Help, my father is an alcoholic!
- A qualitative study of children of alcoholics

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Children who lived with alcoholic parents are at greater risk of suffering negative consequences due to the parental alcoholism. The purpose of this study was to explore some of the consequences of growing up in a family with either one or both parents who are alcoholics. The objective of the study was achieved by conducting interviews on seven adult children of alcoholics, three men and four women between the ages of 19-24. They were selected using snowball sampling. The results showed that there are consequences of living in such an environment. Different roles were undertaken by these children in order to survive the predicaments at home coupled with feelings of anxiety, fear, disappointment and regret. Their view on alcohol was also affected as a result of their parents being alcoholics.

Keywords: alcohol, alcoholic parent, alcohol abuse, shame, disorders.

Introduction

The national Board of Health and Welfare (2009) reported that several children in Sweden live with one or both parents who abuse alcohol or other drugs. In a survey conducted by the national Board of Health and Welfare (2009), it was discovered that more than 16 percent of fathers living with their children and 8 percent of mothers living with their children are counted as drinkers with risk of exaggeration. Another survey done by Tryggve (2010) in Sweden indicated that over 500,000 children of minor age, living with their parents and under their responsibility are counted among those whose parents consume alcohol to excesses. Iverus (2008) provides some statistics on consumption of alcoholic beverages in Sweden. According to her book (Iverus, 2008), in Sweden 50,000 persons are regarded clinically as alcohol addicts with serious problems of giving up or reducing their level of alcoholic consumption and 500,000 Swedes, although not generally counted as addicted are at risk of becoming addicted if they continue drinking at their current rate. There are 250,000 persons who consume alcohol excessively and have developed health related
problems as a result of their excessive alcoholic consumption or inability to stop or control consumption.

According to the report of the Alcohol Policy Commission (Alkoholpolitiska Kommissionen, 1994), men drink 75cl per week roughly corresponding to 14 glasses of wine while women drink around 55 cl of alcohol per week, which in turn is considered to be nine glasses of wine or 8 glasses of beer with each beer having an alcoholic content of 10.2%.

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the experience of children with alcohol-abusing parents, the consequences of having grown up in such an environment, and its effect on the future of the individual.

Alcohol abuse

Bengtsson & Gavelin (2004) define an alcoholic as any individual who is unable of controlling his/her way of drinking even if it is obvious that there are adverse repercussions related to their consumption of alcohol. For a person to be considered as an alcohol addict, there are certain characteristics that must be satisfied. One of these characteristics is a strong and almost uncontrollable urge for an alcoholic beverage without regards to time and place. Another characteristic is the occurrence of health related problems due to their high rate of alcoholic consumption such that it becomes pretty difficult for the individual in question to refrain from such a drinking attitude. Hence his quality of life is affected negatively (Iverus, 2008).

When an individual consumes alcohol, there are always both negative and positive effects. A group of people can share a drink as they try to change the atmosphere and talk, it even allows some people to say openly what one thinks about the other, things that cannot be said in sober state might be said then. Alcohol can create this relaxing effect between individuals who know each other and even between people who don’t know each other before the consumption of alcoholic beverages (Grant, Dawson, & Stinson, 2002).

While the consumption of alcohol may bring joy among friends, it may also lead to conflicts, problems, discussions and pain between those who are drinking and those around them (Jackson, Sher, & Park, 2005). An increase in alcoholic consumption can lead to existing health conditions becoming chronic (Schulenberg & Maggs, 2002).

There are several different reasons why people drink more than normal. It varies from the desire to get out of the ordinary reality (Sande, 1994) by trying to escape their problems by abusing alcohol due to failure in an aspect in life, the fear of loneliness that pressurizes an individual to flee the realities of life, but exaggerated consumption of alcohol can also be caused by the desire to create a positive feeling (Goldberg, Halpern-Felsher, & Millstein, 2002).

The causes that can push an individual to drink alcohol in excess are varied and may include the following: divorce, unemployment, rejection, loss of a loved one etc. Thus most often people drink in order to forget their pain or negative feelings (Cooper, Agocha & Sheldon, 2002). It is understood that pain is absorbed when one drinks alcohol. There are other reasons that can lead individuals to exaggerate their consumption of alcohol which are not always external but could stem from social reasons and the desire to be comfortable and feel at ease around friends and relatives without any bad motives pushing to exaggerate this consumption from the beginning (Borsari & Carey, 2004). Most individuals are not even conscious of the fact that they have begun consuming alcohol in exaggerated quantities and often times such
individuals would try to conceal this behavior from others. This behavior will occur until one tries to avoid all kinds of possible negative judgment which could eventually bring condemnation to this consumption of alcoholic beverage. But for whatever reason that may cause an individual to an exaggeration of alcohol consumption. When an individual has a family and children, those children within that family will suffer for their actions as long as the parent keeps abusing alcohol.

Growing up with addicted parents

*Emotional consequences of growing up in abusive environments*

Parental alcoholism has severe effects on children of alcoholics. When a child has reached the age of consciousness, he will gradually come to understand that his parents are totally different from other parents. This brings about emotions of shame on the part of the child (Hansen, 1995) upon comparing the family of his friends to his own family. Because of this feeling of shame, the child will try to conceal what actually happens in his/her home from those outside. Lambie & Sias (2005) suggests that in such families, it’s not just children who try to hide the realities of the house but the parents as well.

When the parent abuses alcohol, the child could develop feelings of dissatisfaction, insecurity and sometimes even aggressive reactions may occur (Hansen, 1995). Other disorders might also occur such as phobias, anorexia (Gance-Cleveland, 2004).

Because of the addiction of the parent, the child could feel lost and unable to trust his/her parent at any given point in time. Two different personalities can come out from the child. The child would be able to confide and develop a relationship with his/her parents especially when they are not under the influence of alcohol and again find it pretty difficult to have this same relationship or connection when their parents are under alcoholic influence. As such there would be no close knit or stable relationship between the child and his/her parents and this could lead to distrust and lack of confidence between them both. Lack of proper communication may ensue as a result and the child could develop feelings of guilt and even believe his/her parents have no interest in his/her wellbeing (Goldberg, 1993).

For a child to blossom in all aspects of life, parents must provide both moral and material support and when they are under the influence of alcohol, they cannot provide the support that a child requires. Children have difficulties to understand that their parents are alcoholics (Karlsson & Öberg, 2004) and under the influence of these drinks, it can be difficult to communicate with them or to explain what is happening (Hansen, 1995). The child can withdraw to themselves and not be open to other people.

Children living in abusive environments of drugs or alcohol face some potential risks. They themselves could begin using these drugs which could become worse in the future if efforts are not made for them to come out of such an abusive environment (Johansson & Wirbing, 2005).

However, research has shown that children who grew up in addicted homes can overcome that situation by talking with someone who is able to direct and support them and also by talking to other people who went through the same difficulties like them. This will help in reducing some of the adverse effects of living in such
According to the interpretation given by Black (1993), there are many different roles that can be taken by children who grow up in homes with one or both parents who are addicts in their quest to survive the drama or the stress encountered at home. Such character traits could be developed unnoticed to those outside. Children emerging from this kind of homes will ensure that nobody else knows the situation in which they find themselves in at home.

When a parent abuses alcohol, certain responsibilities reserved to them at home could be neglected. Because of this, a child old enough to understand what happens at home will have to take the role of an adult, which should have been undertaken by the parent. While trying to take the role of a responsible, the child constantly seeks the consent of his parents (Bachman, Wadsworth, O’Malley, Johnson, & Schulenberg, 1997) which over time may bring the feelings of not doing good enough or not being good enough for his own parents (Nilsen, Festin, Trinks, & Bendtsen, 2008). The child can also try to fill the empty void created by the absence of the addicted parent, an absence which is not always physical but as well as moral.

The role of mediator will be taken by the most sensitive child. He will try to bring peace where conflict reigns, try to be attentive to the needs of all and sundry, console and reconcile those who are tired of the situation.

Some children will take upon themselves a position of a child who fits all that happens around him/her. Such a child would normally have no problem to follow the orders given either at home, at school or even by his friends (Black, 1993).

Because of the lack of communication and explanation, the child will try his/her best to attract the attention of his parents. This is how some kids will want to get noticed by taking the leadership role at home, doing work that surpasses their age just to get the appreciation of the parents. This kind of role is often taken by girls and the eldest in the family with the aim not only being that they want to be appreciated but to develop the hope of saving their family from that addiction and the obvious need to become like all the others and enjoy his family as well. Others can become unruly children, always moving, causing troubles both at home and at school, and always trying to be in the spotlight of those supposed to be always there for him (Black, 1993). There is another role which is most often undertaken by the youngest child found in families where parents abuse alcohol; it is the role of a mascot (Vernig, 2011). This role consists of acting funny whereby the child will try to distract everyone in order to forget the problems of the family.

Some children admitted that their way of looking at alcohol may depend on the manner in which their parents have abused alcohol (Leijonhielm, 1997). In a study of Leijonhielm (1997) who interviewed three young adults, one of the interviewees pointed out that he was aware of the way which alcohol has destabilized his family, that’s why his way to consume it was very limited, and that he did not allow himself to drink if it was not until the weekend. The second person expressed himself by speaking about the fear that reigned at home because of an unpredictable parent; no
one could know what his response could be, either in a nice or aggressive manner, which created an endless terror in their homes. The last one emphasized that when his parent was drunk, he was unable to control his language and was assaultive to everybody by making inappropriate remarks irrespective of the individual (child or adult). And that's how he connects alcohol to hurtful words, which always leaves traces that cannot be easily forgotten. This is how in a home where one or both parents are alcoholics, children will have difficulties to identify themselves with those who were supposed to be a role model; it will even be harder to trust them and to develop intimacy and complicity between parent and child.

In a study done by Amodeo, Griffin and Paris (2011), they found out that female children who grew up in alcoholic families are not always victims of the consumption of their parents. The study demonstrated that 26% of participants had no negative effects due to the alcoholism of their parents but were instead impacted positively. Due to the alcoholism of their parents, some developed the ability to resist the pressures of alcoholic consumption and even the use of drugs whilst others were forced to become mature very early, and still others developed the desire to have more in life and to offer more to their children than what they themselves had received in their homes. However, Kelly, Schroeder, Cooke, Gumienny, Platter, and Fals-Stewart (2010) showed that female children of alcoholics (ACOA) are affected negatively by having a problem to attach emotionally in romantic relationships than those who do have parents who are not abusing alcohol. When a parent is an alcoholic, she/he can perhaps influence her/his child in one way or another such as influencing their way to drink since adolescence. Belles, Budde, Moesgen, & Klein (2011) investigated the influence of alcoholic parents on their children's consumption and deduced that there is a strong connection between the concept of alcohol and arousal, but that there is no link between the consumption of alcohol and the expectancy of alcohol arousal.

**Purpose of the study and research questions**

In spite of a substantial amount of research on alcoholism, there has been little emphasis on the feelings and thoughts of the children about their home situation living with parent(s) who abused alcohol.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the experience of children with alcohol-abusing parents, the consequences of having grown up in such an environment, and its effect on the future of the individual.

The following questions guided the study:

- What emotions in relation to the abusive parent has the child felt while growing up?,
- What roles can children take while growing up with an addicted parent?, and
- Which attitudes have the adult children developed about alcohol?

**Method**

**Participants**
To know the experiences of a person who grew up in a home with one or both parents who abuse alcohol, three men and four women who grew up in such homes were recruited and participated in this study. They all had or still have an alcoholic father, their ages ranged from 19 to 24 years. All participants are students and none of them is an alcoholic.

Three of them were selected through personal contacts and four others were chosen through a snowball sample. By Snowball sample, it means that the author came into contact with qualified individuals for this specified study and the other participants who were also qualified for the study were found through these contacts. In the snowball sample, participants were found with the help and assistance of a support group for children of alcoholic parents. Thus from one person to another, the author was able to come into contact with several people who volunteered to participate in this study.

**Material**

A semi-structured interview guide (see appendix 1) was prepared in advance before meeting the respondents. Questions were formulated in a systematical way, in order not to miss any stage of their experience. It was begun by asking from the discovery of alcohol dependence, difficult times during growth, the support received or not received, and the current situation. Such questions allowed the participant to go even beyond the asked questions, to respond individually with some specific details to the situation which they lived.

Participants were asked to describe and clarify some points of their story by explaining in details what happened. Through a narrative history, it is easier to understand what the person might have suffered, what kind of relationships that were formed during those moments of pain, how the steps were carried until to date and what are the roles and decisions which were taken by participants, the causes of certain decisions, the pros and misdeeds that came out from these same decisions taken during those times. It becomes even easier to give an explanation of why certain things happened during those moments, an explanation which could have been hard to give during those moments of suffering.

All interviews were done face to face with the respondents, each interview took between 75-90 minutes. Upon conclusion of all the interviews, a transcript was made to assist in the sharing of different participants in different categories and to avoid missing important information. It took between three to five hours to write down and each interview transcription had about five to seven pages.

**Procedure**

Since the interviewees were adults, there was therefore no need to ask permission to anyone for interviewing them. Each individual had the right to choose a place that suited him for the interview, in order to feel comfortable (Cederborg, 2000). Through this study, the ethical principles have been considered and respected. The four main requirements were strongly considered (Codex, 2010), such as the *information requirement* which is to make known to the participant for the purpose of the study in
details. After having explained the purpose of the study, it was then time to explain to participants that they had the right to accept or refuse to participate in our study i.e. **consent requirement**. It was specified that they had the right to interrupt the interview each time the individual feels uncomfortable. About the **confidentiality requirement**, it was made clear that all the data would be kept confidential without any third party access to them. The use requirement was another point which was explained to respondents about the use of the information received from the interview. It was specified that any data collected will not be used for other purposes than the study.

To remain anonymous and to preserve the privacy of participants, their names were disguised. The real names of the participants were changed to a given name, so that readers can get an idea of the identity of interviewee and differentiate the different participants by their given names.

With the permission of each participant, the interview was recorded; allowing focusing on each participant and giving each and every one necessary time to recover when they answered to some questions that they thought was painful.

**Analysis method**

A qualitative research method with a narrative structure was used for analyzing this study. According to Kvale and Brinkman (2009), a narrative structure concentrates on the stories told by informants and develops their structures and experiences. Narrative interviews are usually used to investigate social problems and issues that may have had negative impacts on the interviewees. In this study, a narrative analysis was done by processing and transcribing the whole interview text throughout the story told by the participants during the interview. After reading the transcribed texts, the data were categorized in three different themes: feelings, the role played by the participants and their attitudes towards alcohol.

**Result**

While describing the background of the participants and corresponding citations from the interviewees, each theme will in the following be described in details and separately.

**Feelings**

By feelings, the participants spoke about what they have felt when they discovered the addiction of their parents, what they thought about when the parent spoke to them under the influence of alcohol, and what kind of feelings was developed due to the attitude of the alcoholic parent towards the child.

Each participant had felt something different from others. Following answers keenly indicates how the participants have been affected emotionally:

Olle: “I felt insecure and afraid of him as he was changing all the time”

Jane: “How could somebody love me and make me feel unwanted? I felt like
nobody cared for me”

Arne: “Why did I have to do all things for them instead of them doing things for me? I was so angry at them, and still couldn’t run away of my duties”

Ida: “I couldn’t tell the truth, what if others deserted me as my father did it? I couldn’t let them know the truth about us”

Linda: “How could he do that to me? It was hard for me to understand that the only one who was left was not being there for me”

Erna: “I felt sorry for him, but I always believed that soon or later he would come out of it”

Sally: “I was angry because I knew that a parent was not supposed to act like that”

Participants spoke about the lack of trust between themselves and the parents; this was due to the feeling of disappointment that the children were always receiving each time they saw their parents under the influence of alcohol.

Another feeling experienced by participants was the feeling of incomprehension, when none explains what addiction means, the child will struggle to understand the change in behavior and attitude of the parent who is under the influence of alcohol.

Erna experienced confusion as she saw her father changing moods all the time.

“I was confused when he returned to normal and became sober. He tried to redeem what he said by becoming kind and offering us gifts. I could not believe it when I saw him crying and regretting. I felt compassion for him, believing that one day with a little help he will come out of it.”

Olle did not understand why his father suddenly had taken a strange attitude towards them. The explanation of his mother did not at all reassure him, which created a lack of understanding in him. ‘I could not understand why he was being so mean to me without me doing anything. Some days my father was so rough which pushed me to never feel secure in his presence’.

“I hated it when I could not have the expensive toys I wished for, because my mother had to take care of the bills and debts first. My father’s attitude was hurtful due to his change of mood. I was disappointed when he was unable to keep his promises”.

For Jane, the lack of understanding resided in the failure to understand why his family did not behave as other families. And as he had no one to explain, he grew up with the feeling that his father was not interested in her at all.

“I felt like my dad hated me for not having being interested in me, I was confused about why my family was not like the family of my friends. I felt always alone whenever there were school activities that involved parents, nobody was there with me. A sense of loss was felt, and I grew up believing
none of my parents wanted me.”

The feeling of insecurity may arise because the child does not know what attitude to adopt towards his father. This feeling of insecurity may appear in two different ways. It could be negative and expressed via aggression as well as it could also be an avoidant attitude, so as to avoid causing problems. Sally’s feelings was anger, it caused her to react aggressively towards others. This insecurity depended on the fact that she never knew when her father's behavior would change.

“The words of dad repeatedly marked and hurt me a lot. That’s why I always think about of the effects of my words in the lives of others. He died last year, but it can still hurt in my heart and makes me angry when I remember it, over the years, I’ve learned to control my anger and express what I feel by words not deeds. I was deceived because, no matter how much he could apologize, it didn’t prevent him from saying hurtful things whenever he was drunk again. “

Linda could not talk about her situation, because according to her, she was disappointed by her father for not being able to comfort her after the loss of her mother. If her father could not help her, he who was better placed than any other to understand her feelings, had adopted an unfriendly attitude, she did not think that talking about her situation to a stranger would be the solution for her.

“Disappointment, alone, afraid, embarrassed, those were my feelings in that time. I could not understand why my father was doing that to me when I needed him.”

Ida noticed the difference between her and her classmates whose fathers catered for them which of course was not the case for her. The shame of not having her father at her side as the others, urged her to look for stories to protect her family from shame and not exposing to others what they were going through.

“When I saw my friends with their dad, I felt embarrassed and ashamed of mine, and would tell them that my dad went on a trip and will be back soon.”

Roles

As participants were trying to survive difficult situations at home, each one of them had taken a role related to how they felt and the responsibilities they received, but also because of the situation they experienced.

Even if their roles were different, all have been affected by their situation at home:

Olle: “Money was needed at home; I couldn’t just sit and not do a thing about it.”

Jane: “I knew that if I didn’t do it, nobody would do it for me”
Arne: “My Brothers needed me to help them; I did not have a choice not to help them”

Ida: “Nobody noticed if I was there or not, I could go out and come in without anybody wondering where I have been to”.

Erna: “I just wanted my dad to feel well and not seeing my sister resenting him so much. I’ve tried so many times to convince her that it could go away but without success”

Sally: “The way my dad was drinking made me angry, I couldn’t talk about it, that’s how I always found myself fighting with other children because of anger”

Olle had taken a responsible role by seeking for a job at the age of 17 in order to help his mother pay the bills for the month, and Jane took the same role by trying to do everything, taking care of herself with the hope that one day her father would notice what she was doing and appreciate her.

“Because my mother could not offer me everything I needed, I started working at age 17, it also allowed me to help her pay for some bills, and I also learned how to manage my money.”

“I’ve learned at a young age to take care of the house, stay calm in my corner in order not to disturb my father when he was asleep in front of the TV. I had to wake up in the morning, prepare my own breakfast and go to school by bus. When I returned home I had to do my homework by myself without my father’s help.

Arne has also assumed the same role, being the eldest of the family, he found himself having taken the place of his mother and father by taking care of his siblings. He was 15 when this happened and all responsibilities were given to him to ensure a smooth running of the house. At some point he felt it was weighing so much on him. His father died later on because of liver cancer, and Arne took the role of his father by catering for his brothers.

“My dad always liked to drink, but when they went bankrupt my mum got depressed, my dad begun to drink more than usual, at that time I was 15 and able to help them to take care for my brother and sister and other things which were needed to be done at home.”

Although Erna was not proud of her father’s behavior, she had instead taken the role to be responsible and the unifier between her sister and her dad.

“I was closer to my father and ensured that whenever he was drunk, he had to eat something before going to bed so as not to go to bed hungry. My sister was always angry at him and I wanted to unify them. I always thought that I could help him to come out of the addiction and to make my sister understand that despite his state he remained our dad.”
Ida, the last of four children, did not attract so much attention; she was living in fantasy world when her dad was on a trip to be back soon.

“Because I was the youngest of four children, it was easy to be passive to what was happening around me, and to be unnoticed in the family chaos and I would do just what I was told to do, in my mind I believed that my dad was on a trip and at the end he would come back home, and I even told the same story to my friends at school.”

Jane also assumed this role by trying to stay calm and silent when his father was home. He was trying to adapt himself to the condition of his father, in order not to lose him and be left alone.

“I’ve learned to stay calm and just be in the same room with dad, even though he was not talking to me or even noticed that I was there.”

Linda had the same experience. She felt unnoticed, as her dad was incapable of having a conversation with her.

“As my father was unable to sustain a conversation with me because of alcohol, and I had no one who spoke to me, I just had to sit quite and play games alone and watch TV at home.”

The role of a disruptive child or a rebel child was taken by Sally, one of the twins. The rebel child tries to attract attention by rebelling or causing disorder or troubles. This reaction happens because the child cannot express what he feels, so in consequence projects his anger on something else. Sally was angry and outraged at the attitude of her father; she projected her anger on others to the point that the least issue could exasperate her in a short time. Sally always had problems at school despite the fact that she had good grades but she was always fighting with other children. At one point the professor had to recommend a school counselor to help her manage her anger. Over the years Sally learned to control her anger and expressed what she feels by words not deeds.

“Because I could not confront him or change his way of behaving, I found myself fighting with those who resisted submitting to my will.”

**Attitudes towards alcohol**

Although the opinions of the participants on alcohol were different, in one way or another, the parents’ addiction has affected the opinions of participants on their way of seeing and even consumption of alcohol.

Olle: Alcohol damaged my relationship with my dad; I cannot allow my children to suffer because of it.

Jane: Of course I drink, but not too much, what if I become like my dad?
Arne: I always control myself, I don’t wish to die early like dad.

Ida: My dad and my brother are alcoholics, why should I drink when I know that there is a great chance of becoming one.

Linda: I thought once of it as a refuge to problems but the state of my dad changed my mind.

Erna: Alcohol can push someone to become mean; I don’t think that I will consume it like that.

Sally: My dad’s attitude caused me trouble; I will make sure not to become like him.

According to the respondents, none of them fell under the addiction. Linda was tempted to exaggerate, but refrained because of the state of her father. Linda’s father still abuses alcohol today and this is one of the reasons that made her not to keep contact with him. At one point, Linda believed alcohol was the cause of all the problems as a result of the state of her father who seemed present but absent.

“I admit that I was more than once tempted to exaggerate my consumption of alcohol, but I retained myself when I remembered about the pitiful state of dad who is still abusing alcohol today”

Ida expressed her awareness of the damages that alcohol caused in her family, having to grow up without her father and a brother who had also become an alcoholic. She totally discredits the consumption of alcohol. She admits that if she had not grown up in a condition where alcohol was not an issue, maybe her way of considering the consumption of it might have been different.

“After several years of therapy, I cannot stand even to this day the smell of alcohol, it prevented me from knowing who my dad is; I couldn’t develop a relationship with him like everybody else. I despise it more now because of the addiction of my older brother”.

Olle describes the same attitudes. Although many of his friends like to drink, he never even considers consuming alcohol, no matter the situation. He has always restrained himself to this day, by making himself a promise that he'll never let his children suffer because of alcohol. He admits that if his father had not disappointed him, he might not have been as hard as he is right now with regards to the consumption of alcohol.

“Whenever I think of alcohol, I think of it as a thief that has stolen my best friend, it has totally changed my life style and made me lose trust in my father. The man I used to believe in and had faith in was completely changed because of alcohol, I will never think even on touching alcohol. I’m studying social science hoping one day to work with children who are going through the same situation as me.”

Unlike Olle and Ida, other participants consume alcohol, although very sparingly,
according to what they said. But all agreed that if there had been no addiction of a 
parent, their attitudes towards alcohol would have been less negative from what it is 
today.

Arne goes even further to relate alcohol to the death of his father. According to 
him, the consumption of alcohol by his father precipitated his death.

“When my father later died of liver cancer, I associated his death to alcohol and 
that it’s the cause of us being orphans. The doctors might have been able to save 
him if he had not abused alcohol for so long. Even though I drink, I do it with 
moderation so as not to lose control because of alcohol. I always remember that 
I have to take care of my brothers and sister as something my dad would do it if 
he was still alive”.

Jane has a different perspective on alcohol because of the addiction of his dad.

“Even if I drink alcohol with friends but I could not dare to drink alone. I was 
scared that loneliness could make me go above my capacity and become an 
addict like my dad who was always alone.”

Erna drinks sometimes but without exaggeration. She is afraid to become an alcoholic 
like the father.

“I consume alcohol but with moderation. That’s why what happened to dad 
could hardly take hold of me since I always control myself in order not to hurt 
anyone around me.”

Sally said that she consumes alcohol but with moderation, she always controls herself 
in order not to hurt anyone around her. The words of her father repeatedly marked and 
hurt her so many times that she thought of the effects of her words in the lives of 
others.

“There is no chance for me to become an alcoholic, my dad verbally abused us, 
and it was painful, it’s not an example that I will follow.”

The results of the study regarding the feelings, roles and attitudes of the seven 
interviewees are summarized in Table1.
Table 1. Summary of the results of 7 interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewees (disguised name)</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Roles</th>
<th>Emotions in childhood</th>
<th>Attitudes towards alcohol</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Olle</td>
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<td>Responsible</td>
<td>Fear</td>
<td>Do not drink</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Insecurity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
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<td>Responsible</td>
<td>Dislike</td>
<td>Drinks</td>
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<td>Leader</td>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>Drinks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ida</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Unnoticed</td>
<td>Disappointment</td>
<td>Do not drink</td>
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<td>Embarrassment</td>
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<td>Shame</td>
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<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
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<td>Disappointment</td>
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Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of adult children who grew up with one or both parents who abused alcohol. The goal was to explore the consequences of having grown up in such an environment, and the effects on the future life of the individual.

The stories of the participants have shown many similarities about what they felt. This confirms Karlsson and Öberg’s (2004) suggestion that when different people come from families whose parents have an alcohol addiction, they can have some similarities in how they feel but each experience is different from the other.

In the feedback obtained from participants, it is remarkable how some have felt shame (Hansen, 1995) to have such parents and at some point how some developed the feeling of frustration and disappointment to go back home where nothing seems to change. Results also show that some children blamed their addicted parents, but even
more, some have lost trust in adults because of that parental disappointment.

Some participants had difficulties talking about their situations countless of talking about their emotions or feelings either to their own parents or somebody else. Each child had learned to hide the parent’s addiction from the outside world, for some, even if at first there was a lack of understanding as to why the parent who was addicted was acting differently, each child reacted consciously or unconsciously in protecting his family from the outside world. This confirms the study done by the national Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen, 2009). Those children who belong to families with an addicted parent had great difficulties talking about what was going on at home. This is related to the fact that the child does not feel safe when he/she confides herself to another person. The child who is already disappointed by the behavior of his parent is not able to trust someone else because of fear of being let down again. It is also because of shame that the child does not let anyone else see what is really happening at home.

Another feeling experienced by some of the participants was the feeling of incomprehension, when no one explains what the word addiction means. In this regard, the child will struggle to understand the change in behavior and attitude of the parent who is under the influence of alcohol. According to Karlsson and Öberg (2004) children can have difficulties to understand that their parents are alcoholics.

In this study, each child found himself in a situation he/she had not chosen, and therefore, all of them were forced to adopt a role which they never intended to or adopt a behavior because of the situation at home. In the roles taken by these children, most of them were putting the needs of their parents before theirs. The majority of participants were more interested in the wellbeing of their parents instead of the opposite. This confirms the interpretation given by Black (1993), about the roles that can be taken by children who grow up in homes with one or both addicted parents, trying to survive the drama or the stress encountered at home.

Children can take different roles, such as the role of a responsible person, which is a role that is often times undertaken by the female or the eldest child of the family. By assigning this role to him/herself, the child is trying to hide what is happening at home by taking responsibilities that should have been undertaken by the parents. The child is trying to save his family from this situation hoping that the parent under the influence of alcohol may soon change (Black, 1993).

Some children play the role of an adult or a responsible at home in their desire to fill the void created by the absence of their parents. This was characteristic of one respondent who tried his best to attract the attention of his parents by assuming the leadership role at home in order to attract the attention and appreciation of his father for his work with the hopes of saving their relationship and thus having a normal family (Bachman, Wadsworth, O’Malley, Johnson, & Schulenberg, 1997).

The role of mediator (Black, 1993) was undertaken by one of the respondents as she was trying to bring peace and reconcile her sister and her father, and also to be attentive to the needs of her father. Another role also was observed: the role of the unnoticed. It is a role in which the child spends most time living in a fantasy world that he creates in an attempt to fit into a world where he did not belong to from the beginning. In this role, the child will be docile, takes measures and will put the interests of others before his in order just to fit in (Black, 1993).

The role of rebel is a role that a child can take to attract attention, by always moving and causing troubles, this role was taken by one participant; this was due to
the anger she felt and could not express it. It also confirms the description of Black (1993) about the disruptive child as a type of child often found in abusive families. The child causes problems through his behavior in the form of anger.

Another point noted in this study is the attitude of each participant towards alcohol. One of the respondents considered alcohol as destroyer that has destroyed and destabilized his family. For another, alcohol was seen as a thief that has stolen his best friends. Others associated alcohol to death, to deception, to confusion and to hurtful words.

All the participants admitted that the addiction of their parent has affected their way of consuming alcohol. They were aware that an alcoholic does not only destroys his/her life but also affects negatively the lives of those close to him/her (Lambie & Sias, 2005). This is in accordance with Leijonhielm’s (1997) results that children of addicted parents have a different way of considering alcohol depending on the manner in which their parents have abused alcohol (Leijonhielm, 1997).

It could have been exciting to involve adult children still living with alcoholic parents, to explain their feelings, emotions and difficulties they confront every day. But because of the difficulties of finding such children who may agree to participate and also the difficulties to have parental consent, it was impossible to accomplish. Another fact is that all participants had moved out and no longer live with their parents. Most of the participants recounted their stories as something of the past considering that they no longer live or were in contact with their parents. It might have been able to change the results if there were at least few participants who had good relationships with their parents. As the objective was not to seek those who had a good relationship with the addicted parent, but rather the experiences they encountered whilst living together with such parents, it was considered that the right response to the questions were obtained and the purpose was achieved.

The reliability of this study, as describes in quantitative studies, is low because of the small sample size. It is also difficult to assure that respondents would give the same answers if the interview guide is used at another time because this depends on how much a respondent is able to open up and share its experience to the researcher. Reability means that the same results would be obtained with the replication of the study under the same circumstances (Bryman, 2002). It also allows the researcher to make certain conclusions and make recommendations based on the results of the study. Reliability increases if the researcher clarified the issue that he wants to investigate as accurately as possible before its beginning. In this study, after defining the research question as carefully as possible, an interview guide was also used to help the researcher to gather the necessary information as detailed as possible.

The validity is estimated high in this study. Validity is the extent to which a test measures what is intended to be investigated (Kvale, 2009). There are two different kinds of validity: internal validity and external validity. Regarding the internal validity, the purpose of qualitative research is to describe or understand the phenomena of interest from the participants’ eyes, and the participants are the only ones who can legitimately judge the credibility of the results. What made internal validity to increase in this study was an interview guide designed to answer questions about the specific purpose. The interviews were conducted according to the plans, the respondents answers were recorded and a transcription was made to assure that the answers were correctly perceived and the report was checked to see if it was based on the purpose of the study.

Qualitative external validity concerns itself with comparability (i.e., the ability of other
researchers to extend knowledge based on the “richness and depth” of the description) 
and translatability (i.e., the extent to which other researchers understand the results 
given the theory and procedures underlying the study.) . To enhance generalizability 
and transferability in this study, it was tried to describe the central concepts and 
assumptions in the research context as detailed as possible and thus a deep 
understanding of the research issue, telling the story from the participants viewpoint, 
has been achieved properly.

To conclude, it seems that the purpose of this study has been achieved, by the 
respondents’ stories who have described what it’s like to grow up with a parent who 
abuses alcohol and what impact it has had on these young people.
References


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APPENDIX 1

Interview guide

How old are you?

What do you think about alcohol?

Which one of your parents was abusing alcohol?

How old were you when you noticed that something was strange about your parent(s)?

What did you feel when you noticed that?

For how long did she/he abuse alcohol?

Have you ever talk with your parents about that behavior?

Have you ever wanted to talk with somebody else about that situation?

Did you receive any support from school or from other adults in your relatives?

Did your alcoholic parent’s(s’) behavior at home influence your work at school?

What do you think about alcohol?

What do you think about your childhood?

If you compared yourself with your friends, was it any kind of differences?

How did you cope with an alcoholic parent as a child?

When you were a child, how were you seeing or thinking about your parent(s) as he/she was abusing alcohol?

How has your parental alcohol abuse affected your lifestyle?

How do you see your abusive parent(s) now?

Do you have any good relationship with your (alcoholic) parent(s) now?

Have you ever been tempted to abuse alcohol?
What effect does alcohol have on you now?

Is there anything else you want to talk about?