The aim of the conducted studies was to find a mechanism responsible for shaping intimate relationships among Adult Children of Alcoholics, including variables that mediate this process: family variables (retrospective assessment of one’s relationship with parents) and personality variables (level of differentiation of Self). As it was previously proven, people whose parents abused alcohol, due to being raised in an unfavorable atmosphere, tend to have a higher level of difficulties in numerous areas during their adult lives, and worse psychosocial functioning in adulthood, yet it is impossible to create a coherent image that demonstrates the existence of a ACoA syndrome. The study was conducted on 75 people: the students and participants of the meetings for Adult Children of Alcoholics from Gdynia. The participants were divided into two groups: study group – Adult Children of Alcoholics (37 people) and the control group (38 people), in each of the group there were 15 men. Participants filled in the questionnaires arranged in different orders: Attachment Styles Inventory by Mieczyslaw Plopa, Retrospective Assessment of Parents’ Attitudes Inventory – separately for mother and father by Mieczyslaw Plopa, Differentiation of Self Inventory by Elizabeth Skowron and Myrna Friedlander (1998), Love Attitudes Scale by Clyde and Susan Hendrick in Polish adaptation by Bogdan Wojciszke. In conclusion, on the conscious and relational level ACoA might declare weaker bond with alcoholic parents but on the intra-psychological level they often remain emotionally fused.
with them. An adult child of an alcoholic with weakly differentiated Self pursues a partner with whom he or she can “emotionally fuse” and thus attempt to stabilize their Self, by reducing fear, this time in an intimate relationship.

Introduction

Psychological functioning of Adult Children of Alcoholics has been of interest to psychology since the publication of the first work by M. Corka in 1969. The author focused on difficulties faced by children who grow up in families with alcohol problem. In the literature, Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACoA) are perceived as a risk group for behavioural disorders (see Black, Bucky, & Wilder-Padilla, 1986). According to Rys (2007) this problem affects 40% of the Polish society and thus understanding the functioning and difficulties that ACoA face throughout their lives seems to be of importance. According to Wider-Wysoczanska (2003) an Adult Child of Alcoholic is an individual that comes from a family where the alcohol was a central problem. During childhood such a person struggles to survive, which in adulthood results in a belief that they were never children. According to Bradshaw (1994) the main reason for becoming ACoA is the perception of being abandoned by parents/guardians who disregarded one’s need of belonging, the fulfilment of which is essential for regular personality development. Miller and Tuchfeld (1990) highlight that the term ACoA suggests that a person goes unsuccessfully through the developmental stages that determine adulthood and maturity.

Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACoA) syndrome can be related to problems with psychosocial functioning in many areas. One of the issues often touched upon in the literature is the roles that children from alcoholic families fulfil. According to Cierpiałkowska (1992) they are preserved in specific behavioural patterns that affect individual’s relationships outside the family. Four main roles described by Wegsheider (1981; in: Deutsch, 1992) are the following: the hero, the lost child, the scapegoat and the family mascot. Each of these roles is related to fulfilling a different function in the family which subsequently affects identity shaping, self-esteem and which reinforces the pattern of social relationships and the way of functioning assigned to each role, that later in life becomes important for interpersonal relationships in ACoA’s nuclear family.

Individuals who grow up in a family with alcohol problem are often faced with a rejecting or overly disciplining attitude of an alcoholic parent.
Moreover, most children feel rejected also by their non-drinking parents because they are preoccupied with the addicted partner and thus leave the child alone with their problems. The behaviour towards the child by the alcoholic parent is often ambiguous (Sobolewska, 2000). Therefore, ACoA know only "uncertain" love which affects their preferences when choosing a partner in adulthood. As Bradshaw indicates (1994) those individuals often encounter difficulty with defending the borders of their own Self, with assertive behaviours and with the ability to clearly communicate their own needs and expectations. Experience of rejection is such a substantial injury that it might induce the need to meet expectations at all costs in order to maintain the relationship (see Sobolewska, 2000). As a result, a child that lives in a family with one or two alcoholic parents develops uncertain and unstable Self (Woititz, 2002). In adult life those individuals often pursue relationships with strong, demanding and critical partners (Woititz, 2002). The consequence of insecurity and instability in family environment as well as uncertainty of emotional relationships in family of origin shapes low self-esteem and activates two types of basic reactions in interpersonal relationships: perfectionism and avoidance. On one hand these individuals set high standards for themselves and assign themselves many tasks to complete while always striving for perfection. On the other hand, being afraid to fail they withdraw from difficult tasks or – feeling worthless – they chose partners that are not very attractive (Sobolewska, 2000).

A common problem among ACoA is also the lack of trust and a need to keep distance from others which leads to loneliness and isolation (Woititz, 2002). Adult children avoid others or enter relationships with random people who they do not feel emotionally attached to. They hide their emotions because their experience from the alcoholic family is that the display of feelings is related to rejection or even aggression from the close ones. Such an "emotional freeze" manifests itself by not demonstrating empathy, a disability to be moved, rigidity and a tendency to withdraw.

As indicated by Woitz (2002), what seems to be characteristic for ACoA in the area of intimate relationships is their quick emotional engagement in relationships, in which they often copy the behavioral scenarios known from their childhood. They expect their partner to devote all of their time or attention to them, and they feel rejected when it does not happen. Children of alcoholics also tend to be excessively loyal and they consciously remain in relationships
that destroy them (Woitiz, 2002). Sacrificing for others can be a source of self-esteem and as such it can create a mechanism that maintains high satisfaction with life (Cermak & Rutzky, 1998).

Emotional impoverishment in childhood and in adulthood causes denial of the need to be loved and accepted. When dealing with others, adult children of alcoholics try to please them. Suppressed feelings such as anger and hatred, arouse the feeling of guilt and as a consequence lead to auto-aggressive behaviors (Sobolewska, 2000). Fearing aggression, they rationalize anger and find an explanation for it, which lowers their mood and causes depression (Woititz, 2002). Many authors identify psychological changes caused by alcoholism in a family with disorders characteristic for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Which, to a large extent, results from the traumatic nature of life experiences that are often chronic, long-term and difficult to control. Consequently, as a result of such experiences, in adulthood ACoA can suffer from various disorders. As shown by Jona (1997), trauma can cause two types of reactions when faced with stimuli that causes painful associations: re-experience of trauma or emotional numbness. The second type of reaction is, according to Melibruda (1997), a particular threat to the emotional life and to a sense of meaning in life, as it causes emotional exhaustion, sense of emptiness, indifference and inability to experience intimacy in relationships with other people. According to Kucinska (1997) the sense of inferiority and of incompetence, which is one of the most commonly mentioned symptoms of psychological functioning of ACoA, is especially visible in relationships with others and is caused by a negative self-image, lack of positive experiences in close relationships and poor interpersonal skills in the areas of communication, establishing and maintaining relationships and conflict solving. Fear and anxiety experienced by ACOA are often related to the possibility of being exposed by others as “small” and weak (Woititz, 2003), which is similar to the functioning of people with character neurosis as described by Horney (1986). Berkowitz and Perkins (1988) also underline the importance of sex differences for the emotional and interpersonal consequences among ACoA. Based on own research they indicate the predisposition to a strong (excessive) autonomy among men and a clear tendency to emotional disorders among women from ACoA group. In turn, Wright and Heppner (1993) emphasize the influence of alcoholism in the family of origin on the shaping of dysfunctional ways of problem solving and irregular patterns of interpersonal
relations. Numerous research reports, which analyzed results on ACoA’s functioning, demonstrated a recurring pattern of dysfunctionality among ACoA, expressed in larger problems with social functioning, hyperactivity, somatic problems, tendency for abuse, lower intelligence, larger number of emotional problems, lower educational and professional achievements and significantly larger interpersonal problems (El-Guebaly & Offord, 1977, Heller et al., 1982; Owings-West & Prinz, 1987 in: Hibbard, 1989). Benson and Heller (1987) emphasize the significantly higher percentage of depressive disorders, neurotic and psychotic patterns of social functioning among women – daughters of alcoholics. Parker and Harford (1988), on the other hand, looked into the issue of durability of ACoA’s relationships and found their relationships to be far less stable over time and ACoA to be more likely to use negative patterns of emotional reactions.

However, the question of a coherent pattern of psychological functioning among ACoA remains unresolved, due to diversity of consequences and their large individual variability. Yet, there is no doubt that the development of personality and identity in a family affected by the problem of alcoholism impairs psychological functioning, especially the area related to the development of the structure of Self, responsible for the regulation processes of actions and emotional relations and the ability to maintain close relationships over long periods of time.

Method

Groups

The study was conducted on 75 people: students and participants of meetings for Adult Children of Alcoholics from Gdynia. The participants were divided into two groups: study group – Adult Children of Alcoholics (37 people) and control group (38 people), there were 15 men in each of the groups. The respondents were between 19 and 59 years old (ACoA: $M = 27.4, SD = 8.59$; control group: $M = 24.08; SD = 8.61$).

Procedure and materials

The participants received a survey that consisted of five questionnaires and introduction to the study. The introduction contained information about
the goal of the study as well as a request to the participants to answer whether anyone in their closest family had or has alcohol problems; if they responded „yes” they were asked to state who that person was. Afterwards, the participants filled in questionnaires arranged in different orders: Attachment Styles Inventory by Mieczysław Plopa, Retrospective Assessment of Parents’ Attitudes Inventory by Mieczysław Plopa – separately for mother and father, Differentiation of Self Inventory by Elizabeth Skowron and Myrna Friedlander (1998) (attachment B), Love Attitudes Scale by Clyde and Susan Hendrick in Polish adaptation by Bogdan Wojciszke, and Cantril’s Ladder for the evaluation of bond with parents.

**Attachment Styles Inventory by Mieczysław Plopa (2008)**

This inventory is used to test men and women with experience of being in a close relationship. It is meant to test attachment styles in romantic relationships. The consists of 24 items, 8 for each of the three scales that allow to diagnose different attachment styles: secure style, anxious-ambivalent style and avoidant style. Each participant responds to each of the items on a 7 points scale, where 1 means *does not agree at all with the statement* and 7 means *completely agree with the statement*. The raw data for each of the scales fall between 8 and 56 points.

1. Secure style: high results indicate close, emotional contact with one’s partner, based on the sense of security and shared trust; average results mean moderate intensity of presenting this style in interpersonal relations; low results indicate lack of sense of security, lack of open communication and displaying affection;

2. Anxious-ambivalent style: high results indicate high anxiety level regarding the stability of relationship; average results indicate moderate intensity of presenting the style; low results indicate lack of anxiety and worrying about relationship;

3. Avoidant style: high results indicate avoidance of close relationship with the partner, building visible boundaries when it comes to openness to intimate contact and dialog; average results indicate moderate intensity of presenting the style; low results indicate lack of tendencies to avoid intimacy in the relationship.
Retrospective Assessment of Parents’ Attitudes Inventory by Mieczyslaw Plopa (2008)

The measure consists of two questionnaires – to assess mother’s and father’s attitudes separately. It allows to conduct retrospective assessment of parents in terms of five parental attitudes: acceptance/rejection, demands, autonomy, inconsequence and protection. Each of the questionnaires consists of 50 items; participant can choose between five categories of answers:

- she (he) definitely was like that and behaved this way
- she (he) rather was like that and behaved this way
- I have some doubt if she (he) was like that and behaved this way
- he (he) rather was not like that and did not behave this way
- he (he) definitely was not like that and did not behave this way

The raw data fall between 10–50 points on each scale.

1. Acceptance – Rejection Attitude: high results indicate close emotional parent-child relation; average results indicate moderate intensity of the attitude; low results indicate lack of acceptance;

2. Autonomy Attitude: high results indicate highly desired treatment of the child by the parent and understanding of child’s independence; average results indicate moderate intensity of the attitude; low results indicate lack of autonomy;

3. Protection Attitude: high results indicate overprotective attitude; average results indicate moderately appropriate attitude; low results indicate appropriate attitude;

4. Demanding Attitude: high results indicate over-demanding attitude, average results – attitude moderately appropriate; low results indicate appropriate attitude;

5. Inconsequence Attitude: high results indicate inappropriate attitude; average results – attitude moderately appropriate; low results – desired attitude.

The Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI) by Elizabeth Skowron and Myrna Friedlander (1998)

The inventory is used to study the level of differentiation of Self, based on Systems Theory of the Family by Murray Bowen. Polish adaptation was
carried out by Magdalena Blazek and Marta Lemanska in 2009 (with authors' consent). DSI consists of instruction and a set of 43 items to which the participant needs to relate to. Each participant responds by choosing one of six categories of answers, where 1 means that it is not at all true and 6 means it is completely true. By using the DSI it is possible to describe the global level of differentiation of Self as well as to receive a general measure of factors such as:

1. Emotional Reactivity – 11 items – indicates the extent to which a given individual reacts to emotional stimulus from external environment.

2. I position – 11 items – measures how strong is the self-confidence and to what extent can an individual stay true to one’s convictions, values, goals and how much one is prone to submit to pressure from other people.

3. Emotional Cutoff – 12 items – measures the sense of intimacy or the fear of closeness.

4. Fusion With Others – 9 items – measures the extent to which the individual engages emotionally with other people. In extreme cases the engagement is expressed in form of a triangulation or over-identification with parents.

Successively each answer is assigned a number from 1 to 6 and in case of some questions a reversed score from 6 to 1. Since there is between 9 and 12 items within each scale the raw data from each of the scales fall in different score ranges. General raw result for each of the scales is obtained by summing up the answers assigned to each of the scales. General result is obtained by summing up the results of scales: Emotional Reactivity, Emotional Cutoff, Fusion With Others, result from question number 35, and I position scale. It is assumed that the higher the result the higher the differentiation level of Self.

**Love Attitudes Scale by Clyde and Susan Hendrick (1990) in the Polish adaptation by Bogdan Wojciszke**

It consists of 42 items; where each 7 items measure one type of love. The participants are asked to respond to subsequent items while thinking about one’s specific partner (the current one or the most recent one if they are currently not in a relationship). The responses to each of the questions are given on a scale from 1 (completely disagree) through 2, 3, 4 to 5 (completely agree). The sum of responses per one sector (7 positions) referring to the same type of information measures how strong is the tendency to experience love of a certain type: eros, ludus, storge, mania, pragma, agape. This
Retrospective assessment of relationships in family… allows to compare both people between each other and the types of love for the same person (the same relationship). The bigger the sum for a given scale the more dominant this type of love is over other types.

**Assessment of one’s bond with parents** – the participants evaluated their bond with their parents on Cantrill’s Ladder, showing to what extent do they feel emotionally connected to their parents (1965 separately for mother and father).

### Results

1. **Retrospective assessment of relationship with parents**

Significant differences appeared between two groups of participants in retrospective assessment of parental attitudes presented by one’s own father.

**Table 1.** The comparison of assessment of father’s parental attitudes in ACoA group and in the control group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Retrospective assessment of father’s parental attitudes</th>
<th>ACoA mean</th>
<th>ACoA SD</th>
<th>Control mean</th>
<th>Control SD</th>
<th>t(73)</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>d</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance</td>
<td>29.46</td>
<td>11.67</td>
<td>37.76</td>
<td>9.39</td>
<td>-3.4</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>32.84</td>
<td>9.05</td>
<td>38.34</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>-2.82</td>
<td>.006</td>
<td>.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protection</td>
<td>26.41</td>
<td>8.37</td>
<td>30.45</td>
<td>7.53</td>
<td>-2.2</td>
<td>.031</td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demands</td>
<td>30.08</td>
<td>10.85</td>
<td>25.95</td>
<td>10.56</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>.099</td>
<td>.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inconsequence</td>
<td>30.57</td>
<td>10.36</td>
<td>24.21</td>
<td>9.57</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>.007</td>
<td>.65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1.** The comparison of assessment of father’s parental attitudes in ACoA group and in the control group.
Compared to the control group, participants from ACoA group perceived their fathers as displaying less acceptance, autonomy, protection, but at the same time having higher demands (a weak difference) and showing inconsequence towards them in childhood.

Moreover, the Adult Children of Alcoholics assessed their own mothers as more inconsequent in their parental attitudes \( t(73) = 1.96; \ p = .054; \ d = .46 \).

**Table 2.** Comparing bonds with parents in ACoA group and in the control group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Did mother or father was abusing alcohol?</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bonds with mother</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“No”</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>8,87</td>
<td>1,48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Yes”</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>7,70</td>
<td>2,48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonds with father</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“No”</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>8,02</td>
<td>2,12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Yes”</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>4,68</td>
<td>2,8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition participants were asked to evaluated their bond with their parents. It appeared that with both of them Adult Children of Alcoholics feel less emotionally connected to their parents (separately for mother and father) than participants form the control group.

2. Differentiation of Self

Two groups differed also when it comes to the scores obtained in the Differentiation of Self Inventory.

**Table 3.** The comparison of differentiation of self levels in the ACoA group and in the control group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Differentiation of self</th>
<th>ACoA mean</th>
<th>ACoA SD</th>
<th>Control mean</th>
<th>Control SD</th>
<th>( t(73) )</th>
<th>( p )</th>
<th>( d )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Reactivity</td>
<td>34,41</td>
<td>8,55</td>
<td>40,5</td>
<td>6,76</td>
<td>-3.43</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Cutoff</td>
<td>46,47</td>
<td>7,62</td>
<td>43,22</td>
<td>7,67</td>
<td>-1.84</td>
<td>.069</td>
<td>.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differentiation of self – general result</td>
<td>108,05</td>
<td>14,48</td>
<td>119,05</td>
<td>13,97</td>
<td>-3.35</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In comparison to individuals from families where there was no alcohol problem, participants from clinical group obtained higher results on the scale of Emotional Cutoff which indicates their greater tendency to emotionally cut off from social surroundings and their increased anxiety in social relationships. Participants from ACoA group obtained lower results on the scales of Emotional Reactivity and on the general level of Differentiation of Self. This result indicates a decreased tendency to react emotionally to emotional stimuli from environment, as well as immaturity of functioning in interpersonal relationships with increased tendency to fuse with the environment in the absence of separation sense that is regular for mature functioning in relationships.

3. Intimate relationships of Adult Children of Alcoholics

3a. Comparison of attachment styles in ACoA group and in the control group.

Student’s t-test was performed for independent samples. The results are presented in Table 4.
Table 4. The comparison of attachment styles in ACoA group and in the control group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attachment style</th>
<th>ACoA mean</th>
<th>ACoA SD</th>
<th>Control mean</th>
<th>Control SD</th>
<th>t(73)</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>d</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Secure</td>
<td>40.68</td>
<td>9.74</td>
<td>41.26</td>
<td>8.36</td>
<td>-.28</td>
<td>ni</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxious-ambivalent</td>
<td>32.38</td>
<td>9.47</td>
<td>28.39</td>
<td>8.69</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidant</td>
<td>22.73</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>21.05</td>
<td>8.19</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>ni</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3. The comparison of attachment styles levels in ACoA group and in the control group

The clinical group (AcoA) displayed higher level of anxious-ambivalent attachment style in comparison to the control group.

3b. Attachment styles and a tendency to experience a given type of love in ACoA group and control group.

The next step was to perform r-Pearson correlation analysis in order to assess the role of attachment styles in two compared groups. The results showed that attachment styles correlated most of all with the types of experienced love and with differentiation of Self. The correlations confirmed that secure attachment is correlated positively with more adaptive or mature types.
of love (ACoA group), and negatively correlated with immature types of love (ACoA and Control groups). Correlations are presented in the tables 5 and 6.

### Table 5. Correlation of attachment styles with the types of experienced love in ACoA group and in the control group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ACoA</th>
<th>Control group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>eros</strong></td>
<td>.45**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ludus</strong></td>
<td>-.43**</td>
<td>.37*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>mania</strong></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-.34*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>agape</strong></td>
<td>.58***</td>
<td>-.47**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Secure</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Anxious-ambivalent</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Avoidant</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 6.** The correlation of attachment styles and the differentiation of self level in ACoA group and control group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ACoA</th>
<th>Control group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Reactivity</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-.42**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Position</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-.45**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Cutoff</td>
<td>.68***</td>
<td>-.43**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fusion</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-.34*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differentiation of self – general result</td>
<td>.4*</td>
<td>-.68***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3c. Attachment styles and the level of differentiation of Self in ACoA group and control group.

The higher the result of all scales the better psychological functionning of a person.
3d. Attachment styles and retrospective assessment of parental attitudes: father’s and mother’s

Attachment styles did not correlate significantly with retrospective assessment of father’s parental attitudes in the ACoA group and only slightly in the control group. Attachment styles correlated weakly with retrospective assessment of mother’s parental attitudes. However, in the ACoA group the level of statistical significance was reached: secure style – mother’s acceptance: $r = .33; p<.05$; secure style – protection: $r = .37; p<.05$ (moreover, this style correlated negatively – on the level of statistical tendency – with mother’s perceived demands); avoidant style – protection: $r = .34; p<.05$. In this group the anxious-ambivalent style correlated positively – but only on the level of statistical tendency – with perceived demands and mother’s inconsequence. In the control group the level of statistical significance was reached by the correlations: anxious-ambivalent style – demands: $r = .36; p<.05$; anxious-ambivalent style – inconsequence: $r = .35; p<.05$. Moreover, in this group the secure style correlated negatively – on the level of statistical tendency – with the perceived inconsequence of the mother.

Summary and discussion

The aim of the conducted studies was to find a mechanism responsible for shaping intimate relationships among Adult Children of Alcoholics, including variables that mediate this process: family variables (retrospective assessment of one’s relationship with parents) and personality variables (level of differentiation of Self). As it was previously proven, people whose parents abused alcohol, due to being raised in an unfavorable atmosphere, tend to have a higher level of difficulties in numerous areas during their adult lives, and worse psychosocial functioning in adulthood, yet it is impossible to create a coherent image that demonstrates the existence of a ACoA syndrome (see Harter, 2000; Cierpialkowska & Ziarko, 2010; Margasiński, 2010; Gąsior, 2012). From theoretical and diagnostic perspectives, more valuable for science and for use in therapeutic practice with those whose parents abused alcohol, would be the search for mechanisms that are responsible for their problems during adulthood, among others, in the areas of building interpersonal relationships, including intimate relationships. Overview of the subject literature allows to conclude that, even though it is not a trait singling out and
distinguishing ACoA as a clinical group, the majority of the developed characteristics underlines the increased risk of children of alcoholics to experience problems with building close relationships in adulthood (Woititz, 1992, Harter, 2000, Kucinska, 2002)

In accordance with theoretical assumptions, in face of the results obtained in the studies presented here, ACoA, compared to a control group, display an immature pattern of attachment. Insecure form of attachment is mostly manifested by anxiety in relationships and excessive bonding with one’s partner, and by a strong tendency to control one’s partner, which confirms the results obtained for example in the studies by Kelley and colleagues (2005). Conclusions from the studies of Eiden (2002) on attachment styles of little children to their parents who abuse alcohol show that they manifest insecure attachment style more often than their peers whose parents do not abuse alcohol. However, alcoholism in family was only one of the risk factors influencing abnormal development of bonding with the close ones, next to mother’s depression and antisocial personality and father’s lower parental sensitivity. Multiple studies indicating lifetime stability of the attachment patterns (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Owens, 1995; Fraley & Shaver, 2000) and the idea of critical period for the shaping of the attachment style that occurs in early childhood (Bowlby, 2007), as well as the above mentioned study results on attachment styles among small children of alcoholic parents, allow to conclude that the atmosphere in which they grew, shaped by the parental attitudes of their mother and father, can be a significant predictor of an insecure attachment pattern among ACoA. The results obtained in the presented report show that people from ACoA group evaluate mostly their fathers as functioning significantly worse in a parent-child relationship. Fathers of ACoA did not accept the child, they set unreasonable expectations, were inconsequent and did not demonstrate protective behaviours which in result contributed to – as stated in the introduction – sense of rejection and decreased self-esteem. Additionally, obtained results indicate that the Self of people from ACoA group, in comparison with participants from the control group, is less mature which is manifested in higher emotional dependence on others and decreased Self differentiation. This difference can be attributed to irregular process of ACoA’s separation and individuation during adolescence in face of insecure love especially from the father’s side. Research results on adolescents whose fathers abused alcohol indicated that in alcoholic families strong identification with
mother made it difficult to ally with father on the level of family system and hampered the possibility to use father as an identification object on the internal world level (Kalita & Lewandowska-Walter, in press). Results obtained in this study became a foundation for the authors to create a hypothetical model which demonstrates a developmental path that may lead to irregularities in developing intimate relationships by ACoA (presented below).

Figure 4. A proposed theoretical model of ACoA functioning in intimate relationship

Numerous studies referred to in the theoretical part of this article indicate that functioning difficulties of alcoholics’ children manifest themselves in the second and third decade of their lives. During adolescence the identity develops in the process of separation and individuation (Self differentiation) while early adulthood is a period to execute developmental tasks related to intimate relationships and professional career. On the conscious and relational level ACoA might declare weaker bond with alcoholic parents but on the intra-psychological level they often remain emotionally fused with them. Such a conflict is manifested in an anxious attachment style and this dissonance is related to concerns about loss of the relationship – however substandard – with the closest person. Emotional dependence on parents and – on
the subconscious level – loyalty to them as family members hamper the separation process and in the future may lead to repetition of the relationship pattern. An adult child of an alcoholic with weakly differentiated Self pursues a partner with whom they can “emotionally fuse” and thus attempt to stabilize their Self, this time in an intimate relationship. Being anxious about losing close relationship, ACoA often takes control over the relationship taking on a role – typical for children from alcoholic families – that they used to play in their family of origin.

References


for children of alcoholics]. Warszawa: PARPA.


