

Barbara Simonič

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5842-2017>

University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Theology, Slovenia

Elżbieta Osewska

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6050-2403>

University of Applied Sciences in Tarnow, Poland

Emotional Experience and Consequences of Growing Up in a Family with Alcoholism in Adult Children of Alcoholics*

Abstract

Adult children of alcoholics are adults who spent a part of, or their whole childhood in a dysfunctional family, where the biggest problem was alcohol addiction in one or both parents. In families with parental alcoholism, there is usually a lot of dysfunction in interpersonal relationships and in the upbringing of the children, which does not provide a healthy and optimal developmental environment for the child. There is often physical and psychological violence, and other forms of abuse and neglect that children perceive as traumatic. All this leaves the child with severe consequences, which they also struggle with in adulthood. Unresolved and traumatic childhood content often remains repressed and unprocessed and helps shape one's functioning in adulthood, which is frequently emotionally and socially immature. Adult children of alcoholics often have problems in experiencing and regulating their emotions, as they had to carry many emotional burdens in a dysfunctional family, while they had no real opportunity for the healthy development of emotional regulation. The article will present research on the emotional

* The results were partly obtained within the project No. J5-2570, financed by the Public Agency for Research of the Republic of Slovenia, from the state budget.

experience of children with their alcoholic parents and how they recognize related consequences in their adult lives. Using the content analysis method, we analyzed 71 anonymous forum posts on the counselling forum on the topic “Adult children of alcoholics.” The directed approach to content analysis was used to validate forum posts by people who described their childhood experiences with an alcoholic parent. We identified parts of the content that fell into two predetermined categories: emotional experience in childhood with an alcoholic parent and the experience of its consequences in adulthood. The results showed that the adult children of alcoholics mostly experienced severe feelings of fear, shame, sadness and disgust with their alcoholic parents in their childhood, and that these feelings have remained unprocessed. In adulthood, they struggle with negative consequences in the personal sphere (e.g. poor self-esteem, inferiority, anxiety, depression), in interpersonal relationships (e.g. problems in partnerships, mistrust, social phobia, parental stress, complicated relationships with parents) and in everyday functioning (e.g. coping with one’s own addiction, dysfunctional behavioural patterns), but they also recognize that because of this experience they have managed to lay the foundations of their lives differently and better. The results confirm that children are hidden victims of parental alcoholism and justify the need for psychosocial and therapeutic support even in their adulthood.

Keywords

Alcoholism, family, addiction, adult children of alcoholics, emotional regulation.

1. Introduction

A family is a place of relationships that are deep, warm and genuine, but sometimes also wounded. No matter what the relationships in the family are, whether the family is more or less ideal, it is still a school of humanity where one learns about relationships, solidarity, coexistence and care for the good of others and the common good. However, the real family always lives in a multifaceted existence, with its “light and shadows.” Modern families are often a place of conflict, tensions, a vicious circle of violence and abuse, in the grip of social and professional demands, alienation, pessimism, etc., and circumstances in families with various addictions are dire, especially when it comes to parental addiction.

2. Addiction in the family

Addiction has devastating consequences for the whole family. Parental substance abuse has a long-term impact on the entire family system – both on the couple relationship and the children. Addiction is a problem which involves the whole family and not just the member who resorts to addictive behaviour to try and ‘solve’ problems that they are not able to face. The whole family denies and carries difficult feelings, conflicts are more frequent and thus the emotional atmosphere becomes increasingly cold.¹ In addition to emotional pain, a family with an addicted member often faces a variety of dangerous and threatening situations, such as domestic violence, injuries, neglect, and so on.²

A change in values is characteristic of families with parental addiction. Their priorities change so that addiction-related activities become most important. They relinquish responsibilities and tolerate dangerous behaviours.³ They are exposed to various risks, such as illnesses, (traffic) accidents, injuries, and premature losses, either through the death of a family member (the addicted person or a relative, or suicide), or premature departure from families (running away from home, divorce, going to school or finding a job far away from home). All of this is accompanied by difficult emotional states, from fear, shame, guilt, to anger and sadness.⁴ However, it is often forbidden to express these emotions, which often leads to various pathological forms of behaviour and thinking.

Families with an alcoholic parent have a higher level of conflict, fighting, accusations and opposition, and a lower level of connection and family closeness compared to non-alcoholic families. They also report lower levels of physical and verbal expression of positive emotions, less emotional support, warmth, and care among family members.⁵ Alcoholic families are poorly differentiated.

¹ C. Gostečnik, *Srečal sem svojo družino II*, Ljubljana 2003, Brat Francišek in Franciškanski družinski inštitut, p. 19.

² L. Lander, J. Howsare, M. Byrne, *The impact of substance use disorders on families and children: from theory to practice*, “Social work in public health” 28 (2013), pp. 194–205.

³ S. Agha, H. Zia, S. Irfan, *Psychological problems and family functioning as risk factors in addiction*, “Journal of Ayub Medical College” 20 (2008), p. 88.

⁴ W. Caan, *Alcohol and the family*, “Contemporary Social Science” 8 (2013), p. 11.

⁵ P. Johnson, *Dimensions of functioning in alcoholics and non-alcoholics families*, “Journal of mental Health Counselling” 23 (2001), p. 133; M. L. Kelley, V. M. Schroeder, *The influence of family factors on the executive functioning of adult children of alcoholics in college*, “Family Relations” 57 (2008), p. 406.

Due to high levels of tension, family members are constantly anxious, they adapt and react to the behaviour of the alcoholic, there is no possibility in the family for the autonomous development of an individual, and their self-image is distinctively negative.⁶ Excessive drinking and alcohol addiction negatively affect marital satisfaction and stability. Partners of alcoholics experience more marital stress, physical and psychological abuse, and divorce is common.⁷ Parental alcoholism (affecting one or both parents) has a devastating effect on a child's development. 55% of cases of domestic violence occur in families with addiction and in 90%, alcohol is a major factor in child abuse.⁸ Children of alcoholics often show many behavioural problems, from delinquency, addictive behaviour, and resistance to social norms. There is also a significant increase in the risk of a child becoming a problem drinker in adulthood, as evidenced by the results of studies on stressful childhood experiences that are often present in families with alcoholic parents.⁹ Parental alcoholism also greatly increases the likelihood that offspring will develop some form of mental disorder.¹⁰

Addicted parents often use a different parenting approach, take a different attitude towards their children, pass on different values and thus also give a picture of reality that is completely distorted. The addiction of one person entails a poorer quality of life for the whole family for a period of several generations.¹¹ In these cases, children are victims who try their best to adapt to their situation in order to survive, and do all in their power to receive at least a little

⁶ T. D. Crespi, Q. H. Rueckert, *Family therapy and children of alcoholics: Implications for continuing education and certification in substance abuse practice*, "Journal of Child & Adolescent Substance Abuse" 15 (2006), pp. 37.

⁷ L. Rodriguez, C. Neighbors, R. C. Knee, *Problematic alcohol use and marital distress: An interdependence theory perspective*, "Addiction Research and Theory" 22 (2014), p. 295.

⁸ T. Dayton, *The ACOA trauma syndrome: The impact of childhood pain on adult relationships*, Deerfield Beach 2012, Health Communications, p. 14.

⁹ W. Caan, *Alcohol and the family*, "Contemporary Social Science" 8 (2013), pp. 11-12.

¹⁰ K. A. McLaughlin, A. M. Gadermann, I. Hwang, N. A. Sampson, A. Al-Hamzawi, L. A. Andrade, M. C. Angermeyer, C. Benjet, E. J. Bromet, R. Bruffaerts, J. M. Caldas-de-Almeida, G. de Girolamo, R. de Graaf, S. Florescu, O. Gureje, J. M. Haro, H. Ruskov Hinkov, I. Horiguchi, C. Hu, A. N. Karam, V. Kovess-Masfety, S. Lee, S. D. Murphy, S. H. Nizamie, J. Posada-Villa, D. R. Williams, R. C. Kessler, *Parent psychopathology and offspring mental disorders: Results from the WHO World Mental Health Surveys*, "British Journal of Psychiatry" 200 (2012), p. 291.

¹¹ C. Gostečnik, *Srečal sem svojo družino*, Ljubljana 1999, Brat Francišek in Franciškanski družinski center, p. 180.

attention and a sense of belonging. To maintain some form of balance in the family and its functioning, and to care for the addicted parent, they assume several roles that they are not up to (e.g. parentification).¹² One of the negative characteristics of families with addicted parents is instability, as children never know what to expect from moment to moment, so they live in constant fear that the family will fall apart and their lives will become even more broken.¹³ The interpersonal, emotional and social consequences of alcoholism or other types of parental addiction are painful for the whole family and can persist into a child's adulthood. In the clinical practice and research of the consequences of parental alcoholism in children, this is covered by the concept of "adult children of alcoholics" (ACoA).

3. Adult children of alcoholics (ACoA)

ACoAs are people over the age of 18 who spent a part of or their whole childhood growing up in a dysfunctional family, where the biggest problem was alcohol addiction in one or both parents.¹⁴ These adults suffer from the effects of alcoholism in the primary family, which some simply call the "ACoA syndrome."¹⁵ Unresolved and traumatic childhood content often remains repressed and unprocessed, and helps shape one's functioning in adulthood, which is frequently emotionally and socially immature.¹⁶ All this is the result of growing up with parents who did not provide the child with a safe and healthy developmental environment.

Of course, not all children of alcoholics in adulthood have the same problems. Growing up in an alcoholic family does not necessarily mean that an individual will have problems, but it is a serious and important risk factor for developing

¹² L. M. Hooper, S. A. Wallace, *Evaluating the parentification questionnaire: psychometric properties and psychopathology correlates*, "Contemporary Family Therapy" 32 (2010), p. 53.

¹³ D. Geddes, *An international perspective on the communication problems of families with an alcoholic and adult children of alcoholics*, "World communication" 22 (1993), p. 70.

¹⁴ A. Pasternak, K. Schier, *The role reversal in the families of adult children of alcoholics*, "Archives of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy" 14 (2012), p. 51.

¹⁵ S. L. Harter, *Psychosocial adjustment of adult children of alcoholics: A review of the recent empirical literature*, "Clinical Psychology Review" 20 (2000), p. 312.

¹⁶ A. Pasternak, K. Schier, *The role reversal in the families of adult children of alcoholics*, "Archives of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy" 14 (2012), p. 52.

problems.¹⁷ Compared with adults coming from families where parents have not been addicted to alcohol, ACoA has a higher risk of substance abuse, developing symptoms of depression, antisocial behaviour, lower self-esteem, anxiety disorders, and relational problems.¹⁸ Numerous clinical observations and research confirm that ACoAs are a fairly homogeneous group with some similar characteristics on the continuum of experience and psychosocial functioning as a result of growing up in specific circumstances and dynamics, present in the family due to parental alcoholism.¹⁹

ACoAs are therefore individuals who, on the one hand, are trapped in a child's fears and reactions, and on the other hand, as children, they had to become adults too quickly without going through the natural stages of child development, where optimal development into a healthy adult would be possible.²⁰ As children, growing up in an alcoholic family, they lost a normal childhood and could not be children. They usually had to grow up too fast, but they were not yet mature enough to do so. Therefore, they have never really grown up and even in adulthood, inside they still feel like a child struggling with terror and feelings from their childhood. Thus, ACoA seems to have two identities: that of adults and children at the same time, as unresolved and traumatic content, stemming from growing up with alcoholic parents, shapes their functioning in adulthood.²¹

ACoAs live with emotional scars from the time when they were growing up in a family with parental alcohol addiction. They have more physical problems than people who grew up in non-alcoholic families.²² They often feel insecure, are self-condemning and afraid of intimacy. When they grow up, their problems

¹⁷ C. W. Hall, R. E. Webster, *Risk factors among adult children of alcoholics*, "International Journal of Behavioral Consultation and Therapy" 3 (2007), p. 494.

¹⁸ D. Beesley, C. D. Stoltenberg, *Control, attachment style, and relationship satisfaction among adult children of alcoholics*, "Journal of Mental Health Counseling" 24 (2002), pp. 282–284.

¹⁹ S. L. Harter, *Psychosocial adjustment of adult children of alcoholics: A review of the recent empirical literature*, "Clinical Psychology Review" 20 (2000), p. 313.

²⁰ A. Pasternak, K. Schier, *The role reversal in the families of adult children of alcoholics*, "Archives of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy" 14 (2012), p. 52.

²¹ D. H. Ruben, *Treating adult children of alcoholics: A behavioral approach*, San Diego 2001, Academic Press, p. 8.

²² K. E. Hart, D. L. Fiissel, M. McAleer, *Do adult offspring of alcoholics suffer from poor medical health? A three-group comparison controlling for self-report bias*, "The Canadian journal of nursing research" 35 (2003), p. 53.

with trust, relationship dependence, self-control, identity, and emotional expression continue.²³ Compared to adults from non-alcoholic families, ACoAs have higher levels of anxiety and avoidance in partnerships and are generally afraid to form attachments with other adults.²⁴ There are also higher levels of depression and anxiety²⁵; many live in constant fear of becoming alcoholics themselves, which is often the case.²⁶

ACoAs often have difficulty experiencing, expressing, and regulating their emotions, as they have experienced many emotional burdens in a dysfunctional family, while they had no real opportunity for the healthy development of emotional regulation. They often repress their emotions and are reluctant to share anything personal or vulnerable.²⁷ By disclosing, they could risk guilt and shame because they feel they are not good enough, they are afraid that they would look incompetent, and that others would not approve of them. Self-expression is thus very selective, cautious, and premeditated.²⁸ Based on this, specific ways of self-perception, perception of others and relationships are formed, which usually bring complications in their everyday living.²⁹

Based on these starting points, which are confirmed by research and the results of clinical practice, we decided to qualitatively research the nature of ACoAs' experience, namely 1. Their emotional experience in the time when they were growing up with alcoholic parents and 2. Which consequences of such childhood they recognize as having an impact in their adult lives.

²³ G. R. Collins, *Christian Counselling*, Nashville 2007, Thomas Nelson, p. 662.

²⁴ M. L. Kelley, T. F. Cash, A. R. Grant, D. L. Miles, M. T. Santos, *Parental alcoholism: Relationships to adult attachment in college women and men*, "Addictive Behaviors" 29 (2004), pp. 1635-1636.

²⁵ S. L. Harter, *Psychosocial adjustment of adult children of alcoholics: A review of the recent empirical literature*, "Clinical Psychology Review" 20 (2000), p. 319.

²⁶ G. R. Collins, *Christian Counselling*, Nashville 2007, Thomas Nelson, pp. 662-663.

²⁷ C. W. Hall, R. E. Webster, *Risk factors among adult children of alcoholics*, "International Journal of Behavioral Consultation and Therapy" 3 (2007), p. 495.

²⁸ D. H. Ruben, *Treating adult children of alcoholics: A behavioral approach*, San Diego 2001, Academic Press, pp. 11-12.

²⁹ K. H. Sorocco, N. C. Carnes, A. J. Cohoon, A. S. Vincent, W. R. Lovallo, *Risk factors for alcoholism in the Oklahoma family health patterns project: Impact of early life adversity and family history on affect regulation and personality, drug and alcohol dependence*, "Drug and Alcohol Dependence" 150 (2015), pp. 42-43.

4. Method

4.1. Participants

The participants in our research were anonymous individuals who participated in one of the Slovenian counselling forums on the topic of „adult children of alcoholics” between 2014 and 2021. They publicly posted accessible content or comments on the forum under pseudonyms.

There were 71 forum entries in all, involving 43 women and 14 men (some had multiple posts), which could be identified from the contents of the entries themselves. Participants had a childhood experience of growing up in an environment where alcoholism plagued one or both parents.

4.2. Procedure and instruments

Using the content analysis method, we analyzed the forum posts of people who described their childhood experiences with an alcoholic parent. Content analysis is a technique with which one tries (or attempts) to compress many units of text into a smaller number of content categories. It is a form of textual analysis that is used to describe and explain the characteristics of the message covered in the text.³⁰ We used a directed approach to content analysis, the aim of which is to validate or extend conceptually a theoretical framework or theory. The main advantage of a directed approach to content analysis is that existing theory can be supported and extended.³¹ This approach is characterized by a more structured process than in a conventional approach. Typically, based on an existing theory or prior research the researcher identifies and sets key concepts or variables as initial coding categories (deductive category application by designing predetermined categories).³² Operational definitions for each category are then derived based on the application of the theory.³³

³⁰ A. Assarroudi, F. Heshmati Nabavi, M. R. Armat, A. Ebadi, M. Vaismoradi, *Directed qualitative content analysis: the description and elaboration of its underpinning methods and data analysis process*, “Journal of Research in Nursing” 23 (2018), p. 2.

³¹ H. F. Hsieh, S. E. Shannon, *Three approaches to qualitative content analysis*, “Qualitative Health Research” 15 (2005), p. 1283.

³² W. J. Potter, D. Levine-Donnerstein, *Rethinking validity and reliability in content analysis*, “Journal of Applied Communication Research” 27 (1999), pp. 264-265.

³³ H. F. Hsieh, S. E. Shannon, *Three approaches to qualitative content analysis*, “Qualitative Health Research” 15 (2005), p. 1281.

In our study, we thus formulated two predetermined categories: 1. emotional experience in childhood with an alcoholic parent, and 2. experiencing consequences in adulthood. Following the operational definition of these descriptive and broad domains, 71 ACoA records were analyzed. Forum posts allow for anonymous confessions, so we concluded that the participants were being sincere and comprehensive in describing their experiences, and that the content is therefore relevant. The records were collected, printed and reviewed several times, i.e. analyzed in terms of content, and we looked for content that would fall into one of the defined predetermined categories. As a unit of analysis (consisting of the whole record, or a few sentences where several contents were thematically covered in the record), we took the part of the text that referred to a specific topic, and which fell into one of the predetermined categories. We then determined the codes for each classified unit of analysis; the codes were grouped into sub-categories within each of the two predetermined categories.

5. Results and discussion

The results showed that in their childhood with alcoholic parents, ACoAs experienced severe feelings of fear, shame, sadness, and disgust which often remained unresolved. Table 1 presents the individual codes, which are classified within the subcategories, within the predetermined category “emotional experience in childhood.” Illustrative records of participants reflecting the analyzed content are also added.

Table 1: Category EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE IN CHILDHOOD

SUB-CATEGORIES	Codes	Examples of records
FEAR	Physical violence Terrorizing/psychological violence Helplessness Doubt Insecurity Horror Unprotectedness Anxiety	“My stepfather was alcoholic, aggressive, a psychopath... My mother, also an alcoholic, already hit rock bottom. As much horror as there was behind our door... Blood on the walls and I had to clean it (at 8 years old), so many broken bones, tufts of hair pulled out...” “We children hid around the house; we were afraid to go to sleep, afraid to return home from boarding schools, afraid to eat together, afraid to hang out together...”

SUB-CATEGORIES	Codes	Examples of records
SADNESS	Rejection Redundancy Contempt Humiliation Heartbreak Longing Trying hard Despair Disappointment	"She was cold, she didn't hug me, didn't comfort me; all these things were done by others." "We never celebrated birthdays, mother cooked mostly for father... There was no order." "I always tried to please everyone, to be a good little girl and I thought that then my parents would be proud of me."
ANGER	Resentment Injustice Indignation Hatred Rage	"In a way, I resent mother – because she robbed me of a carefree childhood. I think this affects our relationship even today." "Many times I had such a strong feeling of hatred that I could have killed him if I had not been aware of the consequences. You feel as if you are slowly getting insane because of all this hatred and anger and fear stored inside." "I have despised and hated my father all my life because he drank and still drinks today."
DISGUST	Aversion Contempt	"Endless gob and bickering every day... I feel real aversion." "My father was an alcoholic, too... He came home and keeled over onto the couch. Disgusting." "I remember that stench of a glass of stale white wine. I remember the sound of the refrigerator that kept singing in the evening and the bottle emptying. It makes my stomach turn."
SHAME	Embarrassment Awkwardness Restraint	"Then a fight, the police and so on and so forth. I was ashamed of such parents." "I had a really unhappy childhood – our house was not pretty, I did not dare to bring friends home, because I never knew what my father would come home like – I was ashamed." "Most children are ashamed of their own shadow, let alone their parents."

In countless cases, the participants were particularly afraid of experiencing physical violence by an alcoholic parent, and there was also a lot of psychological violence in the form of exercising terror, various pressures, unreasonable demands, etc. Along with all this, there was a lot of helplessness, and feelings of being trapped and unprotected were awakened; these were the main source of anxiety because as children, the participants were completely at the mercy of those (violent and abusive) situations where they did not get any protection. And as children, they were not yet mature enough to properly regulate these feelings of anxiety and threat. In situation

where they felt fear were mostly experienced as traumatic, and this trauma was chronic.

Another strong emotional subcategory was sadness. Grief was not stated in direct terms; instead, they described it as feelings of rejection, redundancy, contempt, and humiliation when they felt the pain that they were not loved, that there was no warmth and care in the family. The pain was also felt in the expressions of longing and constant expectation that they would get attention and recognition if they tried hard enough, and this was usually followed only by disappointment and finally despair at the realization that nothing would ever change.

The participants felt anger especially when they perceived past experiences as an injustice that should not have happened to them as children, and they also felt outraged. They felt robbed of a peaceful childhood and loving relationships and expressed resentment and hatred towards their parents. The emotion associated with anger was often one of disgust, which was expressed as contempt for the parent who drinks, and often as a physical aversion to the state in which the parent was. At the same time, there was a lot of shame, which the participants expressed as an embarrassment because of the family situation or the alcoholic parent. Shame could also be detected in the background of the behaviour resulting from embarrassment. As children, the participants were often uneasy and cautious in their relationships as they tried to cover up embarrassing family situations.

The results of our research show that children who grew up with alcoholic parents express psychological impairment in childhood which is marked by traumatic experiences. These are accompanied by difficult emotional states, most of which remain inappropriately regulated: fear, anger, shame, sadness, and disgust. Because of inadequate emotional regulation children can develop other regulatory mechanisms that often manifest as emotional problems (e.g. anxiety and depressive states)³⁴ and behavioural disorders (e.g. hyperactivity and restlessness, aggression and antisocial patterns, anxiety reactions, a low tolerance for stress, panic disorder, co-dependent behaviour, social phobia etc.).³⁵

³⁴ M. C. Haverfield, J. A. Theiss, *A theme analysis of experiences reported by adult children of alcoholics in online support forums*, "Journal of Family Studies" 20 (2014), p. 168.

³⁵ R. Oravec, *Otroci odvisnikov*, "Psihološka obzorja" 11 (2002), p. 97.

Emotional regulation refers to the ability to control one's emotional arousal and allows one to navigate through positive and negative affect.³⁶ The development of emotional regulation takes place mainly in childhood and adolescence, when the brain, abstract thinking and social connections develop, through which the foundations are laid for unique traits of emotional regulation, which continues into adulthood.³⁷ Early experiences with parents influence the development of the organic basis of our personality: they are written in the brain, which is responsible for processing conscious and unconscious information throughout life. In childhood and adolescence, the foundations of the emotional functioning and emotional resources of an adult are established.³⁸

During this period, the role of parents is irreplaceable. The way parents express their affective states and how they respond to their children's expressions of affect shows children how to deal with and internalize emotions.³⁹ The supportive and empathetic response of parents to a child's expression of emotions allows the child to successfully identify and address their emotion during a social episode. Parents who respond to a child's emotions in a humiliating and rejecting way often encourage a child's negative adaptation and poor regulatory behaviour.⁴⁰

In families affected by emotional stress, such as in families with alcoholic parents, parents are unable to show appropriate emotions or guide their children to gain control of their own emotions. Inconsistent communication is often present in such families, making it difficult for children to interpret how to accept and respond appropriately to interpersonal messages.⁴¹ This

³⁶ K. N. Ochsner, J. J. Gross, *The cognitive control of emotion*, "Trends in Cognitive Science" 9 (2005), pp. 242–243.

³⁷ R. A. Thompson, S. Meyer, *The socialization of emotion regulation in the family*, in: J. Gross (ed.), *Handbook of emotion regulation*, New York 2006, Guilford, pp. 249–250.

³⁸ B. Simonič, A. Poljanec, *Building motherhood in the young mothers' group*, "Child Care in Practice" 20 (2014), pp. 271–275.

³⁹ C. H. Fewell, *An attachment and mentalizing perspective on children of substance-abusing parents*, in: S. A. Straussner, C. H. Fewell (eds.), *Children of substance-abusing parents: Dynamics and treatment*, New York 2011, Springer, pp. 29–30.

⁴⁰ J. J. Gross, R. Thompson, *Emotion regulation: Conceptual foundations*, in: J. J. Gross (ed.), *Handbook of emotion regulation*, New York 2006, Guilford, pp. 3–6.

⁴¹ P. Fonagy, G. Gergely, E. Jurist, M. Target, *Affect regulation, mentalization and the development of the self*, New York 2002, Other Press, p. 160.

is a relational trauma that leaves completely different patterns in the child's neurobiological functioning, as it negatively affects the developmental processes in the functioning of the brain that depend on experience. This leaves a long-term negative impact on the development process itself, and also on the personality structure of the individual. Not surprisingly, these people, even as adults, suffer the consequences that are devastating in their lives and the lives of their loved ones. Various disorders in adulthood have their roots in childhood, e.g. eating disorders, substance abuse, overly impulsive behaviour, lack of empathy, depression, anxiety, aggression, etc., all because of a poor development of emotional regulation, thus individuals are unable to properly manage their feelings.⁴²

Many negative aspects of psychophysical functioning can be observed in ACoA, which the participants in our research directly linked to childhood experiences. In their background, we can recognize inappropriate emotional regulation. Concerning the second research area, our results showed that ACoA feel the negative consequences in everyday functionality, in the personal area (self-perception), in interpersonal relationships, but also recognize that this experience has laid different and better foundations for their lives (personal growth). Table 2 presents the codes which are classified within the subcategories, within the predetermined category "consequences in adulthood." Illustrative notes of the participants are also added.

Table 2: Category EXPERIENCES IN ADULTHOOD

SUB-CATEGORIES	Codes	Examples of records
PROBLEMS IN EVERY-DAY FUNCTIONALITY	Addictive behaviour Re-living trauma (PTSD) Depression Anxiety Panic reactions Fear of the future Restlessness Aggression Irritability Tenseness	"Even today, I'm afraid if someone gets angry, I'm very scared and I flinch when the door slams or something breaks." "Sometimes I wonder if there is any point in living at all. I keep getting depressed." "Alcohol is just a consolation to me, I know it's very bad, but it's the only thing that puts me in a good mood at least for a while... I tried to live without alcohol and it worked, but then all my past came after me and great sadness at the same time. My life is one big sadness." "I also sometimes get into alcohol and occasionally drugs. When I use, everything is different."

⁴² S. Gerhard S., *Why Love matters*, London 2004, Routledge, pp. 70-77.

SUB-CATEGORIES	Codes	Examples of records
SELF-PERCEPTION	Self-contempt Feeling worthless Poor self-esteem	"I find myself telling myself the same words he used to insult me with: You worthless nit." "This, however, still hurts and will never stop hurting. The feeling that you weren't loved and that you weren't worthy of being loved."
INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS	Conflicted intimate relationships Co-dependence Need for control Distrust Problematic parenting Problems in relationship with parents	"Maybe I'm not able to return such love as I should." "Now... I am terribly afraid of people, it's called social phobia." "It hurts because I'm awkward around people, I don't trust anyone, I don't have friends. Relationships are just not my thing. And obviously, I will always remain single." "Because of this, I often find myself in the other extreme: I want to have everything under control, my partner has to show love all the time and in all imaginable ways, I can't stand if he doesn't come for a longer period, I absolutely can't stand not knowing when he will come..."
PERSONAL GROWTH	Aversion to alcohol Processing of traumatic experiences Forgiveness New positive experiences in relationships Acceptance and calmness	"I can't stand alcohol." "Today I live happily surrounded by people who don't need alcohol to relax." "Even as a girl, I swore that I would NOT have such a partner/husband – and I don't." "In my case, it has benefited me in life. It wasn't pleasant, but I took everything positive out of it. I studied hard and always worked hard, so I gained experience with people from whom I also learned and gathered patterns elsewhere, not at home."

In adulthood, ACoAs feel the consequences in various areas of everyday functionality. Dysfunctional patterns of behaviour are often reported, including various forms of addiction. Their mood is often depressed and they find it difficult to find meaning, there is also anxiety and fear of the future. In their reactions, which can be impulsive, they often recognize panic, tension, and fear, which they associate with traumatic childhood experiences whilst growing up with alcoholic parents. These aspects are often associated with a negative self-perception of oneself as inferior, which is associated with poor self-esteem. They also perceive many problems in interpersonal relationships. These can manifest themselves in general relationships with others (mistrust, social phobia), in intimate relationships (fear of intimacy, conflict, need for control), in relationships with one's own children, or unresolved and complicated relationships with one's own parents.

These consequences complement the findings of other research. As adults, children from alcoholic families develop markedly low self-esteem, feelings of worthlessness, rejection, are much more prone to feeling guilt, shame, fear, devaluation, mutual manipulation, hostility and pathological symbiosis.⁴³ They often have an internalized fear of abandonment, a need to control others, neglect their own needs, and over-commit to the needs of and problem-solving for others.⁴⁴ Many ACoAs report social phobia and panic disorder⁴⁵, agoraphobia, and generalized anxiety disorder.⁴⁶ ACoAs also have problems with social and emotional adaptability.⁴⁷ The emotional and psychological characteristics of ACoA also contribute to behavioural problems.

ACoAs often have difficulty establishing intimate relationships in adulthood. Many find it difficult to develop a healthy intimate relationship.⁴⁸ Due to a lack of trust and self-confidence, they do not allow anyone to approach them and develop a close, trusting relationship with them.⁴⁹ What ACoA perceives as an expression of love and intimacy is co-dependent behaviour or strict control.⁵⁰ Researchers also find that ACoAs have lower levels of marital satisfaction, higher divorce rates, lower levels of satisfaction with their children, and will more likely marry an alcoholic than adult children of non-alcoholics.⁵¹

⁴³ D. B. Omkarappa, S. Rentala, *Anxiety, depression, self-esteem among children of alcoholic and nonalcoholic parents*, "Journal of family medicine and primary care" 8 (2019), pp. 604-605.

⁴⁴ D. H. Ruben, *Treating adult children of alcoholics: A behavioral approach*, San Diego 2001, Academic Press, pp. 10-15.

⁴⁵ M. C. Haverfield, J. A. Theiss, *A theme analysis of experiences reported by adult children of alcoholics in online support forums*, "Journal of Family Studies" 20 (2014), p. 168.

⁴⁶ S. Rangarajan, L. Kelly, *Family communication patterns, family environment, and the impact of parental alcoholism on offspring self-esteem*, "Journal of Social and Personal Relationships" 23 (2006), p. 656.

⁴⁷ C. W. Hall, R. E. Webster, *Risk factors among adult children of alcoholics*, "International Journal of Behavioral Consultation and Therapy" 3 (2007), p. 504.

⁴⁸ M. C. Haverfield, J. A. Theiss, *A theme analysis of experiences reported by adult children of alcoholics in online support forums*, "Journal of Family Studies" 20 (2014), p. 166.

⁴⁹ J. N. Kearns-Bodkin, K. E. Leonard, *Relationship functioning among adult children of alcoholics*, "Journal of studies on alcohol and drugs" 69 (2008), p. 941.

⁵⁰ N. Trtnik, *Okrevanje odraslih otrok alkoholikov in duhovnost*, "Bogoslovni vestnik" 76 (2016), p. 197.

⁵¹ P. Johnson, *Dimensions of functioning in alcoholics and nonalcoholics families*, "Journal of mental Health Counseling" 23 (2001), p. 128.

On the other hand, an important aspect highlighted by many participants in their writings is personal growth based on the insights they gained when faced with the burden of childhood experience. Participants reported that by working hard on themselves and with the support of others, they processed traumatic experiences and also created new positive experiences in relationships. They feel aversion to alcohol, and do not give in to addictions. They are somehow reconciled to the past and have accepted it, and many times this has been possible after they have been able to forgive their parents (but not forget). In these cases, we are talking about ACoA recovery. Transforming non-functional patterns of functioning and emotion into more functional patterns is of great importance for ACoA recovery. In the process of recovery, they learn to set new boundaries, accept responsibility for themselves and their needs, and at the same time reduce the need to control and solve the problems of others. They need to put themselves first, recognize their needs and be able to express them. They need to realize that they cannot take the blame for the irresponsible behaviour of others. They develop enough insight into what is happening that they realize that they are not the culprits, and that they were thrown into this situation as children. They need to substitute guilt for responsibility and understand that taking care of themselves is not selfish. Above all, it is important to gradually increase one's feeling of worthiness, which was neglected in childhood.⁵²

6. Conclusion

The results show several difficult emotional experiences that ACoAs had as children growing up with their alcoholic parents, and how they link these experiences to the consequences in their adulthood. The results complement the findings of many previous empirical studies with in-depth insight into various aspects of experience, which confirm various complications but also a possibility of post-traumatic growth. Research mostly shows that, although alcoholic parents and their family members are a heterogeneous group, children in such family systems are at a greater risk of developing negative consequences⁵³, both in their childhood

⁵² N. Trtnik, *Okrevanje odraslih otrok alkoholikov in duhovnost*, "Bogoslovni vestnik" 76 (2016), pp. 198-199.

⁵³ R. E. Godsall, G. J. Jurkovic, J. Emshoff, L. Anderson, D. Stanwyck, *Why some kids do well in bad situations: Relation of parental alcohol misuse and parentification to children's self-concept*, "Substance Use & Misuse" 39 (2004), p. 790.

and later on in adulthood.⁵⁴ The problem of ACoAs is that the children's personal development while growing up in the dysfunctional dynamics of interpersonal relationships due to addiction, is affected. They internalize these dynamics into their concept of self and self in relationships, which they play as ACoAs with their partners and in their newly formed families. Long after leaving alcoholic homes, they get stuck in a loop of repetitive patterns of relationships that are a direct result of childhood trauma. ACoAs carry the pain of past relationships into their intimate partnerships, parenting, and the social environment.⁵⁵ ACoAs also develop an increased risk of problems related to behavioural, psychological, cognitive, and neuropsychological deficits.⁵⁶ The results of our research confirm that ACoAs are in some way hidden victims of alcoholism and substantiate the need for psychosocial and therapeutic support even in their adulthood.

Bibliography

- Agha S., Zia H., Irfan S., *Psychological problems and family functioning as risk factors in addiction*, "Journal of Ayub Medical College" 20 (2008), pp. 88-91.
- Assarroudi A., Heshmati Nabavi F., Armat M. R., Ebadi A., Vaismoradi M., *Directed qualitative content analysis: the description and elaboration of its underpinning methods and data analysis process*, "Journal of Research in Nursing" 23 (2018), pp. 42-55.
- Beesley D., Stoltenberg C. D., *Control, attachment style, and relationship satisfaction among adult children of alcoholics*, "Journal of Mental Health Counseling" 24 (2002), pp. 281-298.
- Caan W., *Alcohol and the family*, "Contemporary Social Science" 8 (2013), pp. 8-17.
- Collins G. R., *Christian Counselling*, Nashville 2007, Thomas Nelson.
- Crespi T. D., Rueckert Q. H., *Family therapy and children of alcoholics: Implications for continuing education and certification in substance abuse practice*, "Journal of Child & Adolescent Substance Abuse" 15 (2006), pp. 33-44.
- Dayton T., *The ACOA trauma syndrome: The impact of childhood pain on adult relationships*, Deerfield Beach 2012, Health Communications.

⁵⁴ N. Trtnik, *Okrevanje odraslih otrok alkoholikov in duhovnost*, "Bogoslovni vestnik" 76 (2016), p. 191.

⁵⁵ T. Dayton, *The ACOA trauma syndrome: The impact of childhood pain on adult relationships*, Deerfield Beach 2012, Health Communications, pp. 14-20.

⁵⁶ T. D. Crespi, Q. H. Rueckert, *Family therapy and children of alcoholics: Implications for continuing education and certification in substance abuse practice*, "Journal of Child & Adolescent Substance Abuse" 15 (2006), p. 82.

- Fewel, C. H., An attachment and mentalizing perspective on children of substance-abusing parents, in: S. A. Straussner, C. H. Fewell C. H. (eds.), *Children of substance-abusing parents: Dynamics and treatment*, New York 2011, Springer, pp. 29–48.
- Fonagy P., Gergely G., Jurist E., Target M., *Affect regulation, mentalization and the development of the self*, New York 2002, Other Press.
- Geddes D., *An international perspective on the communication problems of families with an alcoholic and adult children of alcoholics*, "World communication" 22 (1993), pp. 68–73.
- Gerhard S., *Why Love matters*, London 2004, Routledge.
- Godsall R. E., Jurkovic G. J., Emshoff J., Anderson L., Stanwyck D., *Why some kids do well in bad situations: Relation of parental alcohol misuse and parentification to children's self-concept*, "Substance Use & Misuse" 39 (2004), pp. 789–809.
- Gostečnik C., *Srečal sem svojo družino II*, Ljubljana 2003, Brat Francišek in Franciškanski družinski inštitut.
- Gostečnik C., *Srečal sem svojo družino*, Ljubljana 1999, Brat Francišek in Franciškanski družinski center.
- Gross J. J., Thompson R., *Emotion regulation: Conceptual foundations*, in: J. J. Gross (ed.), *Handbook of emotion regulation*, New York 2006, Guilford, pp. 3–24.
- Hall C. W., Webster R. E., *Risk factors among adult children of alcoholics*, "International Journal of Behavioral Consultation and Therapy" 3 (2007), pp. 494–511.
- Hart K. E., Fiissel D. L., McAleer M., *Do adult offspring of alcoholics suffer from poor medical health? A three-group comparison controlling for self-report bias*, "The Canadian journal of nursing research" 35 (2003), pp. 53–72.
- Harter S. L., *Psychosocial adjustment of adult children of alcoholics: A review of the recent empirical literature*, "Clinical Psychology Review" 20 (2000), pp. 311–337.
- Haverfield M. C., Theiss J. A., *A theme analysis of experiences reported by adult children of alcoholics in online support forums*, "Journal of Family Studies" 20 (2014), pp. 166–184.
- Hooper L. M., Wallace S. A., *Evaluating the parentification questionnaire: psychometric properties and psychopathology correlates*, "Contemporary Family Therapy" 32 (2010), pp. 52–68.
- Hsieh H. F., Shannon S. E., *Three approaches to qualitative content analysis*, "Qualitative Health Research" 15 (2005), pp. 1277–1288.
- Johnson P., *Dimensions of functioning in alcoholics and nonalcoholics families*, "Journal of mental Health Counseling" 23 (2001), pp. 127–136.
- Kearns-Bodkin J. N., Leonard K. E., *Relationship functioning among adult children of alcoholics*, "Journal of studies on alcohol and drugs" 69 (2008), pp. 941–950.
- Kelley M. L., Cash T. F., Grant A. R., Miles D. L., Santos M. T., *Parental alcoholism: Relationships to adult attachment in college women and men*, "Addictive Behaviors" 29 (2004), pp. 1633–1636.

- Kelley M. L., Schroeder V. M., *The influence of family factors on the executive functioning of adult children of alcoholics in college*, "Family Relations" 57 (2008), pp. 404-414.
- Lander L., Howsare J., Byrne M., *The impact of substance use disorders on families and children: from theory to practice*, "Social work in public health" 28 (2013), pp. 194-205.
- McLaughlin K. A., Gadermann A. M., Hwang I., Sampson N. A., Al-Hamzawi A., Andrade L. A., Angermeyer M. C., Benjet C., Bromet E. J., Bruffaerts R., Caldas-de-Almeida J. M., de Girolamo G., de Graaf R., Florescu S., Gureje O., Haro J. M., Ruskov Hinkov H., Horiguchi I., Hu C., Karam A. N., Kovess-Masfety V., Lee S., Murphy S. D., Nizamie S. H., Posada-Villa J., Williams D. R., Kessler R. C., *Parent psychopathology and offspring mental disorders: Results from the WHO World Mental Health Surveys*, "British Journal of Psychiatry" 200 (2012), pp. 290-299.
- Ochsner K. N., Gross J. J., *The cognitive control of emotion*, "Trends in Cognitive Science" 9 (2005), pp. 242-249.
- Omkarappa D. B., Rentala S., *Anxiety, depression, self-esteem among children of alcoholic and nonalcoholic parents*, "Journal of family medicine and primary care" 8 (2019), pp. 604-609.
- Oravec R., *Otroci odvisnikov*, "Psihološka obzorja" 11 (2002), pp. 95-107.
- Pasternak A., Schier K., *The role reversal in the families of Adult Children of Alcoholics*, "Archives of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy" 14 (2012), pp. 51-57.
- Potter W. J., Levine-Donnerstein D., *Rethinking validity and reliability in content analysis*, "Journal of Applied Communication Research" 27 (1999), pp. 258-284.
- Rangarajan S., Kelly L., *Family communication patterns, family environment, and the impact of parental alcoholism on offspring self-esteem*, "Journal of Social and Personal Relationships" 23 (2006), pp. 655-671.
- Rodriguez L., Neighbors C., Knee R. C., *Problematic alcohol use and marital distress: An interdependence theory perspective*, "Addiction Research and Theory" 22 (2014), pp. 294-312.
- Ruben D. H., *Treating adult children of alcoholics: A behavioral approach*, San Diego 2001, Academic Press.
- Simonič B., Poljanec A., *Building motherhood in the young mothers' group*, "Child Care in Practice" 20 (2014), pp. 270-285.
- Sorocco K. H., Carnes N. C., Cohoon A. J., Vincent A. S., Lovallo W. R., *Risk factors for alcoholism in the Oklahoma family health patterns project: Impact of early life adversity and family history on affect regulation and personality, drug and alcohol dependence*, "Drug and Alcohol Dependence" 150 (2015), pp. 38-45.
- Thompson R. A., Meyer S., *The socialization of emotion regulation in the family*, in: J. Gross (ed.), *Handbook of emotion regulation*, New York 2006, Guilford, pp. 249-268.
- Trtnik N., *Okrevanje odraslih otrok alkoholikov in duhovnost*, "Bogoslovni vestnik" 76 (2016), pp. 191-201.