The experiences of family members living with a problematic alcohol drinker: a systematic review protocol of qualitative evidence

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Review question/objective
The objective of this review is to synthesize the best available evidence on the experiences of the non-drinkers in a family who are living with a problematic alcohol drinker. The notion ‘problematic alcohol drinker’ refers to a person, who drinks alcohol to such an extent that it seriously affects family life. In this context, family members are people who live in the same household as the drinker, and who are sharing everyday life with him or her. This includes spouses, children, parents, cousins etc.

The review question is: What are the experiences of non-drinkers in a family who are living with a problematic drinker?

Background
Alcoholism or “hazardous alcohol consumption” is described in the research literature as a worldwide problem “with many locally distinctive features across cultures”. Alcohol and problematic alcohol drinking is being studied in a number of different countries such as Venezuela, India, USA, Dominica, Botswana and Denmark. Despite differences in cultural, national and local assumptions it seems, that some of the themes relating to excessive alcohol drinking are recurring across cultures. For instance, cultural norms, views and meanings of alcohol use vary a great deal from a poor Venezuelan community to the Danish public. Still, the two cultures have in common that the notions of normality and pathology play a predominant role in people’s perceptions of alcohol consumption and drunken behavior. Seen in that light, it might be that family members across cultures have mutual...
experiences of living with a problematic alcohol drinker, and, furthermore, there seems to be a link between these experiences and prevailing ideas in society of good (corresponding to 'normal') vs. bad (corresponding to 'pathological') parenthood.

The preliminary findings show that researchers have preferences for the following three family roles: child, husband/father and wife/mother. Specifically, the harmful effect on children who grow up with a parent who is a 'problematic drinker' seems to be of interest. Some of the main findings are that children of alcoholics have traumatic experiences with neglect, abuse and aggression and the adult children of alcoholics are more likely to suffer from physical, emotional and mental health problems in comparison to adults who did not have an alcoholic parent. In addition, adult children of alcoholics are more often alcoholics themselves. The next-most common research in the field of alcohol use in the family seems to be on violence and other kinds of aggression performed by men against their female spouses or partners.

However, it would be insufficient to consider family life with an alcoholic in terms of harm only. Relations among family members are much more complicated, and some studies show that family members often harbor (or cherish) ambiguous and mixed emotions towards the drinker rather than clear-cut emotions and family life may, somehow ironically, motivate the drinker to drink rather than preventing him or her from drinking. One article introduces the notion of dilemma to describe the mixed emotions in family relations where one member is an alcoholic: "From the one side drinking parents are the cause of serious destruction of child health and development. From the other side we [the researchers] have data about positive influence of strong bonds between children and their parents in alcohol use prevention (parenting as protective factor)". According to these findings, a review should include both negative and positive perspectives in order to grasp the complex nature of family life with an alcoholic.

In sum, the initial literature search implies that the impact on family life where a family member is a problematic alcohol drinker is a cross-cultural phenomenon, and that researchers tend to focus on the negative sides, whereas they pay less attention to the ambiguity of mixed emotions and experiences. An initial search in the data bases SOCIIndex, CINAHL, JBI CONNECT+, PubMed, The Cochrane Library and JSTOR shows that no systematic review on this topic exist, or is currently underway.

The results of this review will be of relevance to researchers and agencies that deal with prevention and treatment of problematic alcohol drinking: health workers, social workers, prevention and treatment institutions, educational institutions, and policy makers.

It is complicated to define the person who drinks alcohol and the phenomenon of drinking with a single, unambiguous and neutral concept. The literature is using terms as 'problematic drinker', 'alcohol drinker' and 'alcoholic', but these terms all have negative connotation and that is not desirable in research. The same goes for the effect of actions on others: 'Third party harm' 'victimization' and 'passive drinking' are some of the terms in use. This review will apply a pragmatic approach: A person is an alcoholic, when the literature says so, and a person is affected when the literature says so.

This review applies two approaches, which are apparently contradictory to one another. On the one hand, the review aims to be unbiased in an attempt to understand family life on its own terms in order to present an unprejudiced account of good and bad sides of everyday life in families where alcohol plays a predominant role. On the other hand, the review points to possible solutions, which is to some extent a normative approach. The review solves this apparent contradiction by dividing the article in two
distinct parts: One, which is predominantly understanding-oriented, and a second one, which is predominantly solution-oriented.

Keywords
Alcohol; experience; family; consequence; emotion; harm; men; effect; problems; victim; attitude; interpretation; perception; child/children; neglect; normal; every-day; women; norm; behavior

Inclusion criteria

Types of participants
Family members living with a problematic drinker. Family members are people who live in the same household as the drinker, and who are sharing everyday life with him or her. This includes spouses, children, parents, cousins etc.

Phenomena of interest
The experiences of the family members.

Context
The family home environment.

Types of studies
Qualitative studies, e.g. phenomenology, grounded theory and ethnography.

Search strategy
The search strategy aims to find both published and unpublished studies and will consider studies published in the English and Scandinavian languages for inclusion. A three-step search strategy will be employed. The first step is a pilot search, which has already been completed. From the onset, the pilot search was limited to anthropological literature only as anthropology might contribute with a new angle to the field of reviews, and was started with databases of anthropological literature. Anthro* was used as one of the search word in combination with e.g. alcohol and famil*. However, this strategy did not give many results, and the search was broadened to include a wider range of literature.

The pilot search included the following databases: Soc index/EBSCO, Web of science, Pubmed, Forskningsdatabasen (= the research database, Danish), Academic Search Elite, AntropologyPlus, Anthrosource and JSTOR. Alcohol was a recurrent search word in combination with experience, anthro*, famil*, consequence*, emotion*, harm, men, effect, problems, victim, attitude, interpretation, perception, child/children, neglect, normal, every-day, women, norm and behavior.

The result of the pilot search was a selection of 11 articles.

The second step of the search strategy will be to re-visit the results of the pilot search and assess them with a trained research librarian with the aim of qualifying the further search. Based on this assessment, a new search strategy will be made. This will include Google Scholar and IBSS (International Bibliography of the Social Sciences), which has not been included in the pilot search. The second search will use all identified keywords and index terms to search across all included databases. The reference list of all identified reports and articles will be searched for additional studies.
Finally, the third step in the search strategy is to scan homepages for both published and unpublished literature and to search in books. Relevant homepages are e.g.:

- www.crf.au.dk (= Centre for Alcohol and Drug research)
- Center for alkoholforskning (= Centre for Alcohol Research)
- SFI (= the Danish National Centre for Social Research)
- Homepages from research centers and universities in e.g. UK, USA, Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Finland
- Book chapters

**Assessment of methodological quality**

Papers selected for retrieval will be assessed by two independent reviewers for methodological validity prior to inclusion in the review using standardized critical appraisal instruments from the Joanna Briggs Institute Qualitative Assessment and Review Instrument (JBI-QARI) (Appendix I). Any disagreements that arise between the reviewers will be resolved through discussion, or with a third reviewer.

**Data collection**

Data will be extracted from papers included in the review using the standardized data extraction tool from JBI-QARI (Appendix II). The data extracted will include specific details about the interventions, populations, study methods and outcomes of significance to the review question and specific objectives.

**Data synthesis**

Research findings will, where possible be pooled using JBI-QARI. This will involve the aggregation or synthesis of findings to generate a set of statements that represent that aggregation, through assembling the findings rated according to their quality, and categorizing these findings on the basis of similarity in meaning. These categories will then be subjected to a meta-synthesis in order to produce a single comprehensive set of synthesized findings that can be used as a basis for evidence based practice. Where textual pooling is not possible the findings will be presented in narrative form.

**Conflicts of interest**

There are no conflicts of interest.

**Acknowledgements**

I would like to acknowledge the valuable response and editorial help of Preben Ulrik Pedersen and Palle Larsen. Furthermore, I would like to acknowledge my place of work, Metropolitan University College, for organizing the training and technical support needed in order to carry out the work with this protocol and the coming article.
References
8 Mackrill T, Hesse M. The Adult Children of Alcoholics Trauma Inventory. Subst Use Misuse 2011 2011;46(9):1099-1104.
13 Vail, M O. Longitudinal indicators of women's identity and family self and daughters' current perspectives on relationships with nonalcoholic and alcoholic parents. Blacksburg, Virginia: the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University; 1998.
Appendix I: Appraisal instruments

QARI Appraisal instrument

JBI QARI Critical Appraisal Checklist for Interpretive & Critical Research

Reviewer __________________________ Date __________________________

Author __________________________ Year _______ Record Number _______

1. Is there congruity between the stated philosophical perspective and the research methodology? □ □ □ □

2. Is there congruity between the research methodology and the research question or objectives? □ □ □ □

3. Is there congruity between the research methodology and the methods used to collect data? □ □ □ □

4. Is there congruity between the research methodology and the representation and analysis of data? □ □ □ □

5. Is there congruity between the research methodology and the interpretation of results? □ □ □ □

6. Is there a statement locating the researcher culturally or theoretically? □ □ □ □

7. Is the influence of the researcher on the research, and vice-versa, addressed? □ □ □ □

8. Are participants, and their voices, adequately represented? □ □ □ □

9. Is the research ethical according to current criteria or, for recent studies, and is there evidence of ethical approval by an appropriate body? □ □ □ □

10. Do the conclusions drawn in the research report flow from the analysis, or interpretation, of the data? □ □ □ □

Overall appraisal: □ Include □ Exclude □ Seek further info. □

Comments (including reason for exclusion)
________________________________________________________________________
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### Appendix II: Data extraction instruments

**QARI data extraction instrument**

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**JBI QARI Data Extraction Form for Interpretive & Critical Research**

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#### Study Description

- **Methodology**
- **Method**
- **Phenomena of interest**
- **Setting**
- **Geographical**
- **Cultural**
- **Participants**
- **Data analysis**
- **Authors Conclusions**
- **Comments**

**Complete** Yes □ No □
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Extraction of findings complete: Yes ☐ No ☐