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# Parental Alcoholism, Triangulation, and Self-Differentiation in the Sibling Relationship

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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Tiffany Graham

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Walden University  
2018

Abstract

Parental Alcoholism, Triangulation, and Self-Differentiation in the Sibling Relationship

by

Tiffany Graham

MA, Webster University, 2006

BS, Appalachian State University, 1995

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Human Services

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## Abstract

Exposure to parental alcohol use disturbs important family relationships and may influence self-differentiation and triangulation, especially among siblings. The sibling relationship provides a foundation for future relationships, yet researchers know little about how parental alcohol abuse influences the sibling relationship. The purpose of this descriptive phenomenological inquiry was to explore the influence of parental alcohol abuse on triangulation and self-differentiation in the sibling relationship in families of origin. Purposeful sampling and semistructured, face-to-face interviews were used to gather information from 12 self-identified adult children of alcoholics to explore triangulation and self-differentiation among siblings. The research questions guided the study to help reveal how triangulation and self-differentiation among siblings is influenced in their family of origin by parental alcoholism. Twelve audio-recorded interviews were manually transcribed and coded for themes using a categorization system based on word repetitions, key terms, and metaphors. Family systems theory served as the conceptual framework for the study. Member-checking, detailed descriptions and audit trials were used to determine the trustworthiness of data. Sibling relationships in an alcohol-focused family system were found to be volatile and stressful, resulting in triangulated relationships and a distorted sense of self. The results of this study may add to the current body of literature on the alcohol-focused family system, and the associated recommendations may inform treatment modules with targeted interventions designed for siblings. Such interventions would result from a proposed shift in the current treatment focus on the identified client to a more family system based approach to treatment.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this work to all those who have blazed the trail before me and the courageous and benevolent souls who so graciously shared their story with me. I am forever indebted to the World Service Organization of Adult Children of Alcoholics who graciously opened their doors to me and supported me during this journey.

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Dr. Tracey Phillips, my committee chair, you have supported me and guided me through the entire process. You believed in me when I did not believe in myself. You have been a positive and motivating force through the entire process. Thank you! To my committee member committee, Dr. Lillian Chenoweth, thank you for aiding me during this process and making sure my methodology was on point. You are appreciated. My family has supported me spiritually, emotionally, and most importantly financially. Your support and encouragement made this journey possible and a lot less stressful. We can all take a bow and a collective sigh of relief. WE DID IT!

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## Chapter 1: Introduction of the Study

### **Introduction**

Family and sibling relationships can have an influence on how individuals think, act, and feel (Howard et al., 2010; Vivona, 2013). While the parent child relationship is important and influential, the relationship between siblings has a different influence (Davis, Carlo, & Streit, 2015; Howe & Recchia, 2014; Warner, White, & Johnson, 2007). In multi-sibling homes, siblings differ in their interdependence; therefore creating triggers, increasing anxiety, and fostering dysfunctional behavior in one another (Howe & Recchia, 2014; Vivona, 2013). Sibling relationships can influence each stage of an individual's life from childhood into adulthood (Howe & Recchia, 2014). As the first major non-parental relationship children encounter, siblings have an influential role in the choices an individual makes involving friends and will affect the type of relationship she or he create over the years (Howe & Recchia, 2014; Hummel et al., 2013).

It is inevitable for siblings to take on different roles in the family. For example, younger siblings often learn important skills like empathy and conflict resolution from older siblings that can aid in the development of healthy identities (Hummel et al., 2013; Samek et al., 2015). However, in an alcohol-focused family system, children become trapped in roles based on their perception of what is essential for survival. In these roles, they attempt to bring stability back into their lives, which forces them to play out roles that serve the needs of the family and may disrupt their self-differentiation (Byng-Hall, 2008; Klostermann et al., 2011; Kramer, 2010; Lander, Howsare, & Byrne, 2013; Samek et al., 2015; Titelman, 2008). According to Orford et al. (2010) role groupings among

siblings help identify the roles each sibling should assume based on gender and age. For example, younger siblings often assume the role of a learner and follow the example of older siblings. Additionally, older female children assume a more mother-like role for younger siblings. However, in the alcohol-focused family system, roles are often confused (Byng-Hall, 2008; Haverfield & Theiss, 2016; Howe & Reechia, 2014; Orford et al., 2010). Therefore, personal and professional relationships, problem-solving skills and emotional health these siblings can be distorted as a result of parental alcoholism (Orford et al., 2010; Peleg, 2014).

Siblings in an alcohol-focused family system learn from their family of origin coping skills that may interfere with their ability to form a mature identity based on self-differentiation (Howe & Reechia, 2014; Warner, White & Johnson, 2007). These differences between siblings can reveal disparities in each sibling's level of self-differentiation and sibling triangulation (Tinnfalt, Eriksson, & Brunnberg, 2011). According to Vivona (2013), self-differentiation is an unconscious process that involves the development of certain desires and qualities that are expressed differently from the observed qualities of another person, while suppressing desires and qualities that are perceived as similar. The less developed an individual's "self," the more influence their siblings can have on functioning and the more they try to actively or passively control how their siblings function (Black, Bucky, & Wilder, 2008; Haverfield & Theiss, 2016; Vivona, 2013). The fundamental building blocks of self are natural; however, when relationships, especially sibling relationships, are influenced by parental alcoholism, so too are self-differentiation and triangulation within the sibling relationship (Peleg, 2014;

Vivona, 2013). Additionally, triangulation in the sibling relationship in an alcohol-focused family system can significantly contribute to the development of clinical problems for siblings and sibling dyads. (Howe & Recchia, 2014; Mackril & Hesse, 2011). When triangulation occurs within the sibling relationship, it results in one sibling getting pushed from an inside position to an outside position that can trigger serious emotional damage (Dallos & Vetere, 2012; Howe & Recchia, 2014; Kramer, 2010).

Based on the devastating and crippling influence that parental alcoholism has on shaping individuals' levels of self, these individuals find change extremely difficult (Howard et al., 2010). The purpose of this research was to explore the influence of parental alcoholism on triangulation and self-differentiation within sibling relationships in their family of origin. Additional insight and information regarding sibling experiences within an alcohol-focused family system from the adult siblings perspective will contribute to social change by aiding in the development of treatment specifically designed to support siblings and sibling relationships in alcohol-focused family systems.

### **Problem Statement**

Over the last 10 years, scholarly research and awareness concerning the emotional, physical, and psychological stress experienced by children raised by one or more alcoholic parents has rapidly increased (Belles, Budde, & Klein, 2011; Braitman et al., 2009; Fosco & Grych, 2008; Klostermann et al., 2011; Orford et al., 2010; Warner, White, & Johnson, 2007). Past literature has shown that the exposure to parental alcoholism has become a central element in the lives, behaviors, personalities, feelings, social adjustment, and overall life progress of most individuals raised in an alcohol-



focused family system (Klostermann et al., 2011; Pasternak & Shier, 2012; Ruben, 2003; Warner et al., 2007). In addition to the aforementioned, these siblings can be plagued with constant threats of instability, miscommunication, and misunderstanding (Brown, 2011; Howard et al., 2010; Howe & Reechia, 2014; Ruben, 2003).

Given the comprehensive set of risk factors, there is a need to understand how parental alcoholism influences self-differentiation and triangulation within the sibling relationship. When a home is plagued with alcoholism, the entire family system will experience extreme difficulty and the children often have problems managing themselves later in life (Beletsis & Brown, 2008; Black, Bucky, & Wilder, 2008; Vernig, 2011; Warner et al., 2007). Moreover, in adulthood, these children may also struggle with acceptance, anxiety, procrastination, intimacy, trust, guilt, social interactions, confusion, and honesty because they failed to receive proper guidance in these areas (Berkowitz & Perkins, 2008; Kim-Appel & Appel, 2015; Lamb et al., 2014).

Researchers have addressed the resilience of children who are raised in alcoholic family systems and how they become experts in hiding their pain as they have learned how to simply survive in a dysfunctional environment (Belles, Budde, & Klein, 2011; Black, Bucky, & Wilder, 2008; Brown, 2011; Klosterman et al., 2011; Ryan, 2007). There is also extensive developmental literature that has shown how children model their parents' behaviors. However, relatively few researchers have explored how triangulation and self-differentiation influences the sibling relationship when parental alcoholism is present (Beletis & Brown, 2009; Dallos & Vetere, 2012; Fosco & Grych, 2008; Howe & Reechia, 2014; Orford et al., 2010).

Research relative to triangulation and self-differentiation has focused on the entire family and parents relationship with their children (Howe & Reechia, 2014; Peleg, 2014; Sharpe & Rosenblatt, 2009; Titelman, 2008; Woodcock, 2009). In this study, I addressed how parental alcoholism in the family unit influences sibling triangulation and self-differentiation. Current literature that has addressed the influence of parental alcoholism, triangulation, and self-differentiation primarily has focused on the husband-wife and parent-child dyads. Therefore, this research is necessary to help researchers and clinicians understand whether parental alcoholism has an influence on sibling triangulation and self-differentiation, especially later in life.

### **Significance**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore how parental alcoholism influences sibling triangulation and self-differentiation. In this research, I focused on siblings rather than the entire family system. Self-differentiation and triangulation may influence problems in sibling relationships. Siblings struggle in their interactions with each other for a number of reasons; therefore, I determined that the issues surrounding parental alcoholism and the effects of exposure among siblings needed to be analyzed and studied in further detail.

The experiences of siblings raised in an alcohol-focused family system can vary greatly, and the effect of being raised in an alcoholic environment may be either positive or negative. Therefore, the findings of this study may offer insight on how siblings experience exposure to alcohol use within the family system may aid in this research and further explore how siblings may be affected by being raised in this type of environment.

Past researchers have identified a strong relationship between parental alcoholism and family dysfunction; however, this dysfunction clearly influences each sibling differently (Beletsis & Brown, 2009; Black, Bucky, & Wilder, 2008; Haverfield & Theiss, 2016; Klosterman et al., 2011; Lander, Howsare, & Byrne, 2013)

This research was essential because the scholarly focus on sibling relationships continue to grow, and, although they are all parts of a whole, siblings must function independently of their family in everyday life. This study may also help provide additional information to siblings from alcohol-focused families about the continued negative effects of parental alcoholism. Additionally, the study may increase scholarly and clinical knowledge about individuation within family systems and potentially guide treatment processes. The implications for positive social change include expanding support and treatment intervention methods specifically for siblings.

### **Background**

The following is a list of findings that support the main assertions of this study.

1. Brody (2013) explored the sibling relationship as a “system” within the system. The sibling relationship is a powerful bond that can influence every aspect of an individual’s life.
2. Balso and French (2013) discussed the intrapersonal and emotional influence of childhood exposure to alcohol.
3. Howe and Recchia (2012) addressed how the sibling relationship is of extreme importance because individuals learn to share, strive for equality, and

have their initial experiences of equal and peer relationships in the sibling system.

4. Becvar and Becvar (2012) provided a systems perspective that help clinicians examine the way individuals in a system interact and relate with one another to form a whole. Systems theory focuses on each individual while emphasizing the connectedness and interdependence of all parts of the whole.
5. Warner, White, and Johnson (2007) explored the alcohol-focused family system, and how the sibling bond is one that has not been effectively outlined or honored; yet it is a unique relationship that has the greatest chance of covering an entire lifespan.
6. Vivona (2013) addressed the link between siblings as one of the most unusual familial bonds, as it often survives throughout our lifetime, becoming a link that encompasses the longest period of time in comparison with other relationships.
7. Peleg (2014) explored how siblings influence one another and how certain life events among siblings are negatively related to emotional cut-off, emotional well-being.
8. Hummel et al. (2013) explored how an individual's quest for equality begins in the sibling system and our personal sibling constellation.
9. Kramer (2010) provided an overview of how an individual's group placement, community involvement and many other group constellations can be

observed, by increasing an awareness of the early trajectories from our experiences within the sibling system.

Although the sibling relationship has often been ignored in the past, especially in an alcohol-focused family system, things are beginning to shift as new research develops. This research explored how parental alcoholism influences triangulation and self-differentiation among siblings. It is the researcher's position that sibling relationships are extremely important to self-differentiation and sibling triangulation in an alcohol-focused family system.

### **Conceptual Framework**

I used family systems theory as a framework for understanding the influence parental alcoholism has on sibling triangulation and self-differentiation. Family systems theory holds that the family is a system consisting of interconnected parts that influence one another and thereby contribute to their growth or impairment (Becvar & Becvar, 2012). Additionally, the theory holds that the family is always changing, adapting, and self-organizing in response to its members and others outside of the environment (Brown, 2011). Family systems theory was well suited for this research because of its core tenet that the family is a collaborative and interactive system where an individual's behavior can only be understood as it relates to the family as a whole (Brown, 2011; Hummel et al., 2013). Therefore, family systems theory provided me a foundation for understanding how parental alcoholism and family environment affect each sibling (Becvar & Becvar, 2012; Brown, 2011).

Family systems theory will help researchers explore sibling relationships and experiences and how siblings deal with others based on early interactions within an alcohol-focused family system. Emphasis has been placed on how a traumatic family environment offers comprehensive clinical explanations; thus, linking systems theory and the literature on the experiences of Adult Children of Alcoholics (Becvar & Becvar, 2012; Brown, 2011; Ruben, 2003). Additionally, family systems theory helps make the connection to environmental issues and development of the sibling relationship while exploring the influence alcoholism has had on self-development of siblings (Hummel et al., 2013; Ruben, 2003; Ryan, 2007). Finally, self-differentiation and triangulation are both internal processes that produce relational consequences (Howard et al., 2010). I thus used family systems theory to shape my exploration of each participant's experiences and highlight how siblings fit in through emulation of others, especially through differentiation and identification.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions that guided this study are:

1. How does being raised in an alcoholic family system influence sibling relationships?
2. How is triangulation among siblings influenced by parental alcoholism?
3. How is self-differentiation among siblings influenced by parental alcoholism?

### **Nature of the Study**

I used triangulation and self-differentiation as key concepts to explore the influence of parental alcoholism on siblings in this qualitative transcendental

phenomenological study. Specifically, I used Husserl's transcendental phenomenological method to explore and describe the experiences of siblings raised in an alcoholic family system, and to provide a foundation on which to discover shared experiences and universal themes in this population (Husserl, 1970; Orbe, 2009). The participants were purposefully selected based on being siblings raised in alcoholic family systems where at least one parent was considered an alcoholic. Each participated in a 60 to 120 minute interview. I transcribed the interviews verbatim, and then analyzed the data for emerging themes.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Alcoholism/alcohol dependence:* A chronic disease characterized by prolonged periods of heavy alcohol use, difficulty controlling consumption once it has started, increased dependence expressed by withdrawal symptoms when use is stopped or interrupted, increased need to consume more alcohol to get the same effects, and a wide range of social, economic and/or legal problems associated with alcohol use (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013).

*Alcohol use disorder:* A pattern of alcohol consumption that leads to clinical distress or impairment, where an individual meets at least two of the following DSM-V criteria for alcoholism over a 12 month period: (a) consumption of alcohol taken in large amounts over a longer time period than intended; (b) extreme amounts of time participating in activities that require obtain and using alcohol and recovering from the effects; (c) a strong desire to use alcohol; (d) several futile attempts to stop or control use of alcohol; (e) intermittent alcohol use which results in an inability to meet life

obligations at home, work, or school; (f) persistent alcohol use despite reoccurring interpersonal and social issues caused by or intensified by alcohol; (g) inability or failure to participate in occupational, social, or recreational activities due to alcohol use; (h) regular use on alcohol in physically hazardous situations; (i) consistent use despite an awareness of chronic physical or psychological problems that will be worsened by continued alcohol use; (j) increased alcohol intake to reach the same effect or a significantly lessened effect from the same consumption amount; and (k) withdrawal is revealed by withdrawal syndrome traits (APA, 2013).

*Alcoholic-focused family system:* A family that has at least one individual whose personal alcohol abuse affects the overall family structure including communication, roles and boundaries (Bowen, 1986).

*Self-differentiation:* The capacity of an individual to maintain his or her identity, feelings, and beliefs (Peleg, 2014).

*Triangulation:* A concept developed in the study of dysfunctional family systems in which one family member refuses to communicate directly with a family member, but will communicate with a third family member, causing the third member to become a part of the triangle (Titelman, 2008; Woodcock, 2009).

### **Assumptions**

I this study, I assumed that the research participants would answer the interview questions honestly, would be willing to discuss their current sibling relationship, and would be willing to discuss experiences of being raised in an alcohol-focused family system.



### **Scope and Delimitations**

This study focused on adult siblings who were raised in North Carolina and were exposed to parental alcoholism in their family of origin. Given the scope of this study and the limited population, the outcomes are not meant to be generalized. It is likely that the outcomes of this study will lead to further implications for adult siblings who were raised in an alcohol-focused family system. Additionally, the study offers insight and supplementary information regarding Bowen's family system theory, which I used as the framework for this research study.

### **Limitations**

One limitation of the study is the small sample size of six sibling groups. I designed the study to explore depth rather than breadth of the phenomenon. Another limitation of this study is the sibling selection from one geographical area. The research participants are residents of North Carolina.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 1, I provided pertinent information on the need and justification for research related to siblings raised in an alcohol-focused family system. When a home is plagued with alcoholism, the family members are often face with challenges, and the significant needs may be a source for the need of individual treatment. Since family systems function as physical, social, emotional, and financial units, when any type of dysfunction and disruption occurs, the entire system can be influenced. The relationship between siblings provides a significant foundation for fostering successful relationships. In Chapter 2, I offer a comprehensive review of the literature that outlines the influence

of alcoholism on the family unit, the importance of sibling relationships, and how alcoholism influences the sibling bond.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

Research has shown that alcoholism is a family disease and is responsible for more family problems than any other singular issue (Adelson, 2010; Brown, 2011; Casswell et al., 2011; Copello, Templeton, & Powell, 2010; Davis, Carlo, & Streit, 2015; Johnson & Stone, 2009; Manton et al., 2014; Samek et al., 2015). According to Haverfield and Theiss (2016), one out of every four families faces issues with alcoholism. When the family is affected by alcoholism, particularly parental alcoholism, it may result in troubled life styles that influence each family member physically, emotionally, and mentally (Adelson, 2010; Brown, 2011; Haverfield & Theiss, 2016; Howard et al., 2010; Johnson & Stone, 2009; Lander, Howsare & Byrene, 2013; Mackril & Hesse, 2011; Vernig, 2011). Being raised in an alcohol-focused family system does not necessarily mean that an individual will develop problems, but it does serve as a tangible and suggestive risk factor (Adelson, 2010; Black, Bucky, & Wilder, 2008; Lander, Howsare, & Byrne, 2013). Researchers have examined the many ways alcoholism influences the life of the alcoholic and his or her family. However, after an exhaustive review of the literature, I have been unable to find research that explores how parental alcoholism influenced sibling triangulation and self-differentiation. In this research, I focused on siblings rather than the entire family system, and took a closer look at the sibling dynamics surrounding parental alcoholism and the effects of exposure among siblings.

The purpose of the literature review is to show how a research study addressing a particular issue can be positioned within the current body of existing research (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). A thorough examination of the existing literature should offer the foundational elements necessary for a problem worthy of researching. According to Rudestam & Newton (2015), when done properly, the literature can aid in confirming the significance of the study. In this chapter, I provide a thorough explanation of the research strategies I used, as well as an examination of relevant literature on the following topics:

1. *Alcoholism*: Research and statistics on how alcoholism influences both the individual and the family will be presented.
2. *Self-differentiation*: Research and statistics about how self-differentiation is influenced by being raised in an alcohol-focused family system.
3. The research will discuss how siblings who are raised in an alcohol-focused family can lead to a flawed sense of self-differentiation.
4. *Parental Alcoholism*: Research and statistics on the influence of parental alcoholism on both the family and individual levels. The research will discuss parental alcoholism and the influence it can have on how siblings relate to one another, thus complicating self-differentiation and increasing the risk of triangulation.
5. *Sibling Relationship*: Research will discuss how sibling dynamics and relationships are influenced by parental alcoholism, with a specific focus on triangulation and self-differentiation. After an exhaustive review of the literature, I have been unable to find research that focuses solely on the

relationship of siblings who were raised in an alcohol-focused family system, the literature on sibling relationships will provide an adequate framework for understanding sibling triangulation and self-differentiation and support the basis of the research problem.

6. *Triangulation*: The research will provide the basis for presenting what is already known about triangulation in sibling relationships in an alcohol-focused family system. The review of literature will highlight what is not known about how siblings triangulate when they have been raised in an alcohol-focused family system.

### **Literature Review Strategies**

The topics I addressed in my literature review share many common characteristics that overlap several fields of study. Therefore, I used several databases and many keyword combinations to search for and locate peer-reviewed scholarly articles. Specifically I used the Walden University Library to search SocINDEX, Thoreau, ERIC, EBSCO, PsycINFO, Education Resource Complete, PsycARTICLES, and MEDLINE. I also used ProQuest, Sage Journals, Google Scholar, and Academic Search Complete. Google Scholar was helpful in eliminating non-peer reviewed journals.

I used an extensive combination of the following keywords in the database searches (with Boolean identifiers): *alcoholism, parental alcoholism, addiction, parental addiction, parent and child relationships, sibling relationships, triangulation, triangulation and siblings, triangulation in relationships, triangulated relationships, alcohol family system, self-differentiation, self-differentiation and siblings, children of*

*alcoholics, adult children of alcoholics, sibling roles, family dynamics, and family systems.* Additionally, I conducted searches using the most commonly found names in literature such as *Peter Vernig, Gene H. Brody, Susan M. McHale, Jim Orford, and Stephen Jenkins.* The following review of the literature highlights parental alcoholism and how it influences triangulation and self-differentiation in the sibling relationship.

### **Alcoholism**

Alcoholism, most commonly referred to as alcohol use disorder, is a general term for problems associated with ethanol consumption. The term commonly refers to alcohol addiction, which is the habitual and unrestrained consumption of alcoholic beverages, usually to the detriment of an individual's health, family, and personal and social relationships (AMA, 2102; APA, 2013; NCADD, 2012). Medically, alcoholism is considered a disease, particularly an addictive affliction that has the potential to affect adversely each bodily organ, including the brain (Adelson, 2010; AMA, 2012; Casswell, You, & Huckle, 2011; Manton et al., 2014). Chronic alcohol abuse is the cause of many medical and psychiatric problems (APA, 2013; Manton et al., 2014; Roth, 2010; Ryan, 2007; Vernig, 2011). According to the DSM-V, an individual meets the criteria for alcohol dependency and abuse when an individual meets at least two of the following criteria over a 12 month period: (a) large amounts of alcohol consumed over a longer time period than intended; (b) extreme amounts of time engaging in activities that require obtaining and using alcohol and recovering from the effects; (c) a strong desire to use alcohol; (d) several futile attempts to stop or control use of alcohol; (e) intermittent alcohol use which results in an inability to meet life obligations at home, work, or school;

(e) persistent alcohol use despite reoccurring interpersonal and social issues caused by or intensified by alcohol; (f) inability or failure to participate in occupational, social, or recreational activities due to alcohol use; (g) regular use of alcohol in physically hazardous situations; (h) consistent use despite an awareness of chronic physical or psychological problems that will be worsened by continued use; (i) increased alcohol intake to reach the same effect or a significantly lessened effect from the same consumption amount; and (j) withdrawal as revealed by withdrawal syndrome traits (APA, 2013).

Psychiatric conditions and alcoholism often occur together in what researchers refer to as dual diagnosis or comorbidity (Anda et al., 2014; Lee & Williams, 2013; Richards & Nelson, 2012). The most common psychiatric conditions that may accompany alcoholism and addictions are personality disorders, anxiety disorders, depressive disorders, and schizophrenia (McGrath, Nunes, & Quitkin, 2015; NCADD, 2012; Room et al., 2010). According to McGrath, Nunes, and Quitkin (2015), individuals who suffer from major depressive disorders and panic disorders are four times more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol. Addressing alcoholism can be extremely challenging for those affected, because the social stigma related to the disease tends to deter individuals from seeking treatment and avoiding diagnosis for fear of shame and other negative personal, familial, and social consequences (Adelson, 2010; Anthenelli, 2012; Caswell et al., 2011; Johnson & Stone, 2009; Manton et al., 2014; Warner, White, & Johnson, 2007). In general, problem drinking is considered alcoholism when the individual continues to drink despite the social, personal, family, or health problems

associated with alcohol consumption. Therefore, alcoholism may cause severe complications and deadly afflictions that may lead to death (Adelson, 2010; Anda et al., 2014; Balso & French, 2012; Casswell, You, & Huckle, 2011; Manton et al., 2014; Ryan, 2007).

### **The Effects of Alcoholism**

The literature on alcoholism has shown that it is one of the worst problems in society, and the adverse effects of this addiction can be serious (AMA, 2013; Anthenelli, 2012; Caswell et al., 2011; Haverfield & Theiss, 2016; McGrath et al., 2015; NCADD; 2012; Richards & Nelson, 2012; Ryan, 2007). First, much of the literature has indicated that alcoholism influences physical health, crime rates, workplace performance, ethics, family structure, and accidents (Ackerman et al., 2010; Anda et al., 2014; Lander, Howsare, & Bryne, 2013). Moreover, researchers have noted that despite the family, social and economic upheavals that result from alcohol use and abuse, the purchase and consumption of alcohol continue to rise (Ackerman, et al., 2010; Lander, Howsare, & Bryne, 2013; Ryan, 2007).

According to Testino et al. (2014), the primary influence of alcoholism is physical. The physical influence of alcoholism weighs heavily on an individual and increases the risk of long-term diseases or death (Testino et al., 2013; McGrath et al., 2015; WHO, 2014). For example, alcoholism can cause cancer of the liver, kidneys, and stomach (Ray, Mertens, & Weisner, 2009; Testino, 2014; WHO, 2014). Furthermore, alcoholism may alter the consumption of necessary nutrients the body needs to stay healthy (Manton et al., 2014; Testino, 2014; WHO, 2011, 2014). Alcoholism may trigger



damage in the nervous system that can cause shifts in bodily functions and lead to depression and loss of appetite (Berends, Ferris, & Laslett, 2012; Copello, Templeton, & Powell, 2010; Testino, 2014). Poor nutrition, high blood pressure, memory disorders, muscle weakness, low blood sugar, anemia, pancreatic issues, reproduction and fertility issues, sleep disturbances, and decreased immunity to infections can be the results of alcoholism (Copello, Templeton, & Powell, 2010; Manton et al., 2014). Additionally, alcoholism can lead to difficulty in marital relationships, child abuse and neglect, domestic violence, legal issues, and homelessness (Belles, Budde, & Klein, 2011; Ray, Mertens, & Weisner, 2009).

Alcoholism also has numerous psychological effects. Initially, alcohol may induce pleasure and relaxation, but as time goes on, it can increase anxiety and lead to depression (Haverfield & Theiss, 2016; McGarth et al., 2015; Testino et al., 2014; Vernig, 2011; Warner, White, & Johnson, 2007). The psychological effects of alcoholism vary from person to person, based on how much and how long you have been drinking. For example, individuals who rarely consume alcohol may experience extreme relaxation and an invigorating release of inhibitions while individuals who moderately consume alcohol on a more consistent basis may experience nervousness, irritation, despondence, and restlessness. Heavy drinkers can experience hallucinations, insomnia, and paranoia (Casswell, You, & Huckle, 2011; Testino et al., 2014; Warner, White, & Johnson, 2007). In addition to the aforementioned effects, alcoholism may cause dysthymia, changes in personality, obsessive and compulsive behaviors, denial, and co-occurring mood and mental disorder (Anda, et al., 2014; Vermeulen-Smit et al., 2012).

Alcoholism also affects the economy. According to the National Institute and Drug Abuse (NIDA, 2012), in 2012, drug and alcohol abuse and dependence cost consumers and health and medical providers an estimated \$136 billion. The economic effects of alcoholism are as damaging to the nation as the health effects, affecting the community and the family (NIDA, 2012; WHO, 2014). Underage alcohol consumption can interfere with healthy development in youth, which can have a negative influence on education and employment (Davis et al., 2015; Lee & Williams, 2013; WHO, 2014). The cost of health care for families dealing with alcoholism is four times higher than for families who are not, and more than half of all emergency room admittances are alcohol related (Copello et al., 2010; Davis et al., 2015). Alcoholism and alcohol abuse has cost the nation more than \$200 billion over the past few years, with an expected \$296 billion by the year 2020, primarily from productivity loss (Copello et al., 2010; Lee & Williams, 2013; WHO, 2014). More than 7 million employees are alcoholic, resulting in an unwavering loss in productivity, proceeds, and competitiveness of American business (WHO, 2014). Although alcoholism contributes to high health costs, especially in the African-American, Native American, and Hispanic communities, society tends only to treat the social and medical consequences of alcoholism, rather than its causes (Manton et al., 2014; Testino et al., 2014).

Finally, alcoholism affects the family. Often, every individual close to an alcoholic is affected in some way (Casswell et al., 2011). The devastating and crippling effects of alcoholism and addiction are not limited to the addict alone; the entire family can suffer, both emotionally and physically (Casswell et al., 2011; Lyness & Fischer,

2016). Spouses within an alcohol-focused family system are often abused and neglected, and the children often lack the level of maturity needed to combat the disturbing destructiveness of the alcoholism (Berends, Ferris & Laslett 2012; Endendijk et al., 2013; Lyness & Fischer, 2016).

### **Alcoholism and the Influence on the Family**

The influence of alcoholism on the family can be more painful and damaging than any other internal or external factors (Casswell et al., 2011; Manton et al., 2014; Richards & Nelson, 2012). Alcoholism and the influence of the drinker's abuse often manifest differently with each family member and usually have long-term implications (Casswell et al., 2011; Howard et al., 2010). According to The National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, more than one-half of adults in the United States has a close family member who suffers from alcoholism (NIAAA, 2015). Quantitative research conducted on behalf of the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism reveals that alcoholism has a plaguing effect on others. More than one billion individuals over the age of eighteen are affected by alcoholism associated with a close family member, with alcoholism being acknowledged as one to the world's largest risk factors for disease and sickness (Casswell et al., 2011; Manton et al., 2014; NIAAA, 2015; Testino et al., 2014).

In an attempt to examine the influence of growing up in an alcoholic family system and how it relates to the risk of alcoholism and depression, Anda et al., (2014) conducted a logistic regression analysis based on a retrospective cohort study of adults who visited a primary care clinic and completed a survey about nine adverse experiences from childhood: witnessing domestic violence; experiencing childhood emotional,

physical, and sexual abuse; parental separation or divorce; witnessing domestic violence; and growing up with drug-abusing, mentally ill, suicidal, or criminal household members. Based on the nine factors, the results revealed that adverse childhood experiences were significantly greater among the 20% respondents who reported parental alcoholism. The number of adverse experiences had a marked relationship to both depression and alcoholism in adulthood, free of parental alcoholism. The frequency of alcoholism was higher among those individuals who reported parental alcoholism, regardless of the number of adverse experiences they reported. Additionally, the correlation between parental alcoholism and depression was accounted for by an increased risk of having adverse experiences in an alcohol-focused family system. The study confirms that individuals that are raised in an alcohol-focused family are more likely to have adverse experiences. The risk of depression, alcoholism, and other forms of mental illness increases due to parental alcoholism. Among children of alcoholics, depression and alcoholism appear to be large, if not exclusively, due to the adverse experience of being raised in an alcohol-focused family system.

While the use of alcoholism on an individual may be measured, ambiguity still exists about the extent parental alcoholism can predict whether their children will abuse alcohol. In order to investigate the association of parental alcoholism with initiation and development of alcohol use, Vermeulen-Smit et al., (2012) conducted a longitudinal study of parent-child dyads and identified patterns using latent class analysis. The longitudinal data was collected over four annual measurements using 2319 parent-child dyads. The study revealed that two out of six parental drinking patterns were directly

related to adolescent drinking. Of those having a paternal drinking influence or two heavy occasional drinking parents, adolescent drinking was higher. Interaction analyses revealed that heavy parental alcoholism influenced adolescent drinking and predicts the onset of alcohol consumption in their children.

The WHO conducted quantitative research that revealed a wide-ranging effect of alcohol abuse and its effects on others. More than one billion adults are negatively impacted by the alcohol abuse of a close relative, and alcohol abuse is highly documented as the world's third greatest threat for disease (Casswell et al., 2011; WHO, 2011). According to Copello et al. (2010) alcohol abuse can cause the most financial burden; resulting in increased crime, health care and lost wages due to the decrease in work productivity.

Rays, Mertens, and Weisner (2009) conducted a logistic regression analyses to compare how the use of alcohol impacted other chronic diseases within families. The information was gathered from an automated clinical databank in California. The participants included family members affected by alcohol abuse, diabetes, and asthma. The results revealed that family members who are affected by alcohol abuse had considerably higher health care cost than those affected by asthma and diabetes (12-13% higher). This suggests that family members who are affected by alcohol abuse utilized health care services more than the family members of diabetics and asthma sufferers. Additionally, family members affected by alcohol abuse were highly likely to be diagnosed with substance abuse disorders, depression, and other trauma when compared to the diabetic and asthma exposed families. Although the study failed to establish the

reason for these differences, the findings implicated there is a distinctive difference among those who are exposed to an alcohol-focused family system.

While the impact of alcohol abuse on the actual individual may be measured, little data exists on the less noticeable effects of alcohol abuse on the affected family members. To examine the less noticeable effects of alcohol abuse on its family members, Johnson and Stone (2009) investigated the impact of parental alcoholism and several indicators of family functioning of varying levels. The study consisted of 813 college students who were asked to answer questions related to experiences in their family of origin, Self-differentiation Inventory (DSI) and the Self-Report Family Inventory Version II (SFI). The results revealed that parental alcoholism impacts each subscale in the DSI report, specifically emotional reactivity and response to environmental stimuli. The research also revealed that children of alcoholics seem to be more emotionally cut-off and experience lower levels of fusion than non-children of alcoholics. Finally, the results revealed that parental alcoholism and overall levels of functioning are considerably predictive of differentiation levels in adult children of alcoholics.

### **The Family as a System**

In recent years, the concept of the family as a “system” has grown in popularity and serves as an important theoretical framework for family therapists and counselors (Ackerman et al., 2011; Kim-Appel & Appel, 2015; Lamb & Sutton-Smith, 2014). According to Becvar and Becvar (2012), a family is designed to function as a unit, and within the unit, each individual plays a critical and unique role within the system. Therefore, it is possible for one member within the system to change or cause a ripple

effect within the system (Ackerman et al., 2011; Becvar & Becvar, 2012; Cicirelli, 2013; Flaskas, 2012). In stark contrast to overall family systems view, families have been habitually understood as a unit of individuals who are linked together by their inclusion in the family, and any given member's performance or behavior is not necessarily related to the performance or behavior of another member (Becvar & Becvar, 2012; Bowen, 1978; Cook, 2007; Flaskas, 2012; Vernig, 2011).

Ackerman et al. (2011) conducted a longitudinal quantitative study to investigate how positive interactions among family members influence the overall quality of the family dynamics. The study consisted of 400 two-parent families with two siblings. The families were interviewed two times a year over a three-year period to gather information regarding family interactions. The study revealed that positive behavior within a family system was based upon family members observing the positive behaviors of others within the system, as well as, a strong indicator of successful relationships in the future. Additionally, the study revealed that reciprocity was the sole indicator of response among family members and positive behavior modeling had the most profound influence, regardless of family functioning. Although this study cannot be generalized, as the sample only included two parent Caucasian families, the study was able to imply that it is an individual's nature, more than the position or level functioning in the family order, which determines their role in the overall family dynamic.

An essential component of family systems theory is self-differentiation (Becvar & Becvar, 2012; Bowen, 1976). According to Bowen (1976, 1978) self-differentiation relates to how much an individual can regulate his or her emotional reactivity. Individuals

with high levels of differentiation are those who can successfully separate their emotions from their intellectual thought processes (Bowen, 1976; Byng-Hall; 2008; Diehl & Hay, 2011; Mehri et al., 2011). This type of separation epitomizes the ability to establish quickly a strong emotional shift directly to a rational thought process (Cook, 2007; Diehl & Hay, 2011; Mehri et al., 2011). On the other hand, individuals with low level of self-differentiation are emotionally reactive and have a limited capacity for emotional regulations and critical thinking, especially during stressful encounters (Mehri et al., 2011; Flaskas, 2012).

Bowen (1978) theorized that self-differentiation is essential for emotional health. Past research supports this theory in that it found that increased levels of self-differentiation are a key indicator of emotional and psychosocial health (Bowen, 1978; Mehri et al., 2011 Vivona, 2013). While emotional cut-off and emotional reactivity are indicative of lower levels of self-differentiation, they are also predictors of overall maladjustments (Mehri et al., 2013).

While most measures of self-differentiation are grounded on Bowen's writing, Schnarch & Regas (2012) developed a study to address self-differentiation based on four points of balance, known as the Crucible Differentiation Scale (CDS). The study consisted of a Likert type multidimensional measure of 4,169 adults and their most important relationships. The results revealed that older individuals score much higher on differentiation and emotional regulation while younger individuals scored higher on connectedness. There was no variation based on marital status; however; individuals in relationships avoided difficult interaction in an attempt to keep the peace. Limitations of



the study include the results were not independent, as the samples were taken from five studies and testing of more independent samples may yield more valid scores across gender, sexual orientation, and culture.

Another component of family systems theory is triangulation. Triangulation is when a member of a family will not directly communicate with another family member but will communicate with a third family member, which causes the third family member to become part of the triangle (Flaskas, 2012; Franck & Buehler, 2007; Titelman, 2008). The concept of triangulation originated from studies of dysfunctional family systems but can apply to patterns in other systems as well (Peleg, 2014; Titelman, 2008). Triangulation can also be used as a type of “splitting” where one family member plays a third family member against one in which he or she may have an issue (Frank & Buehler, 2007; Lobato, 2015). According to Peleg 2014, this type of triangulation usually results in character assassination of both parties.

As with self-differentiation, triangulation is closely associated with the work of Murray Bowen. Bowen (1978) theorized that when a dyadic emotional system is unbalanced, it would often force in a third person or create a triangle under distress. When triangulation happens within a family system, it serves as a messenger to communicate dissatisfaction with the main party from the third person (Buehler, Frank, & Cook, 2009; Pinel-Jacquemin & Gaudron, 2013). For example, in an alcohol-focused family system, the non-alcoholic parent will express their dissatisfaction for the alcoholic parent to one of their children. When this happens, the child is placed in a role of trying to fix the alcoholic parent (Lobato, 2015; Milevsky, Schlechter, & Machlev, 2011).

Often, the child may engage in the relationship with the parent, forcing them into the third person role, thus being “triangulated” into the relationship (Schnarch & Regas, 2012; Ungar et al., 2012) or the child may go the alcoholic parent, conveying what they have been told, forcing them in the role of a “surrogate spouse” (Flaskas, 2102; Lobato, 2105; Stocker, 2013). This usually occurs when both parties are dysfunctional (Stocker, 2013; Ungar et al., 2012).

In an attempt to examine the adolescents’ emotional responses to parental marital conflict and the association between triangulation, Franck and Buehler (2007) conducted a study of 426 two-parent families with four waves of data collected from youth ranging from ages 11-15. The study revealed that triangulation was highly connected to an adolescents’ ability to internalize problems and control marital hostility. An indirect link between triangulation, emotional reactivity, and internalizing problems across time for youth was as established. The overall findings of the study help highlight how triangulation poses a threat to youth development and emotional regulation.

### **The Importance of the Sibling Relationship**

Sibling relationships are a key factor in an individual’s emotional and social development (Cicirelli, 2013; Kramer, 2010; McHale et al., 2012). According to Cicirelli (2013), individuals learn negotiation and conflict resolution and healthy sibling relationships serve as a support system. As aforementioned, siblings offer both emotional and social support for one another and help one another in overcoming life difficulties by listening to complaints and offering advice (Cicirelli, 2013; Kramer, 2010; McHale et al., 2012). The type of support and influence proves to be a necessary element for siblings

who are confronted with the hardships of life, for example, death, divorce and parental discord (Cicirelli, 2013; Conger & Rueter, 1996; Dunn, 2002; Kramer, 2010; McHale et al., 2012; Vivona, 2013). The sibling relationship lets siblings know they are not alone and provides them with a trustworthy confidant to share difficult and private information (Cicirelli, 2013; Stocker, 2013).

The sibling relationship is a bond that influences our sense of wellness and a large majority of our adult life and adult relationships (Dunn, 2002; Stocker, 2013). While this bond has not been properly outlined or revered, it is one relationship that can more than likely span an entire lifetime (Steele, 2010; Stocker, 2013; Vivona, 2013). In exploring the significant relationships between childhood and family of origin, this sibling relationship is the most significant (Brelsford, 2011; Brody, 2013; Vivona, 2013). The pursuit for equality begins in the sibling system and sibling constellation (Dunn, 2002; Diehl & Hay, 2011; Flaskas, 2012; Vivona, 2013). Group connections, community affiliations, and many other groups help draw from some of our early trajectories within the sibling system (Byng-Hall, 2008; Flaskas, 2012).

Whiteman, McHale, and Soli (2011) explored family systems theory and suggest that the importance of the role of sibling relationships is key in regulating behavior and development through the life span. According to their work, the family is complex and unified whole, where individual family members are interdependent and exert a constant and reciprocal influence on one another. On the other hand, Conger and Little (2010) emphasized the importance of understanding the role sibling's play in the transition to adulthood. They assert that when an older sibling successfully transitions to adulthood, it

serves a road map for younger siblings to grasp the concept of social support and social capital over time. On the contrary, if one sibling fails to make a successful transition into adulthood, the effects may be different on the sibling relationship.

Brody (2013) emphasized that there are unique developmental functions within the sibling relationship, and the sibling relationship is one of the most enduring relationships. These relationships involve strong emotional ties and often resemble peer relationships regardless of age gaps. Based on the learning factors of the sibling relationship, they are well suited to remain involved in emotional conflict (Brody, 2013; Kramer, 2010; Stocker, 2013). Due to varying ranges in age, siblings also enforce both leadership and followership (Kramer, 2010; Lobato, 2015; Low et al., 2012).

In a longitudinal study with 395 families, Padilla-Walker, Harper and Jensen (2010) explored how early adolescence is influenced by the sibling relationship. The study took place in a northwest United States city, where face-to-face interviews were conducted over a one-year period and analyzed using multiple group analysis. The research revealed that sibling relationships have both a positive and negative influence on adolescence, with more significance being placed on affection than sibling hostility and more significance than parental influence. The findings also suggest that sibling relationships are more parallel based on closeness in age when compared to more parental and hierarchical relationships, and sibling influence is far more influential than parents in outcomes in adolescence. The limitations of the study include short-term sibling self-report over a 12-month period. However, the results imply that intervention

programs and treatment planning for prevention would profit from emphasizing the importance and uniqueness of the sibling relationship.

McHale, Ungar, and Whiteman (2012) explored the siblings' centrality in family life, disparities in sibling relationship quality, and the significance of the sibling relationship on childhood and adolescence adjustment and development. The results revealed that sibling influences develop not only sibling framework but also by the roles of siblings in larger family systems. While siblings can be considered the building blocks of the overall family structure and major players in family dynamics, their roles remain overlooked by family scholars. Therefore, incorporating sibling studies into family research may offer unique insights into the family functioning and socializing systems.

In a meta-analysis, Buist et al. (2013) investigated the link between sibling relationship quality (conflict, warmth, and differential treatment) from childhood to adolescence. The study examined 12,257 children and adolescents from 34 studies. The results revealed that in the presence of less sibling conflict and differential treatment and more warmth among siblings there are significantly lower amounts of internal and external problems. Additionally, the results indicated variations within the sibling dynamic are essential when studying psychopathology and the influence of marital relationships and parent-child relationships. This current meta-analysis serves a reminder that the sibling relationship continues to demand more attention in research.

The sibling subsystem is considered a very important part of the family system (Brody, 2013; Sharpe & Rosenblatt, 2009; Stocker, 2013). While most societies emphasize the parent-child relationship, there is a relatively low amount of emphasis

placed on the relationships among siblings (Brody, 2013; Diehl & Hay, 2011, Gubbins, Perosa, & Bartle-Haring, 2010; Lobato, 2015; Mackay & Brown, 2013; Mullis & Edwards, 2011; Steele, 2010). While sibling relationships play a very vital role in our overall development as individuals, they often create as much, if not more frustration, joy, anger, and pleasure in our lives (Steele, 2010; Vivona, 2013; Whiteman et al., 2011). Sibling relationships are usually the longest relationships an individual will experience since siblings tend to live longer than parents and begin long before we establish our first friendships (Conger & Little, 2010; Cook, 2007; Whiteman et al., 2011). The dynamics among siblings are so diverse and complex; they often repel any attempt at scientific inquiry (Cook, 2007; Flaskas, 2012; Heintzleman et al., 2014). Many scientists have attempted to characterize sibling relationship dynamics and behavior and classify it into distinct themes, but in general sibling relationship continue to be under studied and, therefore, a growing phenomenon (Heintzleman et al., 2014; Howard et al., 2010; Howe & Recchia, 2014; Kramer, 2010).

According to Reiners (2012), a phenomenon is something that can be understood through an individual's awareness of certain concepts, and every concept bestows and essence. This proposed research study explored the essence of how being a sibling in an alcohol-focused family system influences triangulation and self-differentiation of an individual. Husserl (1931) provided a foundational framework for seminal writing on the understanding of lived experiences through phenomenology. The following literature review provides an overview of the recent literature and seminal works detailing the

importance of the sibling relationship and the influence of parental alcoholism on sibling triads.

In the late 1990s, the sibling relationship became the focus for many mental health professionals. With more than 90% of the population in Western cultures having either a step, half, adoptive or biological sibling (WHO, 2014), the relevance of this relationship continues to increase. Individuals who are a part of family in which siblings are present, feel an increased sense of support and this level of support extends into adulthood (Brelsford; 2013; Brody, 2013; Buist, Dekovic, & Gerris, 2011; Feinberg & Solmeyer, 2011; Hindman, Riggs, & Hook. 2013; McHale, Updegraff, & Whiteman, 2012; Whiteman, McHale, & Soli, 2011). Many individuals possess an innate fear of being alone, and the support one finds in the sibling relationship allows that fear to subside (Pasternak & Schier, 2012; Peleg, 2014). There is an inexplicable unity that exists between siblings that allows them to rely and depend on one another (Peleg, 2014; Steele, 2010). On the other hand, based on the intricacies and challenges of the sibling relationship, one may often define who they are as an individual (Steele, 2010; Stocker, 2013).

There are some factors that add to the intricacy of the sibling relationship, such as age, birth order, and gender. Having older sibling can often reinforce values and life skills that are needed to survive later in life (Buist & Vermande, 2014; Feinberg, Solmeyer, & McHale, 2012). Older siblings often teach sharing, teamwork, considering others feelings, boundaries and the need for time for themselves (Buist et al., 2014; Cicirelli, 2013). Feinberg et al. (2012) associated academic success, competence among

peers, success in romantic relationships, as well as, low self-esteem, depression, risk-taking behaviors and disorderly conduct from youth to adulthood with the sibling relationships. Additionally, teens that have strong relationships with their siblings are more empathetic when compared to teens without strong connections (Lam, Solmeyer, & McHale, 2012).

### **Alcohol-Focused Family System**

An alcohol-focused family system is often associated with loss, distress, and tension among the family members (Anda et al., 2014; Adelson, 2010; Haverfield & Theiss, 2016). An alcoholic can easily destroy family connectedness and thrust the entire system into chaos. Taken together, the countless difficulties that an alcohol-focused family system experiences make them more susceptible to trauma, future addiction and suffering from a chronic mental illness (Sher, Waltizer, Wood, & Brent, 2009; Shumway et al., 2013). Currently, there are millions of families influenced by alcohol abuse that are trying to cope with the adverse effects (Adelson, 2010; Beletis & Brown, 2009; Copello et al., 2010). In many cases, the profound influence of living in this type of environment is not realized until much later in life (Haverfield & Theiss, 2016; Richards & Nelson, 2012; Ryan, 2012). In their futile attempts to survive in a home that is both dysfunctional and deficient of any type of consistency, boundaries and healthy parental love, children are forced to develop coping skills and defense mechanisms at a very early age (Black, Bucky, & Wilder, 2008; Cook, 2007; Howard et al., 2010).

An individual is a member of a system, and a family is the most recognized human system (Becvar & Becvar, 2012; Stocker, 2013). “Circular causality,” is a term



developed by family system theorists that refer to the fact that the activity of one person in the system generates a response from others in the system (Kim-Appel & Appel, 2015; Lobato, 2015; Stocker, 2013). When stress is placed on a family system, members of the family system struggle to gain or maintain balance within the system (Ackerman et al., 2011; Beletis & Brown, 2009; Braitman et al., 2009; Tinnfalt, Eriksson, & Brunnberg, 2011). For the alcohol-focused family system, balance can take on various behaviors, ranging from enabling or maladaptive to extreme dysfunction (Braitman et al., 2009; Byng-Hall, 2008; Cook, 2007; Dodd & Roberts, 2010; Heintzelman et al., 2014). According to Berends et al., (2012) the individuals in an alcohol-focused family system go through many stages. These stages include but are not limited to, dishonesty, denial, and manipulation in an attempt to bring balance back to the system (Anda et al., 2014; Berends et al., 2012; Richards & Nelson; 2012; Manton et al., 2014). Research and clinical observations can shed some light on methods used to gain and maintain balance in this type of system.

One primary difference that arises within the family system is the various roles among siblings (Cook, 2007; Flaskas, 2012; Howard et al., 2010). Extensive research with an alcohol-focused family system has explored sibling interactions and the roles each may assume, specifically, the hero, the scapegoat, the mascot, and the lost child (Howard et al., 2010; Kim-Appel & Appel, 2015; Kramer, 2010; Low, Short, & Synder, 2012). Siblings assume these roles to bring homeostasis or some level of balance and survival to the system. Fischer et al (2005) examined how parental alcoholism and family dysfunction are directly related to sibling role differences within the family system. The

study consisted of 29 college freshman sibling pairs and their younger siblings. The study revealed that both the hero and the lost child roles were significantly associated with parental alcoholism. Additionally, variations of codependency were also significantly related to family dysfunction.

Current research reveals that alcohol use affects and disrupts the entire family system. It also indicates that the family system can have either a positive or negative influence on the individuals within the system (Becvar & Becvar, 2012; Haverfield & Theiss, 2016; Howe & Reechia, 2014; Stocker, 2013; Vernig, 2011). Many past researchers consider the sibling relationship the cornerstone of the family system and this relationship fulfills a vital role in the overall development of family dynamics (Buist et al., 2013; Howe & Reechia, 2014; Lamb et al., 2014; Stocker, 2013). Although the sibling relationship is believed to be a powerful force within the family system, it has been highly disregarded by scholars who explore intimate relationships (McHale et al., 2012; Stocker, 2013; Tinnfalt, Eriksson, & Brunnberg, 2011). Sibling interactions and their assumed roles have been researched; however, this research has also been limited to how parental alcoholism has affected individual sibling role differences.

Most current research focuses on the actual alcoholic within the system and how they relate to others within the system. A gap in the literature was found regarding how self-differentiation and triangulation among multiple siblings within an alcohol-focused family system is influenced. Although each person's developmental path may differ greatly, the exposure to parental alcoholism has an adverse effect on the overall family dynamic and each sibling (Mehri et al., 2011; Richards & Nelson, 2012; Sher, Walitzer,

Wood, & Brent, 2009). As aforementioned, this study aimed to fill the gap in the literature by highlighting how parental alcoholism influences triangulation and self-differentiation within the sibling system. A transcendental phenomenological analysis explored the research participants lived experiences.

### **Summary**

Alcohol use influences families, communities, and individuals and often results in a hectic home environment (Velleman, 2010), with long-term adverse effects on the children raised in this type of environment (Richards & Nelson, 2012). Past research has addressed the psychological and emotional damage that individuals raised in alcohol-focused system experience and the profound effect alcohol has on their ability to engage in normal relationships (Brown, 2011; Endendijk et al., 2013; Lam et al., 2012; Richards & Nelson, 2012). Due to the extreme damage caused by being raised in this type of environment, individuals are prone to developing codependent relationships and multiple failed relationships (Richards & Nelson, 2012; Ryan, 2007). Members of an alcohol-focused family system become experts in hiding their pain; as they have learned how to simply survive (Belles, Budde, & Klein, 2011; Ryan, 2007).

Over the last several years, the research and awareness concerning the emotional, physical and psychological stress experienced by individuals raised in an alcohol-focused family system has rapidly increased (Adelson, 2010; Lander et al., 2013; Lee & Williams, 2013; Ray et al., 2009; Ryan, 2007; Selbekk, 2014). Past literature also suggests that the exposure to parental alcoholism has become a central element in the lives, behaviors, personality, feelings, social adjustment and overall progress in the life of

most ACOA (Adelson, 2010; Anthenelli, 2012; Black, Bucky, & Wilder, 2008). In addition to the aforementioned, the alcohol-focused family system promotes constant threats of stability, miscommunication, and misunderstanding (Adelson, 2010; Black, Bucky, & Wilder, 2008).

The sibling relationship is considered an important factor within the family system and its influence extends the entire life span (Hindman, Riggs, & Hook, 2013; Lamb & Sutton-Smith, 2013; McHale et al., 2012). Within the sibling subsystem, individuals learn to practice certain skills, boundaries, daily living tactics, conflict resolution, and develop a sense of self and belonging (Ackerman et al., 2011; Buist & Vermande, 2014; Kim-Appel & Appel, 2015). The sibling relationship has been described as being the most influential relationship in an individual's life superseding even the parent-child relationship and intimate relationships (Ackerman et al., 2011; Boyd, 2013; McHale et al., 2012; Padilla-Walker et al., 2010; Whiteman et al., 2011).

While this literature review highlights the significance of the sibling relationship and how alcohol abuse can influence the family and sibling system based on the comprehensive set of risk factors, there is a need to understand how parental alcoholism influences self-differentiation and triangulation within the sibling relationship. There are studies that address the resilience of children who are raised in alcoholic family system and how they become experts in hiding their pain, as they have learned how to survive in a dysfunctional environment (Belles, Budde, & Klein, 2011; Brown, 2011; Klosterman et al., 2011; Ryan, 2007). There has also been extensive developmental literature that describe how children model their parents behaviors, while relatively little research has

explored how triangulation and self-differentiation influence the sibling relationship when parental alcoholism is present (Beletis & Brown, 2009; Dallos & Vetere, 2012; Fosco & Grych, 2008; Howe & Reechia, 2014; Orford et al., 2010). Research about triangulation and self-differentiation has focused on the entire family and marital relationships and their children (Howe & Reechia, 2014; Peleg, 2014; Sharpe & Rosenblatt, 2009; Woodcock, 2009; Titelman, 2008). Therefore, this research is necessary to help understand whether parental alcoholism influences sibling triangulation and self-differentiation, especially later in life.

The study may fill the gap in the literature by providing information about how triangulation and self-differentiation are influenced by sibling relationships in an alcohol-focused family system. Chapter 3 provides a detailed design of the data collection and analysis of this study.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

In this study, I used a qualitative phenomenological research design. According to Van Manen (2014), a phenomenon reveals itself through something that can be explored or observed. In essence, phenomenological research aims to uncover the basic principles of the phenomenon being studied, and to identify the phenomena as it is seen by others (Bevan, 2014; Van Manen, 2014). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore how parental alcoholism influences sibling triangulation and self-differentiation. According to Woodcock (2009) triangulation is the process in which one family member refuses to communicate directly with another family member, but will communicate with a third family member, causing the third member to become a part of the triangle. Peleg (2014) defined self-differentiation as the capacity of an individual to maintain his or her identity, feelings, and beliefs. In Chapter 3, I discuss my reason for choosing a phenomenological research method and offer an explanation of the research design and my role as researcher in the study. Additionally, Chapter 3 includes a synopsis of data collection methods, sample size, and sampling strategy, and an outline of the data collection and analysis process. Finally, I conclude this chapter with a discussion of data trustworthiness, the participant's safety, and ethical considerations.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

The research questions that guide this study are:

1. How does being raised in an alcoholic family system influence sibling relationships?

2. How is triangulation among siblings influenced by parental alcoholism?
3. How is self-differentiation among siblings influenced by parental alcoholism?

### **Interpretative and Descriptive Phenomenology**

According to Bevan (2014) and West (2013), a suitable research design is one that provides the best answers to the questions asked in the study. In this study, the research questions were centered on how triangulation and self-differentiation are influenced within the sibling relationship in an alcohol-focused family system. Finlay (2012) described phenomenology as the study of lived experiences, and Bevan (2014) described it as an attempt to reveal meaning in everyday life experiences. In this study, I explored the phenomenon of triangulation and self-differentiation among siblings in alcohol-focused family systems.

In order to establish the most appropriate phenomenological research method, it is important the researchers understand the basic principles that support the different phenomenological designs. Phenomenological research can be either interpretive or descriptive (Kaffle, 2014; McConnell-Henry, Chapman & Francis, 2011; Reiners, 2012). Interpretive phenomenology, developed by Heidegger (1962), reveals *how* people experience a phenomenon based on how they interpret lives experiences (McConnell-Henry, Chapman, & Francis, 2009; Reiners, 2012; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012; West, 2013). Descriptive phenomenology, developed by Husserl (1970), is epistemological (knowing) in that it strives to uncover what is known through descriptions of a phenomenon from research study participants (Bevan, 2014; McConnell-Henry et al., 2009; Reiners, 2012; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012).

Descriptive or transcendental phenomenology seeks to describe individuals' experiences from their own perspectives (Kaffle, 2013; Reiners, 2012; Smith et al., 2012).

### **Descriptive Phenomenological Analysis**

I used this study to learn more about (a) how parental alcohol use influences triangulation and self-differentiation in the sibling unit, and (b) the implications siblings attribute to their experiences. The goal of descriptive phenomenology is to gather deep, detailed descriptions of an individual's experience or worldview (Husserl, 1970).

Descriptive phenomenology offers a basis for unearthing shared experiences and universal themes in the sample population (Bevan, 2014; Husserl, 1970; Kaffle, 2013). A common assumption of this particular approach is that study participants have a clear understanding of their experience. In order to discover a core understanding to the experience, the study participants are asked to describe their awareness of a phenomenon through emotion, memory, imagination, or thought. This implies that the phenomenon can best be understood by revisiting the lived experience of the phenomena.

Descriptive phenomenology offers a method I used to answer the research questions in order to fill the gap in the current body of literature. By using this approach, I was able to gain a clearer understanding of sibling relationship dynamics based on emotions, memories, thoughts, and imaginations as recalled by the study participants. A number of empirical and narrative reports have shown how alcoholism influences individuals and their relationships with others in the family system; however, limited attention has been given to sibling experiences and relationships in the family system (Howard et al., 2010). Most research regarding sibling relationships has been based on



information provided by others in the family system and not on information from the siblings themselves. Moyson and Roeyers (2012) conducted a phenomenological study to explore and compare sibling relationships from both the sibling and parental perspectives. This research revealed a discrepancy between parental and sibling perspectives, suggesting the need to further explore data directly from siblings regarding their relationships. In this study, I focused on the sibling groupings only, and worked to gain information from sibling perspectives as it related to self-differentiation and triangulation.

The aim of descriptive phenomenology is to reveal that which is already known to the knower (Husserl, 1970) by purposefully focusing on developing a description of experiences and allowing the participants to share what is most valuable to them (Kaffle, 2013; Van Manen, 2014). In this study, the “knower” (sibling) was my primary focus. I sought to increase scholarly knowledge about sibling experiences in an alcohol-focused family system free of the perceptions of others in the family system. Descriptive phenomenology aims to gather rich and detailed descriptions of human experiences (Bevan, 2013; Van Manen, 2014). By using this approach, I was able to acquire rich and detailed descriptions of the sibling relationship from siblings and discover common themes that emerged from the data I collected from the identified sample.

### **Other Qualitative Approaches**

In an attempt to discover the most suitable method to answer the research questions, I reviewed and considered other qualitative approaches. Below, I offer an

overview of other qualitative approaches with justifications for why these approaches were inappropriate for my needs.

According to Patton (2014), grounded theory involves a specific group of systematic methodological steps in order to develop a theory from qualitative data. Rather than establishing a definite sample, grounded theorists interview a number of participants till saturation occurs and no new data emerges (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). Glaser (2010) argued that grounded theory supports a design shift from a one-size fits all involvement to a design that is grounded in the research of a target population. During the literature review, I found that the sibling relationship is different from any other relationship and usually outlast most other relationships. Therefore grounded theory may be beneficial in future research to help develop strategies to improve sibling relationships based on individual needs and other family dynamics.

Ethnographic research centers on a particular population and its development, and reflects commonalities in the group (Westbrook, 2008). According to Westbrook (2008), ethnographic research is designed to explore a cultural phenomenon that the researcher observes from within the group. Individuals who share the same environment will unavoidably develop patterns of behavior and interactions based on group expectations and shared beliefs (Patton, 2014 Westbrook, 2008). My study was based in North Carolina, and I focused on the sibling unit in the alcohol-focused family system. Sibling perspectives could deliver opportunities for ethnographic research into behaviors patterns and shared beliefs about two groups. However, the focus of ethnography is the day-to-day life of a specific group and not a phenomenon.

Narrative research is a qualitative approach centered on an epistemological belief that individuals understand life experiences through story telling (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2013). If my goal were to gather siblings' narratives of their experiences and not to understand how a phenomenon was described or understood by a specific group (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2013), I would have used a narrative research method. Narrative research was not appropriate for the study because the problem identified was most appropriately addressed with questions exploring sibling lived experiences.

A case study is used to explore an organization, individual, action, or event by presenting a profound description and analysis of the case under study for a specified period of time (Yin, 2017). If I had used a case study, I would have used siblings from a family system as a case and the alcohol-focused family system as a unit of analysis. According to Yin (2017), case studies are not the recommended method for researching abstract phenomenon; therefore, a case study would not have served as an appropriate method to address my research problem.

### **Role of the Researcher**

One of the main differences between descriptive and interpretive phenomenology is the role of the researcher. This includes researcher biases, judgments, and opinions towards the phenomenon. According to Husserl (1970), a descriptive phenomenologist uses bracketing to address researcher bias. Tufford and Newman (2012) described bracketing as process of checking judgments and beliefs regarding a phenomenon to see it more clearly. Husserl (1970) also suggested that bracketing is important for the

researcher to identify individual biases and establish a connection with a particular phenomenon. This can be accomplished by self-reflection practices of researchers to help identify their beliefs pertaining to the phenomenon being studied, then by setting aside personal beliefs in order to see the phenomenon as it is (McConnell-Henry, Chapman, & Francis, 2011; Tufford, 2014). By journaling these reflections, researchers become mindful of their assumptions and biases and are therefore able to set them aside and carry out the research process without any predetermined ideas or notions about the subject/topic of the study (Tufford, 2014; Van Manen, 2014).

According to McConnell-Henry et al. (2009), most researchers are unable to separate their biases from interpretation. This often results in researchers not being fully aware of biases and judgments until they face them in the experiences of the participants (Giorgi, 2009; Smith et al., 2012). Therefore, it is necessary for researchers to re-examine collected data from interviews until they reach a point of understanding of the participants' lived experiences (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2012). As the researchers become more able to separate their foresight and gain an increased knowledge base from the participants, a more detailed explanation of the lived experiences will develop from descriptive to the interpretive (Smith et al., 2012; Van Manen, 2014).

My personal interest and curiosity in this topic derives from my childhood and adult life experiences. I was raised in an alcohol-focused family system and am now an adult child of an alcoholic. I am the oldest (sibling) of three children. My younger brother is an alcoholic. My younger brother and I are in triangulated relationship with my middle

brother; my alcoholic father and I are in a triangulated relationship with my mother and my mother and middle brother are in a triangulated relationship with my father. While I am aware of these triangulated relationships, this has become the norm for my family interactions; therefore, I trust that I hold no judgments or bias as to the efficacy of the research process. I am aware of issues that may arise during the research process.

Through both personal and professional experiences, I am well aware of the neglect placed on sibling dynamics in an alcohol-focused family system as well as triangulation and self-differentiation among siblings. A combination of factors led me to pursue this track regarding siblings and the alcohol-focused family system, only to discover a gap in literature as it relates to siblings, triangulation and self-differentiation, especially in the alcohol-focused family system. It is my intention to document my thoughts and reflections on the subject and through an increased consciousness, successfully setting aside any personal biases and/or assumptions. While my family of origin was influenced by parental alcoholism, we did not take part in any treatment to address the parental alcoholism and were not aware of the concepts of triangulation and self-differentiation and the influence it had on the entire family system and especially the sibling system. Based on the fact that my family was not involved in any type of treatment and not aware of the concepts addressed in the study, I believe I hold no biases related to this research study, although I am aware that numerous responses to triangulation and self-differentiation are possible.

In my current profession, as a family counselor, I facilitate groups with families and work with individuals who suffer from wide variety of mental illnesses many as a

result of substance abuse. Through my professional experiences, I am aware of the need to address sibling dynamics and build healthier sibling bonds. I did not choose any person(s) with whom I have a personal or professional relationship to participate in this study, thus avoiding any distinction of power that may arise between the research participants and myself.

### **Participants**

The study sample was comprised of self-identified adult siblings who were raised in an alcohol-focused family system. A minimum of two siblings from the same family of origin was recruited, with at least six and no more than twelve research participants. All adult participants are residents of the State of North Carolina, specifically rural areas from the Triad. The Triad includes: Winston-Salem, Greensboro, and High Point.

### **Sampling Strategy**

According to Lewis (2015), qualitative researchers use purposeful sampling strategies to establish the type of participants to use in the study. This denotes a planned approach to participant selection, founded on certain life experiences (Dworkin, 2012; Lewis, 2015). The research participants for this research study were purposefully selected, based on criterion sampling strategy. Dworkin (2012), defines a criterion sampling strategy as one that seeks certain individuals based on a specific criteria or particular experience. The following provides a description of the specific criteria used to purposefully select the participants for the proposed study.

**Adult Siblings**

Each participant of the study was at least 18 years of age or older and have at least one sibling who is also 18 or older. The siblings shared the same biological parents and family of origin, therefore siblings, stepsiblings and half-siblings, who were not raised in the same household, will be omitted from the study.

**Parental Alcoholism or Alcohol Use Disorder**

The criterion listed in the DSM-V was used to explain alcoholism and/or alcohol use disorder for this study. Alcoholism, also known as alcohol use disorder is a chronic and progressive disease that involves problems controlling drinking, preoccupation with alcohol, continual alcohol use without thought of consequences, physical dependence and rapid withdrawal symptoms when attempting to stop drinking (APA, 2013). A parent is defined as a key provider in the home, such as a mother, father or an individual responsible for the care of another from childhood to adulthood. The participants were asked to remember one parent who exhibited at least three of the DSM-V criteria for alcoholism over a 12 month period: (a) consumption of alcohol taken in large amounts over a longer time period than intended; (b) extreme amounts of time participating in activities that require obtain and using alcohol and recovering from the effects; (c) a strong desire to use alcohol; (d) several futile attempts to stop or control use of alcohol; (e) intermittent alcohol use which results in an inability to meet life obligations at home, work, or school; (f) persistent alcohol use despite reoccurring interpersonal and social issues caused by or intensified by alcohol; (g) inability or failure to participate in occupational, social, or recreational activities due to alcohol use; (h) regular use on

alcohol in physically hazardous situations; (i) consistent use despite an awareness of chronic physical or psychological problems that will be worsened by continued alcohol use; (j) increased alcohol intake to reach the same effect or a significantly lessened effect from the same consumption amount; (k) withdrawal is revealed by withdrawal syndrome traits (APA, 2013).

### **North Carolina Residency**

Research participants must be residents of North Carolina, specifically the Triad, which includes Winston-Salem, Greensboro, and High Point.

### **Sample Size**

The sample size for this research study was determined by examining current phenomenological studies and other texts that relate to the purpose of the proposed study. Therefore, the sample size for this study was a minimum of six and a maximum of 12. The literature reveals that sample size in phenomenological studies vary based on the scope to exploration of the identified phenomenon (Clearly, Horsfall, & Hayter, 2014). For example, Howard et al. (2010) conducted a phenomenological study about the influence of parental alcoholism on the sibling relationship, with a sample size of seven. On the other end of the spectrum using a much larger sample size, Milevsky and Heerwagen (2013), conducted a phenomenological inquiry about sibling relationships and transitioning into adulthood with a sample size of 52. Howard et al., (2010) sought to explore a phenomenon by using a smaller sample size and Milevsky and Heerwagen (2013), sought to capture the breadth of the phenomenon. Therefore, a smaller sample size was chosen for this proposed study based on the need to explore depth, rather than



breadth of sibling experience of triangulation and self-differentiation in an alcohol-focused family system.

### **Research Procedures**

According to Felsen et al. (2010), recruiting participants to engage in research where difficult topics are discussed can promote a number of challenges, as the prospective participants may be hesitant to discuss sensitive topics or be concerned about confidentiality and anonymity. When recruiting participants from vulnerable populations to discuss difficult topics, it may be helpful to collaborate with gatekeepers who can provide access to prospective participants; recruit prospective participants face-to-face; use word of mouth from prospective participants and gatekeepers; and trust building with participants (Namageyo-Funa et al., 2014). The World Service Organization of Adult Children of Alcoholics offers meetings that are open to the public. These meetings are offered worldwide, with a local chapter holding meetings in Winston Salem, North Carolina and Greensboro, North Carolina. In order to recruit prospective participants, I attended the open meetings and recruited participants using a face-to-face strategy. Although, I am not participating member of the group, nor have been in the past, entrance did not pose a problem, as the groups are open to the public.

In order to gain access to the group, I contacted the gatekeeper, or group contact person of the open meeting. I offered a brief synopsis of the study and introduced myself during the group meeting. During this time, I also provided, a description of my research topic, data collection procedures and techniques, and explained the overall purpose of the study and its implication for social change. After this explanation, I offered my contact

information and then invited prospective participants to contact me if interested to gain additional information or to become a research participant. By using word of mouth from the participants, I was able to retain siblings from the same family of origin.

### **Data Collection**

Participants contacted me by email or telephone. During our first contact, I confirmed inclusion criteria and scheduled meeting to discuss study details, review and sign consent forms, and move forward with interviews. Research participants were informed of all data collection procedures, to avoid any confusion or surprises. Eight interviews lasted 90 minutes, while four interviews lasted approximately 2 hours. Siblings were interviewed separately, in a semi-private, quiet place. A private room at a local library was the location setting. I was able to complete four interviews a week making the data collection process take approximately three weeks. To guarantee confidentiality of collected data and participant anonymity, a combination of alphabetical and numerical codes were used as opposed to names when identifying and recording data and was deleted after data analysis (Namageyo-Funa et al., 2014).

### **Interviews**

According to Jacobs and Furgerson (2012), interviews can be semi-structured, structured or informal. Effective interview strategies aid in engaging research participants and encourage them to offer clear and helpful information (Jacobs & Schimmel, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). Prior to interviews, attention was given to ensuring optimum comfort of the participants. Water and snacks were provided and I made them aware of the restroom location and nearest exit, if needed. According to Jacobs and Furgerson (2012), when

establishing a rapport with the participants, the following behavioral skills proved beneficial:

1. Appropriate level of eye contact
2. A welcoming and conversational voice tone
3. Maintaining an appropriate and respectful distance (proper boundaries)
4. Asking open-ended questions
5. Empathetic response
6. Proper use of probes

Semi-structured interviews were used to ask the interview question, using prompts centered on the Perceptions of Quality in a Sibling Relationship (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985):

1. How would you describe the experience of having siblings?
2. What are some advantages and disadvantages of having siblings?
3. How would you describe some of the most significant aspect your sibling relationship?
4. Describe a time when you felt influenced or inspired by one or more of your siblings?
5. How did you and your siblings deal with conflict?
6. Did you ever find that when dealing with conflict or other issues, it was easier to address with one sibling as a way to draw another one out?
7. Describe a time(s) when you discussed an issue with one sibling and purposely left out another sibling?

8. Do you think parental alcoholism influenced your relationship with your siblings, and if so, how?
9. Do you think parental alcoholism influenced how you feel about yourself, if so, how?
10. How has the way you feel about yourself in comparison to how you feel about your siblings influenced your relationships?
11. How do you interact with your siblings currently?
12. Would you like to add anything else, not addressed in this interview?

An explorative analysis of the interview questions was completed to answer the following research questions:

1. How does being raised in an alcoholic family system influence sibling relationship?
2. How is triangulation among siblings influenced by parental alcoholism?
3. How is self-differentiation among siblings influenced by parental alcoholism?

The analysis of the interview questions provided the data necessary to answer the research questions. Certain questions were designed to facilitate a in-depth reflection of the participants' experience of being a sibling in an alcohol-focused family system and other questions were designed to foster discussion regarding triangulation within the sibling relationship, as well as the influence of self-differentiation among siblings.

### **Informed Consent**

An informed consent is a simple form outlining the study, the interview protocol, and the expectations for additional communication, if needed. Each participant was

thoroughly informed and educated on confidentiality issues, the right to withdraw from the study at any time for any reason, and the anticipated experiences of the interviews. Once each participant was given an adequate amount of time to read and the informed consent and ask questions relating to the study, the consent forms were signed and collected from each study participant.

### **Debriefing after the Interviews**

The overall purpose of the debriefing process is to identify and address any harm, confusion or stress caused to the participants as a result of the interview (APA, 2011). According to Jacobs and Schimmel (2013), the researcher must take the necessary steps to ensure that the participants are not harmed in any way. As part of the debriefing process, conversations were held immediately following the interviews to gain knowledge and feedback about the study and to address and of the participants concerns. As an additional part of the debriefing process, I discussed and explained to the participants that should they feel any difficulty following the interviews, professional counseling is available upon request. Contact information for outside counseling services was provided. The Lighter Side and Awakenings Whole Life Counseling Center will be options for individuals to receive counseling.

Each interview was audiotaped and then later was hand transcribed. Any significant observations were recorded in a notebook, in order to capture significant details, such as body language and other non-verbal clues that will allow for an additional analysis after the interviews are completed.

According to Jacob and Furgerson (2012), using interview guides are helpful, because they allow the researcher the opportunity to follow the same lines of inquiry with every research participant while ensuring consistency of questions among all participants. An interview guide promoted a clear focus during the data collection process while allowing the interviews to remain both fluid and conversational (Jacobs & Furgerson, 2012). Additionally, Jacobs and Schimmel (2013) suggests that by using standardized probes, the researcher will be able to explore certain themes in much greater detail. The following standardized probes were used in this study:

- Could you please tell me more about that?
- Can you explain that in a little more detail?
- Can you please give me an example?
- Can you be more specific?
- What are your thoughts about this?

Each participant was given a gift card at the end of each interview. This was given as a token of appreciation to the participant for taking the time to share their experience.

### **Data Analysis**

According to Finlay (2012), the goal for qualitative research is to identify basic concepts and themes within the data and any connection between them. Qualitative researchers aim to analyze data by searching and uncovering concepts and themes within the data; therefore, the ultimate goal in qualitative research is to identify themes (Finlay, 2012; Rennie, 2012).

The data obtained from the interviews was transcribed manually. Hand transcription gives the researcher the opportunity to become more familiar with the data (Janesick, 2011). According to Maxwell (2013), qualitative data can be analyzed by coding, memo-writing, contemplation, creating, graphic displays, and reading and listening. All interviews were hand transcribed. The following provided an explanation of the steps that were utilized to analyze the transcripts that were gathered from the participants recorded interviews.

### **Reading and Listening**

According to Bevan (2014), before analyzing the data, the researcher must provide a written account of their thoughts and experiences in relation to the phenomenon being researched. This information was kept in a research journal that was used before, during and after data collection. After individual interviews were completed, the transcripts were analyzed. Smith et al. (2012) suggested that transcripts should be read while listening to the recording. Transcripts were read and re-read in an effort to become more familiar with the text. After each transcribed interview, I notated distinctions between specific interpretations, descriptions, and events (Rennie, 2012; Smith et al., 2012). These notations allowed any separation of my early views about the interviews and transcripts for the actual interviews (Dworkin, 2012; Smith et al., 2012).

### **Memo-Writing**

As aforementioned, reading and re-reading the transcripts provided the opportunity to make distinctions between specific interpretations, descriptions and events (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014; Smith et al., 2012). While reading each transcript, I

made note of these distinctions. Memo writing allowed for the organization of early thoughts and reactions about the transcripts, while enabling the researcher to continue to make the necessary distinctions (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014).

### **Coding**

Qualitative researchers use inductive reasoning, which seek to offer strong support (not absolute proof of) the accuracy of the results (Lipscomb, 2012). According to Smith et al., (2012) inductive reasoning begins with observing specific examples and forming generalizations about the phenomenon being studied. Coding is a qualitative method used to organize qualitative data into themes and categories, which promotes inductive reasoning (Mantere & Ketokivi, 2013; Shaw, 2013). Shaw (2013) offer four methods to that will aid in the discovery of specific data themes that will be used as a coding guide in the proposed study. The four methods are based on: word analysis, careful examination of blocks of text, the deliberate analysis of linguistic components, and physically manipulating the text (Shaw, 2013).

### **Word Analysis**

In an attempt to understand what the research participants are attempting to convey, it is necessary to look at the actual words they are using in response to the interview questions. According to Shaw (2013) certain techniques should be used for data analysis of the transcribed data. These techniques involve searching for duplicated words and identifying significant original terms. When reading the data, I focused on repeated words that appear throughout the text. The use of the “Find” command will aid in



identifying words that appears frequently and allow for the development of word-frequency list for identified texts.

### **Examining Large Blocks of Text**

This technique involves comparing and contrasting themes in the text that share similarities and differences (Lipscomb, 2013; Shaw, 2013). Through the compare and contrast of larger blocks of text, I was able to make comparisons of answers among participants. Bogdan and Biklen (2009) stated this method is beneficial for researchers who aim to understand how people solve problems and manage social relationships.

### **Analysis of Linguistic Components**

The deliberate analysis of linguistic features helps reveals metaphors, modification, and associations within the data. Transitions, like “now” and “then” identify chronological sequences on date, while connectors like, “if” or “because” denote a causal connection among ideas (Lipscomb, 2012).

### **Physical Manipulation of Text**

Mantera and Ketokivi (2013) stated that two examples of text manipulation are cutting and pasting and pawing through the text. Cutting and pasting key quotes and phrases onto cards and then arranging the cards into like groups promote sub theme identification (Shaw, 2013; Tufford & Newman, 2012). Pawing through the text involved using different color pens to highlight patterns in the text (Bogdan & Biklen, 2009; Shaw, 2013).

In summary, open-coding techniques were used for this study and themes derived from a thorough examination of the participants’ answers. Coding can be either manual

or electronic, based on research size, researcher knowledge, and available funding (Lipscomb, 2012).

### **Quality Assurance**

In qualitative research, trustworthiness of data is determined by credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Shaw, 2013). Credibility was determined by ensuring that rigorous techniques are used in data collection and interpretation (Lipscomb, 2012; Shaw, 2013). During this process, I carried out a thorough and honest self-examination of biases toward the phenomenon and disclosed this information. Additionally, member checking was used to determine credibility. For this study, the participants were provided with a summary of the researchers explanation of member checking

Establishing and maintaining a thorough audit trail helped determine dependability for the study. According to Smith et al. (2012), a detailed audit trail includes an interview guide, field notes, interview recordings, hardcopy and electronic transcripts, and the entire research proposal. The audit trail provided a clear guide of each step in the research process and served as a means of ensuring the research was carried out properly and with integrity. Finally, the role of the researcher throughout the research process was outlined and released to determine confirmability (Smith et al., 2012).

Transferability will guarantee that the experiences of each participant are understood by those who read the study (Castro et al., 2011). Rich descriptions were used to convey the experiences of participants' in a way that the reader will understand what it was like to have lived the participant's life (Lipscomb, 2012). Data was reported by

detailed and direct quotes to represent the relationships, events, experiences and thoughts processes that are associated with the participant's sibling relationship, triangulation, and self-differentiation and parental alcoholism.

Confirmability is the level to which the researcher is able to exhibit impartiality in their analysis of data based on a confirmability audit. An audit trail for this study contained raw data, an analysis plan and notes, field notes, and manual and electronic transcripts.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Each participant was informed about the purpose of the research study and what was expected from each participant. Each participant was asked to complete an informed consent. At this time, I explained to the participants the possibility of disclosing sensitive information about their lived experiences. I discussed with each participant the supports they have in place and assessed their ability to deal with stressful situations. Finally, I reminded the participants that the study is voluntary and explained that they can refuse to answer or opt to answer a question later, or refuse to participate if the discussion becomes too intense.

All electronic data is stored in the password-protected file on researcher's personal computer. Hardcopy data is locked and stored in the home office in a locked file cabinet, which is only accessed for research related purposes. Additionally, I used pseudonyms for the research participants and any parts of their interviews they request to remain confidential will stay confidential. Data will be destroyed according to university guidelines.

### **Summary**

This chapter provides an in-depth overview of descriptive phenomenology and a justification for choosing this method to address the research problem outlined in the proposal. A semi-structured interview guide was created to prompt participation and promote discussion of the lived experiences of adult siblings who were exposed to parental alcoholism. The data analysis plan is outlined, and addresses quality assurance issues, such as confidentiality, safety, risk factors, anonymity, and other ethical considerations. Chapter 4 will present the findings of the research study.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this research study was to explore the influence of parental alcoholism on triangulation and self-differentiation among siblings. I conducted a qualitative, descriptive phenomenological analysis using data collected from the in-depth interviews with sibling groups from six different families. The research questions that guided this study were the following:

1. How does being raised in an alcoholic family system influence sibling relationship?
2. How is triangulation among siblings influenced by parental alcoholism?
3. How is self-differentiation among siblings influenced by parental alcoholism?

In this chapter, I discuss participants' demographics, the setting, interviews, and the processes of transcription and coding for significant themes. The study process progressed inductively from coded units of data to significant themes that developed from the data. I also discuss the approaches I used to ensure transferability, dependability, credibility, and conformability, and I conclude with a detailed summary of the major outcomes as they relate to the research questions.

### **Research Setting/Location**

I conducted the research in the Triad of North Carolina. The Triad of North Carolina is made up of three major cities: Winston Salem, Greensboro, and High Point. All interviews were conducted in a private room in the Forsyth County Library central branch location in Winston Salem, North Carolina. I secured the room before each

interview, and the participants completed and signed an informed consent form prior to participating.

### Demographics

The demographic details of the 12 participants are shown in Table 1

Table 1

#### *Participant Demographics*

Sibling Groups	Sex/Age	Ethnicity	Number of Siblings	Alcoholic Parent
Sibling Group 1				
P1	M/47	African	2	Mother
P2	M/44	American		
Sibling Group 2				
P3	F/62	Caucasian	4	Mother
P4	M/54			
Sibling Group 3				
P5	F/36	Caucasian	3	Father
P6	F/29			
Sibling Group 4				
P7	M/29	African	3	Father
P8	M/36	American		
Sibling Group 5				
P9	M/51	Native	4	Both Parents
P10	F/40	American		
Sibling Group 6				
P11	F/30	African	3	Father
P12	M/43	American		

To be included in the study, each participant had to meet the following demographic criteria: be at least 18 years old, have at least one adult sibling who is also participating in the study, be a resident of North Carolina, and have at least one parent who is an alcoholic. The six sets of siblings were interviewed separately. The 12 research participants established inclusion criteria before participating in the study. All participants completed a brief demographic summary, which included age, number of siblings and age, place of residence, and confirmation that at least one parent was an alcoholic. To ensure confidentiality and address any ethical issues, I have not used the names of the participants. Instead, I used alphanumeric identifiers for Participants 1-12 (P1, P2, etc.).

### **Summary of Participant Profiles and Sibling Groups**

**Sibling Group 1.** Participant 1 was a 47-year-old divorced African American male. Participant 2 was a 44-year old married African American male. Their mother is an alcoholic. They reside in Winston Salem, NC and have an older sister.

**Sibling Group 2.** Participant 3 was a 62-year old married Caucasian female. Participant 4 was a 54-year old single Caucasian male. Their mother is an alcoholic. They reside in Winston- Salem, NC and have two younger brothers and one younger sister.

**Sibling Group 3.** Participant 5 was a 36-year old single Caucasian female. Participant 6 was a 29-year-old divorced Caucasian female. Their father is an alcoholic. They reside in Greensboro, NC and have two older brothers.

**Sibling Group 4.** Participant 7 was a single 29-year old African American male. Participant 8 was a 36-year old married African American male. Their father is an alcoholic. They have an older sister and an older brother.

**Sibling Group 5.** Participant 9 was a 51-year old married Native American male. Participant 10 was a 40-year old married Native American Female. Both of their parents are alcoholics. They reside in High Point, NC and have one older brother and three younger sisters.

**Sibling Group 6.** Participant 11 was a 30-year old single African American female. Participant 12 was a 43-year old married African American male. Their father is an alcoholic. They reside in Winston Salem, NC and they have three older brothers.

### **Demographic Summary**

I interviewed six sibling pairs for this transcendental descriptive phenomenological study. Study participants included five African American males, one African American female, three Caucasian females, one Caucasian male, one Native American male, and one Native American female. All participants were over the age of 18, residents of North Carolina, and reported having at least one alcoholic parent.

### **Data Collection**

As the principal instrument for data collection and analysis, the phenomenological researcher tries to bracket or set aside personal experiences associated with the topic being studied. To reduce bias and explore the phenomenon through the experiences of the research participants, I recorded and documented my personal feelings and experiences relating to triangulation and self-differentiation in the sibling relationship in a research



journal. Before the interview, each participant signed an informed consent form. The consent form contained a summary of the study and Walden University's IRB contact information along with my IRB approval number and expiration date. The approval number is 07-19-17-0328834 and expiration date is July 18, 2018.

The consent form also included the eligibility criteria for inclusion in the study, which each participant acknowledged meeting before each interview.

Once I confirmed that participants met inclusion criteria, I scheduled the time and location of the interview. I facilitated semi-structured, face-to-face interviews using an interview procedure with standard interview probes. Follow-up questions and probes were used to extract and gather detailed descriptions. A copy of the interview guide can be found in Appendix A. Participants were given a gift card at the close of each interview as a token of my appreciation for their time. Eight of the interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes each. Four interviews lasted approximately 120 minutes each. Interviews were conducted in a private room in a local library. I used active listening skills to help participants feel more comfortable when discussing difficult topics and processing their feelings.

I used a digital voice recorder to record each interview. The recorder was tested and re-tested before the interviews to ensure that it was working properly. I used field notes to gather nonverbal cues and responses during the interviews. The field notes assisted me in determining topics that needed to be clarified or re-visited at a later stage of the interview process. At the beginning of each interview, I confirmed that each participant was comfortable and relaxed, and that he or she was fully aware that they had

the right to refuse to answer any question or to stop the interview at any time. Each participant completed the interview without any interruptions or difficulty.

The semi-structured interview procedure permitted open-ended responses to the interview questions. Based on the responses provided by the participants, some of the questions were asked out of order to provide a better flow. Several of the participants started with a narrative description before advancing into deep, richer descriptions. I gave special attention to any changes in speech and rhythm during the interview to determine areas that may need to be revisited later in the discussion. Several of the participants shared deep, detailed information early in the interview process, while others had to be prompted to offer more in-depth responses. At the close of each interview, I scheduled a follow-up meeting to review and discuss the results of the findings and to confirm that the findings truthfully and accurately captured their responses.

I manually transcribed the recordings verbatim, as soon as possible after each interview and saved the transcriptions as Microsoft Word documents. The recordings were played and replayed to confirm transcription accuracy. According to Miles and Huberman (2012), saturation occurs when no new information surfaces. I found that saturation occurred after nine interviews. I consistently followed the data collection procedures outlined in Chapter 3. There were no unusual occurrences during data collection. After transcription was complete, I met with each participant at the local library to provide a summary of the transcription and a description of the themes that I identified from the data collected. The participants found that the summaries provided an accurate account of the interviews.

## **Data Analysis**

A transcendental (descriptive), phenomenological design allowed me to explore experiential data by identifying repeated themes that surfaced in participant responses to the interview questions (Maxwell, 2013). I used the following steps to aid in the process of uncovering themes:

### **Step 1: Listening and Reading**

The initial data analysis process involved listening and re-listening to each participant's recorded responses as they correlated to the research questions. During the process of manual transcription, themes about the data began to emerge. Field notes from the interviews were inserted into the transcriptions.

### **Step 2: Physical Manipulation of Text**

The next phase of the process was to determine important and repetitive statements within the transcriptions. This step involved physically manipulating the data utilizing a mixture of varying methods. Statements with similar meaning were acknowledged using color-coding, and significant statements were documented. These approaches to the analysis of the data permitted the discovery of a combination of thematic clusters with different meanings. A journal was used during this stage of the process to note analytical insights and views as they emerged from the data.

### **Step 3: Coding**

According to Miles and Huberman (2012), coding is a qualitative research technique that is used to organize data into classification and themes that facilitate an inductive reasoning process. For this study, codes were defined as labels that delegate

symbolic meaning to the descriptive material collected in a study (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Three methods were used to aid revealing emerging themes: word analysis (seek repetitive words), draw contrasts and make comparisons, and seek analogies and metaphors. Coding was completed without the use of a computer software program.

#### **Step 4: Identifying Themes**

Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) stated that identifying themes is a method used for including particulars into the general flow of information. The first stage of the data analysis process consisted of line-by-line interpretation and the second stage involved the developing code groupings into headings that indicated related themes across the entire set of data. Clusters of repetitive words were recorded under different headings. Words that portrayed the experience of having a sibling such as “awesome”, “stressful”, “forever friend” and “someone you can grow up with and old with, like a spouse but better, because they are stuck with you,” were examples of repetitive words with a similar theme. A record of comparable and contrasting codes was developed and headings were generated that denoted the emerging themes. Several metaphors emerged from the data. For example, one participant referred to “being on the battlefield” with her siblings, offering a multifaceted and rich reference to the memories of childhood violence. As clusters and codes were observed, many key themes surfaced. The themes that developed from this descriptive analysis are: negative self-worth, unpredictability, humiliation and shame, physical violence, conquer and divide, separation and anxiety, isolation, love and attention, comparison, and jealousy and envy.

## **Data Analysis Results**

The data analysis process included identifying, counting, sorting and exploring different codes in sets of similar meanings, or themes, and focused on the three research questions presented in this study:

1. How does being raised in an alcoholic family system influence sibling relationship?
2. How is triangulation among siblings influenced by parental alcoholism?
3. How is self-differentiation among siblings influenced by parental alcoholism?

The research questions inspired a myriad of responses regarding how alcoholism within the family system influences the sibling relationship. The results of the participants' responses offer details about the participants' experiences and the emerging themes. Each of the themes that emerged is discussed in detail, conveying a deeper understanding of how each sibling was influenced parental alcoholism.

### **Research Question 1**

For this question I asked, How does being raised in an alcoholic family system influence sibling relationship? Based on the participant's responses during the interviews, the common dialogue was supported by the following themes: (a) negative self-worth, (b) unpredictability, (c) humiliation and shame, and (d) physical violence. For example, based on their perception, P1 and P2 shared they had to deal with more extreme competition and severe tension. P1 illustrated this by saying, there is a lot more yelling and fighting and parents just not getting along, which created tension in the house and among the siblings who try to diffuse some situations. Additionally, P1 added that he was

always expected to live up to unrealistic ideal and that his parents wanted to live vicariously through the lives of their children. P5 and P6 both recalled the home being a “war zone” and “walking on egg shells.” P9 and P10 recalled that they always felt like they had to be one step above the other and they both attributed this to being older and more competitive than their younger siblings. When the participants offered insight into how alcoholism influences siblings in general, they shared that it encompassed a myriad of things. P3 stated that, “My father’s alcohol use interfered with my school and social life and when I was able to work, my work life was influenced and I was often left feeling embarrassed because I was not able to do things that my peers did. P4 recalled life being irrational and forcing them to act differently in certain situation, which was often confusing and lead to presenting one way in public. P8 shared that parental alcoholism caused tension and increased conflict towards family members, especially siblings. P9 shared that, older siblings were often controlling and that there was a lack of stability in the home and that the alcoholism was always the central focus. P7 shared that, he always felt like he was being compared to his older siblings.

### **Negative Self-Worth**

Feelings of self-worth refer to the participant’s experiences of feeling ostracized and often neglected by their parents and the influence it had on their life and sibling relationship. Ten responses included statements referencing how parental alcoholism influenced their self-worth, especially within the sibling dynamic. P1 “ I never felt like I was good enough”; P3 “ I felt like my older siblings were favored over me,” ; P8 “ I often slipped through the cracks,” ; P6 “ I never felt important,” ; P2 stated, “Whenever my

mom was drunk, she would call me names and this made me feel bad,” ; P10 “I often felt worthless.” These are some examples of the comments that reflect this theme. Six participants (P2, P4, P6, P7, P9, and P12) stated that siblings were just to do the dirty work and help clean up after their parents and solve their parents’ problems. Four references to “being a scapegoat” to their siblings were recorded (P2, P6, P9, and P12). Four participants indicated they felt like they “sucked at everything” or that they had been complete failures and the cause of many problems in the family (P2, P3, P9, and P11).

### **Unpredictability**

Unpredictability as a theme refers to the patterns of random and unexpected behavior that influenced the live of the participants. All but one of the sibling pairs remembered patterns of unpredictability, and all provided examples. P4 described her childhood experience by using metaphors. “It was always touch and go; we were always on pins and needles, trying to predict the next move and survive.” Later in the interview, she stated:

“That means you had to be ready at all times, you had to stay on your game, because you never knew what was next, you know the next trigger moment.”

P3 and P4 recalled that they never knew when something bad was going to happen. P3 stated, “I slept with one eye open until I moved out.” P4 remembered doing the same thing and shared she still sleeps with one eye open. P9 and P10 recalled being pulled out of the bed to clean the walls and scrub the floor when their parents were drunk.

## **Physical Violence**

Physical violence as a theme refers to the participant's personal attitudes that relate to personal safety. Six participants (P1, P3, P5, P6, P11, and P12) reported physical violence between older siblings and the alcoholic parent, as the older sibling often believed they had to protect the younger siblings. These occurrences are illustrated in the following statements:

I recall my sister hitting my father in the back with a bottle, when he was about to whoop" me after he had been drinking." She was always like my protector; she even favored me over our middle brother, like I was her child. (P3)

"My mother often physically attacked us when she was drinking and my dad would get her off of us. She was mad because she was sleep and said we were making too much noise." (P1)

The primary focus of the research was the alcoholic parent; however, all of the participants reported incidents when the non-alcoholic parent had physically abused them. They all felt like the non-alcoholic parent was taking their frustrations out on them. Additionally, four of them reported never knowing what to expect from either parent (P2, P5, P8, P11). They recalled being pulled out of school for no reason and excessive absences from school. P1 recalled that every time the intercom system came on in her elementary school, her heart rate increased, in fear that she was being called to the office to be signed out of school.



## **Humiliation and Shame**

Humiliation and shame refers to personal attitudes participants used to denote embarrassment and practices related making them feel personally dissatisfied. All participants recalled their childhood as embarrassing and confusing as a result of parental alcoholism. Words such as “horrific,” “disgraceful,” and “deprived” were used to describe their family life. Much of the discord in the home was a result of fear and conflict, and the environment was always hostile. P10 stated, “The hostility was prevalent when the alcohol use was high.” Four of the participants (P1, P2, P7 and P8) reported being placed in temporary custody, which was extremely embarrassing and they recalled that was when they realized they “had problems”. Five of the participants (P1, P4, P7, P10 and P12) shared that at times they just wanted to run away, but feared what would happen if they left home. Life was never stable and all participants recalled dreading coming home. P10 recalled an unusually embarrassing event:

It was my tenth birthday and we had been planning it for a while. I knew it would be a success, because my dad had gone on a fishing trip with his brother. Much to my surprise, he came back early to surprise me. What a surprise. He came back drunk and embarrassed me. He fell on my cake; it was like something you see on TV, but it was my life.

Four of the six female participants (P3, P5, P6, and P10) revealed personal accounts of humiliation and shame. P3 remembered being pushed down the stairs while P6 recalled being made fun of in front of her friends, especially boyfriends. Being female, they felt like they always had to care for their siblings and felt like they did not have a normal

childhood. They shared that they often felt like the mother and was often thrust into the role of caregiver. These same four females recalled horrible name-calling and being blamed for everything. P3 stated, “there was a lot a shame associated with the lies we told in an attempt to seem normal.”

Many detailed accounts of humiliation were recalled. P4 recalled a time when her mom came to the school for lunch and was flirting with her teacher. P11 recalled a time when she was coming home from school, and her dad was “peeing” in the front yard. Financial embarrassment was also an issue with all the participants. They all recalled foreclosure, repossession and late payments on household bills. P3 recalled, pretending as though, she was her mom on the phone, telling lies to get payment extension to avoid electric service from being disconnected and their car being repossessed. The participants’ experiences and response allowed for the development of themes that help understand how parental alcoholism influences the sibling relationships. The next research question (RQ2) explored how triangulation among siblings is influenced by parental alcoholism.

### **Research Question 2**

How is triangulation among siblings influenced by parental alcoholism? This question sought to explore the siblings have on one another and how alcohol use can influence the overall sibling dynamic. Responses to RQ2 revealed information about the sibling-to-sibling dynamics. Additionally, four main themes emerged: (a) the sibling dynamic, (b) conquer and divide, (c) separation and anxiety, (d) isolation.

## **The Sibling Dynamic**

The sibling dynamic as a theme refers to the influence of siblings and their relationship on the group and group development. All the siblings revealed that being raised in an alcoholic family system was a challenge and the sibling dynamic added to the frustration. Several of the participants (P1, P3, and P9) recalled things being a little easier when they were the only one child and that the more children there were, the more complicated things became, as siblings often fought for attention and belonging.

Eight siblings (P1, P2, P4, P6, P8, P9, P11, and P12) reported that parental alcoholism had an adverse effect on the sibling dynamic and that older children often assumed the role as parent to younger siblings, which promoted a distorted sense of power and often alienated them from their younger siblings. This led to resentment and hostility among the sibling pairs. Older siblings served as protectors and older sisters acted like mothers, who would often take advantage of the power that had been forced on them and would begin bullying their younger siblings. Older sisters were recalled as being “overbearing” and “domineering.” Some participants (P2, P4, and P6) accredited the domineering demeanor as a form of love and affection that they did not receive from their parents. The older siblings offered a different viewpoint, describing anger and resentment regarding their forced responsibilities. P12 stated, “When you are the oldest, you have a certain obligation to step up and do what needs to be done.”

Despite the challenges and negative experiences, the sibling relationship was considered a vital source of survival in a highly dysfunctional environment. Siblings were described as “confidants” and “buddies” who offered support, comfort, and leverage. All

participants revealed that their siblings were steady and loving forces in their lives. A myriad of metaphors were used to describe the relationship, such as, P4: “a shoulder to cry on,” P10: “the calm in the storm,” and P6: “someone to help you get through the rough times.

Five siblings (P1, P4, P6, P8, and P9) stated that their parents were “master manipulators” and knew how to play the siblings against one another for their own personal gain. All the siblings that participated in the study are in regular contact with their siblings, and one sibling group (P5 and P6) still lives with their parents in the home they grew up in. The siblings all stated that they wished they could share more about their childhood without so much discontent and feelings of disconnection:

We are still close. They are still my closest allies. We still fuss and fight, but I know she has my back. I mean she will go through the fire with and for me. Life taught us how to be there for one another, but that same life makes it hard for to really talk, you know what I mean. (P2)

Four siblings (P1, P2, P4 and P11) revealed that contact on a regular basis between them as adults is extremely fearful and difficult. They feel this is because they fear too much communication will bring secrets to the surface:

When we see each other, it is touchy-feely, like we are dancing around stuff. The conversation is always on guard. We laugh a lot and have a good time, but once it is time to go our separate ways, we all take a sigh of relief (breathing in and out), like glad that is over. (P1)

Four siblings (P3, P4, P9 and P10) believed their interactions and closeness had increased once their parents died. Two of the siblings (P3 and P4) recalled extreme difficulty in executing the parent's will. Although their parents are no longer with them and they had to decipher through a lot of mess upon them passing, they are grateful for the new-found love and happiness they have found with their siblings since their parents death.

Several participants became emotional when talking about their current relationship with their siblings, as illustrated in the following comments:

“They make my life full. They give me life. I never want to imagine my life without them.” (P11)

“My siblings are my ride or die, for life partners. We go hard for one another, they come before anybody. I know they got me, no matter what.” (P2)

You see, when you grow up like we did, it is hard to trust and even harder to let your guard down. I trust my siblings more than I trust my mate. See, my mate don't know what they know, so he can't hold me down like they can and that is real talk. (P10)

### **Conquer and Divide**

Conquer and divide as a theme relates an individual's ability to gain an advantage over a rival through the use of manipulation. Individual responses were grouped together as different power and control strategies. Three of the participants (P3, P9, and P12) admitted to using age as a means of influence and power and as a means to navigate through stressful family dynamics.

I recall being somewhat of a “bully” to our middle brother. My younger brother and I had a stronger bond and we often used that bond against our middle brother. You see, my baby brother used his youth as a way to control; after all he was the baby. I, on the other hand, used my advanced age to control the situation and the middle sibling was left out. (P1)

P3 remembered that she would often plan out ways to play her younger and older brothers against one another to get what she wanted and to keep them isolated. P4 learned that she could convince her younger sister to do anything, because her younger sister wanted to be just like her. All older siblings learned that age was significant in family order and that the oldest was often revered as knowing the most and being the most powerful and that they were often left in charge during times of difficulty.

I learned that I had to keep some sense of power in order to maintain some control in the home. You know, just like in government in order to successfully break up power, you must conquer to strongest machines. Since I was the only girl, but the oldest, I used my age to conquer that machine. (P1)

Furthermore, in an attempt to conquer, division and manipulation were also documented as a means of control among siblings. Divisive behavior developed as a result of keeping secrets and divided feelings of loyalty and commitment between siblings and parents. Older siblings also recalled learning how to manipulate both their parents and siblings at an early age. Four participants (P1, P3, P9, and P12) acknowledged manipulation as a way to control that was learned from their parents.

Power and control within the sibling subsystem led to the incorporation of certain roles. Participants recollected adopting certain roles to gain power, or observing their siblings adopting certain roles to obtain power. Two participants (P1 and P2) from the family of origin described their roles as sergeant and general. Siblings were considered protectors, but older siblings were more like a boss.

### **Separation and Anxiety**

Separation and anxiety as a theme emerged as participants reflected on their own exclusion from their family that caused angst among siblings. All participants recounted a lot of anxiety among them and their siblings and that seeds of separation had been planted early, but these things only made them stronger. One participant (P12) believed that separation pushed him to succeed and made him try harder, because even though he had siblings he never felt like he belonged to his family or origin. He recalled being told:

“You were found floating down Winston Lake and that they scooped him up just before an alligator got him.”

While he knew that story was not true, he felt it explained why he was so different from his older sister and younger brother. One participant (P4) described herself as “blessed” to come up like she did.

I am strong because of my upbringing. If my father wasn't an alcoholic and my siblings had not ostracized me, I think my life would have been different, not necessarily better, but different. They made me better, without even realizing it, they have been my greatest inspiration, you see, I never wanted to be like any of them.

All of the participants expressed some gratitude for their siblings and the things they did or did not do. One participant (P8) recalled how separation caused him to be fearful, but it turned out to be his greatest gift.

I remember my older sister would take my younger brother to the store to buy booze; he was an alcoholic just like my dad. But she would not even take me to the store to buy cookies. They had some type of allegiance to one another and they always cast me out. It made me feel bad and still does to this day, but hey, they did what they had to do and I did what I had to and we all made it. That separation opened me up to a whole new world.

Another participant (P10) recalled that when her siblings pushed her to the side, she turned to books and that she loved to read. Reading allowed her to be whoever she wanted to be; she also remembered that her love of fantasy heightened her interest in pornography. This caused more separation from her siblings, because they labeled her as “easy” and “slutty”. She added, she does not regret the decisions she made and that if her siblings had been nicer to her and included her in things maybe she would not have been so sexual. She just wanted to be wanted and books did not provide her the tangible pleasure that sex did.

### **Isolation**

Isolation as a theme refers to the participant’s expression of loneliness and the influence it has on their life and experiences of being raised in an alcohol-focused family system. Some of the participants (P2, P5, P8, and P12) recalled feeling unloved by their parents and this made them a scapegoat among the siblings, which caused the sibling to



co-conspire with the alcoholic parent to isolate them to make them fight for love and approval. P11 recounted the subtle and not so subtle ways in which both her sibling and her parents “marginalized” her.

“When I had done well at something, like good grades, winning a championship; my mother would deflect the conversation by reminding me that my siblings had done that and then my brother would down play my achievement. I always felt close to my brother, but I still feel like I am an outsider.” (P11)

Three of the female participants (P5, P7, and P10) reported that their male siblings arranged their sibling relationship with deliberation. In many cases the older brother would actively work at making sure the female child did not bond, by setting them against one another, or triangulating. As a result, many females who were raised in an alcohol-focused family system, ended up living their lives without feeling connected to their siblings. One of the female participants (P5) described it, as “living with strangers with the same parents but you don’t know any of them.” In the same vein, two male participants (P2 and P12) recalled the older sister being shunned and isolated because she behaved more like a mother than a sister.

Several participants (P1, P2, P5, P6, and P8) recalled the alcohol-abusing parent using tactics to isolate the siblings by badmouthing and complaining about them. P1 stated that he does not allow his siblings or his parents to visit him at the same time, not even on special occasions. He concluded that this “rule” was to eliminate anybody being the center of attention and not forcing communication. Ten participants (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P11, and P12), reported that they can be emotionally detached in their

relationship with their siblings and that they rarely hug, not even after extended periods of time without contact, and that their primary means of communication is Facebook or email.

Discrepancies were noted among reports from siblings from the same family of origin. P1 stated that their mother favored them over the middle child, “He was mom’s favorite.” P2 stated, “They always fought and then they would blame me.” P5 recalled that the siblings always played together, and another sibling P6 stated, “We always had to play what our older brothers wanted them to play.” Differences between individual descriptions of the influence of parental alcoholism were also revealed in their reactions to triangulation in their relationships. The participants’ experiences helped to inform how triangulation is influenced in sibling relationships by parental alcoholism. The next question will help capture experiences of the research participants related to how self-differentiation among siblings is influenced by parental alcoholism.

### **Research Question 3**

How is self-differentiation among siblings influenced by parental alcoholism?

Three central themes developed from this question: (a) love and attention (b) comparison and (c) jealousy and envy.

#### **Love and Attention**

Love and attention as a theme refers to ideas the participant’s share about how they felt supported and cared for in their environment. Several of the participants (P5, P6, and P7 and P8) reported that in most cases their mother treated everyone badly, especially when the father had been drinking. These siblings reported that this made them

understand family dynamics differently and more importantly this caused them to feel different about themselves. Additionally, when there was a larger age gap reported between siblings, the older sibling became like a substitute mother, which caused younger siblings to fight for both the love and attention of the mother and the sister. P6 reported that as the youngest girl in the family she often felt unloved and that she had a hardwired need to gain love and attention from her mother that inevitably created a toxic rivalry between her and her siblings. She also attributes this to many failed relationships and being unmarried with three children. Many of the participants recalled that sibling rivalry between brothers was a little easier and the blow to the self-esteem was not that severe, but the pain was intensified when one daughter is loved and the other is rejected.

You know, when my mom ignored me it hurt, but when she spent time with the others, I would simply think, they needed her love and attention more than me.

In the same vein, when she spent time with my sister, it cut like a knife and I felt so unloved. In some way, I believe this still has an impact on my self-esteem and relationships to this day.

Eight of the twelve participants (P1, P2, P3, P4, P6, P7, P9, P10) reported that the alcoholic parent showed them love and affection based on achievement. For example, several participants (P2, P4, P9) recalled that siblings who were more athletic received more love and attention from their parents, especially the non-alcoholic parent. There was an enormous pressure on the siblings to succeed, in an attempt to attain their parent's love. P2 stated, "It was a rivalry that no one can win".

## **Comparison**

Comparison refers to how the participants feel in relation to their siblings and the lack of connection among the group. Several of the participants (P2, P8, P12) recalled that there was the “Golden Child” in their home. The “Golden Child” was described as the one who could do no wrong and the other children in the home could do no right. One daughter (P3) from a sibling pair recalled how her mother would rock her brother for hours and sing to him constantly. She remembered how she would act lovingly toward him and how she never acted that way towards her; it was like watching a movie and longed for the day she would be that way with me, unfortunately that day never came.

Participants described incidents when attention was lavished on one sibling and the other siblings were met with harsh criticism and negative insults. Several siblings stated that their sense of self, “dogs them” and despite having wonderful families of their own, they still find themselves comparing themselves to their siblings:

“My mother and my brother had a great relationship; they were like a team. They adored one another. I always felt like an outsider. I still walk on eggshells whenever I am with them, making sure I don’t do anything to provoke my mother’s scornful comparison of me.” (P2)

Four of the participants (P2, P3, P6, P12) reported that they spent years in therapy, in an attempt to break the feeling of being ‘less than.’ The participants reported a myriad of outcomes, ranging from feeling much better about themselves in comparison to their siblings to stating that nothing much has changed in how they feel about themselves as compared to their siblings.

## **Jealousy and Envy**

Jealously and envy relate to times in the participant's life when they realized they resented their siblings. All participants stated that they did not realize how much of a role their parents had played in creating jealousy and envy among them and their siblings. One participant (P3) recalled that both her parents placed expectations on her based on their own shortcomings.

My parents wanted to re-create the things they failed to accomplish; therefore they pushed me harder. This caused my siblings to be jealous of me, you know, they were not required to do much.

Ten of the participants recalled being labeled. Labels like "lazy" and "underachiever," were used when comparing them to their siblings. The participants who were labeled as "lazy" remembered feelings like their sibling was just better than them and they got more attention from their parents and this created a sense of jealousy which has followed them into adulthood. While, these ten siblings described their siblings as their first friends they also noted that as they got older the jealousy intensified.

All participants stated that they learned that some jealousy among siblings was normal and at times acceptable, but when that jealousy festers, it can bring out the worst in a person and can really mess up how you feel about yourself and your siblings. Many described an understanding of excessive jealousy and envy that had infiltrated their adult life:

I can recall when my brother bought his house and my sister got married, I was stark-raving mad. I had to be act like I was happy, when she asked me to be in her

wedding and when I received the invitation to his house warming party. I thought to myself, why do they get it all and expect me to show up and be happy. It was like childhood all over again. I showed up, but I was mad about it. (P2)

Two participants (P2 and P12) reported that it took them a while to realize that they could change their attitude towards their siblings. These participants noted that although they cannot control what their siblings do, they can control how they react to what they do, and once they acknowledge the highlights in their siblings' life did not come at their expense. In order to determine the trustworthiness of this research study, a rigorous process was used throughout the data collection and data analysis to accurately and clearly convey the participants' experiences. The concepts of credibility, transferability, confirmability and dependability are discussed in the next section and how they apply to this study.

### **Trustworthiness**

The credibility of this research study was established by using a rigorous data collection and data analysis process. All cases were individually coded before proceeding to the next case. Themes and codes were not pre-determined; rather they were identified during the data analysis process by listening to the recordings, reading and re-reading each transcript. Member checking was done by presenting each participant with a transcript summary that offered a detailed account of the major themes that emerged during each interview. The participants were asked to ensure the accuracy of each interview and the themes developed provided a true interpretation on their response. Each participant acknowledged that the summary and themes were accurate.

Detailed descriptions were used during the research process to clearly and accurately convey the participants' experiences and ensure transferability. Dependability was established by keeping an audit trail that included twelve recorded interviews, twelve transcripts, and twelve summaries from member checking, twelve files of codes and themes and a participant contact sheet.

Confirmability was established by reflecting the role of the researcher during the study. From the beginning of this study, I took into consideration my personal experience of being an adult child of an alcoholic and a sibling in an effort to reduce bias and to explore the phenomenon as experienced by the participants. This was done by the use of a research journal and audit trail. I reviewed the data collection and data analysis process and documented my thoughts in relation to codes and emerging themes. Additionally, in an effort to establish and maintain my level of awareness regarding my position in this study, I explored ways that my personal experiences as an adult child of an alcoholic both informs and hinders the research process.

### **Summary**

This chapter has provided a description of a transcendental phenomenological analysis designed to learn more about the influence parental alcoholism has on triangulation and self-differentiation among siblings later in life. Some of the participants expressed positive experiences and some expressed negative experiences regarding their sibling relationship. Regardless of their experiences, all the participants viewed their siblings as being an integral part of their development and life. Additionally, the

participants expressed a high level of gratitude for the role their siblings played in their lives.

Chapter 5 presents the findings of the study as it relates to the conceptual framework and past literature, the study limitations, recommendations for future research and implications for positive social change.



## Chapter 5: Discussion, Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore the influence of parental alcoholism on triangulation and self-differentiation in the sibling relationship. I used a qualitative, descriptive analysis to collect and analyze data from six sibling pairs, for a total of 12 participants. The three research questions revealed several themes. Research question 1 revealed themes of negative self-image, unpredictability, humiliation and shame, and violence. Research question 2 revealed themes of conquer and divide, separation and anxiety, and isolation. Finally, research question 3 revealed themes of love and attention, comparison, and jealousy and envy.

In this chapter, I present the findings and discuss them in relation to the conceptual framework and previous literature. I also present the study limitations, recommendations for future research, and implications for positive social change. The chapter concludes with a summary of the research project.

### **Interpretation and Findings**

In this study, I focused on the influence of parental alcoholism on triangulation and self-differentiation among siblings. Researchers have commonly explored questions of triangulation and self-differentiation from the vantage point of husband-wife and parent-child dyads (Haverfield & Thesis, 2016; Howe & Reechia, 2014; Peleg, 2014; Tinnfalt, Eriksson, & Brunnberg, 2011; Vivona, 2013). Previous studies have included triangulation and self-differentiation within the family; however, limited research had been devoted solely to siblings (Howe & Reechia, 2014; Peleg, 2014; Sharpe &

Rosenblatt, 2009; Titelman, 2008; Woodcock, 2009). My intent was to fill the gap in research to help understand how parental alcoholism influences triangulation and self-differentiation among siblings, especially later in life. The research questions were designed to focus on the experiences of adult siblings raised in an alcohol-focused family system. The themes I identified from the interviews included, negative self-image, unpredictability, humiliation, and shame, violence, conquer and divide, separation and anxiety, isolation, love and attention, comparison, and jealousy and envy. These themes reflect the dynamics of family systems theory. The research participants communicated their experiences of being raised in alcohol-focused family systems and how that influenced their sibling relationships. They described their sibling relationships as being important parts of their overall development. With regard to their experiences of being raised in an alcohol-focused family system, participants expressed that family dynamics were different and often challenging, as compared to others not raised in an alcohol-focused family system. The participants acknowledged that being raised in an alcoholic environment caused a level of stereotypical scrutiny; however, they all expressed that their parents did the best they could under the given circumstances.

### **Findings Linked to Family Systems Theory and Previous Literature**

Family systems theory offers a framework for exploring the influence of parental alcoholism on triangulation and self-differentiation among siblings. The theory embraces the concept of holism. Holism holds that in order to understand a family, the system must be looked at as a whole (Becvar & Becvar, 2012). The fundamental premise of family systems theory is that families arrange themselves to carry out daily life tasks and

challenges, and that they adapt to the needs of their members (Becvar & Becvar, 2012; Vernig, 2011). The participants' responses in this study supported the fundamentals of family systems theory. Although every family system is unique and made up of individual elements, the outcomes result in a sum of the whole. All participants, regardless of their experiences, their responses were indicative of the concept of holism. Participants communicated that "I am my brother's keeper" (P1 and P2), "we feel each other's pain" (P5 and P6), and "when one suffered, we all suffered" (P11 and P12). All the themes that emerged from this study were consistent with family systems theory as it relates to triangulation and self-differentiation among siblings.

Themes evident in participant responses included how their siblings have influenced them and how they affect the way they act, think, and feel. Although certain unique behaviors may be assigned to the entire system, the participants acknowledged they might not always adequately describe individual elements. The participants' responses were specifically interrelated to their exact personal structures and elements. All the participants acknowledged that they acted in patterns. Based on participants' responses they were able to adapt to external and internal circumstances and needs according to individual development. Siblings strive to maintain a balance between change and stability through strict adherence and constant variations in roles and activities. According to the family systems theory, these patterns and repeated cycles can help maintain "homeostasis" within the family unit (Becvar & Becvar, 2012).

The participants of this study elaborated on boundaries and how each had a clear line that had to be drawn between those in the system and those outside of the system.

For two participants, this meant not allowing external systems to influence the internal systems. Additionally, all the participants, regardless of which parent was an alcoholic, indicated that their sibling relationship had been adversely affected by parental alcoholism. However, they also reported that having siblings also had a positive effect when parental alcohol use was present. The study results highlighted the influence of parental alcoholism has on triangulation and self-differentiation in the sibling relationship.

My findings also confirmed Bowen's assertion that the family is an emotional unit in which the members are powerfully connected and each member has a profound influence on how the others think, feel, and act (Becvar & Becvar, 2012; Stocker, 2013; Vernig, 2011). I found 10 major themes that I used to answer the research questions. However, I discuss the following five themes because they were the most significant: conquer and divide, separation and anxiety, isolation, love and attention, and comparison. I determined that these themes were the most significant because responses from all participants related closely to these themes, which have not been addressed in past studies.

### **Theme 1: Conquer and Divide**

Responses from all participants in the study indicated that having an alcoholic parent had an adverse influence on their sibling relationships. They also reported that parental alcoholism caused high levels of sadness and emotional distress. The study results also confirmed what previous researchers have found as it pertains to the negative influence of parental alcoholism. Based on the participants' responses, it is clear that the

sibling relationship is a key contributor to the culture associated with parental alcoholism. Participants reported that boundaries were set around periods of drunkenness and irresponsibility, which result in the children finding allegiance in one another. Comments made by sibling pairs exposed polarization of their feelings toward the middle sibling and the advancing sibling connection with another sibling. P2 stated, “My brother would get angry with me and hit me and then I would get mad, I normally don’t really care for him, but was able to refuge in my older sister.” The participant continued, “Later when things would calm down, I would still retreat and stay away from him, but I must admit I did love him, but my allegiance was to my sister.” Given the nature of sibling dynamics, these conflicting statements can be read as common and normal within many siblings bonds (Brody, 2013).

Self-differentiation is a basic concept of family systems theory that marks an individual’s ability to maintain a healthy balance between independence and togetherness (Becvar & Becvar, 2012; Bowen, 1978). One participant (P3) recalled ignoring her siblings as a way to drown out the negative feelings she had towards them and her mother. According to Lander, Howsare, and Byrne (2013) children of alcoholics have extreme difficulty forming healthy relationships. Four participants (P2, P4, P8, and P12) reported that they kept a low profile and experienced dissatisfaction in their social network and among their siblings.

Several participants recalled the roles they adopted within the family, which created power struggles and promoted a conquer and divide ethos among siblings, especially among younger and older siblings. The participants offered several examples

of the roles that they assumed. Role reversal was the leading type presented in this study, with older children compensating for the lack of parental involvement and persistent inconsistency. The older siblings recalled taking on parental roles and having to take care of the home and the family from a young age. This often caused the younger siblings to resent the older sibling and caused the older sibling to fear that the family would at some point rally against them.

Siblings in this study also asserted their desire and need to be recognized as their own person distinct and independent from their siblings, and that their value and importance be recognized. Brody (2013) confirmed the importance of the sibling bond and elaborated on the need for each sibling to have a “core identity.” Brody (2013) also asserted that the middle child is the most ordinary and unbothered in the sibling dynamic and tends to live from the viewpoint that their relationship with their siblings will never change.

## **Theme 2: Separation and Anxiety**

Sibling rivalry is one of the elements that perpetuates the sibling bond, and even in the alcohol-focused family system sibling rivalry persisted as a part of the normalization process. The responses in this study confirmed findings in two previous studies (Peleg, 2014; Vivona, 2013) regarding the sibling need for recognition and validation, which is directly connected patterns of separation and anxiety siblings experience in an alcohol-focused family system. Peleg (2014) found that siblings would frequently become angry when their parents ignored them, which caused anxiety and promoted more separation from parents and a continued breakdown in the sibling

relationship. Vivona (2013) presented cases where siblings experienced extreme difficulty establishing a personal and separate identity. The siblings in my study reported feeling ignored and separate from their siblings and at times their parents. In most cases, children look to parents for validation, but in an alcohol-focused family system, the siblings are often the source of validation to aid in decreasing feelings of anxiety and promoting self-confidence.

### **Theme 3: Isolation**

The responses of the siblings in this study were, in part, very similar to those described by other siblings who were raised in an alcohol-focused family system. This study confirms both differences and similarities; on the contrary, adult siblings who were raised in an alcohol-focused family system report feeling isolated from their siblings based on parental alcoholism. Hummel et al (2013) studied how siblings strive for equality and conceptualize isolation in response to distressing life situations. Although the siblings in this study did not use the term isolated or isolation to describe their experience, they were able to reveal how difficult certain things were for them. Other studies (Brody, 2013; Kramer, 2010; Warner, White & Johnson, 2007) conducted with siblings raised in an alcohol-focused family system reported an increase in stress levels of siblings based on the prevalence of alcoholism and strained family dynamics. Essentially, the findings regarding isolation were similar.

An attempt to establish a sense of independence and as part of the process of negating feelings of isolation was explained by P3, who shared, “I got up every morning at 4am, made myself some breakfast, got my siblings up to let them know I have to get

ready and leave for school soon. This everyday occurrence created isolation and division between my siblings and me because I felt I was being forced to be responsible and self-reliant.”

#### **Theme 4: Love and Attention**

Parental alcoholism is considered an element of danger for the family system (WHO, 2011). When danger elements are a factor, the likelihood of children experiencing lack in certain areas is high. The siblings in this study revealed certain protective factors that reduced the amount of love and attention they received from their siblings. Several participants stated they enjoyed relatively good amounts of love and attention, despite some serious hardships, and believed they were blessed to be born into an alcohol-focused family unit. This suggests that love and attention stems from aspects that are not restricted to certain types of family units. All participants expressed love for their siblings that grew as a result from the absence of love from their parents. Participants noted that the lack of love and attention from their parents created the opportunity to develop more care and concern, deriving from the dysfunction in the home as a path to self-love and self-discovery.

The siblings reported they learned fundamental skills from their siblings that became useful in adulthood and social relationships. However, the siblings reported that the alcoholic parent showed them more love and attention than the non-alcoholic parent. The participants expressed contempt toward the non-alcoholic parent due to the lack of love and attention. Several participants described the lack of love among their siblings, based on parental alcoholism. One participant recalled her sibling being emotionally



distant and withdrawn, while the majority of the participants focused on their parents' lack of love and attention. This suggests that some recollections may be more vivid and traumatizing, therefore creating the prospect of future research that will delve deeper into love and attention from a broader perspective.

### **Theme 5: Comparison**

Parental alcoholism is closely related to a variety of stressful factors within a family system (Caswell, You, & Huckle, 2011). This study looked closely at triangulation and self-differentiation between siblings. The most expected mechanism among siblings in an alcoholic focused family system is comparison (Balso & French, 2013; Brody, 2013; Warner, White, & Johnson, 2007). A detailed example of comparison was provided by P2, who shared that, the comparison between him and older brother was so extreme, that even in adulthood they rarely communicate on a regular basis and not at all when their parents are around. Other participants described manipulation, lying, and disconnection as examples of comparison. Self-differentiation is a basic component of family systems theory that measures a person's ability to maintain a healthy balance between independence and togetherness (Becvar & Becvar, 2012; Bowen, 1978). One participant (P3) recalled the comparison between her and her siblings being so strong, that she had a hard time concentrating and it affected her performance in school and her relationship with her peers. According to Lander, Howsare, & Byrne (2013) difficulty establishing healthy peer relationships and connections is normal among children of alcoholics. Two participants (P3 and P10) remembered that they had very few friends and no opposite gender friends or relationships because they felt like they never measured up.

Evidence of sibling comparison and rivalry based on favoritism from parents confirmed findings based on previous studies (Baker, 2013). The participants in the study described feelings of hostility, resentment, and jealousy as a result of the constant comparison. However, none of the participants stated a total disconnect from their siblings. According to Milvesky and Heerwagen (2013), distance among siblings can be to their advantage. Although comparison was prevalent, the siblings in the study supported their siblings and revere their relationship as both important and enduring. All participants became extremely emotional in remembering their sibling relationship and reflecting on the comparison. Some of the participants attribute the constant comparison to a lack of emotional stability in their parents, as evidenced by the following comment:

“In a strange and crazy way, the constant comparison actually drew us closer and made us more caring and compassionate to one another.”

While the siblings in this study recognized the resilience and longevity of the sibling bond, many of the participants expressed a desire for more closeness among their siblings and their family in general. According to McHale, et al. (2012), although, the sibling bond may be powerful and resilient it is not unbreakable. It often reveals unfavorable circumstances and abuses resolution is always a possibility.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the influence of parental alcoholism on triangulation and self-differentiation among siblings. Several limitations occurred in this study. The first area of limitations is related to solely relying on self-reports of the participants. The participants could have overstated the truth of their experiences or

embellished their responses to make light of certain situations. In an effort to protect against this limitation, extreme care was used during the interview process, reviewing the consent form, confidentiality, and the use of the findings. The previously stated information encouraged the participants to be clear and accurate in presenting their experiences. Member checking was used to give the participants the opportunity to review their information for clarity and validation of their experiences.

Second, the participants were purposefully selected to ensure that inclusion was met. This means that the study findings cannot be generalized across a larger population. The small sample size of the study (12 participants) was another limitation. Additionally, the participants were all associated with the World Service Organization for Adult Children of Alcoholics; therefore, the study does not include the experiences of perceptions of individuals who are not associated with this group. The final limitation of this study is that the siblings were selected from one geographical area. The research participants are residents of North Carolina.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research regarding the sibling relationship and parental alcoholism would help expound on the findings of this study and previous studies. To gain more in-depth information, a quantitative correlation study could be used to measure different variables such as one parent being an alcoholic compared to both and the influence on sibling relationships. Additionally, using a single case study would offer a broad depiction of the influence of parental alcoholism on sibling relationships and give meaning to an individual's explanations and descriptions.

Finally, conducting more than one interview with the participants is a recommendation for future studies regarding parental alcoholism and the sibling relationship. According to Seidman 2013, three interviews are recommended to accurately explore the participant's experiences and place them in a context to reflect the meaning. By conducting a series of interviews, it would generate more data about growing up in an alcohol-focused family system and allow more time to reflect on the sibling experiences. Conducting more than one interview would also promote in-depth discussion from the participants, as over time more rapport can be established, prompting more detailed information. Overall, the responses from the participants were brief. Although, they answered the interviews questions and were eager to participate more meetings and a stronger rapport would yield more detailed responses.

### **Implications for Social Change**

The participants of the study had the opportunity to explore and reflect on their experiences as siblings raised in an alcohol-focused family system. The participants and the World Service Organization of Adult Children of Alcoholics took an extreme interest in the study. The participant's eagerness to share their experience will aid in helping not only their situation but also many other adult children of alcoholics. The study outcomes of this study provide insight into sibling dynamics in an alcohol-focused family system.

Researchers, community organizations, national organizations, and educators can add the findings of this study to the current body of knowledge on the subject of siblings; triangulation, self-differentiation in the alcohol-focused family system and use it to add to the current discussion. The findings of this study will also aid creating interventions for

siblings that will help them identify experiences and feelings associated with being raised in an alcoholic family system, by increasing the understanding of how sibling dynamics and relationship quality is affected by overall family dynamics. The sibling relationship should be considered when developing treatment models, especially family centered approaches in order to promote positive outcomes. Therapist should work to become familiar with overall family dynamics and the overall quality of relationships between the sibling subsystems early in the treatment process. The sibling relationship can have a negative influence on the overall personal development, which should inspire practitioners to address these dynamics in therapeutic settings to help siblings and family members learn and understand how to manage negative experiences associated with being raised in an alcohol-focused family system.

The results of this study validated the importance of the sibling bond and their dedication to one another and their perseverance in the face of adversity. Despite, their own experiences, the siblings in this study revealed a desire to establish positive outcomes among siblings. This study offers a foretaste of the experiences and perceptions related to siblings. The need for continued exploration of sibling dynamics is necessary to develop appropriate interventions and research based programs. Programs dedicated to supporting and engaging siblings from alcohol-focused family systems, such as sibling support groups.

The development of more programs dedicated specifically to siblings would offer support for and benefit both the siblings and their families. The participants of this study expressed their understanding of the importance of the sibling bond. Sibling-oriented

support groups and family groups could provide education and foster long-term benefits from siblings.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Alcoholism, triangulation, and self-differentiation, have been the focus of many studies from a myriad of perspectives, most commonly as it relates to husband-wife and parent-child dyads. Researchers have begun to include siblings and sibling relationship dynamics, based on this being an important sub-system in the within the family system. This study gave voice to the sibling relationship and how parental alcoholism influences triangulation and self-differentiation among siblings and their experiences and perceptions. The siblings noted that parental alcoholism did have an emotional and psychological influence on their overall quality of life. Moreover, the siblings acknowledged their recognition of the importance of their sibling relationship and how parental alcoholism jaded that relationship through resentment, anger, jealousy and violence.

Although the findings of this study cannot be generalized to a larger population, the study can function as a guide for siblings raised in an alcohol-focused family system. The sibling relationship is an essential bond that lasts throughout an individual's life. This bond can be adversely influenced in an alcohol-focused family system. As an individual learns how to function in this type of environment and navigate the challenges, they can lose fundamental skills. However, being raised in this type of environment offers opportunities for siblings to move away from blaming their siblings towards individual responsibility.

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## Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. How would you describe the experience of having siblings?
2. What are some advantages and disadvantages of having siblings?
3. How would you describe some of the most significant aspect your sibling relationship?
4. Describe a time when you felt influenced or inspired by one or more of your siblings?
5. How did you and your siblings deal with conflict?
6. Did you ever find that when dealing with conflict or other issues, it was easier to address with one sibling as a way to draw another one out?
7. Describe a time(s) when you discussed an issue with one sibling and purposely left out another sibling.
8. Do you think parental alcoholism influenced your relationship with your siblings, and if so, how?
9. Do you think parental alcoholism influenced how you feel about yourself, if so, how?
10. How has the way you feel about yourself in comparison to how you feel about your siblings impacted your relationships?
11. How do you interact with your siblings currently?
12. Would you like to add anything else, not addressed in this interview?

## Appendix B: Example Student Email

April 21, 2017

I am a doctoral student working on my dissertation. My chosen area of interest is adult children of alcoholics from the sibling viewpoint. I wonder if you would consider allowing me access to your group meetings to introduce myself, my study and possibly recruit participants.

Thank you for your consideration,

Tiffany Graham

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