ALCOHOLISM AMONG THE ELDERLY

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Abstract: Consistent with the views of researchers in the field of social gerontology, tendencies of alcoholism among the elderly represents a form of evasion of reality due to the inability of those elderly who can not adapt to changes induced during old age and who can not confront, by other means, the difficulties and negative events that occur inevitably in this stage of life.

Key words: social gerontology, elderly, alcoholism

Consistent with the views of researchers in the field of social gerontology, tendencies of alcoholism among the elderly represents a form of evasion of reality due to the inability of those elderly who can not adapt to changes induced during old age and who can not confront, by other means, the difficulties and negative events that occur inevitably in this stage of life.

Although eligible for support from family, children or friends, some elderly turn to alcohol as a way of escaping from discrimination and humiliations due to their old age. For other elderly who do not have or do not have anymore this support, alcohol represents a mean to compensate for some losses (loss of partner, loss of close relatives, friends, active roles etc. ). On these lines, alcoholism is not necessarily an irrational behavior, but an "adaptation" behavior to a situation considered hopeless, a kind of "solution" to a situation considered insurmountable.

Specialists from the West have reached conflicting results when estimating the incidence of alcoholism among the elderly . Some of these estimates consider that the proportions of elderly people who often turn to alcohol or are alcoholics are between 8-15 %, 40 % of them living in

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8 Paper presented to the International Socio Plus conference Strategies and Ways to Develop University Curricula in the Area of Social Work Education, 10-11nov.2015, Arad
urban areas. Other estimates placed the percentages of elderly alcoholics or alcohol dependent only between 2-10%. The difference between these estimates is mainly given by the different definitions of old age and by the different chronological age intervals considered in establishing these definitions.

These data should be treated with caution when they are related to the elderly Romanian population because, just like other forms of deviance, alcoholism is structured according to cultural patterns of different countries, according to their prescriptive or proscriptive percepts about regulating alcohol consumption. In some countries the existing rules prohibit alcohol (such as the Islamic counties), while in others they encourage or even stimulate this consumption in some celebrations or festivities.

However, all assessments agree that the incidence of alcoholism is higher among men than women and higher among young people and adults than in elderly. Such tendencies can be explained by poor health of the elderly, the liver and heart diseases that occur in old age. Moreover, elders develop a physiological intolerance to alcohol that counteracts its positive effects on the tonus when consumed in reasonable quantities. According to a number of classifications, old alcoholics are divided into two main categories:

- those who began their "career" of alcoholics in the early or middle adulthood, continuing to drink excessively at old age;
- those who start drinking excessively after the age of 50 years.

The largest is the first category, comprising over two thirds of elderly alcoholics, some of which live in families and social circumstances that do not justify excessive alcohol consumption only as a manifestation of sociability. As regards the second category, it consists mainly of single people, widows, divorced or separated, where alcohol abuse is a form of compensation for loneliness.

Distinguishing between sociable and solitary drunks, K. Weinberg appreciates that the first group is characterized by the desire to interact with others during alcohol consumption, while the latter is characterized by the absence of any social relations during this consumption. Although all excessive drinkers belong to family or social groups in which regular alcohol consumption and drunkenness are common practices, solitary drunk tends to focus exclusively on their own life problems, while sociable drunk is a member of group in which drinking is a way to stimulate sociability and the need to communicate.

Many of the elderly who are dependent on alcohol present deviant behavior, having permanent conflicts with family, neighbors or authorities. Statistics from the West show that more than half of the
elderly arrested for various crimes or offenses, including public nuisance, are alcoholics. On the other hand, a high proportion of elderly people addicted to alcohol presents symptoms of senile dementia, mental or neurological disorders. Symptoms of senile dementia include manifestations such as incoherent speech, delirium, memory difficulties, non functional stereotypical actions (eg. unconscious laughter), disorientation in time and place, various bizarre and illogical behavior.

As degenerative disease caused, among others, by nutritional shortcomings, senile dementia may be precipitated by excessive alcohol consumption, because only consumed in small quantities alcohol has nutritive valences, while its consumption beyond measure has no nutritional value.

Given the association of alcohol with psychiatric and neurological disorders, health care institutions, particularly in hospitals for mental illness, there is a much larger number of elderly alcoholics than there are in the elderly population that are not in institutions. This could suggest that alcoholism is closely linked to health problems that occur during old age and deviant behaviors that occur at this age.

An important part of the alcoholic elders is represented by the elderly who have no shelter, wandering and begging on the city streets. These elders are rarely treated in healthcare facilities, are not enrolled in special institutions for the elderly and the police tend to ignore them, except in cases of public nuisance or of criminal actions. Many of them, as noted often the press in Romania, die in the street (especially during winter), without assistance and without knowing their identity.

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