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Experience of Mothers of Adult Alcoholics – A Report from Studies

Doświadczenia matek dorosłych alkoholików – Raport z badań

Abstract: The aim of the article is to describe the situation of mothers who face the alcohol problems of their adult children. We are primarily interested in female narratives, which are a reflection on the situation of mothers connected with adult children addicted to alcohol. We are trying to touch upon the essence of maternal experience. The inspiration for this presentation of the problem was a visible gap in the research carried out in the field of social sciences, which would concern directly the parents of harmful drinkers. The stage of designing and conducting the research, as well as the process of analyzing the collected empirical data, allowed for in-depth reflection on the experiences of the narrators in the context of femininity and motherhood. Our research was qualitative in nature, placed in an interpretative paradigm (symbolic interactionism) with the use of the grounded theory methodology.

Keywords: qualitative research, family, motherhood, alcoholism, biographical studies.

Initiatory Non-Places – An Attempt at Exemplifying a Term

We shall begin our considerations by putting forward the thesis that each *non-place* is initiatory, if through nothing else than the lack of its *identification*. There is no epistemological premise to become involved in its history (i.e. place). We shall first attempt to explain the category of *non-place*, and then show its initiatory character, as well as the reason for this.

When referring to classic source literature devoted to *non-places*, i.e. the works of Marc Augè, we read: „If a place can be defined as identity, relational and historical, a space that cannot be defined as identity, relational or historical will define a *non place*" (Augé, 2010, p. 53). Therefore, a lack of epistemological premises to enter the story and the *I*, a lack of a certain type of internalisation in a place makes it a *non-place*. Augè believes that responsibility for this lies in supermodernity, which „creates non-places which are not themselves anthropological places, which […] do not integrate earlier places: instead these are listed, classified and promoted to the status of a place of memory, and assigned to a circumscribed and specific position" (Augé, 2010, p. 53). On the other hand, M. Bogusławski writes that „non-spaces are zones of excessive space, which shape narcissistic and lonely individuals. Loneliness is the result of acceleration and constant flow, and of the fact that non-places, through enabling constant transit, prohibit any type of binding commitment" (Bogusławski, 2019) (TN: own translation). M. Bogusławski stresses that non-places create „people without characteristics who live in a state of constant tension and fear of being unmasked. For it is the the mask or image, as it is now called, that is the only thing they possess and want to have full control over. The subjects of our research were very often forced to wear different metaphorical masks in order to survive. In some places they appear as mothers of people who are drinking problematically or, in other places, as codependents. No stranger can know that the their tinfoil (position, financial success, erudition) conceals emptyness. „The life of a narcissist" – according to Eichelberger – „consists in maintaining an illusion", on making sure that the image appears constant, i.e. on controlling the environment – „the mirrors of other people's eyes, hearts and minds". Controlling the environment also means excluding love or frindship, for they assume rooting, authenticity and reciprocity. „A narcissist has to dominate, extending and air of mythical radiance surrounding their I" (Bogusławski, 2019) (TN: own translation). What is more, a *non-place* is „a very subjective term, heavily influenced by an individuals relationhip with a place" (Uhl, 2018, p. 213) (TN: own translation). As Augé observes: „Places and *non-places* are fleeting poles: the place never disappears entirely and the *non-place*

is never fully created – they are palimpsests onto which the muddled play of identity and relation is constantly reflected anew. However, *non-places* are the real measure of our time; one that could be quantified – with the aid of a few conversions between area, volume and distance – by totalling all the air, rail and motorway routes, the mobile cabins called means of transport (aircraft, trains and road vehicles), the airports and railway stations, hotel chains, leisure parks, large retail outlets, and finally the complex skein of cable and wireless networks that mobilise extra-terrestrial space for the purposes of communication so peculiar that it often puts the individual in contact only with another image of himself" (Augé, 2008, p. 129). Therefore the category of *non-space* is a marvellous tool to describe women-mothers in the role of those who coexist with adult children with alcohol problems. For the purpose of the article we treat the category of *non-place* as a metaphor, for they are „fundamental to our method of conceptualising and understanding of social and organisational life, which is alien and unknown to all" (Costas, 2013). In such a configuration we perceive this category as *anthropological spaces* (Bauder, 2016, p. 1). This in turn leads to what Augè refers to the *non-place* paradox: The same place can be an anthropological space and a *non-place* at the same time (Bauder, 2016).

„A Labyrinthine Testing of Oneself. She Has to Enter to Know What She Thinks"
(Jaworska-Witkowska, 2016, p. 36)

The labyrinth category is significant in describing the situation in which mothers of adult alcoholics find themselves. A labyrinth is a metaphor of individual entanglement in the spectrum of emotions as „a symbol of existence which, by way of successive attempts, moves towards its own centre, its own I […]" (Czapiga, 2013, p. 10). Moreover, according to Małgorzata Czapiga, the labyrinth is also a „structure which stores traces of cultural changes" (2013, p. 9) (TN: own translation). This includes the role of woman-mother. This specific category uncovers the dimension of a world entangled in stereotypes and in „paradoxical space of cognition" (2011, p. 211) (TN: own translation).

A very good illustration of entaglement in labyrinthine spaces are stories included in the collection *Obsoletki* by Justyna Bargielska. The author „creates or opens a zone of focus common to the stories and invites one to participate in this united space of thought and reflection by parents, pedagogues, psychologists, husbands, *living-children*. Although Bargielska seems to be saying that one cannot prepare oneself for such situations, her prose

implicitly depicts a potential of educational hope, which brings reflection and motivates one to rethink the entire system of introducing men and women to cross successive thresholds of intimate initiation" (Jaworska-Witkowska, 2011, p. 191) (TN: own translation). Hence, the situation of losing a child (also symbolically), which is buried in the abyss of a „graveyard of buried hopes" (Walley-Beckett, 2017). That is why sometimes „a sense of struggle – attempting to work out sanctity in one's life" (Estès, 2016, p. 215) (TN: own translation) reminds one of „a great rubbish dump" (Estès, 2016, p. 215). This is how, in the narratives of women-mothers, the situation of coping with adult alcoholic children looks. The above theoretical presentations provided the framework in which we analysed the collected material.

The Theoretical and Methodological Perspective of Realised Empirical Studies

Our considerations were focused on the situations of women-mothers entangled in the alcohol problems of their adult children. In our analysis of the narratives of women we want to reconstruct the process of becoming a parent of an adult alcoholic, from the point of view of maternal experience. The subject of the presented considerations constitutes a small part of the research project titled *Rodzina w systemie wsparcia społecznego i pomocy osobom z problemem alkoholowym. Badania biograficzne z udziałem rodziców (dorosłych) dzieci uzależnionych od alkoholu [Family in the System of Social Support and Aid For People with Alcohol Problems. Biographical Studies Conducted with Parents of (Adult) Children Addicted to Alcohol]*[1] (TN: own translation), as part of the task „Wspieranie badań naukowych w obszarze problemów wynikających z używania alkoholu", financed by the Fund for Solving Gambling Problems within the framework of the National Health Programme for 2016-2020.

The project was centred on the experiences of parents of adult alcoholic children, connected with the offer of institutional support, social reaction and coping strategies for problematic drinking in adult children. The fundamental objective of the research as part of the project was to reconstruct the process of „becoming" a parent of an adult alcoholic (see Szczepanik 2020).

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As a consequence gathering and then analysing empirical data was embedded in Grounded Theory Methodology (see: Glaser and Strauss, 2009; Konecki, 2000). The conducted studies were maintained in the interpretative paradigm, in which role is subject to the process of reflective and constant interpretation. It is dynamically and permanently constructed and it is created by the subject itself, while its content cannot be defined beforehand (the process of role construction ensues) (Konecki, 2016). „The researcher who 'discovers grounded theory', having to choose between two perspectives on social reality, i.e. the mechanical and humanistic approach, chooses the later one. The mechanical vision of social reality only allows us to explain the existence of social forms, independently of the definition of a situation. The humanistic or interpretative perspective focuses primarily on symbolically shaped human cognitive processes and sees in them a key to explaining and understanding human reality" (Konecki, 2000, p. 14). The grounded theory methodology is applied particularly when studies focus on embarrassing, difficult, emotional or unaccepted human relationships, along with their determinants (see: Wuest, Merrit-Grey and Ford-Gilboe, 2004; Ashby, Hoog, Kerr, Brooks, Nicholls and Forrest, 2005; Chomczyński, 2008; Konecki, 2000). Resorting to the methodology of grounded theory allows the researcher to grasp the perception of the respondents and to become familiar with the perception matrix of the actors, which is based on their definition of social situations. Skillful collection of empirical data makes it possible to explain these methods of defining situations (Ashby et. al., 2005). Building a theory based on collected empirical data is grounded in searching for specific patterns of activities between actors in the social world, context and consequence (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; 1994). Thus, the methodology of grounded theory can be understood as an analytical and research strategy that builds on building a medium-range theory based on systematic and careful collection of empirical material (Konecki, 2000).

In focusing our attention on experience and relationships in which the mother and the adult alcoholic child find themselves, the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism, which perceives people as active subjects capable of generating meanings, as well as defining, analyzing and learning social situations in which they find themselves and reacting to them (i.e. taking action) was of great significance (see: Turner, 1994; Blumer, 2009). According to Turner interactions can be defined as „a process of a mutual exchange of gestures, their interpretation and tailoring one's action on this basis" (Turner, 1998, p. 255). Techniques of collecting empirical data include narrative interviews with parents of adult alcoholics, a focus interview and

unstructured interviews with representatives of institutions offering support for families facing alcohol problems. The collected empirical material consisting of 60 interviews allowed us to establish analytical categories necessary for the research process. For the purpose of this article we selected 8 interviews with women. A consciously applied triangulation of data and researchers involved in activities connected with the project was meant to increase the value of the collected empirical material.

We decided to focus on a selected analytical category connected with maternity and contexts of femininity, which appeared in the emotional narratives of mothers who experienced alcohol abuse in their adult children. Entangled in the life situations of their sons or daughters and in extreme experiences they presented different faces of parental roles. The aim of the article is to try to describe the situation of mothers in the face of the alcohol problem of their own, grown-up, child. We are mainly interested in women's narratives, which are a reflection on the situation of mothers of alcoholics. We try to touch the essence of a difficult maternal experience. The collected material enabled the generation of analytical categories and the creation of a typology of mothers in the context of the relationship to their grown-up child and motherhood. It is worth emphasising that mothers in social discourse are required to stand by their own child regardless of his age for good and for bad. Unlike life partners (Asher, 2018), mothers do not receive understanding when they make the decision to stop rescuing a grown-up child at all costs, even if it is marked by the label of deviant (Szczepanik, 2020).

These were difficult and very emotional interviews, for some women it was the first conversation with a stranger about their life story. Therefore, during the collection of the material, we experienced that women sometimes refused to participate in the study, despite previous declarations, postponed established meetings or, they signalled a preference for completing survey questionnaires. Despite their commitment and the confirmation of their willingness to participate in the study several times, the women postponed the conversation, which was proof that these conversations were very difficult for mothers of alcoholics. On the other hand, they emphasised that they need this conversation and can contribute to the support of other parents of alcoholics.

Personal Narratives of Women – An Analysis

In the biographical experience reconstructed by the studied women we can see pronounced threads connected with parental roles, maternity and

femininity. In the narratives the women we uncovered images of mothers who were coherent with the experienced situations. Analysis allowed us to distinguish several types of women-mothers and their relationships with their children. These are presented below.

Mothers as Fighters and Rescuers

The first type of mothers appears in the context of fighting for one's adult child, often with institutional support. They believe the recommendations put forward by the institutions, creating the perspective of a faithful recipient. The first trait of these mothers is the will to fight connected with the need of maternal action. At certain times they display impotence and suffering. In their narratives we often see a peculiar construction of presented experiences, intertwined with extreme emotions dictated by the current situation of the adult alcoholic child. Despite having one objective, i.e. saving the child, they applied various strategies, which is why we distinguished several variants of this model, in which women presented different tactics. Paradoxically, helplessness and suffering generate the need to fight, which assumes different forms: active, oriented towards seeking help, and passive, focused on the life and current situation of the child. Both variants are focused on the child, situating oneself and other family members in the background:

he would go to therapy several times, so the first time, God, I … [pause] The thing that stuck with me was the last time … when he went to therapy, because I kicked him out then (M_3)[2]

Hmm, I have this sense, certainly, like any mother would, how can you not have it, to do something when you know that the worst is coming, but what can I do? (M_2)

The fighter-mother often confronts her husband, i.e. the father. Taking an offensive stance towards the fathers' opinions of their adult children excludes the fathers from activities oriented towards helping the child. These relationships were usually presented by women who rejected pragmatic but pitiless solutions suggested by their husbands. Assuming protective strategies towards their adult children they excluded the fathers, depriving them of parental agency, and defining them as non-allies (opponents) to rescue responses.

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[2] M_1 means First interview, studied mother

I said, remember, you have one mother, father won't help you (M_7)

If he could be firm but consistent, not aggressive, I wouldn't defend Dominik, if he had said listen Dominik, you did this and that, this is your punishment, or something like that [pause] I wouldn't say a word, but he was aggressive, so I [pause] [hits the table] defended him (M_3)

There were interviews and there was this interview and there were [hesitation] questions for him, about his future plans, and he spoke about mum, so I was so proud. Because his mum was the authority, he was raised [sigh] so that he had everything he needed, without a father, but [pause] he has contact with his father, but he had [sigh] he had everything and he went so astray. He took the blame, said he did wrong, that mum worked hard.(M_4)

The next variant of the fighter-mother is the mother who orders the life of adult alcoholics. Seeing the helplessness of their sons or daughters these women decide to save their lives, they assume responsibilities at work, they mend relationships (with wives, children, friends, managers), they contact professionals, clean the house, pay the bills, arrange sick-leave. They set themselves up as extensions of their adult children's voices.

Piotrek doesn't want to go? He doesn't want to go, because he won't …, he doesn't want to drink and he won't [pause] So, so, so …, his friend says, he doesn't have to get drunk, … I say … I say he doesn't want to go, because he can't drink, and …, [pause] and I know that you'll make him drink, and he doesn't want to. [pause] So I said that to the neighbor, and he says, I didn't know. (M_1)

Mother as Therapist and Expert (Learning)

These women represent the professionalization process. They gather knowledge about their son's or daughter's problem. They become *learning,* action-oriented mothers. Their knowledge is applied in strategies used to tackle harmful drinking in their adult children.

Mothers fulfilling the role of experts try to take control of their family's life situation. The process of becoming an expert, dictated by previous experience, unsuccessful attempts and lack of effectiveness of systemic solutions, was particularly interesting during analysis. In their narratives the mothers described strategies of creating contact networks with representatives of various social and medical professions. They presented ways

of initiating conversations with specialists, depending on the preferred trend, and referred to situations in which they obtained expert knowledge.

So I called, because I didn't even have the address at the time, and had no idea … only to this friend, [pause] and ask her where to go (M_1)

he stopped a long therapy and just [pause], then I didn't know what to do, but I knew he had to go to therapy. So I regularly attended meetings with her and she just [pause] directed me, step by step, what to do, she said it in such a way that … [pause] She explained how this works [knocks on table] this addiction and everything, [pause] I just understood this deeply, why he acts the way he does (M_3)

The Guilty Mother

These mothers try to find the cause for their children's alcohol problems in themselves. In their narratives the women refer to the way in which they raised their children, critically analysing small remembered details, which could have influenced their children's present life situation. They search for causes and justifications which would explain their children's 'illness' while trying to rationalise, inventing arguments protecting their flawless motherhood, entangled in complex unforeseeable events independent of the narrators, for example violent partners, single motherhood, difficult financial situation, etc.

Contrary to all feelings [laughter], which screamed in me, don't do this or he'll die somewhere, something will happen to him, someone will beat him up or kill him. I don't know [pause] you don't know where he'll end up. I felt that I was helping him all the time, because I felt guilty, that [pause] I didn't give him something, that he had it difficult, that he was raised in difficult conditions [pause] meaning that there were two and then three children at home, and he was still little and had problems, and I had three little children (M_3)

He was brought up the same way as the youngest one, [pause] fed the same, spoken to the same, I did everything the same way [sigh] And later I stopped feeling guilty that he was born different, right? If I did everything the same way, and one went one way and the other didn't (M_4)

Maybe I made a mistake raising him, because I didn't raise my daughter, my parents did. [pause] And they spoilt her [pause] because they loved her, because they had one granddaughter [pause] That is I tried, made sure

she had the right clothes [pause] that she was fed, but I didn't tell her enough about life. I didn't have time because of the shifts and the extra hours I took at the hospital, to have everything [pause] and maybe this need for money, this relationship was not very good, between me and my daughter [pause] (M_8)

The Devoted Mother

These women are entangled in cultural patterns and stereotypes which accompany exemplary, flawless mothers, who always focus on the well-being of their children. Fear of being judged by society determined the way in which their present their life situations as 'oppressed motherhood' which can be compared to fulfilling a mission. Despite many difficult situations and complicated relationships with their adult children, powerless in the face of alcohol problems, they tried to hold on to the ideal mother – a strong and impeccable woman.

You love your child no matter what, a least good mothers do. [pause] That's why it hurts so much (M_8)

Only he couldn't drink for 24 hours, so we kept an eye on him …, I didn't sleep all night [pause] and watched him. [pause] He couldn't sleep, couldn't find a place for himself. When he sobered up I … he went out, though I shut the door, he went out, you know, … I didn't sleep all night to keep an eye on him [pause] So that he wouldn't go somewhere and drink (M_1)

Anguished Mothers

In the narratives of these women we could see the helplessness and suffering caused by the turning points in the lives of their adult alcoholic children. Anguished mothers are often women who used to display a fighter attitude, but in the face of various life situations they now present a different face of motherhood, implicated in the alcohol problems of their adult children. Experiencing numerous failures and unsuccessful struggles, these women decided to seek help from institutions, expecting support and suggestions on how to solve their problem. Unfortunately the narrators frequently experienced rejection and secondary victimization. Judged as failed mothers they retreated, becoming resigned to the present state.

because he stole form me, he took a lot of things from me, I went to the police, it was supposed to go to court and make up or it. Earlier, when he was 16 and had, from the bank, it was the same thing, police came, said he was a minor, not even 17, because form the age of 17 he would answer for it, told me to call it off, so that he doesn't do time (M_7)

Mothers in trajectory are women who experience strong emotional pain. Experiencing helplessness they seek help from specialists and are told to throw their children out of their homes, so that their alcoholic children can 'rebound' (see: Cieślikowska-Ryczko and Dobińska 2020). Making such a decision and facing ones feelings, the reaction of an adult child and the social stigma, heavily embedded in the „Polish mother" stereotype, is immensely difficult and sometimes impossible.

This was the most difficult thing, as I remember, really [pause] I can honestly say that it was easier to give birth to 5 children that to throw one out [pause] he came one day, and I said to him [pause] I packed your things and until you agree [pause] to go therapy, you can't come home, and I put his things out the door and I said, [pause] he was shocked of course, and I said I have no other choice, I have to do this [pause] Maybe it was a good thing that it was winter [pause] he had no place to go, because he came back two days later [pause] ill, of course, he had a cold, he slept for two nights in staircases [pause]. And he said he'll go, and he called me names, said what kind of mother are you, he tried to play on my emotions … it was horrible, I tell you, to throw him out [pause] it just sounds good but it's most difficult thing I ever had to do (M_3)

Because, you know, I explain to myself, that's fate [pause] I have to live with it, I have other choice. I really don't, I have to keep living to pay the instalments (M_8)

Conclusions

Using the procedures of grounded theory methodology and inspired by the concept of symbolic interactionism, as well as definitions of places and non-places, we made an attempt to identify and interpret the situations of mothers entangled in their adult children's alcohol issues. The collected empirical material allowed us to generate analytical categories and to conduct a typology of mothers in the context of their relationships with their adult children and motherhood.

On the one hand our analysis showed a multitude of individualised types of mothers, who assume different strategies of coping with their children's alcohol problems. However, we can see that the narrators did not limit themselves to one presented type – on the contrary, the mothers entangled in their children's alcohol abuse undergo transformation and evolution. Influenced by their children's numerous experiences and struggles the mothers assume various types, representing behaviours and coping methods adequate to each type of behaviour. Thus, femininity and motherhood experienced

by the narrators is fluid and undergoes change. Transformation and change is a natural resultant of numerous experiences, emotions and enterprises taken up over the years.

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