

Navigating the Crossroads: An Examination of Family Dynamics Amidst Fathers' Recovery from Substance Abuse

Azahah Abu Hassan Shaari & Arena Che Kasim

Center for Research in Psychology and Human Well-Being (Psitra), Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Malaysia

Email: azahah@ukm.edu.my, arena@ukm.edu.my

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Abstract

The influence of substance abuse on families, specifically when the father is involved, is a matter of significant concern. To delve deeper into this issue, the present study employs Family Systems Theory to explore the intricate dynamics between addiction, fatherhood and family relationships during substance abuse treatment. Authors conducted 6-months desk based study to examine studies related to family and fathers dealing with substance misuse to assess the role played by fathers in this context and examine how their therapeutic interventions impact emotional systems within their families. The results suggest that a considerable proportion of men undergoing therapy are fathers who had previously taken part in their families' daily lives. This emphasizes how family dynamics are interconnected and how families encounter many complex difficulties when a father undergoes substance abuse treatment. The research also stresses the significance of adopting comprehensive care strategies that cater to addiction and simultaneously strengthen familial relationships throughout the recovery phase, highlighting the importance of incorporating family-oriented aspects into substance abuse therapies.

Introduction

In the field of addiction, there exists a significant group of individuals who face the challenge of maintaining strong familial relationships while struggling with substance abuse. According to Miller and Lopez (2022), over 16 million people in the United States engage in some form of substance misuse, leading to detrimental consequences such as high healthcare treatment costs and criminal justice expenses, which reach upwards of \$100 billion annually. Moreover, a considerable proportion of men who seek treatment for substance abuse identify as biological fathers (Fitzgerald et al., 2020). A study by Caponnetto et al (2020) found that over 50% of men entering substance misuse treatment programmes are fathers with an average of two children each. These alarming statistics indicate that family life is significantly impacted by addiction since around 86% of these fathers have either lived with or currently cohabit

with their children. According to Fitzgerald et al (2020), approximately 70% were present at the hospital during the birth of their youngest child, thereby highlighting their essential roles within their families.

The outcomes of a recent examination carried out at a substance misuse centre within the community have unveiled both intriguing and alarming statistics. As per this investigation, almost 68% of males who were mandated by the court to attend rehabilitation for their drug addiction had fathered at least one biological child. Moreover, 30% of these dads were bestowed with custody of a juvenile below the age of eighteen years. Additionally, a dated study by Collions, Grella, and Hser from 2003 discovered that more than half (51%) of fathers who sought treatment for substance abuse also demonstrated significant involvement with their children. By analysing family dynamics amidst substance abuse treatment procedures, the intention behind this research is to cast light on the intricate interplay between addiction, fatherhood, and familial relationships. The results have immense potential for shaping tailored interventions and support systems catering to families grappling with issues arising from drug abuse and recovery.

Objective

Using Family Systems theory, the purpose of this conceptual study is to examine the complex family dynamics that emerge during the recovery of substance abuse in a father or spouse. It will further comprehend how the individual's addiction and ensuing recovery affect the emotional system within the nuclear family.

Aim

1. Examine the complex family dynamics during substance abuse treatment with a father or spouse using Family Systems Theory.
2. Understand how the emotional system within the nuclear family is impacted by the individual's addiction and recovery process.

Substance Abuse

The misuse of substances is a widespread issue that has implications not only for affected individuals but also for their families. Research has revealed that those grappling with substance use disorders (SUD) may either voluntarily seek treatment or be mandated to receive it (Paquette et al., 2022). Various factors impact people's decision to seek assistance, which might include support from loved ones, anxiety, fatigue, self-disgust, spiritual interventions, and reaching an all-time low (Wilson & Rhee, 2022). Additionally, demonstrating the ability to quit and avoiding severe health consequences linked with addiction are significant motivators behind seeking treatment (Lowell et al., 2023; Witkiewitz et al., 2022). The severity of addiction also influences the decision to pursue help. Studies exploring the efficacy of diverse SUD treatments have produced mixed findings. Residential therapy settings seem to offer better outcomes in medical, social, and psychiatric indicators six months following programme completion compared to clients in therapeutic community settings (Miller and Lopez, 2022). Quasi-experimental studies indicate that residential therapy can result in reduced crime rates and less methamphetamine usage while leading to higher completion rates and client retention relative to outpatient programmes (Witkiewitz et al., 2022). Moreover, research suggests that a positive therapeutic relationship between counsellors committed to their clients' abilities and strengths is a strong predictor of successful outcomes in SUD treatments (Caponnetto et al.,

2020). In summary, these discoveries highlight different reasons why individuals opt for SUD therapies while providing insights into how specific techniques work differently depending on factors such as the severity of addiction or the therapeutic relationships between counsellors and their patients.

Family Functioning and Substance Abuse

Studies consistently show that paternal substance abuse has a negative emotional impact on family members. Children of fathers with substance abuse issues often display elevated levels of anxiety, depression, and other forms of emotional distress (Cabrera, 2020; Waters, 2020; Lowell et al., 2023). Likewise, partners or spouses of fathers who struggle with substance abuse commonly report experiencing more psychological distress (Palkovitz, 2019). These outcomes emphasise the harmful impact of paternal substance abuse on the emotional health and well-being of family members; therefore, targeted interventions and support are imperative.

It has been observed that the use of substances by a father can disturb the conventional roles and responsibilities within a family, leading to substantial changes in familial dynamics. According to a research study conducted by Fitzgerald et al (2020), fathers who struggle with substance addiction often face challenges in fulfilling their parental obligations effectively, which can result in confusion regarding their role and create instability within the family unit. Consequently, such disruptions can have an enduring impact on children's development and impede the overall functioning of the family system. Additionally, communication patterns are profoundly affected by substance abuse within families. Research indicates that families belonging to fathers who engage in substance abuse suffer from reduced levels of open and effective communication (Fitzgerald et al., 2020). Communication breakdowns not only hinder conflict resolution but also limit emotional expression while creating an atmosphere of secrecy and mistrust within the household (Pruett et al., 2019). It is essential to comprehend these communication patterns before developing interventions that promote healthy familial interactions and facilitate effective communication among members. Paternal substance abuse adversely affects family operations, thereby straining relationships significantly. Investigations reveal higher rates of marital dissatisfaction, increased conflict, and decreased levels of family cohesion among families with fathers with substance addiction issues (Beckmeyer et al., 2011; Stanton & Shadur, 2016). Such disruptions further contribute to a cycle of dysfunction that negatively impacts the overall well-being of all family members involved.

The Family Systems Theory

According to Family Systems Theory, the emotional equilibrium of each member of a family unit is interdependent, and changes in one individual can have an effect on the entire family system. The Family Systems Theory is an integral theory that provides insights into human behaviour by considering families not as static units but rather as dynamic networks where every member plays a vital role. The theory emphasises that any disruption or imbalance in a single component of the system can significantly impact the entire network (Cowan & Cowan, 2019). Researchers have applied this theory to explore various family issues, such as marital hostility, child abuse by parents, incest between siblings, young adults' job choices in families, and intellectual disability among family members.

Families are complex systems that can experience a range of issues. A key concept in understanding family dynamics is the emotional system, which involves how a family processes emotions and relationships (Ahnert & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2020; Cabrera, 2020). Within this framework, there are four relationship patterns that may indicate problem areas within a nuclear family. These patterns include marital disputes, dysfunction in one spouse, impairment in one or more children, and emotional detachment. These patterns can result from heightened tension within the unit. Another important concept related to family dynamics is the triangle. This refers to bringing in a third party to help resolve conflicts or tensions between two individuals. Although this approach can be effective at restoring harmony within the family unit, it can also lead to problematic situations if one of the parties involved shifts from being an insider to an outsider.

When people are unable to face their worries head-on, emotional cutoff is yet another tactic they use to avoid interacting with other family members. Researchers have discovered that this strategy is harmful because it makes forming new relationships with people outside of the immediate family less likely (Palkovitz, 2019). One aspect of family dynamics that will be examined is the formation of triangles. Triangles refer to the shifting alliances and conflicts that can arise within the family unit (Cowan & Cowan, 2019). For example, when the father is struggling with addiction, other family members may form alliances to cope with the challenges and maintain stability. Understanding these triangles can provide insights into the power dynamics and coping mechanisms within the family system. Emotional cut-off refers to the emotional distance or detachment that family members may employ as a means of self-preservation when faced with the turmoil caused by addiction (Cabrera, 2020; Waters, 2020).

To better understand how Family Systems Theory works within real-life scenarios, this study will focus on three specific ones: The first pertains to the nuclear family's emotional system, which defines four distinct relationship patterns that can serve as indicators of problematic situations within a family. These include marital strife, issues with one spouse, challenges faced by one or several children, and emotional distance. Such tensions are likely to incite the occurrence of one or more of these types of relationships. The second concept centres around triangles, which help introduce balance into systems by adding a third person who can mediate conflict arising from two-person relationships. However, this triangular relationship may become problematic if individuals switch roles from insiders to outsiders (Wilson & Rhee, 2022; Palkovitz, 2019). Finally, the third concept concerns emotional cutoff as a strategy employed by people when they wish to withdraw from relationships with other members due to unresolved anxiety. Over time, this tendency can prevent them from forming new relationships outside their familial circle.

Nuclear Family Emotional System and Family Functioning

The nuclear family emotional system explains four types of relationship patterns that can identify problem development in a family: marital conflict, dysfunction in one spouse, impairment of one or more children, and emotional distance. A high level of tension or conflict will trigger one or more of these types of relationships. When the tension or anxiety level increases, clinical problems or symptoms will develop based on the most active patterns (Ahnert & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2020; Pruett et al., 2019). For example, marital conflict will occur when one partner places strict control over the other partner and the other partner resists following the order. In families with recovering substance abusers, marital conflict will affect the family's ability to function normally. The wife might still be unable to trust her husband's

changes, from addiction to recovery. In addition, she might still have a high level of anxiety due to her husband's previous drug addiction or history of violence. She may decide to control her husband's daily activities, such as not allowing him to socialise with friends. In this case, her husband will feel that his wife did not support his recovery and might be unable to sustain the recovery period.

The second relationship pattern is that dysfunction in one spouse can affect the ability of the family system (Palkovitz, 2019). The father might experience a few episodes of relapse during the period of recovery that will cause depression and prevent them from carrying out their role as husband or father. Depression is a dysfunction that can create anxiety and tension between the father and other family members. According to Stover et al (2013), substance-abusing fathers who have a history of intimate partner violence report significantly more psychiatric symptoms, such as issues with emotion regulation and difficulties with romantic attachment. These types of dysfunctions will affect the balance of the family system.

The third relationship pattern is emotional distance, which is a tool that family members will use to lessen the intensity of the relationship. The father or husband who feels guilty about their previous addiction will create emotional distance with other family members. As a result, he will become too isolated and will lose support from other family members. This might have a long-term impact on his ability to sustain his recovery. However, if the father and other family members can create a sense of closeness, this will help the family function better. A study by McMohan et al (2007) found that 34% of the fathers who are involved with drug treatment to treat their addiction met their youngest children daily, and 24% of the research respondents saw their children weekly to several times weekly. This research is able to prove that while struggling with their addiction and trying to sustain their recovery, the father still made an effort to stay close with their children.

Triangles and Family Functioning

According to Pruetz et al (2019), the concept of a triangle is central to this theory, as it proposes that a third person can help balance family relationships. By spreading the tension in the triangle equally, stability can be achieved. In cases where there is a recovering father or husband in the family, the triangle concept becomes particularly relevant. A healthy, functioning family will ensure that anxiety is evenly distributed among all members—father, mother, and children (Li, 2020). This approach generates positive parenting behaviours between fathers and their children, which reduces tension and conflict with their spouse. However, if one member is excluded from this dynamic, it may lead to feelings of rejection and trigger problems such as anxiety and depression. Disruptions during recovery occur when another member of the family faces challenges outside of the recovery period, such as school-related issues like absenteeism or bullying experienced by an adolescent child.

The concept of the triangle relationship is highly pertinent in explaining how a family with a recovering father or husband from substance abuse functions. During the addiction phase, the family's functioning may differ significantly from that during the recovery phase. As per McMahan et al (2007), continued drug abuse by the father can lead to his relationships with other family members deteriorating. Arrests, incarceration, the inability to provide support both emotionally and financially, and violent behaviour can all contribute to reduced family functioning. On the other hand, if new bonding techniques such as positive communication

patterns and emotional involvement are employed by the family during recovery, stable triangles can be formed.

Emotional Cutoff and Family Functioning

According to Li (2020), the presence of a father or fatherhood within a nuclear family has a significant impact on the overall well-being of mothers and children. For fathers who are in the process of recovering from drug addiction, assuming their role as both father and husband can be particularly challenging, especially if other family members reject their decision and create emotional distance between them. This emotional cutoff can lead to dysfunctional family dynamics where communication about important changes becomes difficult (Cowan & Cowan, 2019; Pruett et al., 2019). For instance, younger children who have witnessed violent behaviour from their addicted fathers or never received positive reinforcement might maintain an emotional gap with him even after he quits drugs. Consequently, they could avoid spending time with him, refuse to speak to him, or even move out of the house in order to disengage emotionally from their relationship with him.

In contradiction, a family's functionality can be enhanced if they can establish equilibrium in the family system when one of its members, specifically a husband or father, is undergoing drug recovery. The wife's and kids' unwavering support during the father's recovery process can aid in his ability to stay sober. Actively participating in support groups tailored for fathers explicitly undergoing substance abuse treatment is an excellent way for family members to demonstrate their support. To promote healing, SAMSHA has initiated a Celebrating Families programme designed explicitly for families that have a member who is recovering from substance abuse. This programme focuses on educating participants about the intricacies of family recovery, reunification, and resilience (Enos, 2020). The father must learn how to navigate his new role as he progresses through his drug recovery journey to ensure stability within the family unit. Sustained recovery is possible through these efforts that enhance family functioning and help preserve the entire system.

Conclusion

The Family Systems Theory offers three key concepts—the nuclear family emotional system, the triangle relationship, and the emotional cutoff—that are highly relevant for understanding family functioning in families where the husband or father is undergoing substance abuse recovery. The theory highlights that such recovery can have a systemic impact on the entire family unit. Encouraging emotional support, maintaining stable triangle relationships, and fostering emotional closeness instead of cutoff can not only motivate the father to sustain his recovery but also help other family members cope effectively with the changes. Understanding how these families function is critical for developing social policies that meet their needs adequately. As noted by Ahnert and Schoppe-Sullivan (2020); Li (2020), it is imperative that federal, state, and private organisations create appropriate social policies to reach drug-abusing fathers participating in drug treatment programmes. Such policies may include parenting skills training for recovering husbands and fathers, stress-coping strategies for mothers and wives, and psychosocial adjustment skills to assist children at school.

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