

Alcohol Abuse and Parental Aggression: Is There a Link?

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Senior Erika Levonian Studies the Link Between Alcohol Abuse and Parental Aggression

Undergraduate senior Erika Levonian has undertaken a project through USC's Family Studies Project that studies the relationship between alcoholism and child abuse. Levonian joined the program about one year ago, starting out by helping around the lab, and then gradually becoming involved in this honors thesis, funded by Provost Fellowship Grants. When asked why she chose this particular research topic, Levonian explained, "I have always had an interest in alcoholism and child abuse, and this was the perfect opportunity for me to learn more about these topics of interest that I have always had." She took on this project with the intention of learning more about the relationships among gender, alcoholism, and child abuse, and of finding ways to prevent physical abuse caused by alcohol consumption. A native of Encino, California, Levonian majors in psychology, and minors in musical studies, with an emphasis in the vocal arts. She plans to complete the project later this spring. After completing senior year, she may begin working toward a Masters in Marriage and Family Therapy (MFT), though she is still considering other career options.

The research proposal mentions that, annually, about 4% of American children fall victim to neglect and physical abuse. Of these cases of abuse, 30% have been reported to be a result of alcohol use. Because there is yet no clear association of alcohol use with abuse, Levonian's research, overseen by Dr. Brian Baucom from the USC psychology department, attempts to determine how alcohol consumption may trigger a parent's physical aggression toward his/her child and how that aggression may develop into

an intergenerational habit. Levonian will also observe the importance of gender differences to the two variables. Her primary questions can be summarized thus:

- How does parent-to-child physical aggression affect youth-to-offspring physical aggression?
- How does parental alcohol use affect youth-to-offspring physical aggression?
- How does parent-to-child physical aggression affect the child's alcohol use?
- How are youth alcohol use and youth-to-offspring physical aggression related?
- Does G2 youth gender affect the strength of the associations in the aforementioned questions?

Because the study necessitated asking personal questions of a large number of participants to collect data, Levonian instead used the data from a similar study conducted by the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) to carry out her research. The Add Health study provided surveys and in-home interviews from 1,222 adults (roughly equal numbers of males and females) between ages 24 and 32. Levonian explains, "I did not recruit subjects of my own ... because my study looks at some very sensitive topics of interest and I feel it would have been difficult to find people. In addition, Add Health has a very large sample size, which will make my results much stronger and more meaningful. I couldn't have gotten this large of a sample size if I wasn't using existing data." Despite having already collected rather than experimentally obtained data, Levonian still describes data collection as a "long, laborious process:" it took nearly six months to investigate what Add Health (the data provider) offered, to apply for the data, to have the application approved, and to finally receive the data. Levonian lends much credit to her mentor, Dr. Baucom, who she finds "very encouraging and optimistic;" he "lets [her] be the leader of [her] project but provides guidance at the same time," and revives her self-confidence when the project becomes overwhelming at times.

Levonian's prior research suggests that parents' unhealthy drinking behaviors tend to be genetically inherited by children. However, she argues that this research still does not explain the relationship between alcohol consumption and parent-to-child aggression. Therefore, it is likely that external factors, such as environment and/or the interaction of genetics and the environment, play a part in the relationship under study.

Her work also notes the importance of gender in aggressive behavior. Though both males and females express aggression under the influence of alcohol, they do so in different ways: men are more inclined toward "overt aggression," which causes more direct physical or verbal abuse, while women tend toward "relational aggression," which attacks social relationships by exclusion and/or spreading rumors. Levonian's research offers reasons for lower instances of abuse among women dealing with alcoholism. Women typically lack the characteristics linked to alcohol dependence, such as sensation-seeking and antisocial behavior; they have lower tolerance for alcohol before experiencing its negative effects; and they are more likely to become victims of sexual assault by intoxicated men. More importantly, it has been found that women may be *genetically* less inclined to become aggressive under the influence of alcohol. At the same time, however, other research claims that regardless of the parent's gender, parent alcohol abuse increases children's misuse of alcohol.

Though the study offers much to scientific knowledge, it also has its limitations. Levonian could not obtain data on parent-to-child aggression in the first generation to determine whether the parents were abused in their own childhood. Furthermore, there is no data to indicate whether children from the third generation will exhibit physical aggression toward their own children, as they themselves are still too young. Had the project had data for both instances, more definite conclusions could be drawn.

Levonian's research has potential to make better sense of the effects of alcohol, and how detrimental alcoholism can be to individuals and their interactions with others. Her findings may not only explain how intergenerational conflicts are propagated by alcoholism, but may also support arguments against excessive drinking at an early age, especially among college students who are pulled into such a dangerous habit.