



The Stories They Tell: An International Focus Group Study Identifying Families' Communication about Alcohol

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Introduction

This study sought to explore how alcoholism is experienced and communicated in the context of the family. Drawing on Fitzpatrick and Ritchie's (1994) Family Communication Patterns Theory, this study compared features of conversation and conformity in family interactions about alcoholism in German and American culture. This cross-cultural comparison provides insight to the cultural extremes of alcohol related behavior and how such behaviors may or may not affect communication in the family.

Methods

The research questions in this study were investigated through a combination of brief background surveys and focus group discussions about family communication patterns regarding alcohol consumption and alcoholism.

We conducted one focus group in Berlin, Germany that consisted entirely of adult children of alcoholics and one focus group in New Brunswick, New Jersey that was comprised of both adult children of alcoholics and some adult children of nonalcoholics.

A team of trained coders used open and axial coding procedures to identify themes in each of the focus groups, which were then evaluated for cross-cultural differences.

Background

- About 43% of adult Americans have encountered alcoholism in their family and there are 26.8 million children of alcoholics (CoA) in the U.S. (ADP, 2007).
- The World Health Organization (2011) alcohol is a causal factor in 60 types of diseases and a component in 200 others. Approximately 4% of all deaths worldwide are attributed to alcohol use (WHO, 2011).
- The likelihood of an alcoholic's offspring becoming a substance abuser is 70% higher than children without an alcoholic parent (The Priory Center, 2006) and the health care costs for CoA are 32% greater than children from non-alcoholic families (ADP, 2007).
- Krois (1987) confirmed ten problem areas for children of alcoholics including academic problems, substance abuse, issues with peer relationships, depression, hyperactivity, aggression, low self-esteem, external locus of control, and dependency.
- Due to the impact alcoholism has on the family construct, alcoholism is often referred to as a family disease (Ackerman, 1986).

International Links

•According to a recent article in the Deutsche Welle (2006), there are several differences between the drinking culture in Germany and the U.S.: (a) the current legal drinking age is 16 in Germany versus twenty-one in the U.S.; (b) in Germany children are able to enter pubs with their parents whereas children in the U.S. are not allowed, regardless of parental consent; and (c) most places in Germany serve beer, including McDonald's, versus the U.S. where alcohol permits are more restricted.

•Moreover, the World Health Organization deemed European regions to have the highest alcohol intake than anywhere else in the world, roughly double that of the U.S.

•Although Germans and Americans experience different norms for alcohol consumption, alcoholism is a problem in both countries, with 2.1% of Germans and 2.6% of Americans having alcohol dependency problems.

•Although information about the prevalence of alcohol and alcohol related illness across cultures is well-documented, less is known about cultural differences in terms of attitudes and communication about alcohol.

•Similarly, little is known about how family communication patterns may vary across cultures in terms of expectations for conversation and conformity.

•Thus, the current study provides initial insight into cultural differences related to alcoholism and family communication.

Who

Participants were individuals who:

- Self-identified as adult children of alcoholics or adult children of non-alcoholics
- Were at least 18 years of age and able to speak, read, and write English
- The German sample consisted of 6 individuals who all self-identified as adult children of alcoholics. There were 2 men and 4 women. The average age of participants was 25.
- The American sample consisted of 15 adult children of alcoholics and 10 adult children of non-alcoholics. There were 8 men and 17 women. The average age of participants was 20.

Germany Focus Group Results

•Parentification

"I was taking care for my mother since I was six years old. This was the first time when she went to the hospital for not drinking anymore. I had to become very adult at six years old and always watching if she doesn't faint. I felt very alone all the time. I always wished to have a bigger brother or have my mom to have a man to talk to."

•Communication

"I think in my family it was my mother who did not want to discuss problems and every time it was started she wouldn't want to talk about it. "Don't talk to your father about it because he is not able to stand it." I wanted to confront him about his behavior and she would tell me "No, you cant do this because he would commit suicide."

•Interacting w/ Alcohol

"For me it was also like making my own experiences and learning from friends who talked about experiences of alcohol. I was still young but I learned from all of my friends. We were allowed to drink beer at 16. I also had some very bad experiences with alcohol. So it took some time to find the amount I can drink that is still good for me that is still making it possible to socialize."

•Relationship w/ Parents

"I always had a difficult relationship with my father because I have so different and weird opinions compared to his close minded opinions. It even got to the point where he said he didn't have a son anymore. It was for a very long time we didn't talk to each other, we would just argue."

•Relationship w/ Others

"I do not think I am good at finding this. Once I dated and I recognized that he drank three bottles of beer during our first date. I thought I don't want to see him anymore."

U.S. Focus Group Results

•Parentification

"I was more of the caretaker in my family my parents worked really far away so I would have to prepare dinner for my family so we could all eat together once they got home. My cousins came and lived with us because they were going through a tough time. I had to take care of them, take them to day care, help them do their homework and stuff."

•Communication

"I felt that after my parent's divorce, I became reserved and I really didn't want to give my opinion on anything. My mom wouldn't come to me for any discussions. She was working all the time. The only people I really talked to were my sister and people my age. I always thought that I was too young to be heard. It caused me to not really communicate that much or express my opinion."

•Interacting w/ Alcohol

"One time I kind of asked when I was about 10. Usually my dad would tell me go get this from the fridge and it would be a bottle of beer. I said what is this and he said oh that's daddy's juice and I knew not to drink that. Now he probably knows I drink cause when I was going to prom he knew I drank and my mom knew too. When I came home I was really drunk so I think they knew. Apart from that, we don't talk about alcohol in the family because they have the idea that if they talk about it I'm going to do it."

•Relationship w/ Parents

"To me it's sad, not frustrating, I pity them that they can't realize what's going on around them."

•Relationship w/ Others

"If someone is drunk and they're at a party, everyone is going to mess with them and make jokes, make the person do something that they can't do. There is still joking around in between but if you're with them one on one that's a different story. But if you're at a party, it's not something you want to make a scene over."

•Cultural Differences

"Growing up in my family, especially because I'm Indian, my parents didn't really care what I had to say. If you're a kid you pretty much had to do what they say and they don't really care what you think about it."

Future Directions

- Drawing on the themes from this focus group study, we intend to conduct a large scale cross-cultural survey of family communication patterns about alcoholism to allow for broader generalization.
- We also plan to develop a study that observes actual communication behavior within the family.
- Finally, we intend to expand investigations to consider perspectives of multiple family members.