



Meaning in life as constructed by male adolescents of alcoholic parents

Debbie Thanpari

Department of Counselling Psychology, Martin Luther Christian University, Meghalaya, India.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 23 October 2015;

Received in revised form:

25 November 2015;

Accepted: 03 December 2015;

Keywords

Adolescence

Meaning in life,

Thematic network analysis,

Alcoholic parents,

Children of alcoholics.

ABSTRACT

We do not choose our parents, and when one parent is impaired by alcohol most of the time, this brings developmental challenges for the young adolescent. Alcoholism occurs in India as in other nations, but here there is a greater sense of shame attached to it. This present study looks at the experience of adolescent sons living with an alcoholic parent by means of a qualitative phenomenological design. The sample were selected using purposive sampling. Thematic network analysis is used to analyse data. This involved organizing the data to three levels reflecting salient themes i.e. basic, organizing and global themes. Semi structured interview with five adolescent aged seventeen to twenty were recruited from Bangalore city. Five global themes emerged from the analysis – need for praise, building self esteem, support, religious faith and belief, being misunderstood by others. What stood out was the boys accepted that alcoholism was a disease and that it was not their father's fault, and remained loyal to their parents

© 2015 Elixir All rights reserved.

Introduction

Alcoholism is often called a family disease, as it hurts the lives of the members of the family and others who are close to the alcoholic. Children are the unseen casualties of alcoholism. The National Household Survey of Drug Use (2004) estimated that about 21% of Indian adult males use alcohol, but the use is significantly higher among the indigenous people, rural men and urban men of lower socio-economic status. Essentially alcoholism is a psychological dependence on alcohol. It includes chemical changes in the body, craving, loss of control, conflicting behaviour and personality regression. The National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (1990) defines it as 'a primary chronic disease with genetic, psychosocial, and environmental factors influencing its development and manifestations'. There is no set time frame for the onset of alcoholism; it can be a couple of months to a year before it manifests. Its effects can be seen in the body; difficulty with balance and walking, liver diseases, poor memory, incoherence of speech and thinking, anxiety and depression.

Much of what is known about the implications of growing up with an alcoholic parent comes from research comparing children of alcoholic parents to the children of non-alcoholic parents. The children of alcoholic parents are often thought to be casualties of parental drinking, with such widespread problems as impaired school performance, low self-esteem, role confusion, impulsiveness, and depression [19]. We can see the real impact of alcohol abuse in family dynamics – domestic violence has made it the single most important problem for women in India.

Adolescence is the period of transition from childhood to adulthood. It is characterised by rapid physical, biological and hormonal changes which results in maturation:- psychological, behavioural and sexual between the ages of 10 and 19. Parental alcoholism brings in another factor that further destabilises the domestic environment significantly impacting on the adjustment and personality of the adolescent.

Erickson [6] described the adolescent as being in vigorous motion between two landings one representing childhood and the other adulthood. He theorised it as a stage when inner identity is to be realised, and described it as a period of identity crisis. For many adolescents this is a time riddled with angst. However if ways can be discovered to help them successfully navigate through this difficult period and establish a sense of meaning, this will help pave the way for their healthy development.

Adolescence in the Indian Context.

The experience of adolescents would vary according to the cultural and social values network that the individual grows in. The Dharmashastra¹ recognise the crucial nature of this phase and has prescribed codes of conduct. These codes reflect and influence the cultural practices toward the adolescence. Most Indian families observe sacred ritualistic ceremonies at various stages of the life cycle which marks the competencies in social and behavioural roles.

In the Indian society the father is the caretaker, economic provider, family head and role model. When the father is an alcoholic he is unable to fulfil the roles especially to an adolescent son who needs guidance, and a role model during this crucial stage of growth and maturation. The Indian family is a collectivistic society that emphasizes integrity, loyalty, and unity. It observes the patriarchal ideology and is patrilineal in most parts of India with traditional gender preferences. Male children are raised to be assertive, less tolerant, independent, self-reliant, demanding and domineering [11]. The lifestyle of urban adolescents from the upper socio economic status is quite

¹ Dharmashastra a Sanskrit text, refers to the Indic branch of learning, pertaining to the Hindu religion and legal duty.

different from the middle and lower class adolescents in regard to private schooling with good quality education, influences of western life style through travel and exposure, which is seen in their preferences in music dressing style and interactions with the opposite sex. But sometimes this can be an eye wash as parental involvement and control is evident when choosing a career and in marriage.

Meaning in Life

Identity formation is the development of meaning and purpose in one's life, and is also a significant theme in existentialism [2]. It is commonly agreed that adolescence is a time filled with conflicts. A number of these conflicts closely resemble existential issues such as increases in freedom, choice, responsibility, and an awareness of isolation. In addition there is the search for meaning which may result in increased anxiety and a sense of personal emptiness. Several studies have shown that the quality of relationship within families, especially with parents is a major determining factor of psychological well-being in adolescents [16], [18]. The importance of meaning in life and commitment to personal life satisfaction and psychological health has been well established [5], [17]. Keeping this point in view, the present study aimed to assess the lived experience of the male adolescent living with a parent who abuses alcohol. Without hearing about what it is like to live with an alcoholic parent, these adolescents might remain silent and continue to suffer. With more knowledge and insight from such study, teachers may provide more compassionate service to those who suffer the effects of growing up in an alcoholic family. The objective of this research is to explore meaning in life as constructed by the male adolescent experiences living with a parent who abuses alcohol, based on Frankl's theoretical position of 'logotherapy'. It views individual equipped with the potential to transcend their environments and gain the freedom and responsibility to make choices that are favourable to growth in spite of their circumstances [12]. Logotherapy teaches that meaning in life cannot be dictated but can be discovered by searching on our own existential situation. Humans can give meaning to their lives by realising three values also called the meaning triad: - the creative value, the experiential value, and the attitudinal value. The creative value can be realised through contributing to life or giving something to life. The creative value may be actualised through work, hobbies or through good deeds. The experiential value includes all experience of "the good, the truthful and the beautiful or by knowing one single human being in all his uniqueness" [8] It is the ability to love someone, to commit and appreciate. The experiential value may be actualise through nature, art, dance, music, literature and through relationships of love and acceptance. The attitudinal value is actualised through stances taken toward unavoidable suffering. The attitude that we take towards suffering is important. When meaning is added to suffering, suffering ceases to be suffering in some way. We have the freedom to find meaning in how we think and in what we do. The research questions are - What are the experiences of the male adolescent growing up with an alcohol dependent parent? How do these experiences affect the male adolescent's interaction with family, peers and his academic performance? Which categories of meaning in life does the adolescent consider most important? What gives meaning to the male adolescent living with an alcoholic parent?

This study will explore the constructs of meaning among male adolescents of alcoholic parents in Bangalore. Meaning in life has colossal effects on health, and human behaviour ranging

from happiness, health, stress resistance, life satisfaction, addiction recovery, to death acceptance. This will give light on what guides the adolescent through his lives from one moment to the next. It is hoped that this qualitative study will shed light and add to our current understanding of some of the vital meanings they take on in the Indian context, it is hoped that the insights gained from exploring the meaning in life of the participants will provide a deeper understanding of how meanings manifest in this particular population. Insights gained may help teachers, counsellors, clinicians, non-alcoholic spouse, extended family members, with useful information on how to better support and understand this population.

Method

Participants were recruited from a prestigious college in Bangalore and from a non government organisation (NGO) that runs a project for youths living in the shantytown. Contact was made through the college guidance counsellor and the project manager. Prospective participants were contacted by the researcher, purpose of the study were reviewed and appointment made for the interview. Nine were recruited but five participated, the remaining changed their minds about participating in the study. The research participants completed the Children of Alcoholics Screening Test (CAST-6) [10] was used in order to screen whether the interviewee is an affected adult child or not. The six questions e.g. "Have you ever encouraged your father or mother to quit drinking", could be answered with "Yes, my father", "Yes, my mother" or "No". A CAST-6-score of two or more positive responses is considered as a sign of a parental drinking problem. After consent were taken from participants they participated in 60 - 90 minute interview. Follow up interview were made for clarifications and additional information. In phenomenological studies, the number of participants can range from one to twenty-five [4]. The sample size is subjective to the sufficient condition to reach saturation [9].

A semi-structured interview guide with 23 open ended questions was used to solicit the participants' experience of living with an alcoholic parent. The interview guide enabled establishing rapport through questions such as: Tell me about yourself? Describe your childhood? Describe a typical day? How has your parents drinking affect you? There were also questions on what gave hope to the participant, what sense and meaning they derived from their experience. Three of the participants at the end of the interview, during debrief shared that they felt lighter as they had never shared their experience with anyone, the reason being 'they will not understand'.

An important concern with qualitative research is trustworthiness and biases. Bracketing or epoche, helps researchers become aware of the influences and personal biases that prevent researchers from seeing the true essence of a particular experience [13]. Bracketing requires the researchers to write their biases as they arise in the margins of the transcript. Engaging in bracketing does not guarantee that researchers will be free of their biases but it assists researchers to become aware of their biases and its influences on the research [14]. In addition the researcher engaged in peer debriefing with a psychology doctoral scholar, which helped to decrease the influence of biases in the study.

Data Analysis

Thematic network approach to data analysis was used, this involved organising the data into three levels of themes reflecting salient themes i.e. basic, organising and global themes[3]. There are six stages in analyses involving thematic

vulnerable adolescents or are temperamental. Teachers misinterpret the participants' downcast expression and sleepiness during classes. The boys in this study were without exception talented individuals in certain areas like academically, sporting and music.

Discussion and Conclusion

Four research questions directed the process of exploration of the meaning in life as constructed by male adolescent of alcoholic parents. The research question is answered below;

What are the experiences of the male adolescent growing up with an alcoholic parent? Some experiences are common to all the participants. They see a drunken father who acts in a way that humiliates them. They often see violence directed against their mother and children too. There is often lack of money. They cannot look up to their father as a role model and in some cases must take the parent role. Even in a more authoritarian society where respect is given to elders, this does not automatically happen if the authoritarian figure is weak and not respected by those below him.

How do these experiences affect the male adolescent's interactions with family, peers and his academic performance? The male adolescent, failing to gain what he needs from his father, may look for it elsewhere through a coach, grandparent or elder sibling. It affects his relationship with his peers in that he does not wish to bring them back to his dysfunctional home. It does cause a drop in academic performance in some of the boys, but not all. It can also make them more determined to succeed.

What categories of meaning in life does the male adolescent consider most important? For the male adolescent, being praised, succeeding in something and having good role models are the most important categories of meaning in life. To be a good drummer in a band or football player, to be praised by community leaders like bishops or teacher is of great importance. Also having people to look up to like elder brothers and coaches.

What gives meaning to the male adolescent living with an alcoholic parent? The Thematic Network Analysis identified five constructs of meaning relevant to the participants: -building self esteem, need for praise, belief, support and being misunderstood by others. The global themes of 'building self esteem' and 'need for praise' go together with basic themes of school, parents, siblings, sports and hobbies, work and study, goals, coaches, grandparents and mothers. Grandparents in this study played a significant role in two of the boys' lives. The grandfather of one boy was the only one who took an interest in him, providing emotional support to him and financial support to the impoverished family. In a second case the grandmother was highly significant as she alone could control her alcoholic son (the boy's father). Werner [20] showed that grandparents play an important role as caregivers and sources of emotional support and that by finding a secure source of attachment, children develop resilience.

This research agrees with the developmental life stage theory of Erickson. Erickson has noted that society has long regarded adolescents as a group of people who are searching to find a sense of identity and meaning in their lives. Erickson postulated that adolescence is a period of trying to establish one's identity in a range of areas from moral through to religious and sexual identity. The concept of 'meaning in life' is pivotal in trying to establish these various identities. Key aspects of self-identity include academic performance, sporting success and social prowess. These provide avenues for respect and

praise from peers. It is likely that adolescents who have a more well established identity are more able to form a sense of meaning in their lives as well as feeling a sense of mastery and pride.

If there is a lack of meaning it may be a contributing factor leading to the struggles and turmoil that adolescents face day to day. Adolescents face an identity crisis in their transition to adulthood. Those who have a strong sense of meaning can make this transition successfully (Hacker, 1994). Being a son of an alcoholic father forces the adolescent to grow up more and be more mature. Three of the adolescent in this study became the de facto leader of the home. It generally seems to toughen them up.

A sense of personal identity provides the structure for understanding who one is; it provides meaning through a sense of commitment, provides values and goals and gives a sense of personal control and free will. A sense of identity gives the framework for consistency, coherence and harmony between the person's values, beliefs and commitments; it enables the adolescent to recognise self-potential through a sense of having a range of possibilities and choices in the future [1]

Being able to accept their father's alcoholism, having a personal faith and a set of core beliefs and hope and goals for the future gives these adolescents a base to work from and a conviction that their lives mean something and that in spite of unfavourable odds their lives will really work out well in the long run. This research supports Frankl's [7] postulate that having some aim or goal strongly affects a person's sense of significance, making their existence worthwhile. Reker & Cousins [15] showed that an experience of meaning in the present is associated with satisfactory life experiences and positive expectations for the future. Counsellors of adolescents can start by exploring where the adolescents derive their meaning. Counselling techniques will help adolescents to search for their sources of meaning and to find out how they maintain their sense of meaning, including areas where they are strong and where they are weak. By critically assessing their relationships with family members, particularly siblings and with peers, adolescents can gain insights into underlying issues that may affect them.

References

- [1] Adams, G.R. & Marshall, S.K. (1996). A developmental social psychology of identity: Understanding the person in context. *Journal of Adolescence*, 19, 429-442.
- [2] Adamson, L. & Lyxell, B. (1996). Self-concept and question of life: Identity development during late adolescence. *Journal of Adolescence*, 19, 569-582.
- [3] Attride-Stirling, J. (2001). Thematic networks: An analytic tool for qualitative research. *Qualitative Research* 1(3): 385-405.
- [4] Creswell, J. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design – choosing among five approaches*. 2nd edition. London: Sage.
- [5] Erickson, E.H. (1982). *The life cycle completed*. New York: Norton.
- [6] Erickson, E.H. (1968). *Identity, Youth and Crisis*. London: Faber and Faber.
- [7] Frankl, V. E. (1967). *Psychotherapy and existentialism. Selected papers on logotherapy*. N. Y: Washington Square Press.
- [8] Frankl, V. E. (2006). *Man's search for meaning*. Beacon Press
- [9] Hill, C.E., Knox, S., Thompson, B.J., Williams, E.N., Hess, S.A., & Ladany, N. (2005). Consensual qualitative research: An update. *Journal of Counselling Psychology*, 52, 196-205. doi: 10.1037/0022-0167.52.2.196

- [10] Hodgins, D.C., Matlicka-Tyndale, E., el-Guebaly, N., & West, M. (1995). Alternative cut-point scores for the CAST-6. *Addictive Behaviors*, 20, 267-270.
- [11] Kumar, P., & Rohatgi, K. (1997). Value patterns as related with high and low adjustment in marriage. *Indian Journal of Current Psychological Research* 2:98–102.
- [12] Krill, D.F. (1996). Existential therapy. In F.J. Turner (Ed.) *Social work treatment* (4th ed. pp 250 -281). New York: Free Press.
- [13] Lavery, S.M. (2003). Hermeneutic phenomenology and phenomenology: a comparison of historical and methodological considerations. *International Journal Qualitative Methods*.2 (3), 1-29
- [14] Orbe, M. (2000). Centralising diverse racial/ethnic voices in scholarly research: The value of phenomenological inquiry. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 24, 603-621.
- [15] Reker, G. T., & Cousins, J. B. (1979). Factor structure, construct validity and reliability of the Seeking of Noetic Goals (SONG) and Purpose in Life (PIL) Tests. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 35, 85-91.
- [16] Sastre, M., & Ferriere, G. (2000). Family decline and the subjective well-being of adolescents. *Social Indicators Research*, 49, 69-82.
- [17] Stephen, J., Fraser, E., & Marcia, J.E. (1992). Moratorium-achievement (MAMA) cycles in life span identity development: Value orientations and reasoning system correlates. *Journal of Adolescence*, 15, 283-300.
- [18] VanWel, F., Linssen, H., & Abma, R. (2000). The parental bond and the well-being of adolescents and young adults. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 29, 307-318.
- [19] Whipple E.E., Fitzgerald H.E., & Zucker R.A. (1995). Parent child interactions in alcoholic and non-alcoholic families: *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 65(1), 153–159. doi: 10.1037/h0079593
- [20] Werner, E.E. (2000). Protective factor and individual resilience. In J.P. Shonkoff and S.J. Meisels (Eds). *Handbook of Early Childhood Intervention*. Retrieved from <http://www.healthychild.ucla.edu/wp/pdf/Session2Chapter6ProtectiveFactorsIndividualResilience.pdf>