

Delaying the Crossroads: The Impact of Parental Alcoholism on Self-Authorship

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This paper proposes a theory regarding the developmental process of College Student Children of Alcoholics (CSCAs). In understanding the distinctive lens through which CSCAs experience Baxter Magolda's (2001) journey to self-authorship and applying Brown's (1988) understanding of identity formation in adolescent children of alcoholics, this paper aims to identify the unique way that CSCAs experience self-authorship.

It is currently estimated that approximately one in four children in the United States grow up in homes with alcohol abuse or dependency (Center on Addiction and the Family, 2011). This means that out of the 11 million 18-24 year olds enrolled in college in 2009, nearly 2.75 million identify with the term Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACAs). While there is growing amount of data and information regarding these individuals, studies and theories that address the development of this population and how they experience college engagement during college remains unexplored. There is a substantial body of work indicating the behavioral, emotional, and psychological issues Adult Children of Alcoholics experience, including lower self-esteem, higher rates of anxiety and depression, excessive self-consciousness, phobia development, codependency, lower scores on cognitive and verbal skill tests, and difficulty developing and sustaining both peer and intimate relationships (Wilson, 1982; National Association for Children of Alcoholics, 1998; Fisher, Jenkins, Harrison & Jesch, 1992; Harter, 2000). While most research indicates that these problems are most prevalent in pre-teen and teenaged children (Brown, 1988), it can be surmised that these issues will continue to affect the identity development of these young adults as they transition into college and adulthood. After examining the effects of parental

alcoholism on development, it is evident that student affairs professionals should know the unique characteristics of this student population and what resources are available for them as they develop.

While the field of psychology broaches this topic, there is a lack of literature addressing what this author is calling College Student Children of Alcoholics (CSCAs). Due to this gap in the literature, student affairs professionals do not have information about what this population experiences as they transition into college life or how they attempt to make meaning of their childhood experiences in this new context. Research about developmental issues in children of alcoholics focuses on their distorted sense of identity and reality based on attachment to an alcoholic parent that leads to a basic mistrust in the intentions of others (Brown, 1988). Brown (1988) indicates that children develop a distorted concept of who they are as a coping mechanism to remain close to their alcoholic parent which then affects all subsequent development. According to this paper, this distorted self-concept will inevitably become a component in college students' identity formation. In an attempt to better understand the experiences of being a CSCA, current literature on the development of children (ages 13-18) of alcoholics and Kegan's (1994) orders of consciousness will be taken into account to develop a unique lens through which to view Baxter Magolda's

(2001) journey to self-authorship. Specifically, this work will focus primarily on the interpersonal and intrapersonal development of the CSCAs who leave the home environment for college; however, these concepts can be applied to all CSCAs. Understanding how CSCAs develop a clear sense of identity and create interdependent relationships on their journey to self-authorship will provide insight to professionals on how to interact with and assess the needs of this unique student population.

Literature Review

Journey to Self-Authorship

Baxter Magolda (2001) describes self-authorship as “the source of knowing, an internal voice from which to interpret and judge knowledge claims from the external world,” (p. 15). In alignment with Kegan’s (1994) fourth order of consciousness, this type of knowing is evident in those who can make choices based on personal value systems that are defined by a sense of self-understanding separate from others’ opinions. The ability to define and understand the various aspects of one’s identity is an integral component in each individual’s holistic development. In the pursuit of self-authorship, Baxter Magolda (2001) indicates that students ask the intrapersonal question, “Who am I?” – the question of self-identity – and the interpersonal question, “What kind of relationships do I want to construct with others?” – the question of relationships relative to identity definition (p.4). These questions lead students through three unique phases: external formulas, crossroads, and self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2001). Baxter Magolda (2001) relates external formulas to Kegan’s (1994) third order of

consciousness, where individuals “subordinate one’s own interests on behalf of one’s greater loyalty to maintaining bonds” (p.75). Kegan (1994), like Baxter Magolda (2001) supported the idea that the “formation of identity is closely tied to the relationships one has with external others” (p.18). In Kegan’s (1994) third order, identity is consumed by our relationships with others, and it is natural to assume the values and opinions of those people we are in relationship with.

In attempting to find the answer to “who am I?” (intrapersonal), students begin by basing their identity off their relationships with others (interpersonal). The movement towards self-authorship requires students to develop a sense of identity separate from the ideas of others. The question “What kind of relationships do I want to construct with others?” (interpersonal) is closely intertwined with personal identity development, as students are attempting to understand their relationships with those around them (Baxter Magolda, 2001). The ultimate developmental outcome is that students will get to a point where their existence is not defined by relationships. Similar to Kegan’s (1994) fourth order, individuals are able to stand apart from relationships and reflect upon them.

The major conflict for CSCAs that arises out of pursuing interpersonal development is cyclical. When they arrive at college, these students believe they know who they are based on what their parents and friends from home have told them. Their intrapersonal and interpersonal understanding of who they are as a person is dictated by their relationships and interactions with the very parent figure that caused the development of basic mistrust. When dissonance occurs in one of the dimensions of self-authorship, all aspects of development are affected (Baxter

Magolda, 2001). This dissonance, typically in the form of a challenge to an ideology or assumption, causes students to feel an uncomfortable amount of stress. They will only be successful in resolving their developmental tasks if they acquire appropriate coping skills for what they are experiencing (Erikson, 1980); otherwise, they are likely to regress to earlier stages of development (Erikson, 1968).

Identity Formation and Attachment in Children of Alcoholics (COAs)

In an attempt to better understand the impact of parental alcoholism on the development of identity, Talashek (1987) completed a study of adolescents with and without an alcoholic parent in which teens (aged 13-17) were given a 72-question survey based on Rasmussen's (1964) Ego Identity Scale. Those with an alcoholic parent were then matched based on age, sex and socioeconomic status with children without an alcoholic parent. The results were compared across data sets and it was concluded that those from families with an alcoholic parent scored lower on the ego identity scale than those who came from families without an alcoholic parent. Due to the continual fear of embarrassment by the alcoholic parent, these children often isolate themselves to avoid scenarios that could cause humiliation or shame (Talashek, 1987). This study of ego identity proposed that those from an alcoholic family may be deficient in their ability to answer "Who am I?"

Brown (1988) states that a family's core beliefs "are based on denial of alcoholism, or the explanations adopted and incorporated to explain it if it is not denied" (p. 169). If a child denies that they perceive a problem or the effects that problem has, developmental arrests and/or difficulties begin to take shape (Guidano & Liotti, 1983).

Guidano & Liotti (1983) indicate that the personal identity resulting from this denial is maintained in contradiction to actual reality. Brown (1988) states that "maintenance of denial and the resultant distorted perceptions about the world then structures subsequent cognitive, affective and social development" (p.169) which causes these areas of development to be bound to the attachment figure. Research indicates that upon entering adulthood, COAs have experienced cognitive, affective, and social development differently than those who have not had an alcoholic parent (Brown, 1988). Their understanding of the world, their emotions, and their relationships are reliant upon the parental figure. Brown (1988) discusses the child's formation of identity beginning at infancy, including the development of basic assumptions "which must not be disproved" (p.170). These assumptions form the basis of the identity, and "individuals cannot function without a stable self-representation" (Brown, 1988, p. 170). Similar to Erikson's (1980) basic trust versus mistrust, this leads the child to become selective in their information gathering to ensure that their self-knowledge remains intact (Brown, 1988).

Guidano and Liotti (1983) state that parents are *the* world to the child. Maintaining an attachment to the alcoholic parent is of the utmost importance, and children will inevitably create a distorted self-concept that will affect future developmental capabilities (Brown, 1988). As parents deny their alcoholism, their child is denying his or her developing senses based on a need to believe and accept the parents' views (Brown, 1988). Because children are incapable of changing their core beliefs or basic assumptions at such a young age, they must then reject the information they are receiving from the world in order to maintain an attachment to their parents, which can

ultimately keep the child from relying on their abilities and lead the child to develop feelings of mistrust in the intentions of others (Brown, 1988). Wilson (1982) also indicated that children will refrain from engaging in close relationships because they want to keep their parent's drinking a secret and they do not trust others with that information, which can lead to long-lasting deficiencies in the ability to develop relationships. Erikson (1980) theorized that mistrust as a child can lead to mistrust of others later in life, and Brown (1988) indicated that mistrust of others and of personal insight were core problems in those attending alcohol-related therapy as adults.

Eventually, this can lead to the child taking on the assumption of responsibility, because "if their parent does not have a problem with drinking, then there must be something wrong with the child" (Brown, 1988, p.176). Ultimately, this will create coping mechanisms developed in reaction to the disequilibrium the child is feeling, as they will consider it worse to believe that the person they depend on is wrong. The ultimate result in COAs is their inability to perceive reality the way other children do since they must narrow their views until they align with and remain supportive of the views they have developed based on their attachment to an alcoholic parent (Brown, 1988). This "so interrupts the path of normal development that the preadolescent is in no way emotionally prepared to negotiate the adolescent tasks of identification and separation" (Brown, 1988, p.180). In other words, they are incapable of defining themselves separately from their alcoholic parental figure.

Brown (1988) continues by stating that in a family that centralizes around the denial of alcoholism, "the development of a stable, integrated, independent identity that

by-passes the issue of alcohol is impossible" (p. 182). Because the entirety of the COA's upbringing has revolved around the topic of alcohol, their formation and development is largely defined by it (Brown, 1988). By wrapping the entirety of the identity into the family alcoholism, this author proposes that CSCAs find themselves torn between a new life at college where they may experience developmental challenges and the familiarity of the alcoholic environment at home. Because they will typically look to their home environment for cues as to how to proceed in their own lives, CSCAs will be inextricably bound to the issue of alcohol, making developmental processes in a university setting even more complicated.

Integration: The Impact of Parental Alcoholism on Self-Authorship

In an effort to better understand what CSCAs experience in college, Baxter Magolda's (2001) journey to self-authorship will be utilized as a framework in defining the CSCA's unique developmental process and attempt at self-definition (i.e. a lens through which they view themselves and others). Brown's (1988) understanding of identity formation in adolescent children of alcoholics will help to better represent the internal changes that CSCAs have experienced and what direction they take in their development. Talashek's (1987) study of ego identity in teenagers (aged 13-17) will assist in identifying where the pre-college aged adolescent is in their development.

Baxter Magolda (2001) indicates "the college experience offer[s] opportunities for questioning and exploration, raising the possibility of constructing an identity separate from external forces" (p.18). In contrast, Brown (1988) indicates that adolescents from alcoholic homes will deny

all external forces that threaten their established ideals about their family and who they are. Instead, they will rely on the previously assumed understanding that has been communicated to them through their parent's alcoholism. Despite the indication in student affairs literature that college often serves as a catalyst for identity definition, CSCAs are likely to reject any formations of a separate identity, as an identity formed based on anything other than their parent's alcoholism is nearly impossible.

A representation of the intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions of Baxter Magolda's (2001) journey to self-authorship indicates that the typical college student moves through different phases towards solidifying their understanding of their identity – beginning first with external

formulas, then into the crossroads, and finally on to self-authorship (see Figure 1). CSCAs may go through a different process that requires additional time and resources, as well as an intentional decision to address this unique developmental experience (See Figure 2). The proposed process of CSCA development is described below.

Stage 1: Prolonged Attachment

This stage is highlighted by the CSCA's struggle with experiencing separation from their alcoholic parent once they arrive in the college environment. The student still remains completely dependent on their parent as the representation of their identity, and the student may have difficulty stating explicit beliefs or values without their parent as context. The student may remain

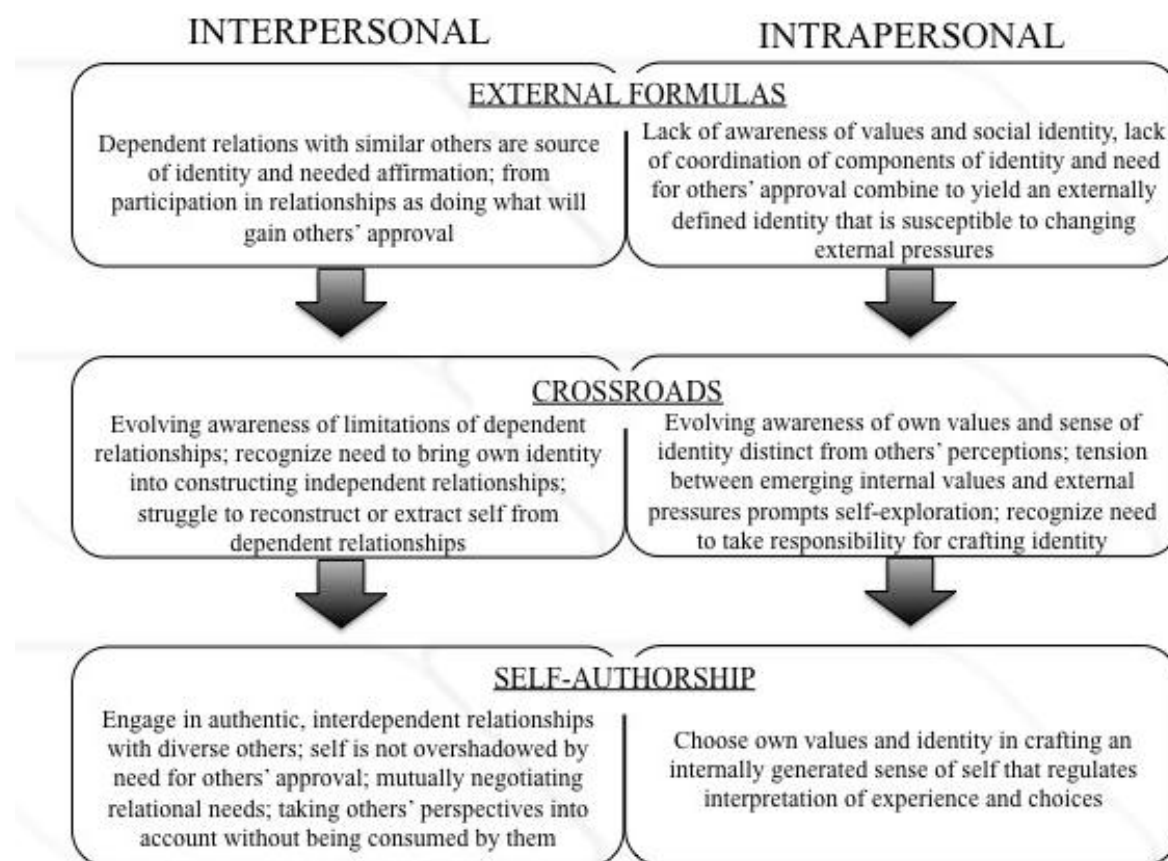


Figure 1. Model of Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Dimensions of Self-Authorship. Adapted from Baxter Magolda, M. (2001). *Making Their Own Way: Narratives for Transforming Higher Education to Promote Self-Development*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

somewhat distant from peers for fear of shattering the identity they have always known, and they may still experience secretive tendencies similar to how they handled fear, embarrassment, and shame for the parent's behavior during their youth. Brown (1988) indicates that adolescents' "distorted self-conceptions remain anchored to forms of prelogical [*sic*] thinking typical of childhood and consistent with denial" (p.171). This student would appear to be following a form of external formulas (Baxter Magolda, 2001). However, due to the symbol of alcohol creating the foundation for all further development, this form of external

formulas revolves around the family and home life rather than friends or other authority figures.

Stage 2: Stall/Restoration

This stage requires deep reflection most often attributed to therapeutic assistance. Various events will prompt the student to seek assistance, ranging from personal identification of a problem to an authority figure mandating therapy. If the student arrests at Stage 1 and refuses to acknowledge Stage 2 as their next step, their ability to develop interpersonal relationships will be stunted. This may lead to unhealthy

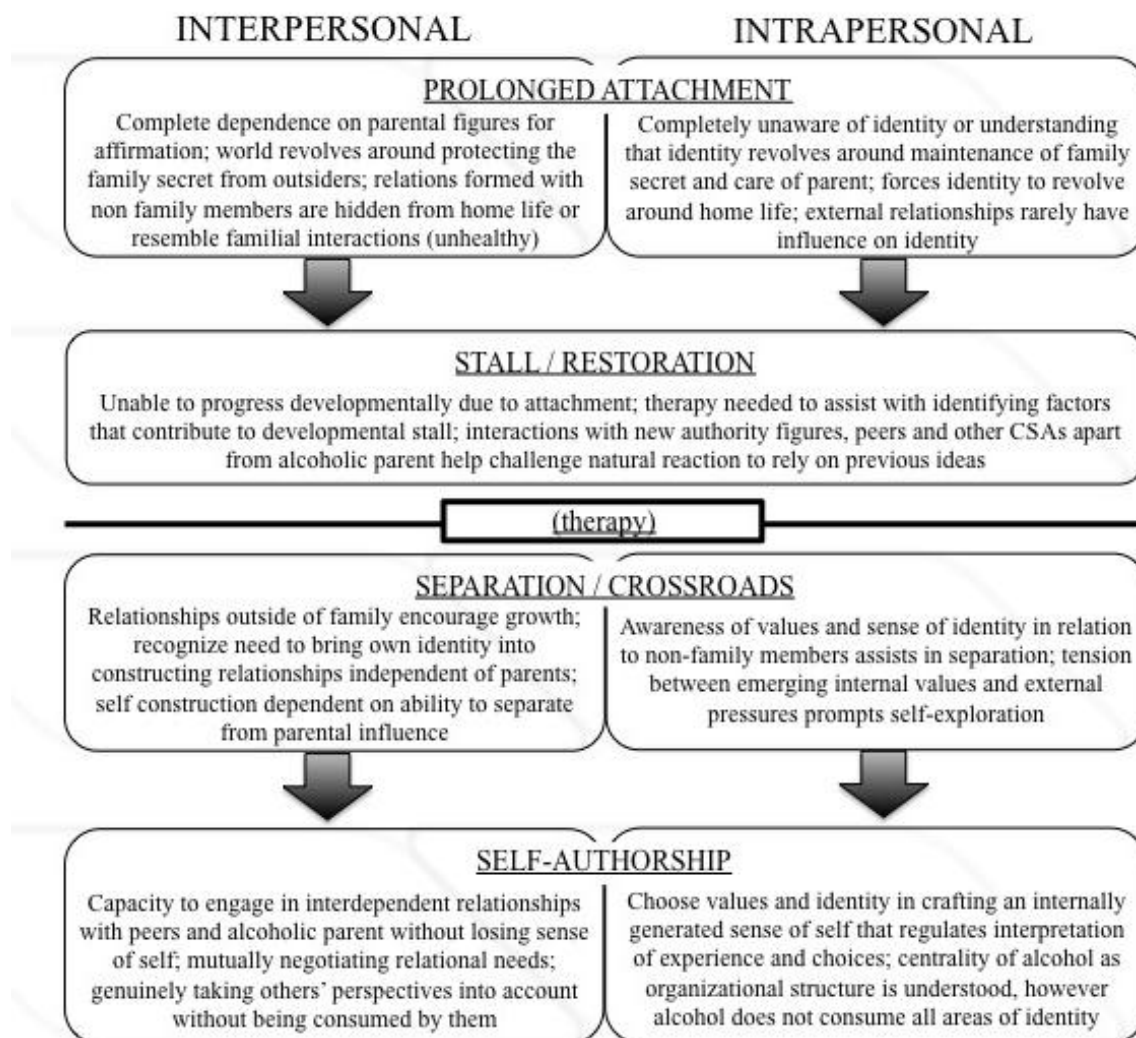


Figure 2. Proposed reorganization and understanding of interpersonal and intrapersonal dimensions of self-authorship

intimate and peer relationships, and their understanding of their identity will remain rooted in their parent's alcoholism. Baxter Magolda (2001) acknowledged the complications experienced by those with difficult histories, stating, "finding their own voices and standing up for themselves was complicated for many participants by personal dynamics and external events" (p.10). Stage 2 is long and difficult, and many college students may leave the university setting still in this stage. As Figure 2 notes, CSCAs will not be able to move past Stall/Restoration unless they have gone through therapy or counseling. It is in this stage that student affairs professionals can be of great assistance, as students may not be prepared to identify therapy as a solution for their struggles. For many, this stage will never end and persist as the student continues on to other stages.

Stage 3: Separation/Crossroads

At this stage, which is best understood as the transition between Baxter Magolda's (2001) external formulas and crossroads stages and Brown's (1988) theory of ACA recovery, students' experiences with others prompts their ability to recognize the importance of separation. Due to their physical separation from their alcoholic parent, students begin to shift away from the alcoholic parent or family experience as their "external formula." Because separating from the parent is still a new process, CSCAs will latch onto the opinions and value systems of their peers. They start to recognize not only the importance of separating their identity from their parent's alcoholism but also the fact that they are capable of such a separation. Students begin feeling comfortable revealing their family history to peers and partners, allowing them to release from those attachments. Recognizing the disparity between their emerging concepts

and beliefs and the ideals from their home lives will prompt further growth and development. At the same time, students must remain cognizant of alcohol's impact on their life and their family's history, and allow their understanding of alcoholism to play a small role in the development of their new values, beliefs, and relationships. Student affairs professionals can again serve an integral role in assisting students as they struggle to handle the confusion that will often accompany this stage.

Stage 4: Self-Authorship

Self-authorship is highlighted by the student's ability to understand who they are in spite of their parent's alcoholism and in relation to peers and intimate relationships. They are able to see parental alcoholism and their experiences growing up as a part of their identity, but this association does not drive their choices and values. It is imperative for CSCAs to accept "the centrality of alcohol as an organizing principle" (Brown, 1988, p.202) in their restructured identity. This allows them to acknowledge who they are as children of alcoholics but not allow alcohol to be the central focus of their life (Brown, 1988).

Further Investigation

Studies on CSCAs have been completed in the past decade that are reflective of codependency differences between ACAs and non-ACAs (Jones, Perera-Diltz, Salyers, Laux, & Cochrane, 2007), alcohol and drug use (Braitman et al., 2009), the impact of parental alcoholism on executive functioning (Schroeder & Kelley, 2008), occupational choice (Vaught & Wittman, 2011) and depression and peer relations (Kelley et al, 2010). While this covers the clinical perspective, none of these studies highlights implications for student affairs. Student

affairs professionals must begin researching this student population to ensure awareness of these various and unique experiences. As stated previously, CSCAs must be able to recognize the centrality of alcohol as an organizational structure in their identities, and to do so they must interact with other CSCAs (Brown, 1988). Student interactions with other CSCAs who are also struggling on their journey to self-authorship may be a significant opportunity for them to experience personal challenge. College and university administrators could provide a student group as a part of their counseling or psychological services departments to assist CSCAs in developing a better understanding of who they are and how they experience life.

Further investigation into these developmental processes requires studies of college students who identify as CSCAs in relation to their experience of self-authorship and their understanding of being children of alcoholics as an identity. Identifying a correlation between parental alcohol use and abuse with how these students experience collegiate drinking culture is an additional topic that deserves exploration. Because stigmas that accompany alcoholism vary by cultural background, therefore influencing the developmental experience in unique ways, recognizing the different experiences of CSCAs who identify as a member of a minority group must be pursued as well. It is also plausible that CSCAs will feel

embarrassed about their family background. Those who have strong role models outside the home may not have as severe developmental arrests or be impacted by parental alcoholism as much as their peers without strong parental figures. Those who had an alcoholic parent who was absent from the home (through divorce, separation, abandonment, etc.) will have varied experiences as well. Due to the increased likelihood of COAs becoming alcoholic themselves (Brown, 1988), it is important for professionals to begin conversations with CSCAs regarding their predisposition to alcohol and substance abuse. Ensuring that these students have safe spaces to explore their identity is imperative to their healthy development.

Student affairs professionals must remain cognizant of the varying degrees to which students will experience the journey to self-authorship as a CSCA. Administrators must remain aware of these differences and how they affect the developmental processes of CSCAs. It is imperative that more empirical data about this student population be gathered. By taking steps towards better understanding the lens through which this unique student population experiences the journey to self-authorship, student affairs professionals can take appropriate courses of action to ensure that CSCAs experience holistic development on par with other student populations.

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