

Pilot project to test a psychosocial methodology

This report outlines the outcomes of a pilot study for researching the relationships between two women who are both 'mother' to the same child, in this case formed by open adoption. The report discusses the utility of the piloted research design and the developments for further research.

Introduction

The research design was based on Hollway and Jefferson's (2009) Kleinian informed approach to the psychosocial subject; a subject who is influenced by social discourses and also by the personal investment they have in those discourses. Discourse on Hollway and Jefferson's view refers to "the organized way in which meanings cohere around an assumed central proposition, which gives them their value and significance" (p.14). Central to Hollway and Jefferson's approach is the notion of the 'defended subject'. Psychoanalysis assumes that we possess a "dynamic unconscious which defends against anxiety and significantly influences people's action, lives and relations" (Hollway and Jefferson, p, 19). Through the gaps in the narrative and associations that people make between ideas, Hollway and Jefferson's research identifies the ways in which people defend against anxiety provoking knowledge.

Sampling and method

As the main purpose of this pilot project was to refine the methodology for the purpose of researching relationships between maternal dyads, I used a purposeful sample of two women who had a depth of experience of open adoption and perceived their relationship as successful. I interviewed each woman separately after first speaking with them about what the research entailed and gaining consent. Hollway and Jefferson's research uses narrative interviews as the method for obtaining information and is based on the principles of the biographical-interpretive method developed by Rosenthal (1993). The principles are: using open questions, eliciting stories, avoiding 'why' questions, following up using respondent's ordering and phrasing, and using free association. I tried not to influence the women by my responses which for the most part were minimal. However, I did at times reflexively share experiences of my own where it seemed appropriate.

I listened to the recordings and transcribed them myself. As I listened I undertook some preliminary analysis noting pauses, changes in energy, free associations and gaps in the dialogue. I took note of the way that the narratives had been framed, the points that held

the narrative together and how coherent they seemed. I was also interested in understanding the discursive resources that the women had found useful or at any rate had utilised as they constructed their family created through open adoption. One of the resources that seemed an obvious choice was that of motherhood. What did motherhood mean to these two women and how did it contribute to the relationship they developed?

As the interviews progressed and as I began to analyse the data it became apparent that the concept of openness was a deep commitment for the two women. Looking for their defences did not appear to be the best way to analyse the data. This is not to say that the two women in this pilot study were not defended, we all are, but that their level of openness and the psychic and discursive strategies that supported it were more prevalent. On reflection this should not have been a surprise, after all the research was about successful *open* adoption. I reassessed the methodological approach which positioned the defended subject at centre and although I recognize that we are all defended subjects to a greater or lesser degree such a focus would mean that I missed other important dynamics. One of the women has had counselling and psychotherapy over a number of years. They were good at identifying their defences and working to undo them. Ultimately, although I remained committed to a psychoanalytic framework for interpretation I found the focus on defences less useful for analyzing the information that I had.

Bateman and Fonagy's approach

I searched for an alternative psychoanalytic approach that could better answer the question: *What are the intrapersonal and interpersonal factors that contribute to a 'successful' open adoption relationship between the two mothers?* I began by going back to the attachment literature which has some overlap with psychoanalysis. Whilst adult attachment appeared relevant it did not seem sufficiently robust for the analysis of openness. Finally, reading Peter Fonagy and colleagues' (2004; 2006) work I chose his ideas on a mentalization based approach, which builds on adult attachment.

"Mentalization ... is the process by which we realize that having a mind mediates our experience of the world" (Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, & Target, 2004, p.3). A mentalization-based approach draws on developmental theory within the psychoanalytic literature, psychotherapy, and philosophy of mind. The ability to mentalize is closely associated with the quality of attachment a person has had in their early life and Fonagy et al argue that the ability to mentalize, which is innate, is suppressed in individuals with poor attachment histories. On this basis Bateman and Fonagy (2006) have developed a clinical assessment of a person's ability to mentalize and a treatment approach designed to support the development of mentalizing.

I was still interested in the psychosocial aspects of identity as a fruitful approach to understanding the relationship between the two mothers in its social context and how

individuals are shaped by and also shape that context. In addition, whilst Bateman and Fogarty's approach is a clinical one I felt it had utility as a research approach with some modifications. The mentalization based approach also uses narrative interviews, usually between therapist and client with some specific questions related to early attachment experiences. They use questions from the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) to gauge the quality of mentalization. During the interview the clinician/therapist aims to illicit a narrative around an interpersonal relationship that has a "clear starting point, a story or a narrative involving at least one other person and an endpoint" (Bateman & Fonagy, 2006, p.65). The aim is to have the person relate the narrative from the position of "someone who is looking on" (ibid).

In my research interviews I had not asked the AAI questions suggested by Bateman and Fonagy although some aspects of early life had been discussed spontaneously. However, the interview was focussed on the interpersonal relationship the women had. Within the larger narrative they offered several examples of discreet events that demonstrated how they managed points of potential conflict. Bateman and Fonagy suggest seeking elaboration of four points: thoughts and feelings in relation to the events, ideas about the other person's mental states at those times, how they understand their own actions, and asking counterfactual questions. Both of the women that I interviewed offered such elaboration without prompting although I did not ask any counterfactual questions. In the event they would not have been necessary. Rather than rate the interviews according to Bateman and Fonagy's rating scale I used their criteria as a guide for analysis using an iterative process.

Outcomes

The pilot study proved to be very useful in determining the best research approach to the question: *What are the intrapersonal and interpersonal factors that contribute to a 'successful' open adoption relationship between the two mothers?* Investment in motherhood is a psychic and cultural relationship that is complicated by being one of two mothers to the same child. Understanding this investment through both discursive and psychic processes has the potential to provide a rich account of the ways in which women construct their position as one of two mothers. Further, the level of mentalizing ability each mother has access to is likely to be a key issue in their ability to manage such a complex relationship.

Both mothers in the pilot project had a high level of access to mentalizing function providing many rich examples of this capacity. At the beginning of their relationship the older adoptive mother had much greater access to mentalizing and emotion regulation and acted in ways that could be described as 'emotionally parenting' the younger relinquishing mother. Nevertheless, the younger mother who had less developed access to mentalizing and emotion regulation at the time was mature enough to recognise, albeit unconsciously, that this aspect was important. She was therefore open to the other's approaches to her.

References

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