

Experiences of Motherhood from the Perspective of Women Reporting a History of Childhood Trauma: An Exploratory Study



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Rationale for the Study



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- Research conducted in part fulfilment of M.Sc. in Counselling Psychology, TCD
 - Developed out of personal interest and clinical experience.
 - To understand how women with a history of childhood developmental trauma conceptualise motherhood and themselves in the parenting role.
 - To explore how they view the effects of their childhood attachment & trauma experiences in relation to themselves and motherhood.
 - To identify areas of parenting intervention from a counselling psychology perspective that may serve to alleviate identified difficulties and strengthen resources.

Literature Review



- 1) Attachment Theory
- 2) Developmental Trauma
- 3) Motherhood & Parenting

Key Findings from Attachment & Parenting



“In every nursery there are ghosts” (Fraiberg, Edelson & Shapiro, 1975)

- A child's experiences of parenting greatly influences their later parenting attitudes & practices (Schuetze & Das Eiden, 2005; Ainsworth & Eichberg, 1991; Slade & Cohen, 1996; Cohen, 1995).
- Some are able to resolve their traumatic pasts – their “*ghosts*” while others experienced enduring difficulties (Fraiberg, Adelson, & Shapiro, 1975)
- Lack of resolution defined as: “The failure to integrate fully the reality of the loss or traumatic experience and to rework mental representations of attachment experiences”
- Unintegrated painful memories would appear in destructive ways in the parent-child relationship.
- *Awareness* of emotional pain associated with trauma & *processing* of it was crucial to breaking the cycle of repetition to the next generation.

Attachment & Parenting Contd.

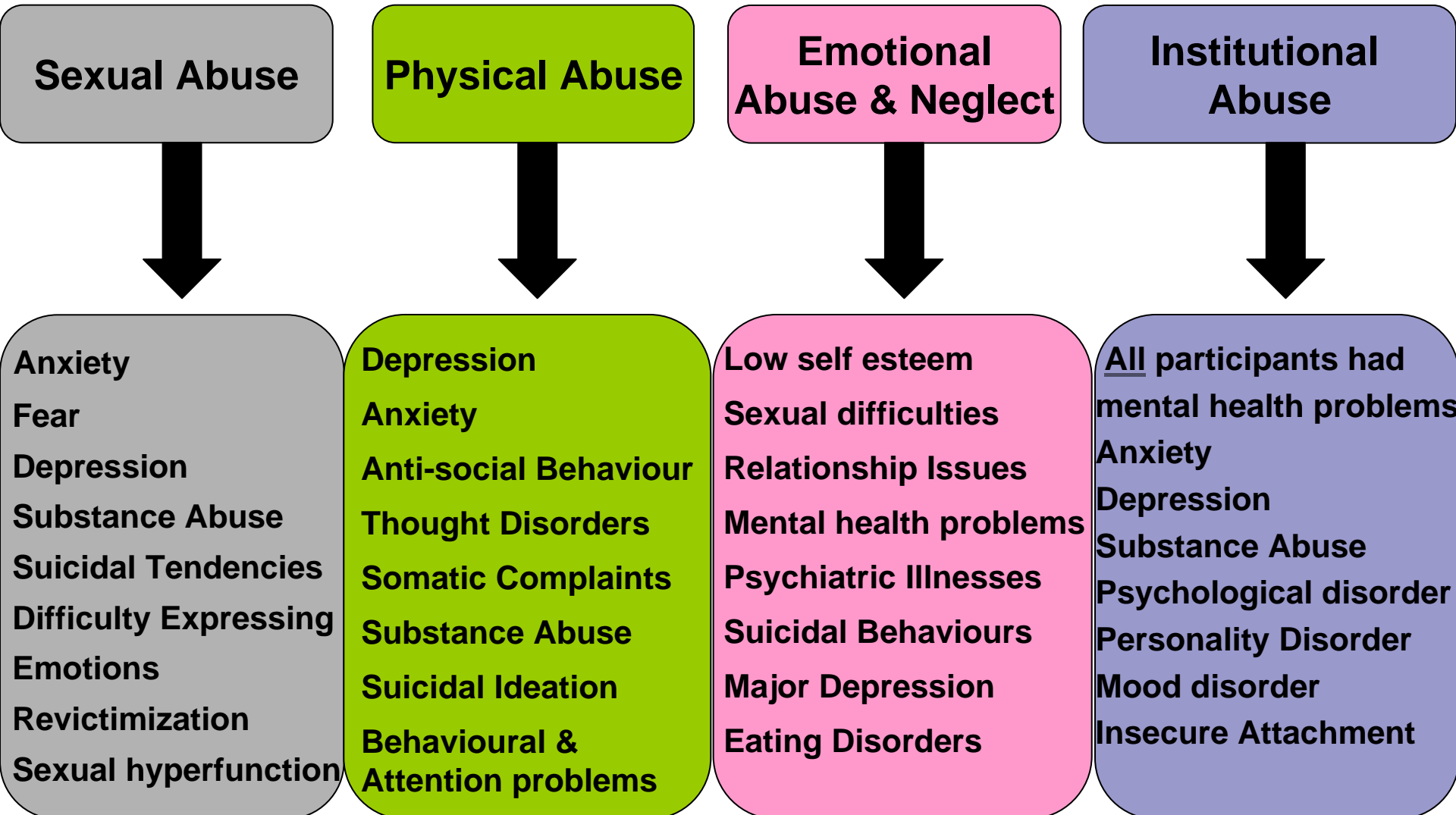


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- Emotional processing of traumatic material found crucial to creating an *earned secure attachment style* Hesse (2008).
 - Behaviours associated with unresolved states of mind in mothers (Madigan et al., 2006):
 - Deferential attitude to parenting
 - Role & boundary confusion
 - Fear concerning the child
 - Aggressive and intrusive parenting behaviours
 - Withdrawal.
 - More resolved mothers displayed more sensitive guidance towards their children, their narratives were more coherent & their children more cooperative (Koren-Karie et al., 2008).

Key Findings from Developmental Trauma

“Trauma is what occurs when neither resistance nor escape is possible and the human system of self defence becomes overwhelmed & disorganised”.

Herman (1992)



Key Findings on Motherhood & Parenting



- Conceptions of motherhood both unconsciously and consciously constructed.
- Motherhood is socially learned & psychologically developed through experiences in the family of origin (Cohen, 1995)
- Research has reinforced the idealisation of motherhood where mother is shown to be limitless in understanding, supporting and meeting her children's needs (Bengtsson & Psouni, 2008)
- Link between mothers' perceptions of themselves as parents and parenting behaviours.
- Relationship between parental self-efficacy (PSE) and parental and child adjustment, and parenting competence.

Motherhood & Parenting Contd.



- **Cross (2001)**
 - No difference in mothering empathy or nurturance
 - Significant difference in communication, unrealistic developmental expectations, negative views of motherhood, limit setting, and more physical discipline.
 - Participants reported “flipping back to being the passive child again”.
- **Krelewetz & Piotrowski (1998)**
 - Protective strategies employed included communication, education, and information sharing.
 - Mothers described themselves as over-protective & over-nurturing.
- **Armsworth & Stronck (1999)**
 - Detached and Numb
 - Over-controlling and over-protective
 - Impulsive, abusive or re-enactments of their own past
 - Concerns about being emotionally absent or unavailable.
 - Most helpful = counselling, empathy & supportive friends.

Current Study - Methodology



- Participants were 8 current clients of the NCS who had at least one child over the age of 12 years.
- Age range 40 – 70 years
- 5 participants grew up in Institutions in Ireland
- Qualitative inquiry used semi-structured interviews where participants were asked to explore their childhood experiences and motherhood.
- Interview schedule informed by the Experiences of Caregiving Interview (Solomon & George, 1993) and the Traumatic Antecedents Questionnaire (Herman & van der Kolk, 1990).
- Data analysed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), where associations, meaning units, and themes were derived systematically from the data (Smith & Osborn, 2003)
- Credibility and Trustworthiness
- Ethical Approval



Findings

(1) A Lost Childhood: Not seen – Not Heard



- In all the participants' accounts of their early lives was the theme of a childhood filled with loss.
- Throughout the interviews, one of the most profound elements was the lack of humanity experienced by the participants where they described existing to serve the needs of others with little or no acknowledgement of their own needs.
- This was apparent not only by their experiences of deprivation and abuse but by the daily drudgery of their lives.

Six of the participants could not identify a loving attachment figure and they described childhoods where their developmental, emotional and educational needs were severely neglected.

Findings



(1) A Lost Childhood: Not Seen – Not Heard

**Feeling Unloved,
Unwanted, & Used**

Mary: We were never loved...we were called numbers, we were just a number. You were just a number in a crowd that's all. You never got loved, you got feed and never got love, and you worked hard.

**Feeling Ignored,
Stupid, & Unsupported**

Natalie: I was always interested in art but the nuns weren't interested in that, and all they needed to make sure with all of us was that we were capable of washing the floor...of cleaning it so that we could be scrubbers in whatever job we took on in life. That was all they needed to educate us for and this is what they were doing.

**Feeling Ashamed,
Different, & Inadequate**

Sabrina: The fact that I got pregnant was exciting for me because I knew I was normal because I didn't think I was normal growing up. I thought everybody could see where I came from and how inadequate I was and I was so low in self-esteem.

Findings

(2) The Phantasy of the Ideal Mother: Seeking Restoration



Most strikingly, all the participants expressed a desire to construct a different childhood for their children – a completely *child-centred world* where the needs of the child were prioritised.



- Three archetypes of mother emerged from the data.



Findings

(2) The Phantasy of the Ideal Mother: Seeking Restoration

**Mother as 'Nurturer':
Creating a Different
Relationship**

Sabrina: *"Everything else went out of my life – I just put my whole being into my son because I loved him to bits... every move he made I was watching"*.

**Mother as 'Rescuer':
Creating a Different
World**

Tara: *"Sad is difficult. Sad is difficult because I want to fix it and I want to have them not hurt or upset. So I tend to...panic wouldn't be the right word, fuss would cover it, and I want to wade in and sort it all for them..."*
"Loyal", "Defend", "Empowered", and "Driven"

**Mother as Omnipotent:
I am "The Parents"**

Lisa: *"I always felt like I was the 'parents' rather than the parent. I took a lot of roles. I did it all....I made an awful lot of promises as far as my children were concerned."*

Findings

(3) The Reality of the Good Enough Mother: 'Ghosts' of Their Pasts



While the Participants aspired to being different & better mothers to their children, the affects of their pasts continued to influence their perception of self, the world and the mother - child relationship.

Natalie articulates the other participants' experiences when she says:

"She [her daughter] brings to the fore the demons of my childhood and without me necessarily always realising it".

The extracts in this section reveal insecurities, fears, and feelings of powerlessness that continued to materialise through motherhood.

Findings

(3) The Reality of the Good Enough Mother: 'Ghosts' of Their Pasts



The Insecure Self

Mary: *"I always feel I didn't do good enough [as a mother] but they [her children] say you did. I've no confidence in myself."*

The Fearful Self

Sabrina: *"I was always aware of adults around, that he might be snatched or something. I just built up that fear in me. That's why I never left him with anybody – I looked after him myself. So I was very overprotective. But because I was scared, because I had the fears of the world."*



Findings

(3) The Reality of the Good Enough Mother: 'Ghosts' of Their Pasts

The Powerless Self

Tara: "I'm not very good at discipline...I would fear upsetting them. I would fear my own childhood scars that you come away with that you think your parents did or didn't do that you didn't like..."

**The Becoming
Aware Self**

Natalie: "Through coming here [therapy], I now recognise that it's my childhood that is kicking in with my daughter, and therefore I stop myself now and I'm inclined to pace myself with her... I'm more settled in my decisions whereas before I still looked for acceptance from the children or 'is it ok', and I felt I had to explain to them why I was doing anything and I felt I had to explain to the world everything that I do."



Summary

- For the participants, conceptualisations of motherhood were extensively informed by childhood experiences
- The participants actively sought to create a different experience for their children by becoming nurturing, protecting and resourceful mothers.
- There was a complex interplay between conscious constructions of motherhood and unconscious influences where both power and victimhood were brought to the role of mother
- Implicit in the findings was a restorative experience for the participants during the transition to motherhood and the subsequent development of an attachment bond with their children.
- The importance of the mothering role to the participants and the experience of developing a 'good' relationship based on love and trust gave the opportunity for a revision of internalised models of self and self in relation to other.



Implications & Conclusions

- Awareness of potential & distress
- The role of therapy in helping to break patterns of the past and preventing re-enactments of abuse
- Exploring own parenting/caregiving histories e.g. genogram
- Focusing on the 'person' of the mother may enhance PSE & the mother – child relationship
- Modelling self-care
- Psychoeducation
- Customised parent support groups
- Motherhood = facilitating environment & creative space
- Motherhood as restorative, a remembrance of painful pasts, envisioning a different future and coping with the present



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