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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## The Struggle of Children from Drug-Abusing Families in Facing Social Exclusion

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper aims to explore the perceptions and reflections on the experiences of children from drug-abusing families in their struggle against social exclusion. The results are based on a qualitative phenomenological analysis of in-depth and face-to-face interviews with 27 informants, including; 12 children from drug-abusing families experiencing social exclusion, 10 parents, 3 neighbors, and 2 shelter professionals. This research resulted in the following themes: 1) parentification as a child's struggle, 2) feelings of sadness and frustration, 3) making peace with a negative stigma and 4) limited professional support. The findings of this study indicate that the experiences of children who have parents who abuse drugs are significantly influential in their lives, whether they live together or separated. Therefore, these children must receive adequate financial and professional support to help them cope with mixed and contradictory emotions and how to deal with the negative stigma that may arise from their surroundings.

**KEYWORDS**

Children's Struggles, Drug Abusing Families, Social Exclusion of Children

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### 1. Introduction

Drug abuse is a global and public health-related issue in many countries, impacting individuals, families, and communities (Dyba et al., 2019; Freisthler et al., 2017b; Perruci et al., 2021; Khalidass et al., 2021). In Indonesia, the threat of drugs has been considered an extraordinary crime (BNN Republik Indonesia, 2021). In Makassar City, the eastern region of Indonesia has been particularly affected by the increasing amount of drug abuse. It is reported that the presence of drugs in the fishing community in Makassar City is a serious and worrying problem (Sumai et al., 2020).

Drug abuse by parents can harm their children, such as children's social exclusion. The concept of social exclusion used by Western sociologists has also developed and become a social scientific study in Indonesia (Yunita & Sekarningrum, 2018). The term social exclusion was first used in Europe, especially in France, in 1970. The concept originated from the concern of Rene Lenoir, a senior official for Social Action Affairs at the French Government, about the marginalization experienced by some mainstream groups. Through his research, *L'exclus: Un Français sur Dix*, Lenoir (1975), highlighted the mechanisms by which people are excluded (Burchardt et al., 1999). Lenoir's ideas encouraged social scientists from various countries to study the process of deprivation and poverty through the perspective of social exclusion (Syahra, 2010). Exclusion is a relational process of declining participation, solidarity, and access (Silver, 2012).

Children's social exclusion refers to the neglect and rejection experienced by children in their social environment (Silver & Miller, 2003). The social environment includes various entities, ranging from the individual level to the broader community level, including; family environment, friends, neighbors, to the wider community (Peter & Olson, 2000; Sarah, 2012). In this context, children with

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drug-abusing parents are vulnerable to neglect and violence within the family (Solis et al., 2012) and negative stigma from the surrounding environment (Fahrizal et al., 2018). Consequently, children growing up in such environments face physical injuries and psychological and psychiatric distress, including sleep disorders, depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, behavioral disorders, and even suicidal behavior (World Health Organization, 2014). They are also at high risk of increased family violence and family dysfunction, which can jeopardize their safety and security (Pakenham & Cox, 2012; Shahan, 2022). Therefore, this paper aims to explore the perceptions and reflections on the experiences of children from drug-using families in their struggle with social exclusion.

## 2. Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach with phenomenological methods to explore their daily experiences when interacting with parents who abuse drugs. This research focuses on the fishermen's community in Makassar City, South Sulawesi Province, Indonesia. The location of this research is located in three sub-districts: Ujung Tanah, Bontoala, and Tallo. The reason for choosing this location is that it is a red zone for drug trafficking (Haerana, 2016). Data collection used in-depth and face-to-face interview techniques. The interviewees were purposively selected through shelters (professionals formed by DP3A) in Makassar City. Before conducting interviews, they first received written information and consent forms to sign. This study involved 27 informants, including; 12 children who experience social exclusion and have parents who are drug abusers, 10 children's parents, 3 children's neighbors, and 2 shelter professionals.

Interviews were conducted at the informants' house and at the shelter house. It started with open-ended questions where informants were asked to tell about themselves and their families, their daily lives, and how they interact with their parents. Further in-depth questions followed the flow of what the informants said. Each interview lasted about 60 minutes to 90 minutes. Interviews were conducted 2 to 3 times so that all questions could be answered. All data and information obtained from participants were kept confidential.

To answer the research problem and obtain the true meaning of the phenomenon under study, it is necessary to analyze the data that has been collected. The data analysis process with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as written by Anderson & Spencer (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Fenyi & Morrison, 2022). The stages of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis were carried out as follows: a) reading the written transcripts several times to get an overall feeling; b) identifying important phrases or sentences that relate directly to the experience; c) formulating meanings and grouping them into common themes; d) integrating the results into an in-depth and complete description of the phenomenon; and e) validating the findings with participants, and incorporating participants' comments in the final description.

## 3. Results and Discussion

Informants' experiences of living with a parent who abused drugs, as well as their experiences of living apart from their parents, revealed four main significant themes: 1) parentification as a child's struggle; 2) feelings of sadness and frustration; 3) making peace with a negative stigma and 4) limited professional support.

### 3.1 Parentification as a Form of a Child's Struggle

Parentification as a child's struggle is one of the main themes that emerged in informants' experiences in the context of families with drugs. Parentification refers to a situation where children are disproportionately given responsibilities and roles that should be performed by adults in their families (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1973). This can happen, either explicitly or implicitly, to create an environment where children feel the need to help maintain the balance and stability of the family as a whole. In some cases, parentification can occur when one or both parents have drug addiction problems, so parents are unable to fulfill their roles and responsibilities within the family. From the results of the study, it is known that children growing up in drug-abusing families experience significant parentification, such as; earning a living, caring for younger siblings, and cleaning the house.

The research showed that one of the most common forms of parentification for children growing up in families of drug abusers is the breadwinner. 10 out of 12 respondents admitted that they were forced to work to help meet the family's financial needs. In this endeavor, they often have to sacrifice their education and childhood, which should be full of learning and playing activities. The children's main goal in working is to get money and help improve the family's economic situation. They use the income earned to buy food, fulfill daily needs and buy necessary clothes. Through this role, these children try to make a tangible contribution to overcoming their family's financial difficulties. The work done by these children varies greatly. Some of them work as coolies at the fish auction, sell hawker food, become parking attendants, become construction workers, or even become domestic helpers. These jobs are quite challenging and risky as they require a lot of physical strength and are not ideal for their young age.

In addition to earning a living, children also experience parentification in caring for their younger siblings. They have to take on the role of caregivers and are responsible for their younger siblings' well-being and daily needs, such as feeding, keeping them

clean, and ensuring their safety. These responsibilities far exceed their age and developmental level and can place considerable emotional and physical pressure on them. In this case, the informants felt severe pressure because they were forced to take on parental roles and be responsible for tasks that exceeded their age and developmental limits.

The informants explained that they were forced to drop out of school to help the family economy and take care of their younger siblings, all of which they did so that their daily lives continued as they should. The presence of parents who are drug abusers causes financial instability in the family, so informants feel forced to take this step. Furthermore, children growing up in families of drug abusers are also involved in cleaning the house. They are responsible for keeping the house clean and tidy, a task that should be the responsibility of their parents. This includes cleaning, washing clothes, and organizing the household. While their efforts in helping the family economy are commendable, children's involvement in such work harms their education and childhood. High levels of assistance in the workforce can hinder their opportunities to learn and develop social and cognitive skills that are important for their growth and future.

This decision not only impacts their education but also their social and emotional development. They lost the opportunity to acquire knowledge and skills that should have been acquired at school and were burdened with tasks that should not have been their responsibility. It is important to realize that the informants' decision to drop out of school was not their actual choice but rather a situation imposed by their complex family circumstances.

This study is in line with research conducted by Bekir et al. (1993), which found a significant relationship between parentification and children's adaptation difficulties in adulthood. Similar research by Pakenham and Cox (2012) shows that the study of parentification risks the quality of children's well-being. Parentification includes situations where children have to take on adult roles and responsibilities, even at the expense of their education, and this can harm children's well-being. Children who experience parentification experience severe psychological distress, excessive stress and have a higher risk of developing mental disorders, as research has shown by Perruci et al. (2021) and Chase (1999) that the effects of parentification in childhood can have a long-term impact.

### ***3.2 Feelings of Sadness and Frustration***

The experience of living with drug-abusing parents and the period of living separately gave rise to mixed feelings in the informants. They described feeling sad and disappointed when they witnessed their parents experiencing addiction and the negative impact it had on their family. When a person stops using drugs after dependence has been established, they experience symptoms such as mood swings, irritability, anxiety, and emotional tension. These symptoms can lead to feelings of frustration, discomfort, and difficulty controlling emotions. In the drug abstinence phase, a person may experience intense physical and emotional discomfort, which can trigger angry behavior and unreasonable yelling. Drug users who are experiencing withdrawal symptoms often experience intense feelings of anger and tend to have shouting behavior. In this condition, parents who are experiencing withdrawal symptoms can easily unleash their uncontrollable anger on their children. As a result, these children are often victims of verbal and physical abuse.

Verbal abuse of children in these situations can take the form of harsh words, taunts, slurs, or threats directed at them. Children may often hear hurtful and hurtful words, which can directly damage their self-confidence. This verbal abuse can also affect children's language and communication development and trigger prolonged psychological distress. In addition to verbal abuse, children living in an environment where parents are experiencing symptoms of sobriety are also vulnerable to physical abuse. Parents' inability to control their emotions may lead them to commit acts of violence that harm children physically and mentally. Children may be subjected to punches, kicks, or other physical abuse that causes injury and trauma. This kind of physical abuse can disrupt children's physical and emotional development, increase the risk of behavioral disorders, and create an unsafe environment for them.

In addition, children growing up in families with drug-using parents also often experience anger and frustration at feeling abandoned or neglected. Parents who are immersed in their own needs tend to neglect the needs and attention they should be giving to their children. This leads to children feeling disempowered and not getting the attention they deserve from their parents. In such situations, children often face complex emotional conflicts. On the one hand, they love their parents and feel a responsibility to take care of them. However, on the other hand, they also have a strong desire to protect and safeguard their well-being. Feelings of guilt often arise as they feel caught between their love and sense of responsibility towards their parents and the desire to take care of themselves and prioritize their well-being. This situation creates an unstable environment for informants and their younger siblings. This finding is significant to research conducted by (Freisthler et al., 2017a), which shows that every parent who uses drugs is at potential risk of child neglect and abuse.

On the other hand, informants also described the situation after their parents were imprisoned. They revealed that although the situation was difficult, they felt more comfortable compared to the time when they lived with their parents. Despite the challenges

they had to face, informants felt that they could build a better life in a safer and more organized environment. This finding is in line with research conducted by (Wangensteen et al., 2019; Werner & Malterud, 2016) that children who have parents as drug abusers have mixed and contradictory campus feelings towards their parents. They may feel love, disappointment, and frustration simultaneously. However, for informants, although there is a sense of separation and sadness at being separated from their parents, life after parental incarceration provides some relief and stability that was missing before. This suggests that there are complex emotional dynamics in the child-parent relationship in the context of drug addiction, where children can feel a sense of relief and hope despite difficult circumstances.

### **3.3 Making Peace with Negative Stigma**

Making peace with negative stigma is also a significant theme in the experiences of children living with parents who abuse drugs. They often face concerns and negative stereotypes from the surrounding community. This situation makes them feel ashamed and sad, as the neighborhood often spreads malicious rumors about their parents. Children growing up in families with drug-using parents often experience social anxiety and stigma from the surrounding community. The general public often has negative views and stereotypes that cause children to feel isolated and excluded. In addition, these children also have to deal with rumors and hearsay in the community. The neighborhood is often the place where information about their family's situation is spread, leaving them with a sense of sadness and shame. They also feel the heavy emotional burden of keeping family secrets and maintaining their parents' honor. They worry about how others will perceive them and their family. This stigma can hinder children's social and emotional development and impair their mental well-being.

In addition to stigma from their neighbors, children from families with drug-abusing parents often face negative stigma at school. This stigma can have a significant impact on children's social lives, including being victims of bullying and having difficulty forming friendships at school. The negative stigma that develops at school often results in these children becoming targets of bullying. They may be teased, harassed, or misunderstood by their classmates. These children are often perceived as different or associated with negative behaviors associated with their drug-using parents. As a result, they feel isolated and unaccepted by the school environment.

Negative stigma also makes it difficult for children to build and maintain friendships at school. Peers may avoid them for fear of being involved with a drug-involved family. Children from drug-using families often feel lonely and isolated because of the difficulty in finding real friends who can understand and accept them for who they are. They may experience shame and be shunned by their peers at school. Building self-esteem and overcoming this social stigma can be a difficult journey for informants, as they have to find ways to accept themselves.

This study found that children who grow up in families with parents who are drug abusers often face negative stigma. This stigma can come from the surrounding environment where they live, such as neighbors, peers, or the child's school environment. Society tends to stereotype families involved in drugs, including their children. These children are often seen as the successors of their parents' negative behavior, looked down upon, or shunned by peers. This finding is in line with the findings put forward by Fahrizal et al. (2018) that drug users are prone to negative stigma from the surrounding environment.

### **3.4 Limited Professional Support**

In the experience of children living with drug-abusing parents, they often face challenges getting the professional support they need. These children need economic assistance and professional support to deal with complicated and stressful situations. However, in reality, the availability of financial assistance is very limited, as well as professional support, and some of the informant families reported not receiving any social assistance from the government. Financial assistance is particularly important for children from families of drug abusers, as the condition often leads to economic instability in the family. These children may face difficulties in meeting basic needs such as food, clothing, and education. However, they often have difficulty getting adequate financial assistance from the government or social agencies. Limited resources and different priorities in assisting often prevent these children from getting the help they need.

In addition, professional support is also very important for children living with drug-abusing parents. They need counseling, therapy, or psychological support to help them cope with the emotional and mental toll of a complicated family situation. However, access to this professional support is often limited or not available at all. Many family informants admitted that they do not receive social assistance from the government or related institutions, so they feel neglected and have difficulty getting the support they need. This lack of financial and professional support can have detrimental effects on children. They may feel marginalized, unheard and struggle to overcome the difficulties they face. Without adequate help, these children can have difficulty building emotional resilience and coping with the negative impact of their family situation.

Limited financial assistance and professional support are one of the challenges faced by informants and children living with parents who abuse drugs. Children in these situations often need expert and professional help, both in terms of financial and mental health support. However, the availability of adequate resources is often an obstacle. This lack of professional support can hinder the informants' recovery and growth process and prevent them from getting the necessary support to overcome the challenges they face. The findings of this study are in line with the results of research conducted by (Wangensteen et al., 2019; Wangenstein & Westby, 2021) that children who grow up with parents with substance use disorders experience constraints in the form of professional support.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Based on the results of the study, it is concluded that the perceptions and reflections of the experiences of children from drug-abusing families in their struggle to deal with social exclusion are very complex. The experiences of children whose parents are drug abusers significantly affect their lives, both when they live together and separately. They live in sadness, frustration and are negatively stigmatized by their community. This research has shown novelty regarding the struggles of children who are excluded from families of substance abusers. The findings of this study confirm various theories of social deviance and social exclusion theory. However, it is recognized that this study still has some limitations and should be addressed with further research. The study was only conducted in a fishing community with a small sample size. To complete this research, it is hoped that further research will be carried out in families who have middle to upper social strata with a larger sample size.

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