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Exploring Forgiveness Among Female Adult Children of Alcoholics of Higher Socioeconomic Status

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Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Michelle Hall

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2024

Abstract

Exploring Forgiveness Among Female Adult Children of Alcoholics of Higher

Socioeconomic Status

by

Michelle Hall

MEd, Midwestern State University, 2005

BA, Midwestern State University, 1996

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

MS Entry

Walden University

November 2024

Abstract

Intergenerational trauma has perpetuated familial estrangement for decades within the adult children of alcoholics (ACOA) population. The purpose of this study was to understand forgiveness within maternal estrangement in female ACOAs to address a gap in literature on female ACOAs from a higher socioeconomic status. Bowen's family systems theory (BFST) was the theoretical perspective used to understand the role of intergenerational systems, familial dynamics and patterns, and familial functioning that contribute to estrangement. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 9 participants and data analysis was conducted using the tenets of the Moustakas modified Van Kaam approach. Through the data analysis eight themes were discovered: benefits of estrangement, focus on healing, consequences of estrangement, mental health issues, non-death losses and grief, path toward forgiveness, impact of higher income, and effects of childhood trauma. The experience of maternal forgiveness among the participants varied from not at all to complete but did not impact participants' ability to complete post-graduate education or obtain career achievements later in life. The findings in this study could be used by behavioral health clinicians to direct effective treatment with female ACOAs. Clinical insight is a factor in perpetuating positive social change for delivering clinical education to advance clinicians' skills providing successful patient care.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to all female adult children of alcoholics that prioritize their time in learning about themselves, their families, and their ongoing worldview because of their traumatic, chaotic upbringings.

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I want to acknowledge all the people in my life that made this dissertation possible. A huge thank you goes to Dr. Sandra Rasmussen, my chair, as she was the unwavering beam of light from the lighthouse on a sea of intermittent writer's block and amotivation. Also, Dr. Rhonda Bohs, my committee member, hit the ground running and had to catch up quickly as a replacement midway through this project. Next, my husband, John, for his countless times of encouragement and space for hours devoted to my higher education. Also, my adult children, Holden & Julia, for inspiration to be inquisitive toward pursuing understanding intergenerational trauma, when you were younger, so that it didn't have to impact you in life. My two grandsons, Grayson & Arthur, let you not be impacted by this maladaptive pattern in your lives. Finally, my late parents for their modeling that despite intergenerational trauma (especially my late father) one can cutoff the damage as best to their capabilities. Lastly, to future scholars dreaming of a finished dissertation, a French proverb, 'A coeur valliant rien d'impossible ("To a valiant heart, nothing is impossible").

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Adult children of alcoholics (ACOAs) struggle with low sense of self because of experiencing trauma living in a chaotic environment. As the child becomes an adult and seeks outpatient treatment to recover from trauma and implement healthier coping abilities, the adult child is often faced with a decision to forgive or estrange from their parent. Researchers have explored multiple components of coping abilities and resiliency in this population. However, less has been explored regarding female adult children of alcoholics that have made the decision to estrange or forgive their mothers. There was even less knowledge about female adult children of alcoholics in the higher socioeconomic class. The purpose of this study was to improve understanding of forgiveness in maternal estrangement among higher socioeconomic status female adult children of alcoholics.

Women growing up with an alcoholic mother are forced to mature at a fast pace and caregiving others takes precedence. Tedgård et al. (2019) stated that children of alcoholics take on a reversal role to become a caregiver and forgive their parents. As the children were brought up, over-responsibility occurred, and their own physical and emotional needs were overlooked. Older children not only were caregivers to their alcoholic parents but also were caregivers to younger siblings. Older children took on the protector role during intoxicated rages and/or when alcoholic parents manipulated feelings of guilt to get their own needs met (Black, 2020).

There is limited research regarding higher socioeconomic status among female adult children of alcoholics (ACOAs) who have made the decision to estrange and/or forgive their mothers. Forgiveness is linked to positive wellness and regard. Singh and Sharma (2018) offered that forgiveness toward oneself, and another is connected to reduced emotional strife and increased mental wellness. There are multiple studies that demonstrate forgiveness as a positive indicator toward psychological health; however, Rasmussen et al. (2019) found that finding differs within disordered traumatic stress. The healthier adult child makes assertive decisions including potential estrangement or forgiveness toward an alcoholic parent. According to Breshears (2015), adult children of alcoholics sought out the use of forgiveness communication techniques both verbally and non-verbally with alcoholic parent.

According to Kissling and Reczek (2020) mothers or mothers-in-law provided either support or strain to the adult child in their middle adult years. Adult children of alcoholics' researchers have explored multiple components of coping abilities and resiliency in this population. Leung et al. (2020) offered that self-reliance was a significant component to directing resiliency in adult children with adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Typically, studies have focused on ACOAs from lower socioeconomic status (Thomeer & Reczek, 2020).

Background of the Study

The female adult child of a mother that was an alcoholic grew up with stereotypical roles. The roles acknowledged in this study were responsible/family hero, adjuster/lost child, placate/people pleaser, mascot/family clown, and acting/out/scapegoat

(Black, 2020). The eldest child is often the responsible/family hero. The family hero has negative traits such as: having a tendency for using absolutes, having difficulty with relaxing, rigidity, and difficulty with leadership. The lost child has negative traits such as: isolation, passivity, and ineffective decision making. The people pleaser has negative traits such as: tendencies for anxiety, pleases others without question, avoids conflict, and ignores negative actions of others. The family clown has negative traits such as: utilizes humor in chaotic situations, and inability to concentrate. Lastly, the scapegoat has negative traits such as: difficulty with listening, reacts with anger in a dysfunctional manner, and does not comply with others' boundaries. Due to having grown up with these roles, the female adult child either maintained these roles or transitioned to healthier ones.

It is unfortunately typical that adult children of alcoholics have times of estrangement from their parents before permanent estrangement occurs. Estrangement is an intentional choice made due to eroding familial relationships that have not changed since childhood Agllias (2015). According to Scharp et al. (2015) adult children's motivation to estrange was to cease the dysfunctional patterns, which are frequently intergenerational. Another rationale for estrangement was a prolonged sense of detachment Agllias (2016) caused by ongoing trauma from their parents.

Some adult children choose to forgive their parents. According to Breshears (2015) a willingness to forgive coincided with the parent choosing sobriety, understanding their upbringing/past, or the adult child choosing to let go of emotions for their own positive health. Adult children of alcoholics could utilize protective factors to

bring about forgiveness. (Goeke, 2017) Resiliency is a protective factor that occurs because of childhood trauma into stability in adulthood.

Researchers have focused on the lower-class socioeconomic class within adult children of alcoholics' families. According to Wolfe (2017) adult children that lived in lower socioeconomic backgrounds with alcoholic mothers experienced increased likelihood of emotional health difficulties as an adult. Greenfield et al. (2019) noted that prior traumatic experiences for the mothers and socioeconomic factors could impact emotional well-being for their children.

Problem Statement

Forgiveness and maternal estrangement have not been explored in female ACOAs of higher economic status. Forgiveness is linked to positive psychological health well-being. Rasmussen et al. (2019) offered that emotional forgiveness is a large predictor of reduced negative emotional states. As a child becomes an adult and seeks mental health treatment, they can implement more effective coping abilities. The healthier adult child makes assertive decisions including potential estrangement or forgiveness toward an alcoholic parent. According to Breshears (2015) adult children of alcoholics sought out forgiveness to aide in their own emotional wellness and heal relationships with a now sober parent.

According to Lueng et al. (2020), resiliency is paramount for regulating emotions and asserting self with others. Adult children of alcoholics' researchers have explored means of coping abilities and regulating emotion in this population. However, less has been explored regarding female adult children of alcoholics that have experienced

intermittent estrangement and/or forgiveness with their alcoholic mothers. There was even less knowledge known regarding adult children of alcoholics in the higher socioeconomic class and potential forgiveness of parent. Typically, studies have focused on ACOAs from lower socioeconomic status (Thomeer & Reczek, 2020).

According to WHO (2018), in 2018 there were 2.3 billion people globally that consumed alcohol. The WHO (2018) reported that there were more male drinkers than female; however, current female drinkers have had an upsurge worldwide. Therefore, there was a gap in literature regarding higher socioeconomic status among females ACOAs who made the decision to estrange and/or forgive their mothers.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to improve understanding of forgiveness in maternal estrangement among higher socioeconomic status female adult children of alcoholics. Studies that incorporated adult children of alcoholics of lower socioeconomic status and did not focus specifically on maternal estrangement. This study may lead to increased understanding on higher class female adult children's decision to estrange or forgive their mothers; thus, leading to increased treatment strategies for this population.

Research Question

The research question for this study was: What are the lived experiences of higher SES female ACOAs regarding forgiveness around maternal estrangement?

Theoretical Framework

The theory that I used to ground this study was Bowen's family systems theory (BFST); see Bowen, (1978). In BFST differentiation of self is a significant trait in how

one functions healthfully independently and among others (Handley et. al., 2019). The purpose of this study was to understand the role of forgiveness and understanding the relationship between higher socioeconomic status and maternal estrangement in female adult children of alcoholics; therefore, BFST promoted alignment of my research. BFST is demonstrated through intergenerational systems, familial dynamics & patterns, and familial functioning.

The logical connections between the framework presented and the nature of my study included Bowen's family systems theory (BFST) and components associated with maternal estrangement and forgiveness. BFST was utilized in a Palombi (2016) study regarding nervousness around separation and intergenerational work to explore root causes. This phenomenological study involved female adult children of alcoholics, and I compared studies that are associated with forgiveness.

Nature of the Study

To address the research question in this qualitative study, the specific research design included Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenology to understand participants' maternal estrangement experiences associated with forgiveness using semi-structured interviews. The modified van Kaam (1966) approach was used for data analysis. For my planned research design, I needed to recruit nine to 12 female participants who identified as adult children of alcoholics and higher socioeconomic status who had experienced maternal estrangement. Semistructured interviews were created to explore the study problem and purpose. The data included participants' responses from interview

queries and identified themes from maternal estrangement experiences associated with forgiveness.

Definition of Terms

Adult Child(ren) of Alcoholics (ACOA): An adult that was raised by one or both alcoholic parent(s) or caregiver(s) (Goeke et al., 2017).

Forgiveness: A process that influences people to cease mal-adaptive interactions and to act helpfully with others that have acted mal-adaptively with them (McCullough, 1997, as cited in Breshears, 2015).

Parent-child estrangement: a rise in isolation then ultimately a cease within relationship by one member due to their understanding of an impaired relationship—that may or may not be shared by other family members (Carr et al., 2015; Scharp et al., 2015, as cited in Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2023).

Socioeconomic status (SES): a person's standing focused by their earnings, schooling, and work compared to others in the nation (Hooker et al., 2020).

Assumptions

I made assumptions in this qualitative study. This was a voluntary research study, and qualified participants met full criteria with being a higher social class female that were estranged, or had been estranged, from their alcoholic mother. Participants responded to queries based on their perceptions of their realities from past or present life experiences. I assumed that participants had explored forgiveness with maternal family member due to estrangement or periods of estrangement in their lifetime. These assumptions were used as a means of data collection within this study.

Delimitations

In this study, I addressed the gap in literature regarding higher socioeconomic status among females ACOAs who made the decision to estrange and/or forgive their alcoholic mothers. Participants from this study were recruited from social media adult children of alcoholic support groups from across the United States. Participants were at a minimum of 35 years old and identified having an income of at least \$60,000 or more yearly.

The small sample size of this study depicted only a small snapshot of this population. Therefore, generalizability was limited to the greater female population of higher class ACOA's. Nevertheless, despite the small sample size, increased understanding of this population could be formed because of this study.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this study was the quantity of recent literature on adult children of alcoholics. I had to include some older literature due to newer literature not addressing certain topics i.e., the concept of dry drunk. Most of the literature reflected recent years associated with 2015 through present. Researcher bias was another potential limitation due to conducting a qualitative study. This limitation was reduced by allowing the process of member checking and validating outcomes from other data findings. Lastly, the limitation of being a licensed professional counselor in the state of Texas. As a licensed clinician, I had more in-depth knowledge of the ACOA population. This limitation was reduced through the following standards of qualitative interviewing.

Significance

This study has significance as it fills a gap by concentrating on female adult children of alcoholics of higher socioeconomic status and forgiveness in maternal estrangement. The contributions of this study should help behavioral health clinicians in targeting specific components in treatment planning and directing effective treatment in this specific gender, class, and relationships of adult children of alcoholics' population. Clinical insight is a factor in perpetuating positive social change for delivering clinical education to advance clinicians' skills providing successful patient care. Behavioral health clinicians are the conduits to supporting patients managing familial dynamics, intergenerational discord, and established familial behaviors. Thus, in assisting behavioral health clinicians' permits for improving wellness in affected populations.

Summary

In this chapter, I addressed the rationale for this study. Current literature does not include higher class socioeconomic status of the adult children of alcoholics' population as well as focus specifically with women. Background information was included within this population along with the study's primary research query. I also provided my motivation for use of the Bowen's family systems theory and described the phenomenological approach that I used. Lastly, I described the significance of the study.

In Chapter 2, I will explain the impact of the alcoholic parent on the familial system from theory to research. I will also give an overview of literature regarding female ACOAs resulting trauma symptomatology effects, exploration of estrangement and/or forgiveness options, and socioeconomic impact on ACOA life functioning.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Female adult children of alcoholics (ACOAs) have a greater likelihood of experiencing post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) Haahr-Pedersen et al. (2020) and problematic upbringings can have a detrimental impact on emotional well-being Berg et al. (2017), higher socioeconomic status, forgiveness Breshears (2015) and/or maternal estrangement. Due to problematic/dysfunctional upbringings, female adult children of alcoholics will typically have episodic times of maternal estrangement. According to Agllias (2016), adult children evaluate parental relationships to promote either estrangement or make reconnections.

It is essential to explore female ACOAs' capacity to forgive their alcoholic mothers. Additionally, the understanding of higher income females ACOAs have yet to be researched regarding maternal estrangement. It is known that female ACOAs can have tendencies for avoidant attachment Kelley et al. (2010) styles and estrangement can be chosen due to maltreatment, abuse, and/or parental indifference (Scharp et al., 2015).

The purpose of this study was to improve understanding of forgiveness in maternal estrangement among higher socioeconomic status female adult children of alcoholics. The rationale for understanding was for helping behavioral health clinicians in targeting specific components in treatment planning and directing effective treatment in this specific gender, class, and relationships of adult children of alcoholics' population.

In this chapter, I will examine the full extent of literature associated with the female ACOA population. I will also describe Bowen's family systems theory. I will also

examine the following areas: female ACOAs experience more PTSD symptomatology, problematic upbringings promote difficulty in emotional well-being, female adult children of alcoholics will either choose to estrange or forgive their alcoholic mothers, and socioeconomic status is impacted because of being reared by an alcoholic parent. This chapter will end with addressing the gap in literature and the need for this research.

Literature Search Strategy

In this study, I explored forgiveness among female adult children of alcoholics of higher socioeconomic status. The terms *adult children of alcoholics*, *adult daughters*, *forgiveness*, *maternal estrangement*, and *socioeconomic status* were used to search for literature related to this study. I searched in the following databases: ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database, EBSCOHOST, Google Scholar, Journals, and Eric. Additionally, a varied collection of ACOA books was included. Most of these books exceeded the recent, optimal 5-year timeline; however, they included meaningful research. Most peer-reviewed resources were from between 2016 and 2022.

Theoretical Framework

I used Bowen's (1978) family systems theory (BFST) in this study. The BFST (Bowen, 1978) is used to explore familial functioning within physical, social, and emotional facets across generations. BFST Bowen (1978) is also used to understand what perpetuates dysfunction and effective functioning within the familial system. There are eight concepts in the BFST: nuclear family emotional system, differentiation of self-scale, triangles, cutoff, family projection process, multigenerational transmission process, sibling position, and emotional process in society (Gilbert, 2006).

Nuclear Family Emotional System

The first concept, nuclear family emotional system, includes the whole family unit and depicts how emotions are readily transferred from one to another. The emotion of anxiety can move between family members, meaning that if one person has been impacted by a stressor another member will be impacted by it (Gilbert, 2006). Another factor is the family fusion factor in which members of family can be drawn to interact as a team to another member, which is triangulation (Gilbert, 2006).

The Differentiation of Self Scale

A second concept in BFST is the differentiation of self-scale. This concept focuses on the individual functioning within the familial and/or relational states. An increased functioning individual demonstrates emotional maturity levels which lower the potential for intense relational fusion. These individuals choose to respond in a reasonable, intellectual manner with intent behind their actions (Bowen, 1978, as cited in Handley et al., 2019). Individuals that function on the reduced end are prone to feeling states that perpetuate stress and anxiety (Gilbert, 2006). These individuals take longer to recover from relational stressors/conflict and discord. The key is to reach personal autonomy and to function outside of fused states for more effective relationships (Gilbert, 2006).

Triangles

Triangles are formed by three individuals. If anxiety is introduced to a couple by a third individual, the susceptible individual is impacted (Bowen, 1978). According to Bowen (1978), as cited in Gilbert (2006), the theory states that the triangle, a three-

person emotional configuration, is the molecule, or the basic building block, of any emotional system, whether it is in the family or any other group. The triangle is the smallest stable relationship system. A two-person system may be stable if it is calm, but when anxiety increases, it immediately involves the most vulnerable person to become a triangle. Triangulation can occur at any age or span in the relationship. There are many varied forms of triangulation i.e., two co-workers and a mutual friend or parents and their child. According to Sammut-Scerri et al. (2020) when a child decides to join with one parent, their relationship with the other can be impaired. Once peace within conflict is set into motion, within the triangle, the formation can be unlocked (Gilbert, 2006).

Cutoff

The cutoff is demonstrated through disconnection and isolation from relationships. The rationale to cut off can vary from ambivalence, avoidance, anger to many other significant emotions. According to Shultz (2022) cutoff can occur intermittently or abruptly and rationale is avoiding nervous interactions associated with others due to fear of loss of own identity when other is present. Those that are prone to cut off relationships can be emotionally dysregulated, have negative mind-sets, and/or demonstrate possessive, detached actions (Choi & Murdock, 2017).

Family Projection Process

The family projection process conceptualizes how parental differentiation is transferred to their offspring. The transfer of parental differentiations can be dissimilar among their offspring (Gilbert, 2006). According to Brooks (2017) if one parent is more aligned to one child, especially through parental anxiety, the child's functioning could

become impaired. This process is not a deliberate act from the family but one that is subconscious (Gilbert, 2006). The key to unlocking this process is through insight and awareness.

Multigenerational Transmission Process

The multigenerational transmission process operates in a way similarly to the family projection process; however, the process involves lineages over time. The process is ongoing. According to Bowen (1976), “If we follow the most impaired child through successive generations, we will see one line of descent producing lower and lower levels of differentiation...”.

Sibling Position

Bowen incorporated Walter Tolman’s research regarding sibling position (birth order) in the family to perpetuate similar functions and traits. Eleven sibling categories were created (Bowen, 1978): youngest brother of brothers, oldest brother of brothers, oldest brother of sisters, youngest brother of sisters, male only child, youngest sister of sisters, oldest sister of sisters, oldest sister of brothers, youngest sister of brothers, twins, and female only child. Middle children will develop traits from one of their siblings or will have traits of multiple siblings (Gilbert, 2006). These proposed traits and functions are thought to be elements of developing a sense of self.

Emotional Process in Society

The last and final concept in BFST is the emotional process in society. When more anxiety is displayed in society, there is increased anxiety in families. This is a cyclical process within families and society (Bowen, 1975, as cited in Bowen, 1976). The

increasing states of anxiety with reduction in societal aids may impact loss in familial functioning (Ferrera, 2019).

How the Theory Was Used in Previous Related Research

Bentley and Matthewson (2020) explored the lived experiences of adult children that had parental alienation as a result from their primary parent. The primary parent uses manipulation and other tactics to alienate the child from the other parent. In this study, semistructured interviews were used with ten participants. In the Bentley and Matthewson (2020) study, during data analysis, seven main themes emerged: (a) alienating behavior and impact, (b) mental health, (c) relationship difficulties, (d) learning and development, (e) grief and loss, (e), disconnection and dysfunction, and (f) coping and healing. As a result of this study, parental alienation was shown to emphasize adult children to have long-lasting mental effects such as depressive and anxious symptomatology, relationship/bonding issues, low sense of self, and difficulties with advancing life achievements.

The Bentley and Matthewson (2020) study highlighted the significant impact parental alienation can have on adult children. Although I explored the mental effects from maternal parents in a dysfunctional household, I explored maternal alienation presently via the decision for the adult child to estrange, which differed from the work of Bentley and Matthewson (2020). Their study was useful in understanding more of the chaotic, dysfunctional upbringing the adult child endures in childhood. There were limitations in the study of having a small sample size, which can impact generalizability.

Lastly, this was a qualitative study so participants' narrative may have been limited based on validity on their perceptions of history.

Thomeer and Reczek (2020) studied the components that led to adults residing with their mothers. The researchers examined if substance abuse and mental health of both generations had impact on co-residencies. The data were the result of a 14-year study of 3092 participants. Adults from the ages of 18 to 33 years old were invited to participate along with their mothers.

Drinking, smoking, and depression data were collected to determine the impact on coresidency on both adults and mothers. Thomeer and Reczek (2020) found that adults' mental health and smoking did predict effects of moving back into their mother's homes. Another finding was that mothers' substance use and adults' drinking had the impact of the adult not coresiding with their mothers.

Overall, this study Thomeer and Reczek (2020) examined adult children and their mothers' behaviors that have a socioeconomic component. This study is important to understand not only the culturally accepted behaviors within ACOA intergenerational patterns but also SES and daily functioning. Although this study does not specify maternal estrangement, it does discuss familial living arrangements and functioning.

How the Theory Relates to the Study

I used the BFST (Bowen, 1978) in this phenomenological study to understand how women behave differently in a family system that can perpetuate emotional cutoffs or chosen forgiveness. According to Noone, (2016) BFST (Bowen, 1978) family is a proponent used to model behaviors across generations and simultaneously prompt

independent distinctness. It is within the family system that dynamics, conflicts, and forms of attachments can either promote action or inaction within family members. This study uses this theory to increase insight regarding for specifically females living in a higher socioeconomic status will behave—forgive or estrange- based on their past familial systems.

Literature Related to Key Concepts

Female ACOAs Experience more PTSD Symptomatology

Haahr-Pedersen et al. (2020) explored men and women who have had adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) that led to potential mental, social, and emotional outcomes later in adulthood. This was a quantitative study of 1839 US participants. Self-report questionnaires were done over the Internet. There were multiple variables associated with mental, social, and emotional status. Chi-square, t-tests, and ANOVAs were utilized to compare all genders and class analysis was used to quantify results of variables associated with ACEs.

Haahr-Pedersen et al. (2020) study results demonstrated that females were more likely to report trauma associated with ACEs than males. Also, females (four classes) had more complex patterns and/or histories compared to males (two classes) (Haahr-Pedersen et al., 2020). Females reported to sexual abuse trauma in childhood compared to males and had more PTSD as a result. Haahr-Pedersen et al. (2020) study showed that males were unlikely to disclose sexual abuse which was a contributing factor. The study also found that household dysfunction due to parental substance use, parental mental health

issues, and/or parental incarceration impacted socioeconomic status impacting later in life advancements/achievements.

Overall, the Haahr-Pedersen et al. (2020) study was able to validate that females had a greater likelihood for being diagnosed with PTSD and had complex patterns of trauma in childhood. Socioeconomic status was also an influential factor in impacting later in life achievements/advancements. The impact of ACEs on females will help in my study within potential resiliency to persevere despite upbringing to hold a higher socioeconomic status in life. Within perseverance females seeking outpatient treatment will have opportunities to practice healthier coping abilities like setting and maintaining boundaries with family members that hold dysfunctional behavioral patterns. Limitations in this study were potential bias within self-reporting research methods, and limited awareness toward protective measures associated with mental health.

Problematic Upbringings Promote Difficulty in Emotional Well-Being

Berg et al. (2017) longitudinal study focused on how adolescent familial relationships determined the pathway to middle adulthood understanding psychological distress was in part due to young adulthood disadvantages. The study began in 1983 with a cohort of Finnish 16 year old adolescents. These adolescents were reached out to again at the ages of 22, 32, & 42. The sample size held 1,334 participants. Variables were lack of parental support, poor parental relationship, and poor home living environment. Kessler's Psychological Distress Scale (K10) measured participants' mental health. When participants were adults, researchers assessed disadvantage factors at follow-up. A univariate then multivariate regression analyses were conducted.

Results of the Berg et al. (2017) study indicated that there was a psychological distress effect on both genders when adolescents had problems in familial relationships. When adjusting for psychological impact on adolescents, the effect was only significant for women. There were also effects from poor familial relationships on specific disadvantages later in life. Poor familial relationships were also shown to influence women with young adult drinking. Lastly, the study indicated that adolescent familial relationships have a direct effect on later mental health.

Overall, the Berg et al. (2017) study, highlighted the significance of how problematic upbringings have a detrimental impact on emotional well-being. Although this study was not specific to the ACOA population, it does further validate that females over males are more vulnerable to significant, negative outcomes. Disadvantages that were identified included health, risks in behavior, social relationships, and factors in socioeconomic status. The socioeconomic component as a disadvantage can be helpful in future studies that include females and future familial status in relationships. Overall, this study can help further researchers see the need for continued exploration in the ACOA/dysfunctional family population.

Female ACOAs Choose to Estrange or Forgive their Alcoholic Parent

The Agllias (2016) qualitative study explored adult children's assertion to estrange from a parent. The study took place in Australia. There were 26 participants who were estranged to at least one parent. The mean age for participants was 44 years old. Twenty of the participants were female and six were males. Interviews took place and an

additional interview was offered. Only a small number of six participants did the second interview.

Data analysis occurred and themes were discovered. There were three rationales from Agllias (2016) study leading up to assertion to estrange: abuse, poor parenting, and betrayal. Another finding was that assertion to estrange was not immediate; however, that it was a lengthy thought process. Varied types of disconnection were also acknowledged that have occurred throughout the adult child's history.

Overall, the Agllias (2016) was a comprehensive study that explored rationales for parental estrangement. This study explored both maternal and paternal estrangement with both male and female adult children. Although the Agllias (2016) study did not specify the adult children of alcoholics (ACOA) population, this population was explored across research participants. For instance, one interview participant disclosed observing her parent in substance abuse behavior in the home. This study also explored dysfunction that occurs in the ACOA population such as lack of boundaries, parental neglect within parenting, occurring abuse in the home, and dysfunctional parental relationship in adulthood.

Scharp et al. (2015) study examined 52 US participants' history and how they asserted parent estrangement. Also, examined was not only how assertion was communicated for estrangement but if estrangement was maintained. This qualitative study focused on study participants telling their story regarding parental estrangement. They were asked to tell their story as if their life events were book chapters. The authors utilized a narrative approach to obtain data.

Study participants were 70% female and about 30% male. The mean age of participants was around 35 years old. The participants were Caucasian. Scharp et al. (2015) study produced the following categories from their data: (a) parental maltreatment; (b) parental indifference; (c) internal realization; (d) external events; (e) network pressures; and (f) cultural expectations. Lastly, another significant finding in the study was about the participants' history prior to estrangement and how estrangement is typically intermittent before finalized.

Overall, the Scharp et al. (2015) study delved in depth into the adult child's history and the relationship facts/life events impacting levels of assertion within parent estrangement. Again, this study did not specify the adult children of alcoholics (ACOA) population; however, the dysfunctional aspects were like this population. Scharp et al. (2015) study closely aligns to my study within background history of the adult child. One factor that was lacking was socioeconomic status was not explored, and both mother/father estrangement was involved. An underlying similarity of all studies, thus far, is that women are in the majority as study participants.

Rasmussen et al. (2019) meta-analysis study explored associations of health and forgiveness. Distinct types of health and forgiveness were explored (e.g., physical health, psychological health, emotional forgiveness, decisional forgiveness, etc.). The rationale for the study was to examine how impactful forgiveness can be toward overall health wellness.

The sample size was large of 26,043 adults and spanned to multiple countries. The participants' mean age was 34.75 years old. Many populations were included: college students, military veterans, geriatric adults, divorced women, and others.

Overall, the results demonstrated that forgiveness is connected to positive health outcomes. Psychological health was especially positively associated with forgiveness over physical health. Emotional forgiveness was associated more than decisional forgiveness. Also, results noted the post-traumatic stress disorder was excluded within positive health outcomes for psychological health and forgiveness.

Socioeconomic Status Impact due to Upbringing by Alcoholic Parent

A study conducted by Mersky et al. (2021) explored disparities in adverse childhood experiences within gender, race, and economic status. Their findings determined that more ACEs (adverse childhood experiences) were among other races and not non-Hispanic Whites. Also, their findings validated earlier studies that females over males had increased ACEs. Lastly, findings regarding socioeconomic status supported earlier studies of the most impacted were impoverished populations.

Another study facilitated by Pisinger and Tolstrup (2022) compared varying levels of socioeconomic status and parental alcohol use that would promote increased emotional symptoms and depression. The findings varied among earlier studies in that no matter the level of socioeconomic status students with parental alcohol use contributed to increased depression and emotional symptoms.

The Pisinger and Tolstrup (2022) study of parental alcohol use, levels of SES, and promotion of potential depression symptomatology in students lends hope to this study in

mitigating the gap of knowledge known regarding female ACOAs in higher socioeconomic class and potential forgiveness of parent. Researchers are beginning to learn that across all levels of socioeconomic status, ACOAs are impacted throughout the lifespan.

Summary

This chapter explored literature related to females ACOAs experience with increased PTSD symptomatology, problematic upbringings promoting difficulty in emotional well-being, female ACOAs decision to estrange or forgive their alcoholic mothers, and socioeconomic status is impacted due to being raised by an alcoholic parent. Prior research supports that female ACOAs have higher occurrences of trauma; however, it is not known if this trauma will allow for higher outcomes for forgiveness or estrangement with the parent. Prior research also supports that more impoverished populations are impacted by adverse childhood experiences and parental alcohol use. It is not known if higher income status will impact the female ACOA decision to forgive or estrange. Therefore, further research is indicated to provide answers to understand this specific population due to a known gap in literature. Lastly, the next chapter will explore how this study will be conducted from research design, question to explore, and instrumentation.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to improve understanding of forgiveness in maternal estrangement among higher socioeconomic status female adult children of alcoholics. According to Greenfield et al. (2019) more research is necessary in increasing insight into adverse childhood experiences associated with mothers within familial dynamics and parental relationships. In this study, I used a phenomenological approach with participants to delve into their experiences of being a higher SES female ACOAs regarding forgiveness around maternal estrangement. The acquired data from this study may provide clinical insight and advancing clinicians' skills providing successful patient care.

Research Question

The research question for this study was: What are the lived experiences of higher SES female ACOAs regarding forgiveness around maternal estrangement?

Research Design and Rationale

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016) phenomenological research is an exploration of a person's experiences. Individual experiences include self, others, and his/her worldview. Phenomenology was developed by Edmund Husserl in 1913 (Miller et al., 2003). The specific research design of this study included Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenology, which I used to understand participants' maternal estrangement experiences associated with forgiveness. The rationale for use of

phenomenological research design was to seek out female ACOAs experiences to emphasize their voices in a meaningful manner.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher in qualitative study is to learn from the participant's experiences, seek data and themes from resulting research, and evaluate and interpret data outcomes. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018) qualitative studies are explanative and direct the researcher to maintain a thorough exploration with participants.

My personal familiarity and experience with female ACOA background was twofold. My prior knowledge of familial alcoholic environment was of a chaotic, dysfunctional familial environment. My paternal grandfather was an alcoholic, and my late father a dry drunk. According to Ranganatha (1985) the definition of *dry* is sobriety from alcohol and *drunk* is a continuance to display alcoholic thinking, emotions, and behavioral states. As a clinician, I treat the ACOA population with a variety of modalities from cognitive behavioral therapy, gestalt methods, and eye movement desensitization and reprocessing therapy.

There was a consideration to research bias with having a background of familial dysfunction and being a licensed professional counselor treating this specialized population. Johnson et al. (2020) stated that reflexivity involves a connection between the researcher's awareness into potential bias that leads to critical direction that is pivotal to overcoming this obstacle. The main strategy to reduce researcher bias is to use the four key pillars in qualitative research: criticality, collaboration, rigor, and reflexivity (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, as cited in Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). According to Ravitch and Carl

(2016), as cited in Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) the criticality viewpoint is to utilize intent to avoid issues with power and state valid perspectives from study participants. Collaboration (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, as cited in Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019) is to work jointly with all involved to lay the groundwork for criticality. Rigor (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, as cited in Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019) ensures an intricate research design, promoting truth from participants, data collection, and data analysis. Rigor vehemently points out the study limitations. Lastly, reflexivity (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, as cited in Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019) is being mindful of the researcher's own perspective, assumptions, and potential bias that influences the study.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

The target population in this study were self-identified female adult children of alcoholics, ages 35-55 years old. There were three requirements to meet criteria to participate in this study. The first requirement was that they have experienced maternal estrangement either in their past or present. The second requirement was that they explored forgiveness because of the estrangement. The last requirement was that the female ACOAs have earned (at some point in their lifetime) at least an annual income of \$60,000. Bernardi et al. (2019) explored childhood family structure and wealth across a lifetime. Bernardi et al. (2019) found that a median income of \$61,600 of individuals aged 47 to 55 that did not reside with both parents constantly from birth through age 18. ACOAs can grow up in single parent homes due to alcohol abuse and domestic violence issues. Ga and Eui-Jung (2020) found that inconsistencies in residence, increased stress,

depression, tendencies in suicidal thoughts, and alcohol issues adversely impacted quality of life associated with single mothers.

I conducted purposeful sampling over Facebook ACOA support groups. A small sample size between nine to 12 participants was preferred due to the need for a concentrated exploration for in-depth ACOA background, lifetime patterns of maternal estrangement, and considerations toward forgiveness. Another rationale for the small sample was the higher income SES component. I promoted saturation with this small sample size through gathering abundant and substantial data (see Fusch & Ness, 2015) through in-depth qualitative interviews. According to Bartholomew et al. (2021) large scale sample sizes can quiet participant responses and reduce the amount of disclosure provided for analysis.

Participants were recruited through social media Facebook ACOA support groups. The participants viewed the recruitment study flyer and contacted researcher via email listed on the flyer. I used an inclusion criteria questionnaire to verify that participants met all criteria. Participants met the following requirements to participate in the study: must be a female between ages of 35-55, have an annual income of 60,000, stopped relationship with mother at least once in adulthood, and have grown up with an alcoholic parent in childhood. Once all participants were identified, I requested permission for participants to be interviewed. Participants were informed about interview details, informed consents were emailed separately, and an opportunity to ask questions took place. All agreeable participants were scheduled for a follow-up interview. In the

follow up interview, the participant listened to my interpretation and provided her feedback.

Risks and Benefits for Participants

Potential risks for participants were telling/retelling of their upbringings, potentially initiating a grieving process to ongoing/episodic maternal estrangement, and/or reflection on past familial traumatic experiences. Potential benefits for the participants were an ability to engage and process through their experiences. Another benefit was a potential for motivation to seek treatment for any unresolved sources to past trauma.

All participants were provided with my e-mail address for any questions or concerns that arose before and after the interview. Lastly, the mental health crisis text/phone of 988 was provided to all participants in case crisis occurred.

Informed Consent and Confidentiality

Before the interviews occurred, informed consent was signed and agreed upon by all participants. The informed consent document contained study background and rationale, study purpose, Walden University researcher affiliation, IRB approved status, study policies, and all risks and benefits associated with this study. The role of confidentiality was explained and defined within the informed consent. Also, participants were reminded that the study was voluntary in nature and the interview could be stopped at any instance. Lastly, participants were e-mailed a copy of the informed consent, if requested, on secure, encrypted e-mail.

Confidentiality was assured using the HIPAA compliant version of Zoom. Zoom platform could not be accessed without a secure username and password. The username and password were not saved on my computer. Audio recordings were offered and if participants gave permission, then interviews were stored on my password secured computer.

Instrumentation

All participants were screened through use of an inclusion/exclusion questionnaire ensuring that they met criteria to participate in the study. Data were collected via the open-ended questions through semistructured interviews, researcher observations, and handwritten notes that were taken during the interviews. Interviews were audio recorded (per written consent approval) to ensure quality transcription and data collection.

I developed the semistructured interviews to answer research query of: What are the lived experiences of higher SES female ACOAs regarding forgiveness around maternal estrangement? According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016) using the phenomenological structure for interviews is the leading technique for collecting data. Semistructured in-depth interviews are flexible and follow the participant's responses naturally. The interviews can be between 60 to 120 minutes each. The interview questions were:

1. What is your relationship like now with your mother?
2. What was the conflict to lead to the estrangement(s) from your mother?
3. Describe the decision-making process that led to the estrangement(s)?

4. What were the boundaries put into place prior to the estrangement(s)?
5. How is your family's relationship with your mother?
6. How does estrangement impact family gatherings?
7. Discuss any guilt that results from the decision to estrange.
8. What would need to happen for reconciliation to take place?
9. Discuss any regrets or resentments toward your mother.
10. Describe your thoughts toward forgiving your mother?
11. Discuss times when you have regretted forgiving your mother.
12. What would have to happen to forgive your mother?
13. What have you learned regarding your childhood that occurred because of estrangement?
14. Tell me how estrangement led to reconnection with other family members?
15. How does your higher income impact the relationship with your mother?

Data Analysis

Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenology method was used to understand participants' maternal estrangement experiences associated with forgiveness using semistructured interviews. Meaning making was within the process of this specific phenomenological approach. The beginning step of data collection was the researcher implementing the epoché phase. Epoché is the process of clearing one's mindset in relation to elimination of all pre-conceived judgments (Moustakas', 1994).

Using Moustakas's (1994) transcendental phenomenological approach can ensure that the data analysis is being implemented in a significant way. I used the modified Van

Kaam method (1966) for continuing data analysis. The steps within the modified Van Kaam (1966) via Moustakas (1994) involved the following: listing/grouping the participants' experiences, which is referred to as horizontalization. Reducing and eliminating extraneous sections of experiences. Clustering and thematizing the experiences to identify significant themes. Finally, validation to ensure participant's experiences were truly noted by accurate, compelling means.

Issues with Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is a significant component in qualitative research. The following elements with trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, as cited in Merriam and Tisdell, 2016) were explored in this study: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility can be ensured by using member checking. The process involved having the participants read over their transcribed interview to check for any errors or inconsistencies present. Dependability (Bloomberg and Volpe 2019) is when data demonstrates durability and persistence. Dependability can be assured through peer review of researcher's chair and committee member.

Confirmability (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2019) is the process of authenticating how conclusions are made from the data. Journaling and continued reflection on the study are another way to promote trustworthiness. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018) transferability can be bolstered by thick description throughout the study components. This use of thick description is a means of perpetuating external validity. I employed the use of thick description using participant quotes and researcher's notes throughout the process.

Ethical Procedures

All ethical procedures and policies were followed accordingly in this study. This study ensured that the use of APA (American Psychological Association) code of ethics and principles were summarized and provided to the participants. Informed consent was distributed and agreed upon and confidentiality was implemented. Data were kept in a secure, HIPAA compliant platform with audio and video interview recordings.

Participant mental health was also checked upon to ensure mental well-being throughout the study process. Lastly, IRB (Institutional Review Board) policies and procedures were followed to ensure study quality standards.

Summary

This chapter included an overview of the transcendental phenomenological approach used in this research study. The researcher's instrumentation was detailed in entirety. The modified Van Kaam method (1966) was described to aid the reader in understanding the data analysis plan. Lastly, the standards and principles in aligning effective strategies for assuring participants' risks and benefits, perpetuating trustworthiness in research, and application of ethical standards and code of conduct.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

In this qualitative study, my goal was to increase understanding of forgiveness in maternal estrangement among higher socioeconomic status female adult children of alcoholics. Results from this study can be used in directing lasting treatment outcomes by clinicians specializing in this population. Clinicians that understand female adult children of alcoholics' decision to forgive or continue estrangement can perpetuate total attunement and wellness. In this chapter, I will describe the setting, study participants demographics, and means of collecting and analyzing the data. The chapter concludes with evidence of trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, detailed study results, and summary.

Setting

This phenomenological study was approved in January 2024. An update occurred in February 2024 with the IRB to increase participants' age due to age range restricting access to willing participants. The participants in the study were female adult children of alcoholics. A social media recruitment flyer was posted in four adult children of alcoholics Facebook support groups with permission from group moderators. Many Facebook ACOA support groups declined the request. My social media recruitment flyer was also posted with permission to a Walden University Facebook page. Purposive sampling was utilized in this study. Once potential participants reached out to my university email an inclusion/exclusion form was sent. If inclusion criteria were met, the study consent form was emailed. Participants were instructed to reply via email with "I

consent” to proceed with study. All semistructured interviews were scheduled to meet over HIPAA compliant Zoom platform. All meetings took place in either my downtown, private office, or home office. No other individuals were present besides the interviewer and interviewee. A brief follow up was scheduled/offered a couple of weeks after the initial interview.

Demographics

Study inclusion requirements were listed as: (a) female between the ages of 35 to 55, (b) have an annual income of 60,000, (c) have stopped relationship with mother at least once since adulthood, (d) grown up with an alcoholic mother in childhood and explored forgiveness. The study had seven participants of various ages from 38 to 51 years old. To promote confidentiality and privacy participants were identified as P1 through P7. Participants were ranked in order that they reached out for participation in study. Participants were from all over the United States: Texas, California, Nevada, New York, and Pennsylvania. Six participants had earned a graduate degree or above. Four participants work in the education field. Three participants are self-employed. Six participants own homes, and one participant rents a home.

Data Collection

Once participants consented to be in the study, interviews were scheduled. Zoom links were emailed to all participants. The first semistructured interview took place on January 31, 2024, and the last one (follow-up) was on April 2, 2024. All participants had one initial interview and one brief follow-up interview except one participant. After four attempts via email for follow-up with participant, the decision was made to stop after

fourth attempt. Follow-up interviews included member checking and asking if they would like to add further information.

All semistructured interviews were conducted over HIPAA-compliant Zoom platform. All participants elected to have their camera on during the interviews. Participants were either in their home, a home office, or their work offices. One participant was in her car due to having to travel at the last minute. Permission to record the interview was requested and granted.

At the start of the interviews, I reiterated the study purpose. After the demographic questions were answered, participants responded to all 15 open-ended interview questions. The longest initial interview lasted 41 minutes in duration, and the shortest was 21 minutes in length. Two follow-up interviews were conducted via HIPAA-compliant Zoom and four were conducted over cell phone calls per request. The longest follow-up meeting was 12 minutes in length with the shortest being seven minutes. All follow-up meetings were done in my downtown, private office. Follow-up queries included asking participants any clarifying questions and/or any information that they remembered after the interviews that they wish to include. After the conclusion of all interviews, the participants were thanked and invited to reach out via email with any questions or concerns. A five-dollar Starbucks gift card was emailed to all participants. All participants requested to know study outcomes, and requests will be granted upon finalization of study.

Originally nine to 12 participants were the range for data collection; however, after the seventh participant data saturation occurred. Repetition of themes were

consistently being reported by participants. Therefore, the decision was made to end with seven participants. According to Charmaz (2006, as cited in Creswell & Creswell, 2018) data collection ends once no further knowledge is discovered.

All interviews were transcribed first using the Otter.ai program. Next, I listened to the audio recordings to check for errors or omissions from the program. I made all final edits and saved the audio and video recordings on a password protected laptop. All files were identified with the P1 through P7 markers with no identifying personal information listed. All data collection and methods were followed accurately as reported in chapter three.

Data Analysis

After all transcripts were edited, I read all transcripts multiple times. Then, transcripts were uploaded into the Delve program for the beginning phases of data analysis. In conjunction with Delve, I also followed the tenets of Moustakas's modified Van Kaam approach (1994). The first step of horizontalization was achieved by highlighting participants' experiences that were meaningful to interview queries. The second step in the method involved reducing and eliminating extraneous sections of experiences. I went through each transcript and eliminated sections that were unrelated to the phenomenon. After completion of this step, invariant constituents (Moustakas, 1994, as cited in Beck, 2021) are developed by exclusive elements emerging. The third step requires clustering and thematizing the experiences to determine themes. Once this step was completed, twenty-four themes were identified as significant to female ACOAs experiences. The fourth step involved validating participants' responses in the transcripts

as agreeable to created themes from invariant constituents (Moustakas, 1994). Next, I created virtual sticky notes on my laptop of all twenty-four themes to initiate the coding process. I established patterns from the participants responses regarding each interview question, and I selected specific colors for categories within themes. The themes were established by two or more participants who reported similar phenomena. The themes, categories, and examples from data are presented in Table 1.

Table 1*Themes, Categories, and Examples from Data*

Theme	Categories	Examples from Data
Benefits of estrangement	Reconnection with extended family Raised by loving family member	“Because of the trauma and the situations again, thankfully, my cousin being kind of in the industry in her own state, I was able to connect with them to say, here's what's going on.” “I actually thanked her for, you know, giving me up to my grandparents.”
Focus on healing	Insight Ownership Boundaries Assertion Self-protection Estrangement	“The lesson it's given me is the one that we kind of all know, right people's behavior says more about them than it does about you.” “I just have these really deep-rooted attachment injuries, and I'm an avoidant. And I run from things, or I don't, you know, or, or sometimes someone will trigger me. I blow up and I realized, like, as a child, it's like, I had emotional needs that were not met. My family did not know how to meet them.”
Consequences of estrangement	Estrangement from family (immediate and extended) Disinheritance	“So, my brother, who is the oldest 65, he got married when he was 18 in this town... and we never saw him again.” “With all the emotions that I've come with it and um,

Theme	Categories	Examples from Data
Mental health issues	Conflicts Manipulation Alcoholism Denial	<p>I'm... I am gonna fight the disinheritance.”</p> <p>“My mom decided it was a great idea to give my kids a pet without asking us.”</p> <p>“One of the things she did is one time when I was 13 or 14, she grabbed an iron, and she threw a heavy iron. The old-fashioned kind and hit me in the back of the head because she was drunk.”</p>
Non-death issues & Grief	Loss of childhood Loss of mother/daughter relationship Signs of grief	<p>“It's interesting um because she used to say when my dad died that a hummingbird was the symbol of my dad. Right after she died, I had three separate incidents with hummingbirds.”</p> <p>“I don't have a mom. I don't have someone to hold me, and say it's gonna be okay. I'm here for you. I have your back.”</p>
Path toward forgiveness	Feelings of regret Feelings of guilt Act of reconciliation	<p>“Like she would have to, like, heal and be able to connect and remember things and I think it's an unfair ask to expect her to be able to do that, you know, short of God's hand coming down and fixing everything.”</p> <p>“I just can't in my heart, be good with myself, by not having them in my life in a way.”</p> <p>“Life is short. That's it, life is short. Everyone deserves a</p>

Theme	Categories	Examples from Data
		second chance or a third or a fourth.”
Impact of higher income	Higher education Affordance of therapy treatment Ability to reside in affluent neighborhoods Affordance of having more than one vehicle Sharing new ways of living	“We're able to afford to live in a nicer area.” “The one benefit of having the higher income is the fact that I can afford to have a therapist on call.” “I felt that I was able to share my not wealth to say, but in so many words wealth with her. Give her exposure to a better way of life, a better way of living because we were always very poor.”
Effects of childhood trauma	Lack of trust Resentment	“I am resentful that she did not protect me, she did not train me she didn't. She did not grow me; she didn't provide a nurturing environment for me to have other options. Instead, I was constantly seeking safety in every other area of life.” “I feel I was like, in a lot of ways, emotionally orphaned as that sounds harsh, but I feel like both my parents didn't protect me, emotionally, or prepare me for the world.”

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Being transparent with readers is pivotal to promote trustworthiness (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). In this phenomenological study, I delved into the lived experiences of female adult children of alcoholics regarding maternal forgiveness or estrangement. I

validated the trustworthiness in this research study by implementing the following steps: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

According to Beck (2021), credibility is associated with having assurance in veracity within the research outcomes. Credibility was achieved through rapport building with the study participants. Participants were encouraged to ask questions, and I made myself available throughout the data collection process. Another valuable source of credibility was the usage of member checks during the follow-up interviews. Participants had the opportunity to validate my interpretation of summaries from their responses. Lastly, self-reflection to known biases were identified and monitored throughout the research study.

Transferability

Transferability was accomplished by study participants disclosing personal recollections of their experiences. Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) explained that establishing transferability is to provide a thick description of background information so the reader can evaluate any semblance of the accounts and the research itself. Lastly, transferability was demonstrated using purposive sampling methods in consideration to forgiveness and/or having maternal estrangement in a specific female ACOA population.

Dependability

Dependability was executed by using the same interview questions with all study participants. Beck (2021) stated that dependability invokes the adherence to study

outcomes across duration and practice. This study was transcribed through Otter.ai and then a second program (Delve) was scanned again to direct accuracy. Study transcriptions also promote dependability ensuring that other researchers could replicate methodology of study if desired. Lastly, dependability was assured through peer review of my university chair and committee member.

Confirmability

Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) noted that confirmability ensures that study findings derive from study exploration than from researcher's bias. This study achieved confirmability through reflexivity of taking notes to monitor any potential of self-bias. Reflexivity involves the researcher being influenced by the study process (Probst & Berenson, 2014, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, confirmability was implemented while interviewing participants and avoiding interruptions. Participants were allowed to fully disclose their experiences to the full extent.

Results

This study aimed to answer this research question: What are the lived experiences of higher SES female ACOAs regarding forgiveness around maternal estrangement? All seven participants answered the same 15 open-ended questions during the semistructured interviews. As a result of the data analysis, twenty-seven categories and eight primary themes emerged. The eight primary themes that resulted from the participant's perspectives: (1) benefits of estrangement, (2) focus on healing, (3) consequences of estrangement, (4) mental health issues, (5) non-death losses and grief, (6) path toward forgiveness, (7) impact of higher income, and (8) effects of childhood trauma. In this

section, a discussion from findings on despite estrangement can lead to beneficial outcomes, how forgiveness is multi-layered, mental health of the alcoholic mother is impactful in choosing forgiveness, childhood trauma and PTSD is supported from the literature review, and finally that higher income changes the trajectory of recovery and healing of the female ACOAs.

Theme 1: Benefits of Estrangement

Benefits of estrangement were reported as leaning on extended family members, reconnecting with outside family, or being raised by a loving family member.

P6

I was living with my mom and my dad, upstate, actually. They were both like, full blown alcoholics. I'm talking drug addicts. This was like, late 80s, so like cocaine, and living upstate, after having grown up here in the Bronx. My grandma lived here in the Bronx. I kind of knew what was going on when I was younger. I literally was like, I can't live here anymore. I moved in with my grandma. That was like a huge like, like tantrum, but I moved in with my grandma, for like, two school years at least. My mom lived elsewhere.

P2 stated, "I've been fortunate enough to know some of my extended cousins. I've been able to lean on them. Some of them have licenses. So, I've been able to communicate and explain what is going on."

P3 stated,

I have some second cousins on my mom's side, I've reconnected with. They're really fun. I'm gonna go visit some of them in March. They live in the Phoenix

area. They're just so fun. It's my mom's first cousin, and I was very close with my grandpa. So, it's her cousin Joe. He's like, sixty now, but he's very full of life. He's very energetic. He feels like he's my age. Like he's in his thirties even though he's closer to my mom's age. He reminds me of my grandpa so much, and that's like, really cool to be around him, you know. So that's like, really fun.

Theme 2: Focus on Healing

Focus on healing was significant for all participants. Wheaton (2020) found that assisting COAs (children of alcoholics) figure out their selves will aid in identification of their emotions and wants in life. Coping with past childhood trauma and management of present life stressors is beneficial to overall well-being. Study participants reported focusing on gaining insight, learning about ownership and accountability, boundary setting, assertiveness including self-protection, and estrangement.

P3 stated, "I tried to repair it myself, like my inner child. So, I'm working on like, re-parenting. It's just one of those things where I think at some point to like, protect my inner child, or heal some of that." P5 stated, "I just think I was just finally done with all the excuses. I felt like I'd given her enough chances to make a difference." P1 recounted, "I put up some healthy boundaries with her to protect my children primarily."

P7 said,

I would need her to go through intensive therapy on her own. Then I would need to have intensive group therapy together where she can acknowledge her behavioral pattern. Then she would need to demonstrate intentionality with

changing those behavior patterns, and healing the wounds that are causing her to behave the way that she does.

P2 said,

It's like, not isolated, but it's a culmination of the fact that I recognize that my mom's not June Cleaver, you know, she doesn't have the capability. I found to protect myself and my inner family I really needed to separate because she does have self-serving narcissistic traits.

Theme 3: Consequences of Estrangement

Estrangement from their mothers often led to estrangement with other immediate or extended family members. According to (Haverfield et al., 2016) familial communication that is combative, uses self-restraint, or unpredictability is likely to result in more affective, cognitive, and functioning issues for CoA, however capable familial communication can perpetuate increased functioning in CoA.

P4 stated, "He got married when he was 18 in this town. We never saw him again. I don't know because I was too little to understand. But there was obviously some tension between his wife and my mom." P7 mentioned, "I don't really consider my aunts or uncles family." P1 offered, "She has made it, so I will never have a relationship with my brother."

Estrangement can also lead to disinheritance when the estranged mother dies. As in the case of P1.

She was in the hospital. We were dealing with stuff the last month of her life. We were actually getting along. We were working together, and we were doing

things. Then when he delivered the trust to me, five days after she died, and he was the only one on it. He was the decision maker, and he was this and he was that. I mean, it was like she wanted to make sure that I was hurt. She was trying to send some kind of message to me. She did this after the, you know, estrangement or distance or whatever you want to call it.

Theme 4: Mental Health Issues

All study participants explained mental health struggles related to past and/or present conflicts with their mothers. A frequent component within the mother-daughter conflicts involved manipulation tendencies from the mothers. Alcoholism was another pivotal component. Some mothers became sober due to sheer will, due to current medical conditions, or some still struggle with their alcoholism. Lastly, there is the component of denial within family members' awareness of mothers' current relationship with alcohol.

P3 discussed family conflict, "She was triangulating like, you know, between me and my brother. Trying to cause problems between us because my brother and I were roommates for a while." P7 explained, "The most recent was her intentionally trying to cause conflict between me and other members. Degrading me and just really, you know, compromising my character, really to people who care for me."

P5 stated current alcoholism, "Her choice to still continue to use drugs and alcohol." P7 explained, "I made it very clear that my children would never be able to be there with her if she was not able to be present, awake, alert, and capable of being with my child in the presence of her husband."

P1 discussed manipulative tendencies, “Because both my parents were alcoholics, my mom hid behind my dad. My mom acted like all the craziness in our house was my dad.”

P5

When I got older, and then a lot of the time, she would be like, ‘Oh, I’m gonna send you something.’ Then she’d say, ‘Oh, did you get it? Oh, someone must have taken it out of the mail.’ I finally was like, I’m just done with the broken promises.

P1 discussed denial from her sibling, “Then my brother, obviously, he knew about the alcoholism. He knew about it, and he just turned a blind eye to it.” P7 reported to siblings’ denial over mother’s issues, “Those are my sisters, but that’s why they won’t speak to me... because I refuse to interact with her.”

Theme 5: Non-Death Losses and Grief

Békési & Kassai (2024) found that COA (children of alcoholics) are exposed to grief that is twofold. The beginning loss is of their upbringing, and the later loss is relinquishing the illusion of a loving parent. This study’s findings found these types of losses and more: loss of upbringing, loss of illusion of loving parent, non-death loss of parent due to estrangement of older, alcoholic mother, and interrupted grief due to high conflict of disinheritance.

P4 discussed non-death loss due to estrangement of older, alcoholic mother.

Then I had my other sister, the drug addict, calling my work and harassing me, telling me, you know, that I had done things to mom. So, at that point, I had to make the decision to cut it off and to be done. I spent, you know, some time

grieving. I said, mom's dead, this is it, you know, because it was not good for my well-being.

P6 explained about her losses in childhood, "I wish I had a normal childhood. wish I had a traditional family white picket fence house." P3 stated, "But I feel I was like, in a lot of ways, emotionally orphaned as the that sounds harsh, but I feel like both my parents didn't protect me, emotionally, or prepare me for the world." P2 offered, "It's interesting, being an adult helping raise my stepdaughter, and she's really reaching her, you know, age of womanhood... and that thing. Realizing and recognizing that I really didn't have that support from my mom."

P3 discussed grieving the illusion of loving parent through gained insight as an adult. I feel I was like, in a lot of ways, emotionally orphaned, as that sounds harsh, but I feel like both my parents didn't protect me, emotionally, or prepare me for the world. You know, my first relationship was a high control one. It was very unhealthy. So of course, of course it was, you know, and then I married that guy, and it was, it just turned out really bad. So, I think learning about my childhood is like I didn't learn self-esteem as a child. I've had to like create that as an adult.

P1 explained interrupted grieving after learning about disinheritance.

I woke up in the morning, and I had a hummingbird in my room. I don't know how it could have gotten there. It had been there the night and hadn't opened the door. I have a picture of it actually, cause I had to go get my husband and have him look at it because I thought I was losing it to be really honest with you. It was

interesting because I was kind of stunned and not able to do it. This is real early in the morning. It's like 5:30 in the morning, like a Saturday or something Sunday or something. Anyway, and the baby bird, he ended up opening the door and the baby bird ended up sitting on his hand, the hummingbird and then he opened the door and eventually the hummingbird flew away. But there's been other instances of that too. The only reason I share this is because I almost was like Mom, go away. Like go away. Like I can't. I don't want to see you right now. Like I just go away mom, like it just it happens so much like I and then I had two of them come fly into my house is what happened. And I had one Yeah, I had three. Yeah, it was strange. And it literally happened within like three or four weeks. I was like Mom, like leave me alone. Like leave me alone. Like, you know and so I only share that because it's so funny because here that's supposed to be like a spiritual sign. I'm like yelling at the spiritual side.

Theme 6: Path Toward Forgiveness

Five of the study participants reported having forgiven their alcoholic mother. One participant stated that she has not forgiven her, and one participant has partial forgiveness. Regarding reconciliation, three of the study participants have partially reconciled with their alcoholic mother with set physical and emotional boundaries. Two study participants reported full reconciliation with their alcoholic mother. One participant is fully estranged from her mother, and the other participant's mother has died. Feelings of guilt or regret were dependent on whether the participant chose to actively forgive

fully or partially. No feelings of guilt were present with current estrangement, and feelings of regret were evident with this participant.

P1 on regret

I wish maybe I had been more involved the last few years. Maybe we could have caught the cirrhosis earlier. That's a big regret, you know, maybe had I been talking to her doctor. Maybe I could have pushed a little bit more for this or for that...

P5 on absence of regret

“I don't have any regrets or resentment toward her. I actually thanked her for, you know, giving me up to my grandparents.”

P1 on regret

I wish maybe I had been more involved the last few years. Maybe we could have caught the cirrhosis earlier. That's a big regret, you know, maybe had I been talking to her doctor. Maybe I could have pushed a little bit more for this or for that...

P3 on feelings of guilt

“I definitely lived with guilt. My mom was all I could think about, and that's why I have a relationship with her.”

P6 discussed feelings of guilt

“So, when I was little, no guilt, and honestly, when I was older, I only feel guilty that there was anger associated with it.”

P4 offered her feelings of guilt

I felt very guilty that she was going to die, and that I wasn't going to be there to help her. I struggled with a lot of guilt. That out of the four of us, I'm the one most capable of supporting her and helping her... and I wasn't.

P3 on partial reconciliation

“I just can't in my heart, be good with myself by not having them in my life in a way.”

P5 discussed reconciliation

“I think to fully, I don't know, if I'll ever fully get there. Like again, I'll keep the relationship there, but kind of at an arm's length.”

P2 stated thoughts of reconciliation

Basically, nothing short of a miracle. Like she would have to, like, heal and be able to connect and remember things. I think it's an unfair ask to expect her to be able to do that, you know, short of God's hand coming down and fixing everything.

Theme 7: Impact of Higher Income

All study participants have sought out higher education. Five of the seven participants have earned a master's degree. One participant has earned a doctorate degree, and one earned a bachelor's degree. All study participants have been on a healing journey through either seeking out counselors, life coaches, self-help books on ACOA, or working in the fields of education, counseling, or self-employed.

P1 discussed affordance for therapy

“So, I mean the one benefit of having the higher income is the fact that I can afford to have a therapist on call.”

Another impact of higher income is having multiple vehicles. P4 discussed her higher income status with owning a home and having vehicles.

I think there's some resentment on her end toward me for the increased income.

Yeah. I own a house. She didn't. We own multiple vehicles. She never did.

There's a big gap in the way that we lived before versus how I live now.

P6 illustrated the ability to live in an affluent area because of her higher income.

So, we're able to afford to live in a nicer area. So, I think those are some impacts.

P4 reported to motivation to share new ways of living with alcoholic mother.

I told her, ‘Mom, have you gone in and you looked at outfits at Kohl's? What's

Kohl's? I said, ‘It's a store down the street and she says, ‘No, I've never been

there... and I said, ‘Well, we're gonna go to Kohl's. I'll take you to Kohl's, so we

can find something.’ I said, ‘Where has your other daughter been taking you?

Where are you buying your clothes from?’ She said, ‘Walmart’ and I said, ‘Why

would you be buying your clothes at Walmart mom? I said, ‘We've got you know

Kohl's... and it's the same prices and are good quality.’ So, I felt that I was able

to introduce her to a new way of life. I felt that I was able to share my not wealth

to say, but in so many words wealth with her. Give her exposure to a better way

of life, a better way of living because we were always very poor.

Theme 8: Effects Of Childhood Trauma

According to Li and Liang (2023) CPTSD (complex post-traumatic stress disorder) is steadily on the rise because of trauma experienced in childhood as a key component linked to diagnosis. All participants experienced some form of childhood trauma—physical, emotional, sexual, or financial abuse. Findings in this study showed effects from trauma such as lack of trust and resentment.

P7 illustrated lack of trust with alcoholic mother.

“I made it very clear that my children would never be able to be there with her if she was not able to be present, awake, alert, and capable of being with my child in the presence of her husband.”

P6 discussed lack of trust with her mother.

“Yeah, she's not like the first person I call. I don't go to her for advice. I'm more of like an adult. I'm more like, I know what's up, you know.”

P7 on lack of trust through gained insight.

“She did not grow me. She didn't provide a nurturing environment for me to have other options. Instead, I was constantly seeking safety in every other area of life.”

P7 on feelings of resentment

My resentment is that like, if you hate me, it's okay. I'm okay with that but leave me alone. I think I resent the fact that she abused me as the other woman in her previous relationship with my stepfather instead of the victim.

P2 on resentment regarding meaningful events

“She didn't attend a lot of events. Like she wasn't at my graduation. No, she wasn't at all sorry.”

P3 on resentment regarding her upbringing

“I feel I was like, in a lot of ways, emotionally orphaned as that sounds harsh, but I feel like both my parents didn't protect me, emotionally, or prepare me for the world.”

P6 on continued resentment of drinking

I think, oh, and I think just the resentment is the continued drinking. Like, that is crazy because she'll text me and it's just drunk texting. It's stupid. It's like YouTube videos and stuff, but I'm literally teaching graduate courses.

Summary

The first half of this chapter illustrated the setting, study participants demographics, and means of collecting and analyzing the data. The middle part of this chapter discussed evidence of trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of study. This chapter concluded with results from participants responses that answered the research question: What are the lived experiences of higher SES female ACOAs regarding forgiveness around maternal estrangement?

Seven participants responded to queries from varying parts of the United States: Texas, California, Nevada, New York, and Pennsylvania. As a result from the data collected, eight themes emerged: Benefits of estrangement, focus on healing, consequences of estrangement, mental health issues, non-death losses & grief, path toward forgiveness, impact of higher income, and effects of childhood trauma. These findings will add to the body of literature on research of adult children of alcoholics,

forgiveness or estrangement, and role of socioeconomic status. All findings align with the study's theoretical framework of BFST and will be discussed further in chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to improve understanding of forgiveness in maternal estrangement among higher socioeconomic status female adult children of alcoholics. I used Moustakas's (1994) transcendental phenomenology in the semistructured interview process. I used the modified Van Kaam (1966) method for data analysis in this study. My goal was to contribute to ACOA body of literature to fill in a gap of literature of female ACOAs of higher economic status. There are limited research studies that have focused solely on ACOAs of higher economic status especially with female ACOAs in particular.

I created 15 questions to answer the research question: What are the lived experiences of higher SES female ACOAs regarding forgiveness around maternal estrangement? I developed these questions because of the theoretical framework and the existing body of literature of ACOAs associated with forgiveness and estrangement.

Understanding female ACOAs along with maternal estrangement in a higher socioeconomic status women may be useful for mental health clinicians in honing specific treatment planning for this population. This study extended the existing literature that parental estrangement (maternal estrangement in this study) can result from attempts to heal from past, traumatic experiences from childhood or adolescence. Moreover, this study further added to the body of literature that forgiveness is not a linear component within familial systems dynamics in maternal estrangement. This study highlighted that despite having an alcoholic mother it did not impact female ACOAs ability to accomplish

education and career achievements later in life. In this chapter, I will provide an interpretation within these findings, study limitations and recommendations, study implications, and final conclusions.

Interpretations of the Findings

While re-examining past and present research of ACOAs the impact of trauma and socioeconomic status influenced later in life achievements. Promoting life achievements with having a detrimental upbringing due to maternal alcoholism contributed to familial conflict/discord. Female ACOAs would have to decide whether to estrange or forgive the maternal parent. According to Bickelhaupt et al. (2021) ACOAs who separated themselves from their alcoholic parent was a pivotal step toward evolving and building understanding and meaningful connections with others.

There were current studies that reflect the opposite stance of adult children maintaining parental relationships despite conflict. According to Reczek et al. (2023) female ACOAs have decreased tendencies to remain estranged from their mothers on a long- term basis. This study's findings were consistent with the cited literature with most participants having a relationship with their mothers despite times of estrangement. This study's findings produced eight themes: (1) benefits of estrangement, (2) focus on healing, (3) consequences of estrangement, (4) mental health issues, (5) non-death losses and grief, (6) path toward forgiveness, (7) impact of higher income, and (8) effects of childhood trauma.

Benefits of Estrangement

Five of the seven study participants had benefited from maternal estrangement either in the past or in present life circumstances. Three of the seven participants directly experienced positive impact from being estranged from their alcoholic mothers in childhood and/or adolescence. Benefits of estrangement contributed to their own mental health to be guided by healthier family members. I found that childhood/adolescent estrangement contributed to participants' well-being, prosocial development, and reduced exposure to traumatic experiences. Despite participants intermittent times of maternal estrangement current conflicts from their mothers promoted relational stress and discord. This study's findings supported prior literature in Chapter 2 that females ACOAs are likely to experience PTSD symptomatology (Haahr-Pedersen et al., 2020) due to problematic upbringings (Berg et al., 2017).

Focus on Healing

All study participants had a significant focus toward healing whether through self-exploration on ACOA or self-help books, outpatient counseling, life coaching, and/or spiritual healers. Through these types of wellness experiences led to gained insight, increased assertion through boundary work, and evaluating own wellness through all familial and outside relationships. This finding directly reflects the study's theoretical framework of second concept of BFST the differentiation of self-scale. The best outcome for differentiation of self-scale concept was to strive for self-determination to live outside of negative, joined states for more successful interactions. (Gilbert, 2006).

All participants found lessons or were in the tribulations of meaning-making within their experiences with alcoholic mothers. These current lessons guided their decision-making toward boundary setting, taking ownership from their own behaviors or past mistakes, directing assertion toward present activations from past trauma, evaluating and clarifying others' behaviors to guide their boundaries toward self or others, or implementing self-protection measures, in the form of maternal estrangement.

Consequences of Estrangement

One finding from this study was sibling triangulation as a result or consequence of maternal estrangement. Tendencies from emotional manipulation from the alcoholic mother contributed or promoted triangulation. This finding validates the study's theoretical framework of BFST third concept of triangles. Triangles contain three people in the immediate family system (Bowen, 1978). Once a child pairs with the parent, the direct impact on the other can be damaged (Sammut-Scerri et al., 2020). Sibling triangulation from this study perpetuated conflict that led to strained or non-existent sibling relationships and late mother's decision to disinherit daughter.

Mental Health Issues

All seven participants were found to navigate their own mental health journeys due to experiencing maternal conflicts and estrangements. A finding from this study reflects the study's theoretical framework of BFST sixth concept of multigenerational transmission process. This study extended the literature regarding how a parent influenced a child that shaped ways of influence across generations (Bowen, 1976). Four

of seven study participants highlighted their alcoholic mother's influence over their siblings within denial of either alcoholism or mental health struggles.

All seven study participants were impacted in some way when their alcoholic mothers isolated themselves from the other parent. This study validated Bentley and Matthewson (2020), as five of the seven participants' mothers ended the marriage or left the relationship in varying developmental life phases: infancy, childhood, or adolescence. Two of the five participants' parents stayed together; however, did have forms of either physical or emotional separation from alcoholic mothers. As a result from separation, study participants had mental health impact, relationships discord and grieving non-death loss components.

Non-Death Losses and Grief

As noted about the Bentley and Matthewson (2020) study, this study supported that all seven participants had non-death losses throughout their lifetimes. According to Békési and Kassai (2024) study, grief in children of alcoholic parent(s) included loss of childhood and fallacy of an affectionate caregiver. This study is consistent with cited literature within all participants not only grieved their childhoods but also through each estrangement, which is a reminder of the fallacy of an affectionate caregiver. Not only did the participants grieve non-death losses but also had grieving complications. Two study participants experienced either anticipatory grieving or interrupted grieving. Anticipatory grieving is complicated due to the alcoholic mother experiencing cognitive illness in a facility. The other participant experienced interrupted grieving of late alcoholic mother due to disinheritance.

Path Toward Forgiveness

Five out of the seven participants had fully forgiven their alcoholic mother. One participant had decided to remain estranged and not promote forgiveness. The other participant had partial forgiveness and was dependent on whether emotional and physical boundaries were met by alcoholic mother. This study further added to the ACOA body of literature that forgiveness was not a linear component within familial systems dynamic in maternal estrangement. Intermittent cycles of reconciliation and estrangements were impacted by feelings of guilt, regret, resentment, and self-protection. Moreover, feelings of guilt and regret were dependent on a participant's level of forgiveness or unforgiveness.

Impact of Higher Income

All seven participants accomplished higher levels of education outside of high school graduation. All seven participants achieved careers in either education, counseling, self-employment, or worked with prominent companies. All study participants had stable housing with all but one owning their homes. All study participants assisted their alcoholic mothers in some way intermittently through either emotional, physical, or financial means.

As stated in Thomeer and Reczek (2020) study, drug and alcohol abuse and behavioral health of both parent and child had impact on residing together. Thomeer and Reczek noted lower socioeconomic status for adult children. This study's findings are in contrast with the cited literature (Thomeer & Reczek, 2020). All participants maintained a higher level of income despite a disruptive childhood (Berg et al., 2017).

Higher income was also noted to influence forgiveness responses toward alcoholic mothers. One participant made attempts to show her alcoholic mother a new way of living with quality clothing and residence. Higher income also impacted healing with participants having access to outpatient counseling or ability to buy books on ACOA or self-help. Knowledge for directing healing impacted forgiveness or unforgiveness levels toward alcoholic mothers.

Effects of Childhood Trauma

The findings of this phenomenological study further extended the knowledge of effects of childhood trauma that were long lasting into adulthood. This study's findings confirmed earlier research such as in the Haahr-Pedersen et al.'s (2020) study. The Haahr-Pedersen et al. (2020) found that females have a likelihood of having a complicated history of trauma due to chaotic upbringings. All study participants reported to a history of trauma within either physical, emotional, or financial means. One participant had sexual assault trauma in her upbringing.

Another finding from this study extends the cited literature on trauma components of lack of trust and feelings of resentment due to their chaotic upbringings. Five of the seven study participants had a lack of trust with their alcoholic mother. Six out of seven participants had resentment toward their alcoholic mother. Additionally lack of trust and resentment impacted participants healing and relationships but did promote resiliency. This study also highlighted participants' resiliency despite their traumatic upbringing. According to Lueng et al. (2020), the component of reliance on self was pivotal to

promote resiliency. All study participants demonstrated self-reliance for achievements for pursuits in education and career advancements.

Limitations of the Study

There were a few limitations to this phenomenological study. The first limitation was the limited research on ACOAs. When I started this research, I had difficulty finding significant ACOAs studies within the standard five-year duration time. The majority of ACOA research that I found was from 2015 or earlier on. As time progressed, the ACOA studies increased. Additionally, even though recent ACOA research was a limitation, older ACOA studies led to deeper understanding of the ACOA population.

The second limitation was for potential researcher bias. In my personal family history, I have experienced an alcoholic grandfather and late father as a dry drunk. This limitation was reduced due to the process of member-checking during the follow-up study protocol.

The final limitation was that I am a licensed professional counselor in the state of Texas. As a licensed clinician with experience in treatment of ACOAs, I hold different perspectives and knowledge compared to all study participants. This limitation was disclosed to all participants via the study consent form. This limitation was addressed by adherence to quality standards in qualitative interviewing.

Recommendations

This study addressed the gap in literature of understanding forgiveness in higher socioeconomic female ACOAs within maternal estrangement. This study showed that higher income female ACOAs can make strides in life achievements, their healing

journeys, and in varying phases in forgiveness toward their alcoholic mothers. Although the study focused on higher socioeconomic female ACOA population, there is much to be learned in this specific population. A recommendation toward a follow-up research study with this population would be focused on the varied phases of forgiveness. Follow up research would perpetuate increased knowledge and offer varied perspectives due to this ACOA population being limited in study.

Implications

The implications from this study were related to many different areas. One implication was in regard to treatment planning and clinical treatment of female ACOAs. Female ACOAs have sought outpatient counseling more in the past few decades. Therefore, increased understanding from this highlighted ACOA population was designed to target specific areas for in-depth clinical goals toward trauma and grief work. Another implication was increased understanding in theoretical foundation for the female ACOA higher income population. There were limited studies in the higher income bracket on female ACOAs. The highlight of this study was a continuation of long-lasting effects of trauma; however, female ACOAs promoted resilience and capacity to forgive. The final implication was promotion of social change. Advancement in clinical insight was a motivating factor in conducting this research study. Positive social change in clinical education would further advance clinicians' skills to encompass effective patient care. Licensed professional clinicians have been the key to supporting patients' coping of familial dynamics, intergenerational stressors, and established familial dynamics.

Conclusion

This study produced meaningful insights from higher income female ACOAs that have experienced maternal estrangement and exploration toward forgiveness. Eight significant themes were discovered from this research: benefits of estrangement, focus on healing, consequences of estrangement, mental health issues, non-death losses and grief, path toward forgiveness, impact of higher income, and effects of childhood trauma. The results from this study extended the existing literature of ACOA (maternal) parental estrangement that attempts to heal from past trauma were impactful. Additionally, the results added to the ACOA literature that despite having a chaotic childhood, it did not impact female ACOAs ability to complete post graduate education and obtain career achievements later in life. Lastly, the results added to the body of literature that forgiveness was not a linear component within forgiveness in maternal estrangement. It is crucial for continued research in this ACOA population for increased clinician competence and effective clinical outcomes.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. What is your relationship like now with your mother?
2. What was the conflict to lead to the estrangement(s) from your mother?
3. Describe the decision-making process that led to the estrangement(s)?
4. What were the boundaries put into place prior to the estrangement(s)?
5. How is your family's relationship with your mother?
6. How does estrangement impact family gatherings?
7. Discuss any guilt that results from the decision to estrange.
8. What would need to happen for reconciliation to take place?
9. Discuss any regrets or resentments toward your mother.
10. Describe your thoughts toward forgiving your mother?
11. Discuss times when you have regretted forgiving your mother.
12. What would have to happen to forgive your mother?
13. What have you learned regarding your childhood that occurred because of estrangement?
14. Tell me how estrangement led to reconnection with other family members?
15. How does your higher income impact the relationship with your mother?