

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

**The Impact Of Family Of Origin On Social Workers
From Alcoholic Families And
Implications For Practice**

A thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Social Work
at
Massey University

Karenza (Kara) Anne Coombes

1998

Abstract

Social work education and social work practitioners involved in intervention in the lives of families, have long recognised that prior life experience impacts on their work. However, little research appears to have been carried out in this area, particularly in New Zealand. The current study is an attempt to redress this situation on a small scale by exploring with a group of six (6) social workers who are adult children of alcoholics (ACoA), their understanding of their family of origin experience and its effect on their current practice.

The present study is an exploratory one, drawn from the life histories of six social workers, who have identified themselves as growing up in an alcoholic family. Based on the perceptions of the social workers involved, and an understanding of the relationship between their life history and how they practice, the project explores the concepts and themes that emerged within the study and the connections between them including the similarities and differences.

Findings suggest that although participants have experienced the conflict, trauma, physical and emotional abuse commonly found in families with alcoholic parents, they have shown themselves to have a capacity for successful adaptation, positive functioning and competence. These factors have been identified conceptually as resiliency. The impact of these protective factors as well as the cost of resiliency appeared relevant to the participants and to their social work practice. These findings align with previous theory and research, particularly in regard to the importance of the triad of protective factors individual, family and environmental. Further, as the research developed, the relevance of the theory of attachment became significant. Findings in this area indicated that despite their generally abusive backgrounds, participants had formed early positive attachments which similarly influenced subsequent interpersonal relationships.

The outcomes of this research give rise to questions for further research by social workers, other professionals and educators wanting to examine the possible impact of family of origin experience, particularly for the children of alcoholic families, upon social service practitioners and their practice.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following people whose valuable input and contributions enabled me to complete this thesis:

The eight participants (two in the pilot scheme) who were willing to participate in this research, who gave willingly of their time and selves, in sharing with openness and courage, that others might benefit from their participation. Without their co-operation this thesis would not have been possible.

Dr. Ruth Anderson, my principal supervisor, for the encouragement she provided in guiding me through the process of this research, provoking me to think and gain confidence in my work.

Mary Ann Baskerville, supervisor, who was my first Massey University contact when I was ambivalent about beginning my Masters study, for believing in me and keeping me on track.

Alcoholic liquor advisory council (ALAC), who provided a grant to assist in the transcribing of audio-tapes and supplemented my travel costs.

My friends, Pam, Juliette and Sharessa who provided ongoing practical and moral support particularly when my morale flagged.

Denise, my technical and practical advisor, who was meticulous in transcribing my audio-tapes and ever available to guide and implement my computer know-how.

My workmates who were ever willing to affirm me, to tolerate my idiosyncrasies and bring me back to reality. Their clinical experience and practical input was of considerable value.

My family who tolerated my unavailability in times of busy-ness, over what seemed to be a considerable length of time. Nevertheless, they provided their ongoing support and belief in my abilities.

Finally, my mother who showed me I was able to do what I persevered with, and taught me the value of ongoing learning and education.

Table of contents

Abstract		ii
Acknowledgements		iii
Table of contents		iv
1 Introduction		1
<i>1.1 Choosing a research topic</i>		<i>1</i>
<i>1.2 Aims and objectives</i>		<i>2</i>
<i>1.3 An overview</i>		<i>3</i>
1.3.1 Literature review		3
1.3.2 Theoretical base and methodology.....		4
1.3.3 Discussion		6
1.3.4 Conclusion		6
2 Social workers, alcoholic families, and practice implications		8
<i>2.1 Families of origin of social workers</i>		<i>8</i>
<i>2.2 History of the study of alcoholism</i>		<i>11</i>
<i>2.3 The New Zealand scene</i>		<i>13</i>
<i>2.4 Children of alcoholics</i>		<i>15</i>
2.4.1 Characteristics of children of alcoholics		17
<i>Physical considerations</i>		<i>17</i>
<i>Emotional considerations</i>		<i>17</i>
<i>General characteristics</i>		<i>18</i>
2.4.2 Personality development		19
<i>2.5 The alcoholic family</i>		<i>22</i>
<i>2.6 The resilient child</i>		<i>26</i>

2.7	<i>Adult children of alcoholics as practitioners and implications for practice</i>	32
3	Theoretical basis and methodology of study	37
3.1	<i>The value of qualitative research</i>	38
3.2	<i>Feminist research - a perspective</i>	39
3.3	<i>Life history approach</i>	41
3.4	<i>Ethical research</i>	43
3.5	<i>Methodology</i>	46
3.5.1	Participant selection	47
3.5.2	Participants.....	48
3.5.3	Setting	49
3.5.4	Procedure	49
3.5.5	Pilot study	50
3.5.6	The study.....	52
3.5.7	The interview process	52
3.5.8	Transcription and analysis.....	53
3.5.9	Conclusion	54
4	Narrative analysis	55
4.1	<i>Data analysis</i>	55
4.2	<i>Presentation of analysis</i>	57
4.2.1	Introducing participants	58
4.2.2	Alcoholism, according to participants.....	60
4.3	<i>Nature of the family</i>	61
4.3.1	Childhood.....	61
	<i>Place in family and relationship with parents</i>	61
	<i>Special people</i>	62
	<i>Education</i>	64
	<i>Awareness of alcohol use</i>	65
	<i>Family violence</i>	68
	<i>Sexual abuse</i>	70
4.3.2	Adolescence	71
	<i>Relationships with parents and family</i>	72

	<i>Parental relationship</i>	74
	<i>Education</i>	75
	<i>Special people</i>	76
	<i>Family violence</i>	77
	<i>Leaving school, leaving home</i>	78
4.3.3	Adulthood	79
	<i>Changing relationships - moving on</i>	80
	<i>Alcohol/other addictive behaviour of participants</i>	81
	<i>Partners</i>	82
	<i>Children and parenting</i>	84
4.4	<i>The impact of family of origin experience</i>	87
4.4.1	Later adulthood - current situation.....	87
	<i>Relationship with parents</i>	88
	<i>Resolution</i>	90
	<i>Children - the next generation</i>	92
	<i>Self knowledge/awareness</i>	94
	<i>Partner relationships</i>	95
5	Impact of family of origin experience on professional practice	99
5.1	<i>The nature of practice</i>	99
5.1.1	Social work practice.....	99
	<i>Social work as a career choice</i>	99
	<i>Area of practice</i>	100
	<i>Practice style</i>	102
	<i>Challenging and uncomfortable situations</i>	104
	<i>Crisis situations</i>	105
	<i>Need for approval</i>	106
	<i>"Stuckness" with clients</i>	107
5.1.2	Boundaries	110
	<i>Maintaining boundaries</i>	110
	<i>Caseload management</i>	111
5.1.3	Management of stress and resiliency	112
	<i>Stress and the individual</i>	112
	<i>Physical symptoms of stress</i>	114
	<i>Addiction issues</i>	116

	<i>Therapy/counselling</i>	117
5.2	<i>Change in practice over time</i>	119
	<i>Integration of theory and practice</i>	120
	<i>Impact of increased knowledge and experience</i>	120
	<i>Connections, self-awareness, self-knowledge</i>	121
	<i>Ongoing learning and development</i>	123
5.3	<i>Conclusion</i>	124
6	<i>Discussion</i>	126
6.1	<i>Incorporating the concept of resilience</i>	126
6.2	<i>Differences in psychological outcomes among ACoA</i>	128
6.3	<i>Protective factors</i>	129
6.3.1	<i>Intra-personal protective factors</i>	129
	<i>a) Personal attributes</i>	130
	<i>Birth order</i>	130
	<i>Gender</i>	130
	<i>Temperament and personality</i>	131
	<i>Intelligence</i>	132
	<i>b) Social components</i>	133
	<i>Self esteem</i>	133
	<i>Loyalty</i>	134
	<i>Social skills and ability to form and utilise relationships</i>	135
	<i>Responsibility</i>	136
	<i>Empathy</i>	137
	<i>c) Coping strategies</i>	138
	<i>Cognitive escape from situation</i>	138
	<i>Physical escape from situation</i>	139
	<i>Strength from overcoming adversity</i>	140
6.3.2	<i>Protective factors within the family</i>	141
	<i>Special relationships</i>	142
	<i>Partners</i>	144
	<i>Parenting</i>	144
	<i>Attachment</i>	145
6.3.3	<i>Protective factors in the environment</i>	147

	<i>Special people and relationships</i>	147
	<i>Education</i>	148
	<i>Leaving school, leaving home</i>	149
	<i>Therapy</i>	150
	<i>Personal philosophy and faith</i>	151
6.4	<i>Implications for practice</i>	152
6.4.1	Process of change, therapeutic growth.....	155
7	Summary and conclusion	158
7.1	<i>Summary of study and findings</i>	158
7.1.1	Summary	159
7.1.2	Findings.....	161
7.2	<i>Implications for clinical practice and social work education</i>	165
7.3	<i>Strengths and limitations</i>	167
7.4	<i>Future direction – further areas for education and research</i>	169
7.5	<i>Implications for the ACoA movement</i>	170
8	Afterword	172
8.1	<i>Amy</i>	172
8.2	<i>Emily</i>	172
8.3	<i>George</i>	173
8.4	<i>Kate</i>	173
8.5	<i>Mary</i>	174
8.6	<i>Paddy</i>	174
9	Appendices	176
9.1	<i>Appendix 1: Application to Massey University Human Ethics Committee</i>	176
9.1.1	Appendix A.....	180
9.2	<i>Appendix 2: Initial letter of information</i>	183
9.3	<i>Appendix 3: Informed consent form</i>	185

<i>Appendix 4: Demographic information</i>	187
9.4 <i>Appendix 5: Semi-structured interview guide</i>	188
10 References	192