Navigating a normalised and excessive drinking culture: the experiences and perceptions of adult children of alcoholics at university

Acknowledgements

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To my darling baby sister, Sophia, who brings immense joy and light to my life.
I hope that you find comfort in knowing that we are far from alone in our experiences.
You make me proud every single day and I love you endlessly.

This is for you, Phia.

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates the experiences and perceptions of eight adult children of alcoholics through focusing specifically on their time at Durham University. Through revealing the lived experiences of the students (five female, three male), the one-to-one interviews shed light on the lack of voice of children of alcoholics, with students being chosen as research has not yet addressed the voice of those whom are currently in higher education. Existing literature regarding the prevalent excessive and normalised drinking culture in universities, paired with the literature on children of alcoholics, provides evidence for the justification of this research. Those with experience of parental alcoholism were hypothesised to have a complex relation to the alcohol-focused nature of university. The narratives demonstrated that a background of parental alcoholism impacts experiences and perceptions of three key areas of the university experience: worry about drinking, social life and university support. Firstly, thematic analysis of the interviews revealed that the students had substantial concerns about alcohol consumption; they expressed anxiety about their own drinking habits and also showed concern for other students around them who might indulge excessively. Secondly, the research identified that parental alcoholism impacted social life at university, as a sense of social isolation and exclusion was felt by the students, who also demonstrated agency as a result. Lastly, it was found that the students' approach to seeking help at university was ambivalent and paradoxical. Whilst the students considered university support essential, they also believed that it was somewhat unnecessary due to the permanence of the normalised drinking culture and their parents' addiction. Overall, this research was valuable due to its contribution to the small amount of qualitative research on the subjective, lived experiences of adult children of alcoholics.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Alcoholism is an addiction to alcohol (Drinkaware, 2022). This addiction is distinguished by a lack of control or inability to regulate drinking behaviours, an elevated tolerance to alcohol, and placing alcohol as a top priority in one's life (ibid.). As a legal and socially-sanctioned substance, alcohol is recognised as a key facilitator of social interactions in British society (Backett-Milburn et al., 2008), thus making the abuse much harder to recognise and tackle in comparison to illicit drugs (Tunnard, 2002). There has been a long-standing concern over a "British disease" of problematic drinking, with a large government emphasis on reducing overall alcohol consumption in the UK, particularly for young people (Measham, 2008: 208). Yet, alcohol-related harms still persist, with intoxication and binge-drinking viewed as a customary part of the socialising culture in British society (HM Government, 2007). Around 24% of adults living in England and Scotland routinely drink over the recommended guidelines (ONS, 2018, in Alcohol Change UK, 2022), with the main alcohol-consuming social group being those aged 18-24 (Matthews et al., 2006, in HM Government, 2007), and this is commonly associated with being university students (Thurnell-Read et al., 2018). Heavy alcohol use in this context is normalised and considered a fundamental part of social integration into student life (Gambles et al., 2022). Research demonstrates that alcohol intake plays a significant role in various aspects of social life at universities, serving as a possible aid or obstacle to fitting into student communities (ibid.).

Parental alcoholism impacts up to 2.6 million children in the UK (NACOA, 2019). Children of alcoholics often carry a significant emotional weight (Turning Point, 2006), as well as a series of other long-lasting impacts and welfare concerns (Taylor and Kroll, 2004), and it should be acknowledged that this does not dissolve once these children reach adulthood (Dove, 2013). It is here where the concern is often lost, as these effects may not be immediately apparent or easy to understand once the child has left the home (ibid.).

Consequently, it can be anticipated that the university experience of individuals with alcoholic parents would differ from that of others, potentially posing greater difficulties in socialising and drinking. Nonetheless, no research has explored how these students navigate higher education or the unique challenges stemming from their background. This dissertation therefore seeks to provide a space for eight self-identifying adult children of alcoholics, currently studying at Durham University, to share their account of their time at university in light of their experiences of parental alcoholism.

Enhancing understanding and identifying the long-lasting implications and manifestations of parental alcohol misuse through the lens of these students will provide practical next steps and interventions for considering how best to support the needs of such a hidden and vulnerable group. Moreover, addressing the widespread social norms of heavy alcohol consumption in higher educational contexts will be valuable for reframing alcohol consumption in such places with a heavy drinking culture that may be exclusionary for some.

Thus, the following two guiding questions shall be addressed in this dissertation:

1. How are perspectives and experiences regarding university drinking culture influenced by experiences of parental alcoholism?
2. How do adult children of alcoholics navigate and conceptualise their experiences of social integration at university?

The paper will move forward with Chapter Two, discussing the areas of existing literature that feed into the topics of adult children of alcoholics and the excessive drinking culture at university. Drawing on the key gaps in the literature, namely, the absence of voice of university students whom are also children of alcoholics, the value of this dissertation in responding to these gaps will be reinstated. Next, the methodology will be outlined in Chapter Three: how and why the eight participants were chosen for the one-to-one, semi-structured interviews, as well as the ethical considerations that arose. In Chapter Four, the results of these interviews will be considered through the lens of the three emergent master-themes *(worry about drinking, social life and university support)*, as well as a discussion of such. Finally, this paper will conclude in Chapter Five by reflecting on the above questions to provide clear findings and implications, and to also propose direction for future research topics.

Author's note: Alcoholism will be referred to interchangeably in this paper as alcohol addiction, dependence, misuse, and abuse. As a fellow adult child of an alcoholic, I acknowledge the problematic aspect of categorising and defining individuals struggling with addiction; referring to people with alcohol use disorders as "alcoholics" can be considered insensitive by some. This dissertation uses the term solely for clarity and convenience, and in no way intends to offend or homogenise people with alcohol use disorders or anyone else who may be affected by the term "alcoholic" and other expressions used.

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1. Introduction

Children of alcoholics are known to be strongly impacted by their parents' substance misuse, yet the less tangible impacts often go unheard. For example, the child of an alcoholic's relation to alcohol once they are of legal age to drink may be much more complex due to their childhood experiences of parental misuse. This has potential for even more complication once that person moves out of the family home and into the normalised and excessive drinking culture of university. The following chapter will therefore discuss key areas of literature on the impacts of parental alcoholism and the role of alcohol in British society and universities, in order to develop a holistic understanding of the interplay between experiences of parental alcoholism and a person's time at university, where heavy drinking is normalised. Existing research has neglected the interwoven nature between the impacts of parental alcoholism and the normalisation of alcohol use in higher education, and therefore the lived-experiences of adult children of alcoholics whom attend university are more likely to go unheard.

2.2. Parental alcoholism and the impact on the child

Although a large body of existing literature focuses on the individual alcoholic, research also acknowledges the clear risk to those around them; in particular, the drinker's family members (Rossow et al., 2016; Caan, 2013). The vast majority of this research focuses on the more substantive outcomes of the child of an alcoholic, whom are considered to be the most at-risk of impact out of all family relations (Jackson, 1958). Children of alcohol misusers are "directly affected by familial alcoholism" (McGreevey, 2006: 5), and therefore alcohol addiction in the family can have a severely "destructive impact" (Norton, 1994: 457). It has been commonly accepted by academics that children who grow up in families characterised by parental alcohol abuse "are at risk of several psychological, behavioural, cognitive, and social problems", as parental alcoholism can impact children in several significant ways (Tinnfalt, 2018: 531). This primarily includes issues with developing and sustaining positive relationships, poorer educational attainment, as well as an increased likelihood of anxiety and depression (Johnsen et al., 2022; Tunnard, 2002). Furthermore, parental alcoholism also impacts children through the more indirect manifestations, such as death, divorce, financial hardships or a child being taken into care (Marshall, 2002, in Caan, 2013).

A considerable amount of research has also shown that young adult children of alcoholics are likely to develop their own issues with alcohol, with them being more at risk of developing their own substance misuse issues in comparison to other young people (McGreevey, 2006; Cuijpers, 2005; Christensen and Bilenberg, 2000). Discovering parental alcoholism as a child can generate a mass of "deep-reaching ramifications", often characterised by extremely negative emotions, isolation and feelings of powerlessness to change their situation in the home (Barnard and Barlow, 2003: 53). With pathological behaviours being the parental norm for those facing addiction, children of alcoholics are therefore more likely to have a "chaotic and unpredictable" day-to-day (Tinnfalt et al., 2011: 134).

A major manifestation of parental substance abuse is the notion of inadequate and inconsistent parenting (Russell, 2006). The preoccupation with alcohol often means that a variety of basic physical and emotional necessities go unmet for the child (Norton, 1994), and the alcoholic parent can have a range of conflicting behaviours and emotions (Jackson, 1958). In this way, parental alcoholism is often found to be parallel with the distorting of typical parenting norms, as children are often characterised as becoming "parentified" (Bancroft et al., 2005: 112, see also; Kroll and Taylor, 2000). Research into the parent-child social bond, in a context of parental alcohol abuse, has demonstrated the common role-reversal or regression of the parental norm, in which the child is often used for both emotional and physical support (ibid.). Becoming "pseudo-adults" can be extremely traumatic as children must learn to meet the needs of their parent, whilst meaning their own dependency needs are often disregarded (Norton, 1994: 458). Often undertaking the role of a carer at a young age, both for parents and younger siblings, there is a potential heavy emotional burden placed upon them (Backett-Milburn et al., 2008). Typically centred around feelings of worry, anxiety and fear- both for and of their parents (Bernard and Barlow, 2003)- growing up in an "unstable", "culturally deviant" and "socially disapproved" family setting creates a "distorted" parental model for children, and thus has potential complications for their personal development and individual perception of experiences later in life (Jackson, 1958: 91). Existing literature on the impact of parental alcoholism on the child is overwhelmingly negative, and the challenges that these children face are vast and require serious consideration. Despite this awareness, their own personal accounts are typically overlooked (Dove, 2013). Abandoned here are the more subjective impacts on personal experiences of the world, feelings surrounding the transition into adulthood, thoughts on coping strategies and support, and their own perspectives on alcohol consumption (ibid. see also; Ullman, 1958).

2.3. An absence of voice amongst (adult) children of alcoholics

"Little [is] known about what it is actually like for a person to be raised by an alcoholic and how they make sense of their experiences" (Dove, 2013: 19). Where this is addressed, much research is centred around the sense of invisibility that is faced by these children, as the substance abuse is "rarely referred to or discussed" both in and outside of the home (Templeton et al., 2011: 172). The inability or lack of willingness to speak out about one's experiences of being a child of an alcoholic has been found to stem from a variety of reasons. Firstly, a major characteristic of alcoholism is denial from the drinker (Russell, 2006), and the secrecy of alcohol abuse leads to a masking of the issue, hence children's voices are more difficult to obtain (Turning Point, 2006). Secondly, alcohol misuse is often overlooked or is viewed with less distain in comparison to illicit drug addiction, making it a more neglected area of both research and policy (ibid. see also; Delargy et al., 2010). Alcohol being a legal substance means that it is more difficult to establish as an issue, as it is widely available and so receives much less attention in comparison to illicit drugs (Russell, 2006). Thirdly, the "heavy emotional burden" of having a parent that is an alcoholic leads to an urge to camouflage or ignore the issue (Turning Point, 2006: 9).

Children are often aware of the stigma attached to their parents' issue, and thus the notion of "keeping it in the family" and not disclosing any information to people outside of the home constitutes the vast majority of research into the lives of children of alcoholics (Barnard and Barlow, 2003: 51). It has been found that although children are often very critical of their parents' attempts to hide their substance misuse, they also had a clear understanding of the need to conceal the addiction too, due to fears of judgement and family disruption (Bancroft et al., 2005). This notion of helplessness is heightened as children soon learn that they are often powerless to change their parents' destructive behaviours, and the no-talk policies that are often enforced by families of addiction creates an unfortunate bubble of "unacceptable truths and painful emotions" (Norton, 1994: 547). This has heavy implications in that we have limited knowledge about the experiences of children who grow up in families where there is problematic use of alcohol; "their voices are rarely heard" (Kroll, 2004: 129). Yet, this prevailing theme of secrecy and lack of voice may be a result of the small amount of qualitative research that has been conducted (Dove, 2013), and therefore more research is needed to challenge existing thought surrounding what it means to have experience of parental alcoholism.

Mirroring that of childhood, those with an alcoholic parent often have their needs neglected once reaching adulthood (Backett-Milburn et al., 2008). The trauma of being a child of an alcohol misuser is far from over when adulthood is reached, despite research often neglecting this point. This perspective is restrictive when attempting to fully capture the experiences of those impacted by parental alcoholism, as their childhood issues cannot always be left in the past, but rather more likely shapes the way that they continue live (Bancroft and Wilson, 2007). What is typically missed is the impact which parental alcoholism can have on a person's subjective understandings and experiences of the world, particularly when moving into adulthood (Dove, 2013). The isolation felt by these children not only has long lasting impacts on their individual trajectories (Templeton et al., 2011; Norton, 1994), but this covert nature of alcoholism has had little attention from others (Delargy et al., 2010: 8). Research also tends to have a particular emphasis on the need for protecting the young child of an alcoholic (Bancroft and Wilson, 2007). This explicitly disregards the more subjective experiences of that child after growing up and leaving the home (Backett-Milburn et al., 2008). Young children rightly constitute a heavily at risk group, in need of increased consideration and support, yet once older, children are more commonly pathologised through being classed as being risky, both to themselves and others (ibid.). However, academics are beginning to take note of the needs of those children who have left the home, as the notion of growing up and time passing does not equal an erasure of problems (Adamson and Templeton, 2012).

2.4. Normalised alcohol use

Drawing on longitudinal research by Measham et al. (2011, see also; Measham et al., 1994), excessive alcohol consumption, previously regarded a "deviant" behaviour, has undergone a process of normalisation in recent years, characterised by societal acceptance. Alcohol is a legal, widely advertised and accessible substance (Tunnard, 2002), and its consumption can be considered as normalised through the common use and availability in British society (Backett-Milburn et al., 2008; Holmes et al., 2016; Hunt and Frank, 2016). Evidence indicates that alcohol has a large role in the everyday experiences of many people in the UK, particularly for students studying at university (Adamson and Templeton, 2012). Students have long been depicted as a group having a "alcoholic" culture, and academic research into student consumption of alcohol is rather extensive (see for example: Dempster, 2011; Gill, 2002; Hollands, 1995; Piacentini and Banister, 2006, 2009; Hindle et al., 2021). Therefore, scholars claim that an increased consideration of the normalisation of alcohol use in society will help to assess how substance usage is "woven into the very fabric of social existence" (Marshall, 1979, in Freed, 2010: 865).

Alcohol is widely acknowledged as an accepted drug in British society, and the consumption of alcoholic beverages is commonly regarded as an integral aspect of a pleasurable social existence (Velleman and Templeton, 2007). In Britain, there is a noticeable acceptance of excessive alcohol consumption, which is much more prevalent compared to other places (Measham and Brain, 2005). Subsequently, drinking alcohol is deeply intertwined with the social lives of many (Vander Ven, 2011; Beccaria and Prina, 2016), and central to this consumption is the notion of a night-time economy (Measham and Brain, 2005). This is vital for many British cities and towns, bringing with it a "new alcohol order" which involves more drug-wise young people whom utilise alcohol for "good night out" of socialising with others (ibid.: 268). Bars and clubs constitute a large part of young peoples' experiences of drinking (MacLean, 2016), and for students, this night-time economy is commonly viewed as the main arena for socialising (Jacobs et al., 2017). This is most visible in the first few weeks of arriving at university (for example, during fresher's week, the first week of an undergraduate degree, characterised by many social events and parties) where there is an intense pressure to meet new people and make friends (ibid.).

As previously discussed, the socially-sanctioned nature of alcohol usage contributes to its status of being much more of a prominent issue than any other kind of illicit drug misuse (Tunnard, 2002: 7, see also; Thurnell-Read, 2016). Alcoholism remains a "hidden harm" through this widespread acceptance in society and common disregard of addictive behaviours (HM Government, 2007). Deemed necessary for the wider student experience in the UK, there is a general consensus that universities have a sub-culture of "drinking and drunkenness" (Thurnell-Read et al., 2018: 574), and the excessive alcohol use that surrounds the student experience is portrayed as an unavoidable and daily aspect of a student routine (Hammersley, 2005). This drunken culture is regarded as central as it provides an avenue for maximising successful social interactions in peer-related contexts, with alcohol having the ability to boost confidence and assist in helping people become more outgoing (Cocker et al., 2018; Dietz, 2008). For example, drinking heavily is such a routine practice in universities that over half of students who regularly drink dangerous amounts of alcohol do not recognise the associated harms of their behaviours (Longstaff et al., 2014). Consequently, sociologists studying alcohol recognise that additional research should focus on this conventional substance use, in order to understand the correlation between alcohol and broader social existence, and how alcohol frequently performs a crucial function in many people's lives, especially for young individuals in higher education (Freed, 2010: 858).

For children of alcoholics, navigating this university experience is likely to be much more complex, as students whom abstain or limit their alcohol consumption more commonly experience marginalisation, stigma, and difficulties in socialising (Griffin et al., 2009; Conroy, 2014).

2.5. Alcohol and social integration in universities

Alcohol intoxication is often correlated with facilitating social capabilities, which is fundamental for university life where meeting new people and making friends is a major aspect (Stepney, 2013, in Thurnell-Read, 2016). As well as relieving academic pressure, responsibility and overall stress (Vander Ven, 2011), regular heavy alcohol consumption (particularly in a student's first year) is understood to assist in the navigating of a new sense of autonomy and independence that coincides with moving away from the family home and surpassing the legal age to begin drinking (Dietz, 2008; Hebden et al., 2015). In order to fully immerse oneself into the student experience, binge drinking is a problematic drinking pattern in which many drinks are consumed in one sitting, and it is frequently "glamorised by many students"; fed by a variety of drinking games and alcohol-focused events, and is commonplace on campus (Dietz, 2008: 86). Therefore, alcohol has been found to have a range of social benefits for students, but the broader normalisation of alcohol consumption on campus can be exclusionary for those who choose to abstain or limit themselves (Gambles et al., 2022).

Hence, a lack of participation in such culture has been associated with feelings of otherness, as excessive drinking is habitually viewed as a "compulsory" practice (Griffin et al., 2009: 224) that aids a sense of belonging (De Visser et al. 2013). Gambles et al. (2022) found that students were very aware of their ability to use alcohol consumption in order to assist in their own acclimatising to their new life at university. Students are knowledgable about the role of alcohol as it has the ability to reduce anxieties in their transition into their new student lives (ibid.). This is particularly visible in drinking activities related to "Fresher's Week" in the UK, which is viewed as an important time for establishing friends and socialising with other new students (ibid.). Students will often drink excessively at this time in order to facilitate the creation of peer groups and new student identities that are inherently correlated with alcohol consumption (Riordan et al., 2021). Consequently, non-drinking students face the likelihood of being labelled as abnormal and boring (De Visser et al., 2013). Yet, research demonstrates that social pressures can often override any personal opinions or desire to drink, and many students may succumb to peer pressure (Room, 1975; Gambles et al., 2022).

Thus, abstaining from drinking alcohol in the realm of higher education carries with it a particular stigma and potential repercussions for creating friendships and fostering a sense of social inclusion (Jacobs et al., 2017). Non-drinking students have explained in previous studies that being a non-drinker or one that limits their alcohol intake has heavy implications on the social aspect of university, claiming that going against the dominant social norm leads to many socialising difficulties, stamped with alienation and ostracism (ibid.; Brown and Murphy, 2018). Evidence from several studies suggests that "the absence of alcohol would negatively impact the ability to make friends" (ibid.: 738, see also; Conroy and de Visser, 2014; Frederikson et al., 2012). Integration into student life can thus be described as much more complex and potentially exclusionary without the use of alcohol to aid in developing experiences (Frederikson et al., 2012). This is a key example of an anticipated way in which children of alcoholics may have a more challenging experience of social integration at university, as this subgroup of the student population may have "very different attitudes to drink", yet research has not yet considered this (Piacentini and Banister, 2006: 155, see also; Hill, 2015).

2.6. Conclusion

The need for developing this research consequently stems from the lack of consideration of the more subjective, lived experiences of adult children of alcoholics. This is a group that is likely to have a complex relationship with alcohol, which is an undoubtedly significant aspect of the broader student experience in UK universities, embedded in an overall societal culture that is strongly associated with alcohol consumption (Piacentini and Banister, 2006). Situating their opinions and experiences in a context of higher education is something that existing research on children of alcoholics has not yet considered. Thus, understanding how this group of students conceptualise and navigate their university experiences, in light of their more challenging childhood backgrounds, deserves consideration. This research aims to give a voice to adult children of alcoholics, particularly those in higher education, through examining their personal stories of growing up with an alcohol misusing parent and how these experiences relate to and impact their current experiences and opinions on their university environment. By doing so, this dissertation seeks to bring attention to a neglected group. University students with parents who struggle with alcohol misuse are likely to face unique social challenges. It is crucial to give these individuals a platform to share their experiences and perspectives, and it is therefore time that their voices were heard.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This qualitative research is formed through an interpretivist epistemology, in which the participants' individual experiences and opinions were vital to my overall framework for conducting the study (Silverman, 2005; Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). Key for this paradigm is the deeper understanding of how the participants comprehend and construct their social realities and subsequent behaviours (Schwartz and Jacobs, 1979). Through implementing a consideration of this subjective nature of their lived experiences, I will be emphasising the participants' personal narratives throughout Chapter 4 (Marvasti, 2003; Maynes et al, 2011). This research therefore utilised one-to-one, semi-structured interviews, all conducted by myself. The participants were eight Durham University students; six undergraduate students, one Master's student and one PhD student (see appendix 1 for participant information table). The interviews all lasted between 35 and 55 minutes, involving five female participants and three male participants, with all interviews being conducted in-person, apart from one interview with a male student taking place online through Zoom.

To mitigate the influence of my personal connection with the research topic, I have relied on the insights of another adult child of an alcoholic, Lydia Dove (2013), who conducted similar research. In recognising my own status as an adult child of an alcoholic, this was monitored throughout my research, as so to not contaminate findings with my own preconceptions (ibid.; Conroy, 2014). To achieve this, I kept a reflexive diary in order to evaluate and prevent the influence of my own biases as a researcher with insider status. Dove (2013) also employed the notion of "bracketing", in order to be more self-aware of prior opinions that might have infiltrated the research (Barker et al, 2015; Fischer, 2009). I incorporated bracketing in my diary, and indeed throughout my whole research in an iterative manner, through using Ahern's (1999) "Tips for Reflexive Bracketing" and revisiting this diary, for example before each interview. This has involved a strong emphasis on consistently reflecting on my involvement throughout my data collection and analysis to ensure a level of detachment from the research (ibid.).

3.2. Sampling

Self-selection was crucial for this research, as the interviews contained sensitive topics relating to the participants' childhoods and experiences of alcohol consumption. This self-selection was a conscious choice due to my lack of access to sufficient information to obtain a probability sample (Denscombe, 2007), and gaining contact with adult children of alcoholics can be particularly difficult as this is a group which is often reluctant to discuss their family background (Hill, 2015). The study therefore involves a convenience sample, in which the participants are volunteers, with selection based upon their accessibility to myself as the researcher (Lavrakas, 2008; Bryman, 2016).

I advertised the study online on the main Durham University student group, "Overheard at Durham Uni", which had over 21,000 members at the time, and this is how all eight participants were recruited. The advertisement involved a brief description of the study and its purpose, and how potential participants could get in contact with myself. Once the students had got in contact, I provided them with a more detailed information sheet and consent form to sign. They were also required to complete a short online survey prior to the interview in order to determine their suitability for the research (appendix 2). For the in-person interviews, I offered to buy the participant a hot drink as a token of my appreciation for their willingness to take part in the study.

The survey asked for basic information about the participants' availability, but the main body consisted of my own interpreted version of the Children of Alcoholics Screening Test (CAST), which is a thirty-item test for determining parental alcoholism, formulated originally by Jones (1981), a social worker. All students who contacted me were included in the research, as they all met the criteria of being adult children of alcoholics based on their responses in the survey. The participants' personal drinking habits were not relevant to their selection. It was crucial to establish the definition of an adult child of an alcoholic to ensure that the selected participants accurately represented the target population. The survey aimed to identify if alcohol played a significant role in their childhood household and if their parent had a dependence on alcohol. Therefore, participation was based on self-identification, meaning that if a participant acknowledged that their parent had a regular alcohol use that caused negative consequences, they were eligible to take part in the research. Thus, there were no strict prerequisites for participation in this investigation. This is primarily because a vast amount of people do not seek diagnosis or support for their alcohol addiction, and it is a difficult addiction to formally diagnose (Davis, 1977).

3.3. Data Collection

Individually interviewing each participant was most appropriate for this research as it allowed for the facilitation of increased confidentiality and creating "an atmosphere of trust and discretion" (Leavy, 2014: 289). Furthermore, the seven in-person interviews all took place in a quiet café of the participants' choosing; the participants' choice of setting was vital to create as comfortable of an environment as possible for them in order to subtly aid in their disclosure of information (Herzog, 2012). Through utilising an interview guide (appendix 3) to assist in the standardisation of questioning and ensuring focus on the topics available for exploration, this more flexible semi-structured method allowed for participants to communicate what is important to them (Bryman, 2016).

Capturing the participants' lived experience was key for developing my understanding, and therefore through "the interviewee elaborating points of interest" (Denscombe, 2007: 176) I was able to map which aspects are prominent for them to disclose and expand upon (Jones, 1991; Seidman, 2006). Having a willingness to accept changes in direction of my interviews was vital, and I also employed Kvale's (1996) guide for effective questioning, active listening and responsiveness to maximise the positive interview environment. Vital for these interviews was allowing the participants to explain their subjective points of view (Kvale et al., 2018), and therefore cultivating rapport, trust and engagement with each interviewee was of paramount importance (Johnson and Rowlands, 2012). The content of the interviews all followed the same basic structure. Firstly, I engaged in briefing the participant on the use of my phone to audio-record the interview, and I would reiterate the purpose of the study, as described on the information sheet and consent form they were given prior (Kvale et al., 2018). Opportunities for asking questions were also given at both the start and end of each interview, as well as an emphasis on topics related to the ethics of the study (Denscombe, 2007). The interviews consisted of two main topics: 'family and childhood' and 'university'. This involved a consideration of the student's own relationship with alcohol, their parent's relationship with alcohol and the interplay this had with their childhood, their understanding of broader university and societal drinking cultures, and their own experiences of these. Space for a debrief was left at the end, including giving participants the opportunity to discuss any other topics or questions, as well as reinstating more ethical reminders regarding the study (Kvale et al., 2018).

3.4. Data analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2006) method of thematic analysis was used in this research in order to interpret each of the transcriptions. This involved coding the raw data and employing an iterative process of categorisation of recurring themes and patterns that I viewed as meaningful (ibid.). Allowing me to develop a more refined set of key concepts, the aim was to reflect on the emerging themes (Strauss, 1987) that should draw together both the latent and manifest codes of the participants' lived experiences (Leavy, 2014). I independently transcribed the audio-recordings to text verbatim and used a "cutting and sorting" approach in order to gather the passages that were to be vital for the emerging themes (Ryan and Bernard, 2003: 94). Through first coding each line, the key recurring themes were then highlighted. Repeating this process multiple times, then drawing links between the interviews, I was able to produce categories of information. This is a process of analytic induction, as I observed and extracted what I deemed valuable (Kvale et al, 2018).

3.5. Ethics

Only after ethical approval from Durham University did any contact with participants begin. Before interviews took place, a consent form and information sheet were distributed via email to all prospective participants and thus participation required a signed consent form and verbal confirmation that the information sheet was read and understood. Both informed consent and my understanding of ethics were viewed as an ongoing process in this study (BSA, 2017; Diener and Crandall, 1978). Throughout the interview, the participants' right to withdraw- without reason- was reinforced. This was parallel to a reflection that disclosing sensitive information could lead to psychological distress for the interviewees, which was key for my initial risk assessment (Dove, 2013; Kvale et al., 2018). The sensitive topic of parental alcoholism, combined with potentially emotive experiences of social integration and university drinking culture, constituted the need for extra ethical caution (Farrimond, 2013). Following the interview, I ensured that participants were provided with signposting for support if needed, as suggested by Matthews and Ross (2010). Additionally, I conducted a debrief, which involved asking participants if there were any other topics they wished to discuss or any questions they had, as recommended by Kvale et al. (2018). To maintain confidentiality and anonymity, all of the audio recordings and transcriptions were transferred from my mobile phone to my laptop which is a more secure, password-protected device, and they were destroyed after use (Bryman, 2016; Farrimond, 2013). Lastly, I used pseudonyms instead of participants real names in the write-up (Heggen and Guillemin, 2012).

Chapter 4: Results and Discussion

Thematic analysis of the transcriptions provided three master themes: worry about drinking, social life, and university support. Each master theme is of bipartite nature, with an embedded approach to discussion in each of the six subsections.

4.1. *Worry About Drinking*

Participants expressed worry about drinking alcohol at university in two significant ways. Firstly, on an individual level, in which the students who did drink tended to over-analyse their drinking habits. Secondly, participants also demonstrated worry for the drinking habits of others, particularly for students who appeared to engage in excessive alcohol consumption.

4.1.1. Anxiety about their own drinking habits

Of the four participants that stated that they do occasionally consume alcohol at university, three expressed significant self-surveillance of their drinking, in which they closely monitored and reflected on their own alcohol consumption.

For Rachel, she explained how she would think deeply about her relationship with alcohol out of fear that she would become like her alcoholic father…

> "I do have that lingering worry about it… That I can't have a drink easily without thinking-overthinking it like most people can. So it's something I think about every time I have a drink…I'm very aware of it [how much alcohol she consumes]. It's something I have to be conscious of whereas other people don't." [Rachel]

> "I will worry about it if I have one more drink one night than the last night I had a drink. I think, 'oh is this the descent?'… So it has meant I can't participate in that kind of culture without urm… that constant worry. Which is tricky, but ironically you forget about that after you've drunk enough." [Rachel]

This worry about becoming like the alcoholic parent was found to be one of Laura's primary reasons for choosing not to drink at all. Due to her long family history of problematic drinking, she found happiness in abstaining from drinking alcohol because she felt that she was explicitly breaking a generational cycle…

> "It definitely gives me kind of like, like a sense of almost pride, just in the sense that like I didn't fall into the trap this time." [Laura]

The fear of becoming like their alcoholic parent was found to stem from the recognition of the potential harms of excessive alcohol use, as well as the increased likelihood of generational substance misuse in the family (McGreevey, 2006). The students refused any chance of this through being self-critical and monitoring their drinking habits. Accordingly, all of the students who chose to abstain from alcohol consumption reflected upon this reason in describing why they do not drink at all; seeing the traumatic effects of alcoholism for their parents solidified their abstinence.

However, Yvonne and Tina felt more ambivalent when it came to their own alcohol consumption, which led to feelings of confusion about whether to drink…

> "I think it's still a bit weird, like my relationship to alcohol. Cus like I'll go urm… From like abstinent- like I'd label myself, like I'm not gonna drink like ever, but then urm, we'd go out, or like we would have an event, and I knew there'd be drinking involved, and then as soon as we get there like nobody would offer me a drink but I would grab a drink myself. It's almost like instinctual, instinctive… I know it's okay to do here but I know it's not okay to do at home, and then I just feel conflicted… I definitely like limit myself and surveil myself to not drink too much." [Yvonne]

> "I don't want it to feel like its got a hold over me, because I feel like the more you like sort of push it away sometimes, like in my head it's giving power over you… I don't like the feeling of being out of control." [Tina]

Managing this anti-consumption in the face of such a profound cultural norm is not achieved without great difficulty (Conroy, 2014; Piacentini and Bannister, 2009). The student responses demonstrate how their personal experience infiltrates their actions later-life at university; this is unsurprising when considering how previous research has demonstrated the long-term impacts of parental alcoholism (Dove, 2013). As reflected in the literature, "probably no one comes into the drinking situation with more ambivalence than the child of an alcoholic", and the student perceptions described above fall in line with this (Ullman, 1958: 54).

4.1.2. Concern for others at university who drink heavily

Five of the eight participants demonstrated a high level of vigilance when considering the drinking habits of their peers at university. This was mostly through concern for their friends, but also served as a solemn reminder of their traumatic experiences of parental alcoholism. Participants understood the dangers associated with excessive drinking, and therefore tended to feel a stronger personal response to their peers' choices and behaviours. For example, Laura recognised the troublesome nature of her peers' alcohol consumption. She explained how she had witnessed people going out and seeking intoxication in order to take their minds off the academic pressure of university…

> "It seems like a crutch for people to engage in social situations and to deal with their stress… A way for people to make themselves feel better without actually doing the work to make themselves feel better." [Laura]

Furthermore, Yvonne spoke about a friend of hers who started displaying similar drinking behaviours to her alcoholic mother…

> "I fully distanced myself from it. There was a part of me who wanted to be very hands on and completely take care of her, but I just recognised immediately that that's another dependent relationship… I just like did not want to be involved at all." [Yvonne]

Recognising that whilst she often found herself looking after her mother, she couldn't allow it to happen again with her friend. Yvonne attempted to maintain boundaries to mitigate the impact that her friend's drinking had on her, and to prevent her from taking on another parentified role (Bancroft et al., 2005). Echoing previous research, the findings are consistent with understandings of role-reversal with the alcoholic parent (Delargy et al., 2010).

Yet, whilst Yvonne chose to remove herself from the situation, other participants felt a strong obligation to protect their friends from the potential harms of drinking…

> "I feel like I pick up on peoples habits a lot more, like when you see people going out drinking like a lot, it rings alarm bells in me… Even though that's kind of the culture at university." [Tina]

"Whenever I go on a night out, I'm always that person thats kind of in charge of everyone... I don't want to be, but when someone's hammered you always make sure that they get back before you get back yourself." [Emily]

"My sister's just gone to university... I want to involve myself in her going out and how she finds it. She didn't have an introduction to drinking like many people did (due to Covid-19 restrictions)." [Richard]

The students took on a clear caregiving role for their friends, which a few were already accustomed to due to looking after their alcoholic parent and siblings before coming to university. Safeguarding and caring for others came naturally to most of the participants (Hill, 2011), it is clear that these behaviours of caregiving can manifest in adulthood and different social situations (Bancroft et al., 2005. The concerns for the wellbeing of their parent is thus translated into concerns for others at university that display similar behaviours (Harbin et al, 2000, in Barnard and Barlow, 2003). The students took on this role often without thought; the notion of taking care of others is so ingrained for them due to their previous "hijacking of childhoods" (Kroll and Taylor, 2000: 96).

For example, the results showed that the students "have a huge sense of responsibility and often times think of others before thinking of themselves" (McGreevey, 2006: 13), displayed in the ways that they would look out for others on nights out and generally worry about their peers behaviours...

"Sometimes I see things in other people and it does set off this little bell in my head, like 'oh I wish you wouldn't do that...'" [Richard]

"I always think like 'I'm not there to supervise'... You end up being in a caregiving role again." [Tina]

For Richard, this became a very internal process. He expressed how he would often spend time thinking about his friends' drinking, but he would remain private about these thoughts.

"Drinking is the absolute standard, and it's a large scale of how people drink here... but I find it quite hard seeing how people have alcohol... the role it plays in their life- or the role I see it plays in their life- because I don't know, urm... It's a completely internal thing, the effect it has on me. It's all just thoughts and thinking, and if I struggle with something, it's in my head and I'll carry on...I'm not as keen to always laugh at the drunken stories... I think about it a lot more..." [Richard]

"It made me more aware... it was an introspective change I had, it changed my relationship with things... I became much more hypersensitive about it upon coming to university... If I think about it in the wrong way it can get me in a certain place and if I see things." [Richard]

Whilst he saw how his friends may present similar destructive drinking behaviours to his father, Richard's inward reflection represents the broader internalisation of non-disclosure and secrecy, leading him to conceal how he felt (Bancroft et al., 2005; Taylor and Kroll, 2004; Kroll, 2004). This supports research from Dove (2013: 78), who spoke similarly of a participant, stating that "the problem was his and therefore he felt he had to deal with it alone". The embedded nature of concealing problems and keeping thoughts private does indeed manifest into adulthood (ibid.).

4.2. *Social life*

The participants demonstrated two key ways in which the lasting impacts of their parents' drinking affected their social lives at university. Firstly, the prevalence of feelings of social exclusion due to their choices to limit their alcohol consumption or not drink at all was evident. Secondly, and more positively, the participants demonstrated a significant ability to actively resist conscription to university social norms, and instead actively create their own social lives.

4.2.1. Feelings of exclusion and social isolation

Feeling excluded was a common manifestation of choosing to limit their consumption or not drink alcohol at all at university. Participants explained how socialising and alcohol were often intertwined, and thus abstaining or limiting their drinking had clear implications for their ability to partake in the social side of university. This was particularly visible when participants discussed their thoughts on 'freshers week'...

"A lot of the activities were all clubbing nights [during freshers week]... theres an expectation to get absolutely smashed... Even if people are nice about you not drinking and there're not pressuring you, it still feels like you're kind of excluded." [Tina]

"Freshers week, everyone was going out every night... It's the socialising aspect, I enjoy socialising and I'd feel left out if I didn't go." [Emily]

"All the kind of 'fun' things like clubbing or let's go out and get shots, shots, shots, shots, shots… not something that was in my world." [Thomas]

The participants reflect a broader student consensus that suggests there is a clear lack of alternative options for socialising (Davies et al., 2018). Many of the activities in freshers week include going out to nightclubs, and this is "explicitly associated with drinking" (ibid.: 10). As a result, it is clear that more needs to be done to alter the traditional expectations of the first few weeks of university. As in other studies, the students recognised the integral role that alcohol has in being a facilitator of social interaction at university (ibid.; Frederiksen et al., 2012; de Visser et al., 2013)

For Laura, this exclusion did not go away after freshers week. She felt quite strongly about her feelings of social isolation throughout her years at Durham…

"It definitely feels like I'm kind of excluded from a lot of things… I'll still be like very uncomfortable because everyone's slowly getting more drunk…I just don't see the point [in drinking] and it makes me very uncomfortable at times where like everyone's drunk and on a completely different plane of existence to me." [Laura]

"It's always been very kind of off putting for like social situations and I think that's contributed to some of my anxiety at uni… Definitely being in those situations and attempting to partake and have fun while everyone else is quite literally using a substance to get to that level." [Laura]

These feelings were similar for other participants, and contributed to their ability to make friends…

"It's difficult to make friends without it because everyone is doing it. And if you say you're not going to drink then you're suddenly excluded from a range of university student activities." [Rachel]

"Not having the ability to engage at like parties and events and stuff like that has definitely made an impact." [Laura]

"I think sometimes it does make you feel quite lonely if you don't (drink)." [Tina]

The responses showcase the range of ways in which parental alcoholism can impact experiences of social life at university. Notably, all of these experiences are connected to the students' individual choices to limit or not consume alcohol altogether, and the effects that this can have on their social integration.

The students recalled a sense of isolation, parallel to other studies on non-drinkers at university more generally (Jacobs et al., 2017). Here, the huge role that alcohol consumption has on social life can be viewed more explicitly: in essence, *if you don't drink, you feel left out* (Gambles et al., 2022). The findings evidence the isolating ramifications of going against the cultural norm, meaning that the students had to construct their own social lives.

4.2.2. Agency and creating a meaningful social life

Despite some of the negative impacts of parental alcoholism infiltrating the university experience, all of the participants spoke overall positively about their time at Durham. The students were able to reflect on their ability to make their own social groups and develop relationships with people without using alcohol as a facilitator for social interactions.

For example, Emily met her friends through being a part of a Durham sports team…

> "I meet lots of people and we go cafes or get lunch and socialise that way… I'd rather do that. Theres no pressure in the group that I'm with to drink." [Emily]

Similarly, although an inherently difficult process, Laura curated a friendship group in her final year which suited her values around drinking…

> "I've managed over the course of uni to like kind of weave my way through my friend groups to find the people who don't rely on it as much… It's something that I've had to really navigate and like remove myself from." [Laura]

> "[I'm] much more like self aware and kind of self confident in that choice now. And I respect my own boundaries more than I expect someone trying to convince me to drink." [Laura]

As did James…

> "I never really had mates outside of my house until third year… I started setting up music events so people had to talk to me to get to know me… So through that I got mates with the organisers and I met my best mate." [James]

Reflecting more pessimistic findings in previous literature, which often states that non or light-drinking students will struggle to make friends (Jacobs et al., 2017), the students often did face the same difficulty in this research. Yet, the students also challenge the assumptions; they became active creators of their own social worlds through navigating their way through different friendship groups (Gambles et al., 2022). For example, one of the main foundations for all of the students' friendships was that their friends must either be limiting or non-drinkers themselves, or be respectful of their choice not to drink and therefore engage in a variety of non-drinking activities. This tolerance was important for the participants' creation of their fulfilling social lives, and mitigated their feelings of exclusion (Conroy, 2014). The sense of personal agency results from the rejection of of the dominant alcohol culture, as the participants needed to reframe their estrangement from the drinking culture to find people like them (ibid.).

Overall, it was clear that the participants were able to actively create friendships that involved a acceptance around their perspectives on drinking alcohol…

> "The most important thing that I've learnt is that you have blood relatives but you get to choose your non-blood relative family members… Who might be more important in your life later on." [Yvonne]

> "I'm with my flatmate who doesn't drink as well so we kind of stick together… It's helped me and my roommate bond." [Tina]

The findings challenge the prevailing idea in research that adult children of alcoholics are predisposed to negative outcomes, and instead suggest their capacity to turn their experiences into something positive (Dove, 2013). Contradicting the emphasis on the adverse effects on social integration is valuable for reframing the way in which this subgroup may be viewed. The participants displayed independence, drive and resilience in striving to find friends at university, explicitly confounding other evidence that focuses on issues in making friends (ibid.).

4.3. *University support*

Participants had a dualistic outlook on university support. Whilst they recognised that more specific interventions needed to be put forward by the university in order to support people like themselves, they also recognised the permanence of their situation and of the excessive drinking culture at university. This was found in conjunction with their tendency to reflect inwards, rather than seek support from others.

4.3.1. Specific intervention and inclusion procedures

Participants were generally critical of the lack of measures taken by the university to both support students who are children of alcoholics, and to also consider the large role that alcohol plays in the university experience. Some of the students spoke of their feelings of stigma and alienation surrounding them being non-drinkers or uncomfortable with the heavy alcohol consumption at university…

> "I feel like just a general kind of push for more non-drinking activities would be very helpful but not in like a stigmatised, 'this is for non-drinkers' way but more of a like 'this is for student engagement, this is for social development, this is for like…' all of this stuff… At such a like prestigious university that has such a stressful workload where students are consistently stressed… consistently going to these forms of like substances to relieve their stress, and I feel like that push should already be inherently within the university and it's just not." [Laura]

> "There should be more things available for people who don't drink at uni, you know, cause it's a shame. Cause all the things that are available is just, they're so like nerdy. They're just like, it's like tea and toast evenings at like college or something. Like know I've got a life You know, just cus I don't drink doesn't mean like I'm 82. You know?… It's like, it's always the fucking like, nerdiest thing [the non-drinking events] and it's like, it's a bit alienating." [James]

James and Laura highlight views in other literature, where students often expressed how alcohol interventions can be "patronising or preaching" (Davies et al., 2018: 3). The need for these non-drinking activities to be "credible" and "cool" is paramount for ensuring that non-drinking students aren't perceived differently (ibid.: 10). Others voiced many specific things for Durham University to improve on and steps to take towards promoting inclusion for those who don't drink, and for those who have experience of parental alcoholism, as well as approaches towards healthier alcohol consumption for all students more generally…

> "A safe house… Universities have university accommodation and it's empty during the break… if you're concerned for your safety, you can just go there… With alcoholism, I'd say it goes hand in hand with abuse. Just a safe house to escape abuse." [Thomas]

"They never really make it clear like 'hey, we offer support for this specific issue.' I feel like there should be a separate group for it… it would be even nice to make it some sort of a society. Like children of parents who are alcoholics. I feel like that could be quite nice because you could have non-alcoholic events… And Christmas break… It's always just around this time where I feel so depressed. People constantly ask you about your plans, they question you… And the university should have things put together for people who stay here." [Yvonne]

"The university don't do anything to regulate it… College bars serve people who are intoxicated and they shouldn't be allowed to it. People at college bars… I don't think there's much training… the university almost contributes to people getting intoxicated because they don't have any rules… I think there should be more awareness of where you can get help if you need help… I think as well cheap alcohol [in college bars] doesn't help" [Emily]

The opinions of the students above evidence the failures of the university in recognising and responding to the issue, and highlights the need to understand what student opinions are on reducing excessive alcohol consumption and, in turn, supporting adult children of alcoholics (Davies et al., 2018; Brown and Murphy, 2018). In particular, the notion of a support group, as raised by Yvonne, could be beneficial in that students can draw on their similar experiences in order to facilitate feeling heard and comforted; something which is not common for this group (Templeton et al., 2011). Overall, the students provide a variety of clear next-steps that they wish for the university to take. These views were consistent with the perceptions of other students in previous studies regarding the role of the university in providing support in navigating the conflicting dynamics of drinking and non-drinking (Jacobs et al., 2017). The lack of support felt by the students is highlighted in a variety of previous studies (Dove, 2013; Kroll, 2004), and so the findings reinforce the necessity of considering how to better offer help for both adult children of alcoholics and non-drinking students more generally.

4.3.2. Permanence and Invisibility

Whilst wanting the university to do more, participants also understood that the drinking habits of students at Durham was representative of a much larger-scale issue in British society (Holmes et al., 2016). The students recognised the permanence of both their parents' addiction and the excessive drinking culture as a whole, and how they, like children of alcoholics more generally, deal with their issues alone (Hill, 2011). This invisibility was not criticised, but rather accepted as natural for the

participants, which led to them taking a more relaxed approach when discussing university support…

> "I don't actually believe that theres anything the university can do to address the drinking culture that happens amongst students… They just don't have the ability." [Rachel]
>
> "There's not much that they can do, because I mean it's the UK drinking culture is kind of *the* culture." [Laura]

> "I mean I know the uni is useless… And they don't care. But if they, if they could do anything, I'm not even sure what it would be. Cus where do you start changing the whole culture?" [James]

> "I don't expect people to *actually* cater to it." [Richard]

The students saw the excessive drinking culture at university as something which is unlikely to be dismantled; as seen in other research, a "clear message emerged to suggest that student drinking was resistant to change" (Davis et al., 2018: 9). In recognising the permanence of alcohol use in society more generally, they therefore concluded- more pessimistically- that the ability of the university to tackle such is very limited. The participants also spoke of the permanence of the impact that their parents' addiction has had on them as individuals…

> "I feel like that at this point a lot of people have probably dealt with it for a long time in their lives… most of my life have been dealing with this kind of bullshit. So the uni offering support now means fuck all to me." [James]

> "I've never talked to anyone about it and its natural for me to keep it in almost… its awkward." [Emily]

The invisibility of being a child of an alcoholic is explicitly presented here. The students were hesitant to seek support because they had been dealing with these issues often longer than they can remember. As demonstrated in the literature elsewhere, it is expected that the students will have processed their parents' addictions alone and without guidance (Taylor and Kroll, 2004; Templeton et al., 2011). This non-disclosure is a salient feature of parental substance misuse, and so it is unsurprising that the students still reflect this in their early adulthood (Bancroft et al., 2005). When keeping secrets and holding things in is all that most children of alcoholics know to do, then this becomes very difficult to reprogram later in life (Barnard and Barlow, 2003; Hill, 2011).

Nevertheless, the student opinions provide evidence for the notion that not every adult child of an alcoholic "will need or want support" (Dove, 2013: 24).

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> "I think of it as something I just have to carry with me… I think I'm quite successful at holding it, and being aware of it." [Rachel]

> "It is still in my life, it will always be in my life… nothing I can do about that." [Richard]

> "It's just kind of with me all the time." [Laura]

Paradoxically, all of the students recognised that the effects of their parents' drinking stay with them, and that they need to continue to manage this because they cannot simply remove the impacts of their traumatic childhood experiences.

Overall, as in Dove's (2013: 88) research, "all participants described their desire to be different to, and better than their parents". This reframing of the way children of alcoholics are conceptualised is important: this group of adult children of alcoholics were not *risky*, they were not *damaged, troubled* or *hopeless*. The students drew upon their experiences and navigation of university drinking and social life in order to better themselves, rather than weighing themselves down with the past. They were able to actively construct their lives in a way that suited their values and honoured their experiences and understanding of parental alcoholism (Bancroft and Wilson, 2007; Templeton et al., 2011). After all, the participants recognised that they could not change their childhoods, their parents' addiction, or the role that alcohol has in universities and wider British society, but they could aim to give themselves a better future (Templeton et al., 2011).

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This dissertation explored the experiences and opinions of adult children of alcoholics who are currently enrolled at Durham University. The personal narratives of the eight students explicitly responded to the lack of empirical research on the lived experiences of adult children of alcoholics, and provided space for shedding light on the less tangible consequences of parental alcoholism-specifically in relation to the students' experiences and opinions of university life. This was achieved within a backdrop of a sociological understanding of the normalisation of alcohol use, particularly in UK higher education where excessive alcohol consumption is a common culture (Hebden et al., 2015).

In addressing the two questions regarding how experience of parental alcoholism impacts on *(1.)* perspectives and experiences of university drinking culture and *(2.)* navigations and conceptualising of experiences of social integration at university, three master themes were subsequently established. This study has therefore found that:

1. The effects of parental alcoholism are evident in the attitudes and actions of students towards alcohol consumption, primarily by inducing concern about drinking. For the students themselves, this meant heavy self-surveillance and worry regarding their own drinking habits. When it came to the drinking of others at university, this meant feeling concern for their peers and often taking on a caregiving role.

2. The social lives of students with alcoholic parents are affected in regard to their ability and willingness to partake in this normalised drinking culture at university, and their experience of social integration. Participants felt a sense of social isolation and exclusion if they did not drink, yet were also able to demonstrate agency and actively construct their own social groups and understanding of sociability at university.

3. The help-seeking behaviours of adult children of alcoholics are ambiguous in that they recognised that the university should do more in order to support people like themselves (for example, try to dismantle the normalised drinking culture), yet they felt conflicted as they believed nothing could *actually* be done to change the impacts of parental alcohol misuse. The permanence of the excessive drinking culture, alongside the permanence of their parents' addiction, meant that support was often regarded unnecessary. This was paired with the notion of invisibility for children of alcoholics, as the students often dealt with things alone.

Reflecting upon the two guiding subquestions, it is clear that perspectives regarding university drinking culture and social integration into university are expressed in the ways the students face worry around drinking, and how they navigate exclusion from the culture by seeking their own friendships that do not involve drinking. The interviews also demonstrated the ambivalence of views surrounding support, but nevertheless suggest that more needs to be done in assessing the inclusivity of higher education for such an unheard group.

However, this research is not without certain limitations. Firstly, the small and homogenous nature of the opportunistic sample renders it unsuitable for generalisation and application to broader contexts (Bryman, 2016). Moreover, the results cannot be considered representative of the larger student population as the participants were all from white ethnic backgrounds and mostly from middle-class backgrounds (ibid.). The dissertation employed a broad scope of research focus, and whilst this allowed the participants to discuss what was important for them, perhaps the research could have benefitted from a more nuanced and specific topic (Conroy, 2014). Lastly, my own personal connection to the dissertation cannot be overlooked. Despite the keeping of a reflexive diary and a meticulous coding system, the infiltration of my personal experience inevitably seeps into the methods chosen, the questioning and interpretation of results, the topic as a whole (ibid.). To address these limitations, future research could include a more detached researcher that may have provided a different lens (Conroy, 2014), or a more gender-sensitive, specific comparative analysis of participants (Tinnfalt et al., 2011), or utilise a larger and more ethnically-diverse sample. Overall, further research should seek to explore the subjective lens of individual students with alcoholic parents in greater detail.

Finally, an important practical implication of the insight uncovered in this research concerns the intervention required from the university. The research participants proposed concrete measures for the institution to implement in order to begin dismantling the maintenance of the excessive and normalised drinking culture. Hence, the notion of *support groups and societies*, *increased regulation at college bars*, *more non-drinking events*, *safe-houses* and *a recognition of students that stay at university over holidays* due to family difficulties are things that the university can and should address. Another key implication is that this research emphasises the overall need for fostering greater inclusivity at universities when considering the prominent role of alcohol consumption, through the understanding the experiences of non and light-drinking students (Jacobs et al., 2017). The findings underscore the significance of the difficulties that adult children of alcoholics encounter at university when it comes to drinking and socialising with others.

This dissertation is therefore significant for bringing attention to adult children of alcoholics more generally, with them being an often-overlooked population. It also holds importance for contributing to an understanding of the prevalence of the problematic drinking culture in higher education more generally, and for understanding all students who choose to limit or abstain from alcohol consumption. Whether the child of an alcoholic or not, the exclusionary nature of such normalised drinking has huge ramifications for all non-drinking students (Jacobs et al., 2017).

Encouraging alternative dialogue about the problematic nature of alcohol consumption, particularly in how it can be exclusionary for some groups of students, like adult children of alcoholics, is important for promoting changing attitudes towards those abstaining from alcohol use. In the realm of higher education, this is especially needed when these choices do indeed deviate from the societal expectations of what it means to be a student (ibid.). Considering how parental alcoholism can lead to limiting or abstinence from alcohol consumption, and the effects this can have on individual perceptions of integration and other social experiences surrounding drinking and university, makes this dissertation a unique contribution to existing research.

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Appendix

1. Participant Information Table

Pseudonym	Gender	Gender of alcoholic parent	Relationship to parents now	Degree level	Drinking profile
Rachel	Female	Male	Good relationship with mother, okay relationship with father	Undergraduate, final year	Occasionally drinks alcohol for social events
Laura	Female	Both parents	In contact with both parents but has a strained relationship with mother	Undergraduate, final year	No, does not drink alcohol. Has only drank on a few occasions
James	Male	Male	Good relationship with both parents	Master's	No, has never drank alcohol
Yvonne	Female	Female	In contact with both parents but has a strained relationship with mother	Undergraduate, final year	Very occasionally drinks alcohol for large social events
Tina	Female	Female	Good relationship with both parents	Undergraduate, first year	Occasionally drinks alcohol for social events
Richard	Male	Male	Great relationship with both parents	Undergraduate, second year	No, does not drink alcohol. Has only drank on a few occasions
Emily	Female	Male	Good relationship with mother, okay relationship with father	Undergraduate, first year	No, has never drank alcohol
Thomas	Male	Male	Not in contact with either parent	PhD, first year	Occasionally drinks alcohol depending on factors like cost/social situation/time

2. Survey Questions (interpreted from Jones, 1981)

"Please check the answer below that best describes your feelings, behaviour and experiences related to a parent's alcohol use. Take your time and be as accurate as possible.

- Have you ever thought that one of your parents had a drinking problem?
- Have you ever lost sleep because of a parent's drinking?
- Did you ever encourage one of your parents to quit drinking?
- Did you ever feel alone, scared, nervous, angry or frustrated because a parent was not able to stop drinking?
- Did you ever argue or fight with a parent when he or she was drinking?
- Did you ever threaten to run away from home because of a parent's drinking?
- Has a parent ever yelled at or hit you or other family members when drinking?
- Have you ever heard your parents fight when one of them was drunk?
- Did you ever protect another family member from a parent who was drinking?
- Did you ever feel like hiding or emptying a parent's bottle of liquor?
- Do many of your thoughts revolve around a problem drinking parent or difficulties that arise because of his or her drinking?
- Did you ever wish that a parent would stop drinking?
- Did you ever feel responsible for or guilty about a parent's drinking?
- Did you ever fear that your parents would get divorced due to alcohol misuse?
- Have you ever withdrawn from and avoided outside activities and friends because of embarrassment and shame over a parent's drinking problem?
- Did you ever feel caught in the middle of an argument or fight between a problem drinking parent and your other parent?
- Did you ever feel that you made a parent drink alcohol?
- Have you ever felt that a problem drinking parent did not really love you?
- Did you ever resent a parent's drinking?
- Have you ever worried about a parent's health because of his or her alcohol use?
- Have you ever been blamed for a parent's drinking?
- Did you ever think your father was an alcoholic?
- Did you ever wish your home could be more like the homes of your friends who did not have a parent with a drinking problem?
- Did a parent ever make promises to you that he or she did not keep because of drinking?
- Did you ever think your mother was an alcoholic?

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- Did you ever wish that you could talk to someone who could understand and help the alcohol-related problems in your family?
- Did you ever fight with your brothers and sisters about a parent's drinking?
- Did you ever stay away from home to avoid the drinking parent or your other parent's reaction to the drinking?
- Have you ever felt sick, cried, or had a "knot" in your stomach after worrying about a parent's drinking?
- Did you ever take over any chores and duties at home that were usually done by a parent before he or she developed a drinking problem?

Not visible to participants-

Score: Total Number of Yes Answers

0-1 Most likely parent is not alcoholic. A score of 1 might suggest problem drinking.

2-5 Has had problems due to at least one parent's drinking behaviour. This is a child of a drinker or possibly an alcoholic.

6+ More than likely the child of an alcoholic. Stage of alcoholism needs to be determined.

3. Interview Guide

please note that this is a semi-structured interview. Topics will be discussed based upon participant willingness and desire. Some topics will be discussed more than others, some will not be discussed at all. All is of the participants discretion; they can skip a question with no questions asked and no justification needed. Information regarding the students' parents already initially been obtained in the survey.

Personal information-

Name:

Age:

Degree:

Year of study:

College:

Durham email address:

Does the student drink alcohol:

One: family and childhood

- Talk to me about your parent's drinking behaviours during your childhood...

- describe your day to day as well as what you knew about theirs…

- what are your overall thoughts and feelings about your childhood, when considering your parent's drinking?

- In what ways did your parent's problematic drinking impact your childhood?

- Did you ever wish you could change things or try to change things? What methods of intervention, if any, did you partake in or experience?

- How did you feel when you found out about your parent's drinking problem? Would you be able to describe the process of you finding out? (Was it gradual or instant?)

- How is you relationship to both of your parents now? (And siblings, if any)

Two: University

-University students are often perceived as having an 'alcoholic culture'. What do you think about that perception? Have you seen it in action?

- Talk to me about what you know about drinking at Durham University more generally? – What role do you perceive it to play at university?

- What role does drinking alcohol have for your own experiences of university? Do you like the way that it is? why/ why not?

- Do you think that your childhood experiences of having a problem drinking parent impact your experience of being a student at university?

– If so, how? (Is the student a part of any sports/societies)

– If not, why?

- Are there any forms of support you currently receive, from the university or elsewhere, that relates to your parent's drinking? - Are there any forms of support you think you would find useful that you do not currently receive, either from the university or beyond?

- How do you think the university could improve adult children of alcoholics' time at Durham, if at all?

- Is there anything else that you would like to discuss?