcoholism rather than recognizing the needs of the wife. In two cases where the wives' feelings and needs were recognized by the caseworkers the wives continued to come for help for a continued period of time.

This writer feels, as a result of her study, that it is very important for the caseworker in intake interviews with wives of alcoholics, to make a special effort to identify closely with the wife and avoid asking about the husband and his drinking habits. The caseworker should find out what caused the wife to apply to the family agency and not get too involved in the husband's alcoholism. The discussion of the nature and description of

the husband's alcoholism should be taken up with the wife after a good caseworker-client relationship directed toward understanding her needs, has been established. This positive relationship does not usually occur in the initial interviews and in order for it to develop, the wife must feel the caseworker is interested in her and not her husband's alcoholism per se. It is important for the caseworker to express interest and concern about the wife's problems, and express his awareness of her suffering. This should be done even though the wife projects her problems onto her husband. Until the worker's concern is clear to the wife she will not be ready to look at her own role and responsibility in the marriage.

Accepted:  
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APPENDIXSchedule

1. Identifying information
  - a. name
  - b. date
  - c. case number
  - d. age of husband and wife
  - e. years married
  - f. number of children and their ages
  - g. religion
2. Source of referral
3. Source of confirmation of alcoholism
4. Initial request
5. Length of husband's drinking problem
6. Precipitating factors
  - a. financial
  - b. children and their attitudes
  - c. fear of losing husband
  - d. physical
  - e. pressure from relatives
7. Number of interviews
8. Reason for closing case
9. Number of reapplications
  - a. how soon after lost contact

10. Number of interviews on reapplication

11. Reasons for closing case

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