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AN AUSTRALIAN STUDY OF ALCOHOL DEPENDENCE IN WOMEN:
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SEX ROLE IDENTITY, LIFE EVENT STRESS,
SOCIAL SUPPORT, AND OTHER FACTORS

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SUMMARY

In Australia, current knowledge about the social and psychological aspects of alcohol dependence in women is derived almost entirely from overseas research; the present study examines the problem from a local perspective by comparing a sample of inpatient alcohol dependent women with two samples of non-alcohol-dependent women, drawn from the general population and from women engaged in full-time careers. Comparisons are also made between these and other research findings.

Both the demographic characteristics and drinking patterns of the alcohol dependent women were similar to those reported by overseas studies; the differences between the alcohol dependent and non-alcohol-dependent women were also generally consistent with previous reports. There was little evidence to suggest a higher incidence of obstetric or gynaecological problems among alcohol dependent rather than non-alcohol-dependent women, but mental health problems such as depression and attempted suicide were more apparent among the former.

The prevalence of parental drinking problems was similar to that indicated in overseas studies; however, contrary to popular belief, the alcohol dependent women and women drawn from the general population did not differ markedly in this regard. Although family and relationship problems were frequently reported as precipitants of problem drinking by the alcohol dependent women, the objective determination of life event stress did not support the notion that the development of heavy drinking is a consequence of life event stress; however, there were some indications that the transition between heavy and problematic drinking was accompanied by an increase in life event stress, although the direction of causality remains uncertain.

The present sample of alcohol dependent women exhibited aspects of sex role identity that were similar to those identified by overseas research; comparisons with non-alcohol-dependent women suggested the lack of integration of masculine and feminine characteristics as well as a greater degree of sex-role-related conflict.

The alcohol dependent and non-alcohol-dependent women differed markedly in their use of alcohol in conjunction with various emotional states, and also in their perception of the benefits of social support and in its availability. These findings suggest that the alcohol dependent women either do not have or do not activate systems of social support, and instead, use alcohol as a coping mechanism.

Multivariate analyses added further support to the above findings.