

Contemporary Family Systems Approach to Substance Abuse

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Abstract

This paper will address theoretical and clinical issues that challenge family therapists treating families dealing with substance abuse, specifically alcohol. A contemporary family systems approach to substance abuse seeks to understand how the relational patterns of family members are not only recursively shaped by the presence of a family member actively abusing substances, but also how the families' potential for growth and development throughout the family life cycle may be restricted. Research has demonstrated the utility of examining family rituals as a reflection of family process. When families are organized around a substance abusing member, family rituals become embedded with multiple levels of distortion and accommodations. As a method of examining family relational processes and development, this paper will present a current review of literature that highlights the significance of parental drinking patterns in the context of family rituals, and the impact this has on the values, attitudes, and belief systems of young adults as they differentiate from their families of origin.

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Research has demonstrated the utility of examining family rituals as a reflection of family process (Bennett, Wolin & Reiss, 1988; Bente, Storm, Haughland, 2005; Dickstein, 2002; Fiese 1992, 1993; Hawkins, 1997; Imber-Black & Roberts, 1992; Steinglass, Bennett, Wolin, & Reiss, 1987). Family rituals are the epicenter from which social, emotional, individual, and cultural meanings and values emerge. They function as an integral part of family life. Ritual behavior provides "a lens through which we can see our emotional connections to our parents, siblings, spouse, children, and dear friends. Rituals give us places to be playful, to explore the meaning of our lives, and to rework and rebuild family relationships" (Imber-Black & Roberts, 1992, p. 4). According to Bennett and her colleagues (1988), "A family ritual is a symbolic form of communication that, because of the satisfaction that family members experience through its repetition, is acted out in systemic way overtime. Through their special meaning and repetitive nature, rituals can contribute significantly to the establishment and preservation of a family's collective sense of itself..." (p. 825)

When families are organized in response to a substance abusing member, family rituals become embedded in multiple levels of distortion and accommodations. As a method of

examining family relational processes and development, this paper will present a current review of literature that highlights the significance of parental drinking patterns in the context of family rituals, and the potential impact this has on the values, attitudes, and belief systems of young adults as they differentiate from their families of origin.

Empirically the study of substance abuse and its intergenerational process of transmission has progressed from a study of individual factors and perspectives that privilege psychosocial, genetics, and environmental domains (Bennett et al. 1988; Edwards & Steinglass, 1995; Ellis & Zucker, 1997; Fiese, 1993) to a more comprehensive approach which includes a multitude of family factors. Edwards & Steinglass (1995) report, “Early trends in treatment approaches were very much skewed toward a biomedical/behavioral treatment of the individual alcoholic during initial phases and group therapy during rehabilitation phase, again for the individual alcoholic.” (p. 1). Substance abuse has historically been viewed as a problem that affects the individual with subsequent social and emotional costs to the family. Treatment has been primarily modeled on individual pathology, with or without the concurrent treatment of the family (Steinglass et al., 1987). Since 1960 treatment approaches to alcoholism have evolved and a greater number of clinicians are recommending treatment models that include a systemic perspective based on family systems models (Bente et al., 2007; Edwards & Steinglass, 1995; Fiese, 1993; Rollan, & Walsh, 2005; Steinglass, et al., 1987).

Steinglass et al. (1987) comment, “In recent years, a more empathetic view of families with alcoholic members has been emerging. Family oriented clinicians and researchers have drawn on the burgeoning interest in family systems theory...Along with new family perspective, there is increased awareness of the multidimensional nature of the relationship between alcoholism and the family” (p. 8).

Steinglass et al. (1987) differentiate between a family with members who drink and an alcoholic family. Steinglass et al. (1987) define the alcoholic family as “...families in which alcoholism has become a central organizing principle” (p. 9). In this paper I will use Steinglass as the referent and define parental drinking patterns from Steinglass’ definition of the terms, as he and his colleagues have provided a detailed description of the systemic affects of alcoholism in the family system. A more detailed and comprehensive description of the criteria for alcohol dependence and abuse can be found in the *DSM -IV-TR* (2000). In addition, the epistemology

of this discussion provides a framework for conceptualizing the recursive relationships between parental drinking patterns and family rituals and routines.

Research Studies

Clinical and theoretical research has illustrated the importance of a variety of psychosocial factors, such as gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, environment, and psychopathology (Ellis & Zucker, 1997; Sher, Grekin & Williams, 2005; Steinglass et al. 1987) as a contributing risk factor impacting offspring of alcoholics. The focus for this particular paper will be restricted to the discussion of the relationship among variables such as: affective meaning, symbolic gestures and relational interactions in family rituals and routines (Dickstein, 2002; Fiese, 1993; Fiese et al.2002).

Current review of empirical studies demonstrates that family rituals and routines may serve to mediate the psychological impact of heavy parental drinking on offspring and function as a protective factor (Bennett et al., 1988; Bente, et al., 2005; Ellis & Zucker, 1997; Fiese, 1993; Fiese, Tomcho, Douglas, Josephs , Poltrock & Baker, 2002; Hawkins, 1997; Imber-Black & Roberts, 1987 Steinglass et al., 1987). Variables associated with the mediating effect of rituals and routines are related to patterns of ritual observation, the role of alcohol in the ceremony (Imber-Black & Roberts, 1987), the degree of “invasion” of alcoholism into the ritual (Steinglass et al, 1987), and the retention of meaningful symbolism. Ritual observation in this context defines family belief systems, and protects the family’s integrity and identity formation (Steinglass et al., 1987). As observed by Bennett, Wolin, Reiss & Teitelbaum (1987) and cited in Imber-Black and Roberts (1987):

The fascinating thing is that ritual life itself seems to provide some protection against the passing of alcoholism from one generation to another. If rituals are *not* heavily disrupted by parental drinking, then *the occurrence of alcohol problems in the next generation is lessened*. Rituals have a protective function. If they remain intact, the family has a place to come together and support each other, express their identity, and honor their members despite parental alcoholism. This cohesion protects people against drinking problems because they are connected and involved with others and with meaningful traditions. (107)

Family Systems Perspective

Family system's theory provides a context to begin to make sense of the family system, as it contends with the adjustments and accommodations necessary to maintain homeostasis in the face of alcoholism and individual life cycle development. Bowen's observations about family systems highlight the importance of the functional roles and emotional relationships among family members and their reciprocal interactions in the context of family process (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Conceptually, this pattern in families reflects an emotional unit, in which the metaphor of dance keeps members in step, as if responding to the emotional rhythms of each other, with the ultimate goal of preserving the families' integrity. Steinglass et al. (1987) concur and comment that the family is a system viewed within a larger context as "... a set of interconnected individuals acting together to produce a unique social unit that changes in a predictable fashion over time—that is a *family systems* approach that emphasizes the developmental properties of families" (p. 13).

Although every family is unique in its' individual membership and composition, most families share predictable phases of development as they grow and develop (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999). Families typically face multiple challenges as they transition from one phase to the next, delicately negotiating the balance between intersecting phases of individual and family growth in the context of external and internal influences. For families with alcoholic members movement through developmental phases may require minimal reorganization, where as in other families it may challenge the structural organization and growth of the family; shifting roles, challenging boundaries, and essentially leading to a redefining of the family's shared values and belief systems. According to Steinglass et al. (1987), "the family's response pattern is a critical marker of the degree to which it is accepting or resisting an alcoholic identity" (p. 223). The family's response pattern may be directly observed in their ability to maintain the continuity and meaningful importance and symbolism of daily and/or traditional rituals and routines. As Bente et al. (2005) observe,

According to family system's theory, families have a tendency to maintain established patterns of behavior in the face of change or adversity. The level of disruption of rituals and routines related to parental drinking may therefore be an important indicator of how alcohol abuse affects family functioning. (p.2)

Family system's theory describes multilevel relational systems and subsystems as individual members function alone and together to accommodate stress, maintain homeostasis (Dickstein, 2002), and subsequent differentiation of self in the context of the family system. Conceptually, differentiation of self, as defined by Bowen, refers to the multigenerational relationship system of the family operating from an emotionally fused core (Becvar & Becvar, 1996). Theoretically, Bowen distinguishes "between people who are fused and those who are differentiated. The preferred characteristic is *differentiation* {italics in text}, or individuals who can transcend not only their own emotions but also those of the family system" (Becvar & Becvar, 1996, p. 150). Ideally,

People who have differentiated are also flexible, adaptable, and more self-sufficient. The problem with being undifferentiated...is that such individuals tend to be more rigid and more emotionally dependent on others for their well-being. In effect, differentiated persons are ones who feel their own feelings and, while not unaware of the feelings of other around them, are able to maintain a degree of objectivity and emotional distance. Thus, differentiated persons have a conscious (intellectual) awareness of the emotional dynamics around them and can transcend this level of interaction. (Becvar & Becvar, 1996, p.150)

Kerr & Bowen (1988) distinguish between "*basic* and *functional* levels of differentiation. ...Basic differentiation is functioning that is *not dependent on the relationship process*. Functional differentiation is functioning that is *dependent on the relationship process* (italics in text)" (p. 98).

The family's ability to adapt to the stress in the context of alcoholism, will be reflected in their level of differentiation (Kerr and Bowen, 1988), and social agreement of family identity as reflected in their flexibility and objectivity regarding family membership, roles, and emotional cohesiveness. According to Bowen theory, even the most differentiated members might experience compromised functioning when challenged by extreme stressors (Becvar & Becvar, 1996). Kerr and Bowen (1988) posit, "adaptiveness has been exceeded when the intensity of a person's anxious response to stress impairs his own functioning and/or the functioning of those with whom he is emotionally connected" (p.112). The family's level of differentiation is reflected in the emotional reactivity and interactional behavioral patterns that negotiate the balance of closeness and distance in the family system (Teitelman, 1998).

The utility of observing rituals and routines as an index of family functioning can provide the clinician and researcher with rich data regarding the family's developmental growth. The family has choices regarding their enactment of rituals and routines: continuity, discontinuity or altering the rituals to accommodate a stressor, such as alcoholism. Each choice reflects the family's emotional functioning and individual level of differentiation.

The Alcoholic Family

Steinglass et al. (1987) have extensively researched families with alcoholic members. Through their research they have identified a model of the "Alcoholic Family" that is informed by systems theory. Their model is based on the following principles:

1. Alcoholic Families are behavioral systems in which alcoholism and alcohol related behaviors have become central organizing principles around which family life is structured.
2. The introduction of alcoholism into family life has the potential to profoundly alter the balance that exists between growth and regulation within the family....
3. The impact of alcoholism and alcohol related behaviors on family systemic functioning is most clearly seen in the types of changes that occur in regulatory behaviors as the family gradually accommodates family demands to coexistent demands of alcoholism.
4. The types of alterations that occur in regulatory behaviors can in turn be seen to profoundly influence the overall shape of family growth and development-changes in normative family life cycle that we have labeled "developmental distortions" (p.48).

Steinglass et al. (1987) indicate that "alcoholic families" generally develop through three distinct and predictable phases of development. They conceptualize that the family systems approach provides a context to understand the systemic affects of relationship adaptations and accommodations in the alcoholic family. Steinglass et al. (1987) describe three distinct phases of the alcoholic family: early, middle and late, with each phase requiring systemic accommodations and adjustments, and the development of an agreed upon definition of the family as an "alcoholic family". Alcoholism within this context is understood as a process that impacts concurrent individual and family development, and relational patterns of interaction that extend across many generations. It is during the middle phase of development that alcohol and related behaviors

become central organizing themes that shape family interactions, observed readily in routines and rituals.

The middle phase of family development generally is the “longest phase in the family life cycle...it is during this phase that observable regulatory behaviors—daily routines, family rituals, short-term problem solving strategies—are most prominent” (Steinglass et al., 1987, p. 90). It is during this phase of family development that family distortions and accommodations might become so embedded in family rituals and routines that they occur below an active level of awareness of family members.

A case demonstrating these principles was presented in a therapy session several years ago. The presenting problem was an inability to maintain intimate relationships. The client was a forty year old female with a pattern of failed marriages and no children. As the client shared her story, reconstructing her memories of adolescence, she recalled her father’s episodic drinking binges and how the family operated in the context of these binges. She recalled that her mother would run to the local liquor store at her father’s insistence, frequently asking one of the children to accompany her to carry the bags of liquor. According to the client, her mother’s behavior was an attempt to manage her father’s drinking, guaranteeing that he “stay put” during these episodes. The client recalled that during these “seasons of drinking” family dinners and usual family activities were suspended, and she and her siblings operated on their own until her father stopped drinking. The client reported that it was not until she moved away from home and began therapy that she realized this was an aberration and an attempt for the family to maintain homeostasis as they accommodated to her father’s drinking. As an adult, she has been sorting through her anger, resentment and shame and wonders how these experiences might have impacted her current inability to maintain an intimate relationship and her potential for developing similar patterns of drinking. Additionally, Imber-Black and Roberts (1998) cite an example of the Lawton family who visited a lakeside resort for their week’s vacation. As Mr. Lawton’s drinking behavior increased and became less manageable the family devised alternative vacation plans to accommodate the drinking behavior and attempt to continue the family vacations.

Rituals and Routines

Although the systemic view of the family purports a theoretical and conceptual framework in which to think about the family, the families' response to an alcoholic member may be observed behaviorally through a variety of constructs that regulate behavior. According to Steinglass et al. (1987) the families "regulatory behaviors" (p.70) provide a lens through which the clinician can gather qualitative information about the families functioning and their systemic accommodations. Steinglass et al. (1987) have defined three regulatory behaviors:

...daily routines, rituals and problem-solving episodes—...excellent tools for the family clinician-researcher because they can be systematically studied. Family daily routines can be directly observed and recorded by the researcher. Family rituals can be reconstructed via careful inquiry of family members. Family problem solving strategies can be accurately gleaned from clinical material in therapy sessions....(p. 63).

In addition to Steinglass et al. (1987) many family researchers (Bennett, et al., 1988; Bente et al., 2007; Carter & McGoldrick, 1999; Dickstein, 2002; Edwards & Steinglass, 1995; Fiese 1992, 1993, 2002; Fiese & Kline, 1993; Fiese, Tomcho, Douglas, Josephs, Poltrock, 2002; Hawkins 1997; Imber-Black & Roberts, 1998) have studied the role family rituals and routines play as intergenerational transmitters of values, attitudes, and belief systems in families. Family rituals and routines imply varied meanings among family members and are reflective of cultural, ecological, and intergenerational themes. Rituals and routines provide a normative structure for families and further clarify the family's identity, connections, and place in their community and larger society.

Rituals and routines are terms that are commonly used interchangeably however they are not the same thing. A routine is an act such as the activity of daily grooming such as brushing your teeth; a ritual carries more symbolic content, such as a birthday party or anniversary celebration of a meaningful date. Rituals and routines reflect family interactional patterns that include variations in "communication, commitment and continuity" (Fiese, Tomcho, Douglas, Josephs, Poltrock, Baker, 2002, p. 3). Fiese et al. (2002) observe, "Routines typically involve instrumental communication...Rituals, on the other hand, involve symbolic communication" (p. 3). In addition, they state, "When routines are disrupted it is a hassle. When rituals are disrupted, there is threat to group cohesion" (p. 3). Bente et al. (2007) further clarify the distinctions between routines and rituals, "The meaning component emphasizes the symbolic significance and affective quality ascribed to rituals, whereas the routine component represents the

assignment of roles and duties and the regularity in how activities are conducted” (p. 3). Fiese et al (2002) add, “Any routine has the potential to become a ritual once it moves from an instrumental to symbolic act...the terms *rituals* and *routines* [italics in text] are frequently used interchangeably adding to confusion in the field” (p. 4).

Rituals generally mark events, such as family dinners, birthdays, weddings or deaths, or nonsecular rites of passage: such as bar mitzvah, christenings, or confirmation parties. Rituals connect families multi-generationally, as well as reinforce messages about family values and belief systems through repetition of themes (Imber-Black, 1989). Rituals are vehicles to “connect us with our the past, define our present life, and show us a path to our future as we pass on ceremonies, traditions, objects, symbols, and ways of being with each other” (Imber-Black& Roberts, 1992, p. 4). Imber-Black and Roberts (1992) add, rituals provide a “lens through which we can see our emotional connections” (p. 4) to family and friends. The structural changes that take place in how the family performs rituals, from beginning to end, provides an index of the families phase of development and commitment to a specific identifying theme, such as “the alcoholic family” (Steinglass et al., 1987).

Family Accommodations

Daily rituals are characterized by their frequent occurrence in family life; these rituals include familiar times that the family gathers for dinner, themes regarding food preparation, where people sit at the table, and early morning or bedtime rituals, “Participating in daily rituals tells us over and over again about how we relate to each other....Through the repetition of familiar daily rituals, family membership is continually evoked without familiar words” (Imber-Black & Roberts, 1998, p. 144). The informal and repetitive patterns of these rituals define family boundaries and provide the family a context of comfort and predictability.

As the family configurations change the rituals require adjustment to match the family’s changing memberships, identity, and needs. As previously stated, in the context of the alcoholic family, family rituals and routines may provide a protective function for the family, “When family rituals are practiced distinct from the alcoholic-related behaviors of the alcoholic family and the rituals are practiced in a deliberate fashion, then offspring are less likely to develop alcoholism themselves “ (Frieese, 1993, p. 187). Bennett, Wolin, & Reiss (1988) found rituals that were “deliberate” in their “planning and execution” provided a context of stability for families

with alcoholism. Since rituals “often stand out for us as condensed dramas of what went on in our families...” (Imber-Black & Roberts, 1998, p. 302), families vulnerable to the psychosocial and environmental variables associated with alcoholism, and concerned about the intergenerational transmission of alcoholism, might benefit by protecting their ritualized behaviors, and establishing firm boundaries and agreements about the role of alcohol.

In the case of the alcoholic family, rituals may be inadvertently interrupted, consciously ignored, or embedded with rigid behavior patterns and roles. These behaviors may reflect the family’s attempts to make accommodations, protect vulnerable family members, and resist identity formation as an alcoholic family, further stunting and restricting the growth and development of the family. According to Steinglass et al. (1987) family rituals and routines and their continuity or discontinuity provides a rich source of data that reflects family attitudes, values and belief systems in the context of drinking behavior.

Steinglass et al (1987) describe the process of the families’ accommodations as the “invasion process” (p.91). They call our attention to the subtle and pervasive impact of alcoholism on the family system. They cite that the families’ attempts to accommodate to the alcoholic family member through restructuring of ritual celebrations, which ultimately serves to reinforce and maintain the distortions in family organizational patterns and level of functioning.. Steinglass et al (1987) describe this process,

...the invasion process occurs slowly, with the family making accommodations to alcoholism one small increment at a time, it is only after substantial changes have already occurred and are firmly in place that the distance the family has traveled is readily apparent...

... As this invasion of regulatory behaviors takes hold, the middle-phase alcoholic family also becomes developmentally more rigid...The family acts to...blunt *any* destabilizing event in family life. Included here are the normative developmental oscillations associated with individual-unit change...

Thus, in the Alcoholic family, such normative issues as individual growth (say the movement into adolescence, or career changes) get very short shrift. More often than not, they are simply ignored as a family-level issue, leaving family members to fend for themselves. Hence, the reports of overwhelming ennui and emotional distance reported by individuals growing up in such families. And even when attended to, these normative developmental pressures are actively combated and stifled, rather than perceived as health challenges to growth. (p. 91)

Older Adolescents and Differentiation

The proportion of drinkers among college students is approximately 6% higher than with other groups (Ksir, Hart & Ray, 2008). The impact that parental drinking patterns has on the values, attitudes, and belief systems of young adults as they differentiate from their families of origin may affect their lifestyle decisions and behavior as they navigate their way through their college experiences (Bennett et al., 1988; Ellis & Zucker 1997).

Much research has been devoted to studying protective factors for college students as they make decisions about drinking alcohol when they go to college (Fiese, 1997, Haines et al., 2006, Ksir, Hart & Ray, 2008; Tsisis, Mastreoleo & Larimer, 2006, Turrisi, 2005). Most of the attention has been on theoretical models that include: psychosocial, interactional, and environmental variables the young person has been exposed to prior to leaving for college. Empirical research of protective variables includes family environment, communication patterns, peer group associations, extracurricular activities, religious and sports affiliation, education, and community supports (Fiese, 1993, Ellis and Zucker, 1997; Haines et al., 2006, Ksir, Hart & Ray 2008; Tsisis, Mastreoleo & Larimer, 2006; Sher et al., 2003; Turrisi, 2005). Turris (2006) and his colleagues have empirically studied the phenomenon between college student's decisions to drink and their communication patterns with their parents. Their research supports the importance of family environment, specifically affective communication between adolescents and parents, as a protective factor for college age drinking decisions.

There has been a paucity of phenomenological research investigating qualitatively how students' perceptions of rituals and routines during their adolescent years, prior to leaving home, might have influenced their level of functioning and subsequent choices regarding alcohol use in college (Fiese, 1993). As Steinglass et al. (1987) have indicated, it is during the "middle phase" of the alcoholic family's developmental period that youth might be most vulnerable to the interactional behavioral patterns embedded in family rituals and routines. Steinglass et al (1987) add to this thesis,

Ritual behavior in families is patterned—it is repetitive, stable with respect to roles, and continued over time—these patterns have meaning beyond their practical outcome or functional purpose....Finally—and most important for our thinking about families in the middle phase of development—rituals serve the function over time of stabilizing the feelings and actions of members of the group. (p. 224)

During this developmental phase relationship challenges faced by the older adolescent include their relationship to alcohol and whether they define themselves in the context of the “alcoholic family” (Steinglass et al. 1987). According to Kaplan, Gleason & Klein (1991), “The adolescent is confronted with a dual relational task: maintaining a continuity of relationship with family under conditions of distance and less commonality of experience, and evolving ways of finding people in the new network (students, faculty, staff) to supplant some of the relational roles previously filled by parents and longtime friends”(p.128). The task of the student is to achieve a level of differentiation in the context of their family system. As Bowen has observed, “The more differentiated a self, the more a person can be an individual *while in emotional contact with the group*” (Kerr & Bowen, p. 94). Carter & McGoldrick (1999) further describe this phase of development as spanning early teens through age twenty-one. They describe some of the challenges faced by this age group,

During this phase, young people go through major bodily, emotional, sexual, and spiritual changes; evolve their sexual and gender identities; learn to relate to intimate partners; and develop the ability to function increasingly independently. They renegotiate their identity with their parents as they mature; refine their physical, social and intellectual skills; develop their spiritual and moral identity; begin to define who they want to become as adults. (p. 42)

If individual growth and development has been restricted, efforts at differentiation might be hampered as well. Steinglass et al. (1987) posit, “The context for transmission is the sum total of interactions, attitudes, and beliefs that define the family...And it often goes on outside the awareness of the participants involved, the ‘senders’ as well as the ‘receivers’ (p. 304).

In Fiese’ (1993) empirical research study that examined the relationship between family rituals in environments of alcoholic and nonalcoholic parents, and the role rituals played in protecting the transmission of alcoholism to offspring, it was demonstrated that “...reliable evaluation of alcoholism in a college sample may be difficult to ascertain {and}....Examination of the effects of being raised in an alcoholic household should take into account the developmental tasks of the offspring” (p. 191). She further added that, “Singular focus on alcoholism as an outcome may be too restrictive for college age sample” (p.191). Fiese (1993) suggests that additional variables be considered in the context of studying the protective and mediating factors inherent in family ritual behavior in relationship to alcohol. Ellis and Zucker (1997) concur and state that, “future research must more accurately determine the

developmental point at which influences of alcohol-specific processes on COA's {children of alcoholic} begin to converge...and {that} various risk factors may exert their greatest effects on COA's at different times during development" (p. 6).

Asking college students retrospectively to reconstruct narratives describing family rituals and routines might serve to facilitate a greater understanding and awareness of how their families operated in relation to parental drinking. These conversations may serve as part of a much larger dialogue regarding differentiation in the context of their families. Ferarra (1998) comments,

Theoretical knowledge of emotional systems, the ability to be an observer at the same time one is a participant, and consistent work on one's own functioning are the ingredients of differentiating effort. Three circular processes are involved; knowing the system, knowing the self as part of the system, and defining self within the system. (p. 394)

This ability to function at a developmentally appropriate level, and make informed choices, could hypothetically serve to function as an additional protective factor for the college student faced with difficult decisions in this phase of life. As Bowen and Kerr posit, "differentiation describes the capacity to make a choice; it does not define the "correct" or "best" choice" (p. 148).

Suggestions for Future Research

Future study of offspring of alcoholic families would yield valuable information regarding the multiple variables and emotional processes associated with the systemic adjustments made in the context of an alcoholic environment, as well as variables associated with the multigenerational transmission of alcoholism as reflected in rituals (Bennett et al., 1988; Steinglass et al. 1987). The mediating affects of rituals in families can be studied qualitatively through a sampling of college students, who provide a fertile area to examine the impact of alcoholism. Asking students, who grew up in families where alcohol was a problem, to recall their experiences with family rituals might shed further light on how they are making personal choices regarding their relationship to alcohol and peer groups abusing alcohol. Understanding how rituals provide coherence and meaning may help guide a study that examines the protective functions of rituals and serve to protect the transmission of alcoholism to future generations (Bennett et al., 1988; Hawkins, 1997; Steinglass et al. 1987)

Conclusion

Family rituals and celebrations provide a milieu (Abrams, 1999) in which members interact with each other on multiple levels. These occasions can function to mark life cycle changes or merely provide the security of familiarity, such as nighttime rituals. It is during these occasions that families are faced with opportunities to either maintain current patterns of relating or create change. Styles of participation and interaction in family rituals are reflective of family themes and organizing principles that have a history that is steeped in the ancestry of their multigenerational family belief system.

As a response to alcoholism in the family, the family is challenged to make choices regarding how they plan to continue or discontinue their participation in the ritual process and how they wish to define themselves in this context. These decisions reverberate throughout the family system and subsystems. The family may choose to replicate family themes either symbolically or metaphorically, or find that they must create new rituals to reflect the evolving nature of the family system to make them more meaningful.

In this paper I have attempted to begin the conversation of what I hope to be a much larger dialogue, regarding the recursive relationship among family systems theory, parental drinking patterns, and differentiation among older adolescents. Attention to the process of rituals and routines in the context of individual and family development provides a lens through which the family researcher and clinician can begin to understand family process and challenges presented to families when faced with the demands of alcoholism.

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