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ABSTRACT (100-200 WORDS): This study examined the relationship between alcoholics' memories of their first drinks as compared to non-alcoholics' memories of their first drinks. The participants were 36 members of Alcoholics Anonymous and 12 non-alcoholic volunteers (39 male, 8 female, 1 did not indicate gender). Results did not indicate a significant relationship between whether or not the participant was an alcoholic and the vividness of their memories of their first drink. However, results did indicate that alcoholics remembered their drink as being slightly more pleasant than non-alcoholics.

University Honors Program

Capstone Approval Page

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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

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By

Jill Mech

Dekalb, Illinois

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A Comparison of Alcoholics' Memories of Their First Drinks as Compared to
Non-Alcoholics

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between alcoholics' memories of their first drinks as compared to non-alcoholics' memories of their first drinks. The participants were 36 members of Alcoholics Anonymous and 12 non-alcoholic volunteers (39 male, 8 female, 1 did not indicate gender). Results did not indicate a significant relationship between whether or not the participant was an alcoholic and the vividness of their memories of their first drink. However, results did indicate that alcoholics remembered their drink as being marginally more pleasant than did non-alcoholics.

A Comparison of Alcoholics' Memories of Their First Drinks as Compared to Non-Alcoholics

Alcoholism is a disease which affects millions of people worldwide, yet the cause is unknown and there is no known cure. It affects both men and a woman of every ethnicity and social class and is the third leading cause of death in the United States, after heart disease and cancer. Although there are various treatment programs which have proven to be effective in curtailing the progress of the disease, there is very little information on what actually causes someone to be an alcoholic. If more was known about the beginning stages of the disease, greater prevention measures could be taken to ensure that it did not progress. This could be done by comparing alcoholics' memories and perceptions of their first drinks with that of non-alcoholics. Other studies have suggested that there is indeed a link between memories and alcoholism. Analyzing alcoholics' memories of their first drinks may provide interesting information in that respect as well.

Alcoholism has been described by both the American Medical Association and the British Medical Association as an illness that millions are estimated to suffer from worldwide (Alcoholics Anonymous 1972). Although there are no specific requirements or tests necessary for one to be diagnosed with alcoholism, there are various symptoms which many alcoholics exhibit. There are also a few physical tests which can indicate the increased likelihood that someone is an alcoholic. Someone may be an alcoholic if they feel as if alcohol makes them more self-confident and fun around others, think or obsess about drinking occasions, exhibit sneaky behavior about drinking or lie to cover up their

normal functioning (PubMed Health 2011). Chemicals in the brain have been physically altered including amma-amino butyric acid, glutamate, nor epinephrine, dopamine, and serotonin (Cavanaugh & Kail 2007).

The exact cause of alcoholism is not known, although there are certain risk factors which may increase the likelihood of someone developing alcoholism. Scientists and researchers have found information which has led them to believe certain genes may be responsible for increasing the risk of alcoholism, but specifics about which genes and their role in alcoholism is not known (PubMed Health 2011). If a person is already experiencing a mental issue or mood disorder such as bipolar or anxiety disorders, depression, or schizophrenia, they are at an increased risk of developing alcoholism. Stressful lifestyles and problems with relationships or low self-esteem, along with easy access to alcohol also can increase an individual's chance of developing alcoholism. Cultures which glorify alcohol or simply have a high acceptance of its use are yet another factor which can exacerbate alcoholism (PubMed Health 2011). Unfortunately, despite knowing these risk factors, there is still very little information known about the exact cause of alcoholism. There is no definitive answer on why some people can control their drinking and others are controlled by their need to drink.

Although the exact cause of alcoholism is unknown, researchers have found that alcohol use and memory are very interconnected. One study by Von der Goltz et al. (2008) examined this relationship using rats to study the disruption of memory reconsolidation of alcohol-related memories. Because researchers have determined that the neural circuitries involved in long term memory formation are also involved with the

only this, they also found that this memory bias was also correlated with alcohol craving. The researchers went on to explain that the process of memory retrieval and encoding may play an important part in the preservation of addictive behaviors. Regular alcohol use may eventually even alter the neural circuits involved in memory. If the connection between memory functions and addiction was more understood, more treatment methods might become available.

One treatment method which has proved effected for many alcoholics is the organization called Alcoholics Anonymous. Its members have accepted the fact that because there is no definitive way of preventing someone from becoming an alcoholic, they must focus on helping those who already are alcoholics. Their philosophy is to take one day at a time, and never consider themselves cured. They admit that they cannot control their alcohol, and realize alcoholism is a disease which they will always harbor, and the only way to successfully control it is to remain sober. The only requirement for membership is the admittance of their disease and the desire to want to change. The organization as a whole does not involve itself on any outside issues in order to remain neutral and non-controversial, and they are entirely self-sufficient with minimal hierarchies of power within the organization. Membership is currently estimated at over 2 million worldwide in 189 countries.

This study examined alcoholic's memories of their first drinks with those of non-alcoholics, and sought to observe any differences between the two. The purpose of the study was to determine if alcoholics experienced more vivid memories of their first drink than non-alcoholics. It was also a goal of this study to determine if these memories were

series of brief demographic questions and several questions regarding the participants' memories of their first drinks. The questionnaire was administered to individuals attending two Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and non-alcoholic volunteers. The participants completed the survey voluntarily in as much time as was needed. After the surveys had been completed, the data was entered into the computer program SPSS to analyze the results.

Results

The primary goal of this study was to compare alcoholics' memories of their first drink compared to non-alcoholics. Although there was a trend towards the hypothesis that alcoholics would have more vivid memories of their first drinks ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 1.31$) than non-alcoholics ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 1.29$), the results were not significant $t(45) = -0.67$, $p = .50$. However, the results indicated that alcoholics remembered their first drinks marginally more pleasantly ($M = 5.10$, $SD = 1.90$) than non-alcoholics ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 1.85$), $t(38) = -1.74$, $p = .09$. Interestingly, the vividness of participants memories of their first drink was unrelated to how old they were ($r = -.06$, $p = .67$) or how long ago their first drink was ($r = -.01$, $p = .96$). There were several common themes in both the alcoholics' short responses and the non-alcoholics' short responses. Alcoholics often associated their memories of their first drink with feelings of fitting in, fearlessness, and confidence. Many of their first drinks involved a family member, and several explained that they felt the need to drink to "be a man." The non-alcoholics mainly experienced their first drink at a party or with friends, and several got sick afterwards.

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