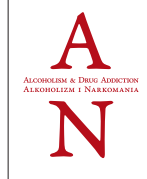


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Original article/Artykuł oryginalny

## Diversifying childhood experiences of Adult Children of Alcoholics

### Zróźnicowanie doświadczeń z dzieciństwa Dorosłych Dzieci Alkoholików

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## ARTICLE INFO

Article history / Historia artykułu  
Submitted / Otrzymano: 01.10.2014  
Accepted / Przyjęto do druku: 23.10.2014

## Keywords:

Adult Children of Alcoholics  
Adverse childhood experiences  
Family with alcohol-related problems  
Typology

## ABSTRACT

**Introduction.** The aim of the research was to determine the differing childhood experiences of Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACoA). We therefore sought to gain a typological picture of ACoA childhood experience in the context of risk factors and protective factors in the scope of the family structure – risk factors like violence, parental conflict, parental mental disorders, their image as well as parental practice.

**Method.** The research applied Gąsior's Family of Origin Dysfunctional Scale (SDRP) and CAST (Children of Alcoholics Screening Test). The research group included 395 Adult Children of Alcoholics, both in therapy (48 alcohol dependent) and not in therapy. Average age 29 years. Statistical analysis included factor analysis and analysis of variance.

**Results.** There were three basic types of ACoA experiences. Severe risk factors (alcoholism and violence) in the family of origin together with negative images and dysfunctional practices by both parents typify the high-risk type. In the moderately affected type, childhood experiences are associated with milder family of origin dysfunction and with better functioning of the mother and using functional practices in contrast to the father. The incidence of risk factors was moderate. In the last family of origin type there was a low incidence of risk factors, the family structure was not disordered and parents fulfilled their functions well. Among the protective factors, the function of the non-drinking parent and positive parental practices related to care and control were primary. Other important protective factors were good sibling relations, socio-economic family status and support from outside the family.

**Conclusions.** The relation between risk and protective factors in ACoA families requires further research.

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## STRESZCZENIE

## Słowa kluczowe:

Dorośle Dzieci Alkoholików  
niekorzystne doświadczenia z dzieciństwa  
rodzina z problemem alkoholowym  
typologia

**Wprowadzenie.** Celem badań była odpowiedź na pytanie, czy spośród DDA (Dorośle Dzieci Alkoholików) można wyróżnić homogeniczne podgrupy o zróżnicowanych doświadczeniach z dzieciństwa. Podjęto więc próbę ujęcia typologicznego doświadczeń z dzieciństwa DDA w kontekście czynników zagrażających (urazowych) i chroniących w zakresie struktury rodziny, czynników urazowych w postaci przemocy, konfliktów małżeńskich, zaburzeń psychicznych rodziców, ich obrazu oraz praktyk rodzicielskich.

**Metoda.** W badaniach zastosowane zostały: Children of Alcoholics Screening Test (CAST) oraz Skala Dysfunkcjonalności Rodziny Pochodzenia (SDRP) autorstwa Gąsiora. Badana grupa liczyła 395 DDA

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korzystających z terapii (w tym 48 osób uzależnionych) i niekorzystających z terapii. Średnia wieku wynosiła 29,6. Do opracowania statystycznego zastosowano analizę skupień i analizę wariancji. Wyniki. Wyniki analiz pozwoliły na wyodrębnienie trzech skupień wśród badanych DDA. Pierwsza podgrupa to osoby z wysoce negatywnymi i zagrażającymi doświadczeniami z dzieciństwa w zakresie występowania przemocy w rodzinie, negatywnego obrazu obojga rodziców oraz niekorzystnych praktyk rodzicielskich. Druga podgrupa, przeciwstawna pierwszej, cechowała się zróżnicowanymi, ale z przewagą korzystnych, doświadczeniami z dzieciństwa. Matka była osobą dobrze funkcjonującą, chroniącą, stosowała funkcjonalne praktyki rodzicielskie. Obecność czynników urazowych była niska. Trzecia podgrupa cechowała się dominacją niekorzystnych doświadczeń z dzieciństwa, ale też i znaczną obecnością doświadczeń chroniących. Niekorzystne doświadczenia nie były ani tak rozległe, ani tak nasilone, jak w przypadku pierwszej podgrupy. Wnioski. Związki między czynnikami zagrażającymi i chroniącymi w rodzinie pochodzenia Dorosłych Dzieci Alkoholików oraz efekty, do jakich mogą prowadzić, wymagają dalszych badań.

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## Introduction

Gaining an insight into the problems of the children of alcoholics not only remains a vital issue, it continues to raise both social and scientific research interest. Many articles and books have been published on this subject over the last forty years. A great part of these, unfortunately, is problematic in itself as it reproduces stereotypes and prejudices on the subject of ACoA (Adult Children of Alcoholics). It is worth bearing in mind that research on ACoA has three basic sources: clinical-therapeutic, self-help and psychometric. The resulting body of knowledge triggered a specific debate on the identity of adult children of alcoholics and the nature of help (therapy) they require. According to some therapists and theorists, this is a specific group that bears the long-term negative consequences of co-dependency mechanisms arising in the family. These are supposed to flair up in the form of ACoA syndrome. However, other researchers or therapists argue that there is no specific ACoA syndrome and growing up in an "alcoholic" family brings with it a variety of largely unpredictable effects. These differences in perspective have a bearing especially on the planning and implementation of ACoA aid.

Recently however, a number of works have critically assessed both positions. The first critical reviews of research on adult children of alcoholics were the work of Woodside [1] and Giglio and Kaufman [2]. Especially that of Giglio and Kaufman was characterised by critical assessment of literature on ACoA since 1960. The next publication was Windle and Sealers *Children of Alcoholics: Critical Perspectives* [3] from 1991. That year also saw the publication of Shera's *Children of Alcoholics. A Critical Appraisal of Theory and Research* [4], which to this day is an important source on the subject of the children of alcoholics. These reviews were apparently a reply to *Adult Children of Alcoholics* by Woititz [5] as well as the positions of other clinicians and therapists accepting the specific character of ACoA syndrome. A wide and insightful review of the literature on the adult children of alcoholics was also carried out by Harter, who analysed the publications since 1987 [6]. She indicated further research directions and posed important questions as to whether the promotion of ACoA syndrome serves therapeutic purposes or rather creates iatrogenic problems by suggesting all have disturbances as a result of childhood experiences. It is also worth mentioning the ACoA research review published by Hall and Webster from 2007 [7], the undeniable value of which is the focus on the analysis of risk factors and durability, and not only on threats.

The first synthesising overview of ACoA literature and research in Polish was presented in the work of Ślaski [8, 9] and Cierpiakowska [10, 11], who for many years has been conducting thorough and insightful analysis on this group [12–15]. Gąsior [16] has published an overview of work on the subject of ACoA, and other

authors systematically addressing this material are Sobolewska-Mellibruda [17], Margasiński [18, 19], Grzegorzewska [20–22] and Chodkiewicz [23, 24].

The majority of the above mentioned authors accept that the ADA group is highly diverse. It includes those with serious mental disorders, minor adaptive difficulties and also those who function above the norm [6, 7, 11, 16]. This is probably the result of many factors that may both threaten and protect. No doubt this is linked to the variety of ACoA experiences arising from the differing functioning of the families in which they were raised.

Up to now, research on ACoA families has sought to identify that what they have in common. Attempts were made to create a quite uniform picture of these families that was supposed to show how health and adaptive problems arose. However, since this is a heterogenic group, it is worthwhile considering the range in which experiences of growing up in a family of origin are differentiated. Furthermore, it may be worth attempting to define the factors (both threatening and protecting) determining these differences. Next it is worth studying the range of links between these various experiences and the occurrence mental or adaptive problems.

## Families with dependence related problems

The well-known family therapists, Irene and Herbert Goldenberg [25], report that families with dependency problems are one of the most thoroughly researched in family therapy. At first, mainly therapists and clinicians conducted research on the functioning of these families. However, the concepts they created were not fully verified empirically. What is more, a peculiar kind of gap opened up between therapeutic practice and the science. The rapists tended to generalise their models of family functioning basing mainly on families in therapy. Their observations would be extended to all other families with dependency issues. On the other hand, scientists, especially in the 60s and 70s, sought a specific family dynamic pattern supposed to determine the occurrence of specific forms of pathology. These basically deterministic assumptions turned out to be at odds with the basic principles of systematic thinking. This had, after all, moved beyond deterministic and linear towards circular logic models. As Józefek [26] noted, there had been a paradigm shift in the field of family therapy and systemic thinking. Earlier models of family functioning are treated as only one of many possible ways of understanding family reality. Their ascribed objectivity is suspended, as therapists and researchers now consider how to comprehend a family and how to help it through dialogue. Steinglass's [27, 28] or Wengscheider-Cruse's [29, 30] systemic concepts of so-called alcoholic families belong to a passing paradigm, which does not mean the knowledge behind it is passé. However, it only sheds light on the

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