

CHAPTER 2

How Parental Relationships Influence Young People's Identities and Meaning Constructions of Family and Family Life

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Abstract: Even though parental mental illness and substance abuse are considered a serious risk to children's wellbeing, most children with such parental problems are cared for at home. In the Norwegian Child Welfare Services (CWS), more than 75 per cent of children are supported while living with their parents. In this chapter, we will listen to the voices of young adults on their experiences of growing up with parental mental health problems and or/alcohol and drug issues. The study explores those practices and processes that young adults themselves identified as everyday ways of 'doing family' and how these practices helped them 'get by' in regard to these challenging experiences in their childhoods. Furthermore, the chapter discusses how parental relationships influence young people's identities and meaning constructions of family and family life.

Keywords: child agency, family practices, parental troubles, belonging

Introduction

I'm just trying to outline a family – it's like ripples in water. Throw a stone in the water and it reverberates in communication and interaction within the family. It is very difficult for me. But I'm an adult. I have words and can describe it, and I have an actual choice. But children don't. They don't have words, and they have to endure it. They can't leave. My youngest son has been attending support groups, and it has been important for him. Because children are dependent on their parents. He can't choose to opt out, and neither could the other children. I can choose to leave, but children can't. And he loves his father very much.

(Mother of four children married to a man with severe mental health problems)

This excerpt is taken from an interview with a mother, reflecting on how her husband's mental health struggles have significant consequences for the entire family, especially the children. Children rely on their parents and are subject to their care. When parents struggle with mental health issues or addiction, both the family system and daily routines are disrupted. In recent years, there has been extensive research on the impact this has on children. Research shows that when the problems significantly affect parental functioning, children can experience unpredictability, fear, insecurity and, in severe cases, neglect (Velleman & Templeton, 2016; Wangensteen et al., 2018; Haugland & Nordanger, 2015; Kufås et al., 2015). This research also highlights that some children take on early adult responsibilities by taking care of younger siblings and even caring for their parents (Kallander et al., 2017; Moore et al., 2011). Furthermore, research points out that both parents and children often experience shame and stigma when parents have addiction issues or severe and chronic substance abuse problems (Backett-Milburn et al., 2008; Werner & Malterud, 2016; Delås, 2015; Halså, 2018).

In the research tradition known in Norwegian as *barn som pårørende forskning* and in English as 'young carers', children are often positioned as vulnerable, and the focus of research has largely been on psychological harm. The sociologist and childhood researcher Wyness (2019) criticises the tendency to overlook children's agency and competency

in this research. He argues that children who demonstrate competence outside of what he calls developmental and pedagogical paradigms are either described as dangerous or overdeveloped (Wyness, 2019, p. 125). He illustrates this point by highlighting that children who, for example, take on unconventional roles in the generational hierarchy (e.g. young carers) are seen as deviant children in need of care and protection, and there is little research on how children themselves understand their position.

This chapter aims to discuss how young people and young adults living in families where a parent has a severe substance abuse or mental health problem talk about how they have dealt with the situation and the relational practices that have developed in their families. In anthropological and sociological research on families, Morgan's (2011) concept of family practices has been of great significance in understanding what a family is. Janet Carsten (2000) uses the term 'relatedness' to clarify that a relationship is not a given phenomenon, but something that is created in interaction with others. Like Morgan, she argues that family is not a fixed entity with predefined positions, but something that is done through practices to show that one is connected to one another. In the family practice approach, the focus is on what family members do in relation to each other, and by engaging in these practices, relational bonds are reinforced and reproduced, often understood as family relationships. What particularly characterises family relationships is dependence, love, intimacy, and shared concerns and commitments (Morgan, 2019, p. 2227). Family commitments develop over time, through past dependency and reciprocity (Finch, 2007).

Morgan (2019, p. 2227) argues that individual problems, such as substance abuse or mental health issues in parents, affect the entire family. The opening quote illustrates this very point. When a father is severely depressed, it affects patterns of interaction and everyday practices, and these experiences construct and reconstruct how family members understand themselves as 'family'. Family practices, according to Morgan (2019), are characterised by boundary work that defines who belongs and how they belong. This is also a central point for sociologist Carol Smart (2007), who has written about how individuals shape their family relationships through memories, traditions and stories, and how these in turn influence their feelings and thoughts about their family. She has explored and written about the significance of the symbolic

meaning of family narratives for the individual's identity work and self-understanding. She argues that the understanding of family is also influenced by the cultural context in which it exists. Images of functioning families considered as normal have gained significant discursive power through academic literature, welfare professionals and the media, making it difficult to showcase family practices that deviate from this normative image. The concept of normalcy, as discussed by Söderström in Chapter 6, refers to canonical cultural narratives about the way things are or should be. Research conducted on adolescents (15–16 years old) raised in families with substance abuse issues shows that these adolescents tend to idealise family bonds, despite many of them reporting feeling betrayed by their parents (Wilson et al., 2012). Researchers believe that one reason for this tendency is the lack of available cultural narratives that these adolescents can use to tell their own childhood stories. This aligns with Smart's (2007) argument that it is crucial for the individual's identity work to be able to construct a respectable narrative about oneself. According to Smart, when you talk about your family, you are telling a story about yourself.

However, Smart (2007) criticises the fact that sociological literature has predominantly focused on the positive aspects of family life, such as belonging, love and care, when analysing family life. She uses the term 'the haunting power of blood relationship' to illustrate that the power of blood ties can also be negative and difficult to escape, even if one desires to do so. Breaking close family bonds is associated with shame, she argues. An example of this can be seen when a child cuts off contact with one or both of their parents. In this case, everyone would understand that something extraordinary and unfortunate has happened in this family, as it is so uncommon for children and parents not to maintain a lifelong connection (Halsa, 2020).

This chapter is based on six qualitative interviews with adolescents and young adults (17–28 years old) who have parents with serious mental health problems or substance dependencies. Specifically, I inquire about how these adolescents and young adults have had the opportunity to exercise agency by asking: How does this agency play out among family members who are connected by close emotional bonds? In the stories of these young people, age is emphasised as crucial for their own agency. Theoretically, I have drawn inspiration from the new sociology of childhood to understand what is inherent in children's agency.

Children's and young people's relational agency

Childhood studies aim to make visible and study social and cultural understandings of childhood (Abebe, 2019, 2021, p. 283; Raithelhuber, 2016; Spyrou, 2018). There has been a great debate among childhood researchers about how children's agency should be understood and, in recent years, many have argued that children's agency is socially and relationally produced, and is not an attribute of the individual child (Spyrou, 2018; Prout, 2011; Raithelhuber, 2016). Several childhood researchers point out that agency should be understood as dynamic, situated and contextually conditioned in order to capture the fact that children's agency is influenced by complex contexts, structures and relationships (Abebe, 2019, p. 12, 2021, p. 282; Hammersley, 2017; Spyrou, 2018). Agency is shaped, reshaped and created in relationships and between generations. Such a perspective on agency highlights it as a process and shows that children can also experience varying degrees of agency in different situations, contexts or over time (Abebe, 2019, p. 6). Thus, agency is not a fixed entity but something that needs to be understood along a continuum. Abebe (2019), for example, distinguishes between thick agency and thin agency. Thick agency refers to the many choices that children and young people have as a result of good access to social networks and support systems, while thin agency refers to the opposite. The term 'tactical agency' can be used to show that children and young people can use creative strategies to help themselves (Abebe, 2019, p. 8). Kj rholt (2005) points out that children are not individual actors with their own interests and that children's desires and needs are largely intertwined and influenced by the wishes and needs of family members. Therefore, children's agency should be understood as a relational agency, i.e., this agency is exercised alongside adults. This means that children's agency must be understood as a relational practice, where the child often prioritises solidarity and togetherness with their parents over their own needs. Abebe (2019, p. 81) also points out that the mutual dependence between family members means that children's agency must be understood within this familial context.

Hence, when research on children growing up in families with substance abuse or mental health problems shows that children and adolescents rarely seek help or tell others about their difficulties, this may be explained by the mutual dependency that children and young people feel

towards their parents (Wangensteen, 2020; Halså, 2020). They want to protect the parents they live with and love, they are afraid of splitting the family, or it may be because the young people's negotiations of identity are closely tied to the family they come from (Halså, 2020, pp. 62–63). They exercise agency by refraining from seeking help, and this agency must be understood in terms of their simultaneous need to take care of siblings and parents, as well as how the family is perceived by others (Abebe, 2019, p. 10).

Method and data

The interviews that form the basis of this chapter were collected for a research project on young people's experiences of growing up with parents with mental illness and addiction. The project was funded by the Norwegian Research Council and was a collaboration between several researchers and doctoral students at the University College of Lillehammer. One of the sub-projects specifically focused on the experiences of children and parents, and as a part of this project, we interviewed a total of 32 children, young people and young adults about their life stories. All were next-of-kin to parents with mental health and/or addiction problems, recruited through the treatment institution attended by their parent, in NGOs working with children, user's organisations or self-recruitment after receiving information. The data were collected between 2014 and 2015. Söderström's chapter uses the same data.

To conduct these in-depth interviews, we developed an interview guide with open-ended questions. We focused on eliciting the life stories of the informants, exploring their upbringing, home situation, school experiences and life as adolescents. We particularly emphasised coping strategies and where they sought social support. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

To answer how young people and young adults have had the opportunity to exercise agency and how this agency plays out among family members, I reanalysed six in-depth interviews to examine how the young people talked about their relationships with their parents and their own agency. I made the assumption that young adults who had moved out of their parents' homes had the opportunity to exercise thicker agency than the youths still living at home or in close proximity to their parents. To investigate this, I selected three interviews with youths who were 17 years old and still

lived at home or in close proximity to their parents and three interviews with young adults who were between 23 and 26 years old.

The first step in the analysis was to thoroughly read each interview and specifically look for descriptions of everyday practices within families, focusing on the youths' agency and obligations towards family members. Then, I wrote condensed summaries and analysis notes on each of the interviews. In the next phase of analysis, I systematised, identified and compared the six interviews based on analytical questions about how they described family practices, emotional bonds and how they dealt with the difficulties they experienced. The plot I was looking for in this analysis was the youths' handling of their relationship with their parents. These experiences are understood in light of the youths' narratives about their anchoring in the nuclear family and their dependence on their parents. The analytical themes in the findings section are that memories from their upbringing are characterised by a lack of routines and significant contrasts for everyone. For the young adults (23–26 years old), it was important to create distance from their family of origin, while for the younger ones, their agency was about trying to find strategies that allowed them to live with the problems.

Presentation of the informants

A common factor among all the informants was that they talked about extremely difficult conditions in their childhood that had led to the development of mental health problems and difficulties in focusing on school tasks. Several of them had received treatment to process their experiences. Only one of the informants lived with both biological parents, while the others had grown up with only one parent, and two of them had also lived in foster care at times. Child welfare services (CWS) had been/are involved with five of the families, but all attributed little importance to the help they received from the CWS and believed that it had done a poor job when it was involved. However, they all mentioned important support persons who had meant a lot to them. For some, it was grandparents, for others, it was their mother's or father's former partner or teachers they had met in school. Below, I will briefly present the six young people.

Marie, 17 years old. She grew up with her mother and stepfather. Her mother drinks, which she has done since Marie was young. Marie was

noticed by a teacher at the end of secondary school, who spoke to her and assisted her in getting help from mental healthcare services for children and adolescents. She now lives with her father and has some contact with her mother. Her father does not have substance abuse problems and she considers her grandmother to be an important support person. The CWS has been involved since she was in daycare.

Viktorija, 17 years old. She grew up with a mother who was a former substance abuser and has a diagnosis of bipolar disorder. The CWS has been involved since her birth. Her father is deceased. He had substance abuse issues and Viktorija never knew him. Viktorija is doing well in school and attends upper secondary school. Her mother has had many partners and it was with her latest partner that she started using substances again. Due to this, Viktorija is currently living in foster care, but she has regular contact with her grandmother who is a very important person to Viktorija.

Carin, 17 years old. She lives with both parents and a sibling. Her father has a serious mental illness and experiences periods of psychosis. Carin attends upper secondary school and tells that she has had a difficult time coping with her father's illness, especially during her time in secondary school. She received treatment from mental healthcare services for children and adolescents and found it helpful. The family has not been in contact with the CWS.

Ruth, 23 years old. She was raised by her mother, who has a substance abuse issue. Her parents divorced before Ruth was born. She has three older siblings with whom she has maintained close relationships. Ruth has lived in foster care at times but moved back in with her mother when she was 11–12 years old. She has completed higher education but disclosed that she struggled with mental health issues during her time in upper secondary school.

Tom, 23 years old. He grew up with a mother who has a substance abuse issue. His mother has had multiple partners and Tom has two younger half-siblings. He got to know his biological father after starting school. When he was young, he believed that one of his mother's previous boyfriends was his father. Tom is currently studying. He contacted the CWS himself when he was 14 years old, which did not provide much help for him but resulted in his younger half-siblings being placed under the primary care of their father.

Kim, 26 years old. Both of Kim's parents have substance abuse problems and they divorced when Kim was young. Kim has three half-siblings.

He has lived partly with his mother and partly with his father and step-mother. He is currently pursuing an education, but for many years, he was outside the education system and job market due to mental health issues. His stepmother and grandmother have been important people in his life.

Memories of growing up: an everyday life characterised by a lack of routines and great contrasts

All the young people who participated in this study spoke of great contrasts in their daily lives, and that living with addicted or mentally ill parents was generally very difficult. They have all experienced unpredictability, fear and unstable routines at home, but for them, it was normal and they didn't know any different. 'And I can say that at its worst, it was hell at home for us. But back then, it wasn't hell. It was life' (Tom).

They all talked about important support figures outside the home, where they could seek shelter and protection when conditions at home became very difficult. Tom told us that one of his mother's former boy-friends was a father figure for him, 'I used to stay with him on weekends, and he could also sleep at our place. He was a really kind guy who I thought was my dad.' Viktoria also turned one of her mother's partners into a father figure. She spoke fondly of Lars and his new partner, saying, 'I see Lars as my father, and I usually celebrate Christmas with his family.' She justified this by saying that her own family was 'not very Christmassy', while Lars and his partner celebrated Christmas traditionally.

When I asked about how daily life was in their families, they all spoke of a lack of routines and rhythms in daily life. Tom said:

No, it's difficult to answer what a typical day was like at home for us. Everything was more divided into episodes and divided into two categories: how I didn't want it to be and how I enjoyed being at home.

A lack of routines makes everyday life uncertain for children and young people. Author Vigdis Hjort (2022) wrote a coming-of-age novel that provides rich imagery of how the rhythms of everyday life constitute the very foundation and security for the main character in the book:

To eat breakfast while mother feeds little brother, to walk to school with little brother and do homework at the kitchen table amidst the smell of mother's activities, freshly baked bread, and silver polish . . . , that it repeated year after year. It had to continue like that. Going to school, coming home, going out to play with friends, coming back for dinner. (pp. 27–29, author's translation)

When young people in this study talked about childhood memories, all the stories were filled with descriptions of episodes and events that were strongly tied to emotions. It was about coming home to a mother they couldn't get in contact with, or stories about episodes of violence and parties gone out of control. Tom (23) talked about how these episodes still affected him:

I have seen a lot of violence. I have seen him (one of my mother's former boyfriends) smash all the plates we had in the cupboard, and he has broken our windows . . . and I was bullied at school from the first day. I sometimes have nightmares at night. I can never get rid of these memories. They are like scars on my body.

Kim (26) says he is still deeply affected by a childhood of neglect. He says he has trouble trusting others, but the worst memories are tied to his mother locking him in a room while she went out:

It's the deprivation of freedom, being locked inside so much. When I was locked in, I couldn't go to the bathroom, I couldn't eat, and there was no light. And there was this unpredictability. Because I never knew how long I would have to stay there.

The three older informants talked a lot about how childhood experiences have an impact on their everyday lives today and how these memories shape their understanding of themselves now. All three talked about a longing for love and understanding. Tom puts it this way, 'I feel a big emptiness inside me that I never got filled. Which has resulted in me longing for love, not necessarily from a partner, but from a close person.'

The younger informants spoke more about fear, uncertainty and how the unstable family life affected their daily lives here and now. They also talked about having a lot of adult responsibilities and being left to themselves. Marie (17) described her everyday life while living with her mother:

I always had to make dinner for myself because either she was sleeping or she was drinking. I don't have siblings and I felt quite lonely. I cleaned and tidied a lot and felt very good at keeping things clean and taking care of the animals.

In this quote, Marie showed that she felt she had to take care of herself and that she was responsible for keeping the house in order while living with her mother. However, Smart (2007) states that such family memories are unstable and linked to emotions. We clearly remember episodes where we were very sad or very happy (p. 39), and what we remember is also linked to the present and where we are today. Therefore, this memory should also be understood in light of the fact that Marie now lives with her father, and she said he picks her up from her friend's house, cooks dinner for her and watches movies with her in the evenings. She said herself that she experiences stability with her father, while she found daily life with her mother stressful and unsafe.

As mentioned, memories are influenced by the context in which we share them. Three of the young people in this sample had moved out of their family homes several years ago, while the other three lived with or near their family homes and had close contact with their parents. The narratives they shared were clearly influenced by age and the distance they felt they had from their parents. The older ones talked about their project of 'getting away', while the stories of the younger ones largely revolved around how they dealt with everyday problems.

Getting away

This strategy involved moving out of the childhood home and trying to create distance from their parents. Several mentioned that when they were younger, they simply longed to grow up and be old enough to move out:

I just waited to reach an age where I could decide a little for myself. It's the small things in everyday life that got me through, like going on trips with my dad, getting to have dinner at my friend's place and getting a job when I was 13 years old.

Here we see that Tom (23) pointed out some small disruptions to the everyday routine that helped him to get through. He managed to move out of his mother's home at the age of 17 by choosing a upper secondary school programme that wasn't offered in the city where he grew up. Ruth mentioned that she chose to pursue education and settle in a different city than her mother to avoid close contact with her. Kim gave the same explanation for why he and his partner moved to a different part of the country than the one his parents lived in.

Everyone found it liberating to establish themselves outside of their parental home. At the same time, everyone's stories contained tales of 'bringing the baggage along'. When they gained distance, the memories of their childhood homes became clearer. Tom (23) expressed it this way:

I feel awful now ... Now I understand, and that makes things worse. I delve into my past. For example, when I'm sitting on the train with some time to myself, I think and understand how terrible things could be, and I become disappointed in the adults who let it happen ... It's even more visible today.

While Tom actively revisits his childhood memories to process and try to understand what happened and why things turned out the way they did, Ruth metaphorically described how she attempts to keep the memories at a distance. She said:

I will always be a 'child of'. I like to think that I carry a suitcase with me, and it will always be with me. Some periods, the suitcase is very heavy, but right now, it's a bit closed. But, like when we had that incident a year ago, it was very heavy. I completely broke down.

When Ruth said she will always be a 'child of', she was referring to how she will always be influenced by her childhood experiences of her mother's substance abuse and the painful events that followed. This experience is a part of her identity and how she understands herself (Smart, 2007). In the quote, she referred to an incident that opened the lid of the suitcase, causing the old emotions to burst out. In short, the incident involved a family gathering with siblings, brothers-in-law, and nieces and nephews, where her mother got extremely drunk and verbally abused everyone. Ruth said she had never seen her mother that awful before.

The stories of these three individuals illustrate what Smart (2007) refers to as the power of kinship ties. They all talked about periods when they had little contact or distance from their families, but the family experiences still have a significant impact on their lives.

Everyone talked about how they had little contact with their parents at times, but they are unable to break the bonds with their mothers. It is easier to break the bonds with fathers who have been absent or had a peripheral role in their lives. Ruth told us that she no longer had the strength to stay in touch with her mother after that incident:

A year ago, we had a lot of contact. She has social anxiety, so my siblings have little contact with her, and I felt like I had to maintain the connection. After the incident, we had some contact over the phone, but when I see her, I feel repulsed ... It's very difficult for me to not have contact because I was used to being the one who would call and ask. And now, no one knows if she's alive, but I check Messenger.

This quote shows that family bonds are strong. As the youngest daughter, Ruth felt responsible for her mother. Despite her mother's behaviour at the family gathering, which resulted in Ruth's suitcase being opened, she struggled to cease staying in contact. Even Kim (26), who talks about a childhood marked by severe neglect by his mother, still maintains some contact with her. As a child, he was locked in a closet for hours multiple times, kicked out of the house and sent away to his grandparents. For several years, he had minimal contact with his mother, but he divulged that he has recently tried to reconnect with her:

We exchange a few messages. For the first time in 15 years, my partner and I celebrated Christmas with her and my siblings last year. It was ok, but then she starts treating me like a friend. We've tried to reestablish contact, but it always falls apart ... So sporadic contact is ok. Just knowing where in the world she is ... I never think of her as my mum. She's someone I have to deal with, someone I have a history with.

As we can see from the above quotes, family bonds come with obligations (Morgan, 2019; Finch, 2007), which make it nearly impossible to completely break away from the relationships with mothers.

When it comes to relationships with fathers, there is much more variation. Ruth and Tom had little contact with their fathers during their childhood. As previously mentioned, Ruth's parents divorced before she was born and her father passed away when she was a teenager. She had limited interaction with him. Kim, on the other hand, has lived with his father and stepmother for longer periods of time. His father struggled with addiction and Kim recounted many painful episodes from the time he lived with his father. Today, they have little to no contact. Kim said:

I don't have contact with him. I saw him last autumn. He has a new partner and a daughter. The partner is nice, but I don't have space for him in my life, so I don't have the energy to meet him. There might be a text message every six months.

Being able to move away from the family home and establish oneself independently was a relief. Several people mentioned that taking an international year during upper secondary school made it possible to get away. At the same time, getting away led to the painful memories of their childhood becoming clearer and more difficult to handle.

‘Family is like a micro-society, and when something is off, it has a big impact on you.’

This statement came from 17-year-old Carin, but the stories told by Marie (17) and Viktoria (17) can be summarised under the same heading. Their everyday lives are closely intertwined with their parents, and their parents’ wellbeing greatly affects their own lives. All three mentioned that particularly during secondary school, things were heavy and demanding for them. They had become old enough to understand their parents’ problems, while feeling powerless to do anything about them. Carin related that her mother had told her about her father’s illness when she was quite young (7–8 years old), and she further explained:

But back then, I didn’t understand much. Suddenly, I realised that I had never lived in a normal family. My father became seriously ill when I was in eighth grade. That was the first time it really hit me because I was older and I was right in the middle of it all.

In recent years, her father has had two prolonged psychotic episodes, of which Carin has a clear notion of when they started and when they subsided. Carin briefly and simply mentioned that her father can have long periods of stability, yet during those periods he may have downturns and function relatively poorly. However, when she talked about her father’s psychoses and bad periods, she became desperate and gave detailed descriptions. She said, ‘He speaks with a different voice, gets angry over the slightest things, argues with Mum, scolds and shouts, and says things he wouldn’t have said before.’ The worst part about these episodes is that there is a long period of time from when family members realise ‘it’s happening again’ until her father is admitted to the hospital. She said, ‘We tried to talk to his GP many times about him needing to be admitted, but the doctor wouldn’t listen. Mum fought to have him admitted, but it was in vain.’ She continued:

To protect children from their parents, they need to be hospitalised when they are that sick. Dad needs to be admitted and get his medication because he won't take them at home. So, in the end, I was so desperate that I sent a text message to my dad's psychologist and wrote that he needed to be admitted because I couldn't take it anymore. I received a response saying she would do what she could. She (the psychologist) got Dad to the doctor, and finally, he was admitted. Even though everyone tells me it's not my responsibility to get Dad admitted, the alternative is 'to endure something even more difficult.' When Mum says he need an admission, no one listens to her.

Here we see that Carin demonstrated what Abebe (2019) refers to as thick agency. For the sake of herself, her brother and her mother, she took control of the situation and contacted her father's psychologist to have him hospitalised. She showed competence and took on what Wyness (2019) has labelled as an unconventional role in the generational hierarchy, and she received feedback that she should not have.

Marie told us about being in a desperate situation in secondary school. She felt trapped by her mother's alcohol abuse. She did not tell anyone about her mother's drinking. Even though she had frequent contact with her father, who lived in a different part of the country, and her grandmother, who lived nearby, she did not want them to know about her mother's situation, 'because I didn't want my dad and his family to have a negative relationship with Mum.' She said that she asked her mother to stop drinking, but her mother got angry and said she did not have any problems. At the end of ninth grade, Marie told us that she was so depressed and upset that she reached out to a teacher she trusted and told her about the situation at home. The teacher helped her to get in touch with a GP who then referred her to mental healthcare services for children and adolescents. When we spoke to Marie, she had been receiving treatment there for two years and said she had received a lot of help 'in dealing with everyday life with my mum.' From the way she told her story, we understood that she divided her life into a 'before' and a 'now'. Before, she was afraid, desperate, lonely, unfocused at school and did not want to bring friends home. Now that she has moved in with her father, life is easier, she has more friends and feels less lonely. She said that the help from the mental healthcare services had been important because:

I have learned not to take on my mum's issues, because they are her problems, not mine. I have to separate my life from her problems. And then I go to Dad's and just try to forget about it. She has to handle it herself. It's a bit mean to say, but that's how I did it.

Viktoria's childhood was, to a great degree, influenced by her mother's bipolar disorder and her many partners. Thanks to a present and supportive grandmother, her childhood was relatively stable until she started secondary school. When her mother did not cook meals, she could eat at her grandmother's, and when her mother was unwell, she would periodically stay with her grandmother. Viktoria said she was used to her mother's manic and depressive episodes, but she did not like the fact that her mother was involved with so many violent men. Viktoria also revealed that one of these men had been violent towards her when she tried to help her mother in a difficult situation. She further explained that she had always been academically successful and had many friends, but after these episodes of violence, she developed mental health issues and started acting out a bit herself. Throughout her childhood, the CWS have been involved, and she has had a stable weekend foster home. Her mother and the CWS wanted this home to be used as a permanent foster home when Viktoria could no longer live at home. However, Viktoria did not want to move, and she said this about the CWS:

I wish they had listened more to what I say. It's strange that they move me away from my mum when I'm 17 years old ... I'd rather stay here (with my mum) because this is home. But child welfare services think it's not stable enough ... My foster family is more like a traditional family, where they eat dinner together every day and stuff.

Viktoria, like many young adults, is just waiting to turn 18 so she can make decisions for herself. She plans to move into a flat with a friend. She feels that there are significant contrasts between the home she grew up in and where she currently lives. She describes her foster family as nice, but there are so many rules there that she is not used to.

A common thread among these young informants' stories is that their understanding of themselves and their agency, as well as their perceptions of what is possible for them, are profoundly influenced by their concern for their parents. Carin with the bipolar father said that she found the situation with her father so difficult that she desperately needed someone to talk to. She talked about having a supportive mother, but then said:

It is very difficult to talk to Mum about it because she is going through it herself, and then to say that being at home is very, very difficult. I can't tell Mum that it's exhausting to be at home because I don't want it to sound like I'm blaming her.

Because of this, she found others outside of the family to talk to. When her father was sick while she was in secondary school, she used her class teacher as a conversation partner: 'I needed someone to talk to, and she thought I should talk to her. And she used all morning lessons to talk to me.' When her father got sick again while she was in upper secondary school, she recounted how she argued her way into therapy despite resistance from the general practitioner and long waiting lists. The therapy sessions were of great help, but it was important that her father did not find out that she was going there. She said:

He (Dad) has been very upset because Mum has told him some things he has caused us, and it's difficult for him to hear. And finding out that because of him, I've had to go to therapy, it's not something I want him to hear.

In the stories of all these young informants, who live closely with their parents, we see an agency that is characterised by weighing their own needs against what they believe is best for their parents. Marie did not want to tell her father and grandmother about her mother's substance abuse, out of consideration for her mother. Carin did not want to burden her mother by telling her how difficult it was to be at home when her father was sick, or tell her father that she was seeking treatment because of his illness. At the same time, we see that their agency is process-oriented and fluctuates with age. When Marie finally dared to tell about her mother's substance abuse, she got help from her father and the therapist to move away from her mother, and she also realised that neither her father nor her grandmother have distanced themselves from her mother even when after finding out about her substance abuse.

Conclusion

The narratives of the young individuals illustrate the significant impact that childhood experiences have had on their own identity development and self-understanding, as well as how family relationships create dependencies and obligations that are difficult to escape. A central point in the chapter is that the youngest participants shared stories about how to handle situations in the present moment, while the older adolescents focused on understanding and relating to their childhood experiences. The power of blood ties is evident in the stories of the young individuals. The young

adults chose to establish geographic distance from their parents to avoid daily contact, yet their childhood experiences persist as painful memories that are hard to shake off. The way they handled these difficult childhood experiences varied. Ruth metaphorically described ‘packing them up in a suitcase’, but acknowledged that carrying this suitcase could be burdensome and, sometimes, the lid pops open. On the other hand, Tom actively processed his childhood experiences by ‘scrutinising my past.’ He equated his memories to scars on his body.

The experiences of growing up with instability, fear and the inability to disclose their parents’ problems align with other research on children with mentally ill or substance-abusing parents (Velleman & Templeton, 2016; Wangenstein et al., 2018; Kufās et al., 2015). Through the narratives of the youngest participants, the point is exemplified that ‘the family is a micro society’. When a parent has severe mental health issues or is addicted to substances, it creates ripples that affect the entire family, which Morgan (2019) refers to as family troubles. The lives of the young individuals are tightly intertwined with the parents they live with, both physically and through strong emotional bonds. The challenges faced by the parents also become challenges for the young individuals. They understand that their own pain stems from their parents’ difficulties and as a result, they feel unable to seek help and support from within their immediate family. They do not want to burden their parents with guilt and shame. In this sense, we can see that the agency of children and young individuals is constrained by the dependencies, love and obligations they feel towards their parents. From the stories they shared, we can also deduce that agency is a process, and their agency must be understood along a continuum (Abebe, 2021, p. 298). Carin and Marie demonstrated agency when they told adults outside the family about their home situations, which led to them receiving help in processing their experiences and finding strategies to cope with the difficulties they live with. Marie explained that the most important thing she learned in therapy was to establish clearer boundaries between her mother’s problems and what she should be concerned about and take responsibility for.

When these young individuals reflected on their upbringing, their memories were not strongly tied to rhythms, daily routines, holidays such as Christmas or summer vacations, or pleasant moments with their families. They have not had the support and cultural help to construct a cohesive narrative about themselves because their upbringing has been different

from their classmates or how it is portrayed in books. Deviations from a happy childhood, as Hennem (2002) suggests, are seen through disruptions in cultural practices where children do not experience a sense of belonging and security. According to her, a happy childhood involves reading books, singing bedtime songs, cosy Saturdays in front of the TV and cosy cabin moments with a fire in the fireplace. These are not the stories that the young people in this study share about their home experiences.

At the same time, the findings show that a family is not a fixed entity, but something that can be negotiated. The stories of the young individuals actively seeking out fathers they like and who are trustworthy individuals demonstrate what Abebe (2019) refers to as tactical agency. Viktoria has defined Lars as her father, and she visits him and experiences the Christmas joy that she missed at home with her mother.

Author biography

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