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Dept. of Applied Social Studies,
University College Cork,
Ireland

An Exploration of Psychological Maltreatment in the Development of Mal-attachment Disorders

Anne-Marie Smyth, B.S.W.

Abstract: The purpose of this paper examines the link between psychological maltreatment in the development of maladaptive behaviours. In undertaking this research the author takes a non-probability purposive sample of five child care professionals currently working in the fields of child protection, education and disability. Interviews were analysed using an interpretative perspective, within the broader paradigm of social constructivism. The implications of this work serves to bring to light the consequences of child abuse which has not had the same consideration as other forms of maltreatment. The research concludes that there is a positive environmental link between psychological maltreatment and attachment disorders.

Key Words: Psychological maltreatment; Attachment theory; Maladaptive attachment disorders.

Introduction

The purpose of this research study was an attempt to make a positive link between psychological maltreatment and the development of maladaptive attachment behaviours. Iwaniec (2006) defines psychological maltreatment as *“hostile or indifferent behaviour which damages a child’s self esteem, degrades a sense of*

achievement, diminishes a sense of belonging, prevents healthy and vigorous development, and takes away a child's well being". Attachment is described as a "unique and powerful relationship that develops between an infant and caregiver during the child's first year of life" (Bowlby 1969).

Not being loved by a parent is deeply painful for most children. One's attachment figure is the person to which one automatically turns in times of need, but for many children all they find is indifference, and in extreme cases hatred. Children may be seen by their parents as troublesome, worthless, unwanted and inconvenient. This can result in the child's emotional intelligence being damaged; a lowering of self-esteem; and even physical growth can be affected when children experience extreme emotional stress. It must be therefore very frightening for any child to comprehend that a parent or caregiver does not have their safety and well being uppermost in their minds. This poses an important question. Who does the child turn to in times of need and distress if rejected by a parent or caregiver? For a young child there may be nowhere else to go except inward to deal with the hurt and distress. The child's self-esteem is assaulted, and their emotional intelligence damaged, resulting in sometimes severe developmental consequences (Howe 2005 pg. 90).

The main argument of this research study was to make a positive link between children who are psychologically maltreated and the development of attachment disorders. In order to develop this argument an examination of the parent-child attachment/ relationship was central. The accumulation of knowledge from child care professionals working in the area of child protection brought valuable information on the topic which was interpreted and analysed in order to gain a better understanding of the subject.

How a child will grow and develop will depend on many factors, including parental experiences of being parented, the child's personal characteristics, economic factors, parental and child health and living conditions. Failure to establish a responsible and



caring relationship between parents and children can result in a number of problems, e.g. development of a poor sense of self, a tendency towards negative self evaluation and dysfunctional cognition. Psychological maltreatment may be a contributing factor to these problems which may result in the development of an attachment disorder. The purpose of this thesis set out to investigate whether the findings produced in the research would support this argument or not.

Literature Review

There is a growing body of literature that supports the claim that psychological maltreatment is just as damaging as physical abuse, sexual abuse or neglect (Egeland and Erickson 1987 pg. 156). Elements of psychological maltreatment are present in most forms of abuse and neglect although it can occur on its own (Tower 1996 pg.121). In such cases, it is less likely to be reported or come to the attention of the child protection services, certainly in cases involving younger children as it is more difficult to detect. Howe (2005 pg.91) suggests that when incidents of psychological maltreatment do come to the attention of the authorities, it is usually when the child is older. This is not because psychological maltreatment does not occur in early childhood but rather because its damaging psychosocial consequences accumulate over the years until a crisis point is reached and the child may be drawn to the attention of a schoolteacher, neighbour or health worker

Defining Characteristics

Some of the major characteristics of psychological maltreatment may be evident in the quality and nature of relationship and interaction between the psychologically abused child and its abusive parent(s) or carer. If these interactions are continually hostile, critical, dismissive or indifferent the caregiver-child relationship may become persistently unfriendly, lacking warmth, security, and a sense of belonging and will be overall a negative experience for the child. Psychological harm may be the result of a build-up of painful, degrading, anxiety-provoking and bewildering unpleasant experiences inflicted upon a child by a caregiver on an on-going basis. This

experience usually occurs in the absence of a compensatory protective relationship with a significant other person, and as such is referred to as emotional abuse and neglect (Iwaniec 2006 pg. 26).

Another defining characteristic of psychological maltreatment is the understanding that motivation to harm a child is not necessary: in fact, it is now well recognised that some parents do not realise that they are harming their child by their behaviour towards them. Overprotectiveness or unrealistic expectations are good examples of caregiver's unawareness that their behaviour towards the child may be harmful (Iwaniec 2006 pg.27).

There is general agreement and recognition that psychological maltreatment exists on a continuum in that some acts or behaviours can be relatively mild and can occur from time to time, while others can be severe and extremely damaging both emotionally and developmentally to a child. It must be remembered that isolated incidents or a series of inappropriate behaviours do not necessarily in themselves constitute an emotionally abusive relationship. In order to classify psychological maltreatment as emotionally abusive it must be repetitive and sustained over time, not in isolated incidents or specific circumstances (Iwaniec 2006 pg.27).

Theoretical Perspectives

Psychological maltreatment is an interpersonal experience. The essential role of interpersonal relations in human development and needs fulfillment establishes an inherent vulnerability to psychological maltreatment. Many of the major theories in psychology contain constructs that are related to this theme, particularly in the way in which they describe critical factors of the developmental process susceptible to the influences of various kinds of interpersonal experiences. *Human needs theory, psychosocial theory, attachment theory, parental acceptance-rejection theory, the coercion model* and the *prisoner of war model* each have value for psychological maltreatment research and interventions. They clarify the ways in which

psychological maltreatment interferes with needs fulfillment and developmental processes, which can produce learning difficulties, physical growth and behaviour problems (Binggeli, Hart, and Brassard 2001).

History and Origins of the Topic

As a result of growing awareness and well publicised cases of physical and sexual abuse and neglect; the concept of psychological maltreatment has been brought back to the public's attention. Psychological maltreatment is by no means a new concept. Klosinski (1993) pointed out that emotional abuse (or the concept of emotional abuse) was an area of research in the fields of psychoanalysis and developmental psychology in the early part of the twentieth century and that the early literature on secure attachment was clearly related to hostile, rejective and cruel parenting which today forms the basis of our current contemporary understanding of emotional abuse (Iwaniec 2000 pg. 5).

Literature, paintings and historical accounts are full of descriptions and depictions of emotionally maltreated children and the novelist Charles Dickens, (1812-1870) brought to the public's attention the plight of abandoned, terrorised, corrupted and rejected children in nineteenth century England. Until recently the level of public interest in child welfare in Ireland was very limited and this is exemplified by the fact that until the 1990s child care was administered under the 1908 Children's Act, legislation enacted under British rule. It was the voluntary sector principally through the work of the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (ISPCC) that carried administrative responsibility for child protection for much of the 20th century (Ferguson 2001 pg.1).

The Evolution of Knowledge and Research on Psychological Maltreatment

It was not until the 1980's that psychological maltreatment was fully recognised as a distinct form of child maltreatment with its own causalities, expressions and consequences, appearing independently on the British child protection register and

being dealt with in its own right. Some of the best documentations of early emotional abuse neglect and the absence of nurturing, resulting in poor growth, problematic psychosocial development, and emotionally disturbed behaviour were those of Spitz (1945, 1946) and Widdowson (1951). Spitz conducted a study of infants cared for by their mothers, which he compared to another group of infants raised in isolation from other infants and adults. A significant causation factor was gleaned from this study, which indicated that the children who were given physical and medical care, but no emotional care contracted more infections, suffered from intellectual deficit, and developed a condition known as anaclitic depression. This manifested in the child withdrawing emotionally, developing disability in cognitive development, failure to thrive, insomnia and sadness, resulting in 37% of the children dying by the age of two (Spitz 1945 pg.53).

In a longitudinal study carried out by Erickson, Egeland & Pianta (1989) on 250 children, it was found that parents identified as ‘*at risk*’ to their children experienced parenting problems resulting in all types of maltreatment. It was pointed out that emotionally neglected children had parents who were emotionally unavailable, and their mothers were found to be detached, unresponsive and cut off from their children’s emotional needs and signs of distress. The mother-child interaction in this study lacked pleasure and fulfillment and was described as emotionless and mechanical. These emotionally unavailable mothers were more tense, angry, depressed and confused.

This study also revealed that the attachment pattern of two-thirds of the neglected children was classified as anxious at the age of one year. At age two the children showed low enthusiasm, increased anger, low levels of frustration and no compliance. At fifty-four months (four and a half years) the children presented with further problems such as poor impulse control, acute dependence on teachers, attention seeking and disruptive behaviour. The final analysis of the study showed that the

developmental deficit of these children between nine and twenty-four months was considerable (Erickson, Egeland & Pianta 1989 pp. 647-684).

Definitions of Psychological Maltreatment

As stated earlier, interest in psychological maltreatment is relatively recent, and is a therefore a somewhat underdeveloped concept (Garrison 1987 pg.157). As with neglect, a major focus of the literature is around problems of definition and its relationship with other forms of maltreatment. Many problems of definition remain with regard to numerous philosophical, scientific, legal, political and cultural issues.

Bifulco (1994) recognises two dimensions of psychological maltreatment: parental antipathy (rejection) and psychological abuse (cruel and sadistic acts). The most influential typology of *emotional abuse* is by Garbarino *et al.* and Hart, Germain and Brassard (1987). It has subsequently been adopted by a host of researchers and practitioners in the field and constitutes most of the official definitions and guidelines today. Hart *et al* (1996) proposed a six-fold definition of psychological maltreatment which provides an example of an approach which centers on parental behaviour rather than the consequences and outcomes for children, it includes,

Spurning – Belittling, degrading and other non-physical forms of overtly hostile or rejecting treatment towards children, shaming or ridiculing them, and general degrading or rejecting or abandoning them.

Terrorising – refers to acts of placing children in danger, threatening them, someone, or something they care for, or generally creating a climate of fear. This also includes placing a child in unpredictable or chaotic circumstances.

Isolating – such as imposing severe restrictions on a child, preventing developmentally appropriate social interaction, and separating a child from the rest of the family.

Exploiting/Corrupting – encouraging children to develop inappropriate and /or anti-social behaviours or values, such as stealing, abusing others verbally, breaking into houses, and hurting older people or younger children.

Denying emotional responsiveness – being emotionally unavailable, ignoring the child, failing to express affection, becoming distant physically and emotionally, and being dismissive of children’s needs for warmth and affection.

Mental health, medical and educational neglect – failing to provide and attend to the psychological, medical, cognitive and developmental needs of the child (Hart *et al.* 1996 cited in Macdonald 2001 pg.74).

Attachment Theory

The origins of Attachment theory emerged from two separate roots, the first is Freudian psychoanalysis, and the second is from ethology (the science of animal behavior). John Bowlby was particularly interested in both how animals bonded and their conflict behavior. Ethological studies with animals mirrored his own work with children and he believed that the parallels between his own work and the work of ethologists verified the validity of the evolutionary perspective on human development (Iwaniec 2006 pg.96). Attachment theory is build upon the assumption that children come to this world with an inborn inclination to demonstrate behaviours leading to the formation of an attached relationship.

This relationship in turn would have survival value in the environment in which human evolution originated. One of these behaviours is *attachment behaviour*, which, is the ability of an infant to powerfully draw people to itself at times of need and distress. Another is *exploratory behaviour*, which urges the infant to look outward and engage with, and make sense of the world and people in it (Fonagy 1995 cited in Howe 2005 pg.3). Attachment theory is in essence, a regulatory theory and can be defined as the dyadic regulation of emotion (Schoore 2001 pg.66).

As a child is totally dependant on parents or primary caregivers, we seldom stop and ask how their attachments develop and are maintained. Attachment is described as a “*unique and powerful relationship that develops between an infant and caregiver during the child’s first year of life*” (Bowlby 1969). The nature and quality of that

relationship is essential in establishing a child's sense of safety and security and influences the child's basic manner in which he will regulate thoughts and feelings both internally and in relation to others. Not all these attachments are secure as children have the ability to adapt to different environments and can and will also attach to maltreating mothers or caregivers. It has been postulated that "*psychological maltreatment during infancy produces an insecure attachment over a period of time that adversely affects the child's later intellectual and socio-emotional development*" (Ainsworth 1980 pp. 35-47). Babies who are emotionally neglected will often fail to thrive, pre-school and school going children will show delays in developmental milestones and will exhibit emotional and behavioural problems. Very often these children will attain poor educational success and in adolescence present with anti-social behaviours, identity problems and relationship difficulties (Iwaniec 2005 pg.36).

Reflecting back to Howe's earlier position on psychological maltreatment, some children are seen by their parents/caregivers as troublesome, worthless, unwanted, and inconvenient and it is therefore frightening for any child to comprehend that a parent or caregiver does not have their safety and well-being uppermost in their minds (Howe 2005 pg 31). Ainsworth & Wittig (1969) worked with many of Bowlby's ideas and were the first to formulate an attachment classification system. They developed four basic categories in which each type represents a certain kind of emotional relationship within which each child has to make particular kinds of psychological adjustment if he/she is to cope and survive in the social world. They include:

Secure attachments whereby a child experiences a positive attachment figure that is available to meet the child's needs and signals of distress. Children whose parents/caregivers that are interested in their child, are keen to understand and be understood by them develop secure attachments;

Anxious/resistant attachment or resistant insecure whereby children are uncertain that their caregiver(s) will be available, responsive, or helpful when needed. The carers



are less predictable, with responses such as being available and helpful to the child on some occasions but not on others;

Anxious/avoidant attachment or avoidant insecure whereby the child expects to be rejected by their caregiver(s) when they seek support or care and as a result, the child will attempt to live their lives without the support and love of others;

Disorganised attachments whereby children who suffer physical abuse and maltreatment seem to show a confused mixture of resistant and avoidant patterns of attachment (Main and Solomon 1986 cited in Howe 1998 pg.180). Conflict behaviour emerges because the source of security for the child is also a source of fear (Iwaniec 2004 pg. 105).

Summary

Neglected and rejected children often do not show distress and do not protest when they are separated from their parents. They tend not to discriminate between known and unknown persons. Because of their insecurities' they are unable to move freely and explore the environment in which they live. They either cling to their parents or aimlessly run around in a disruptive manner displaying fear and anxiety (Iwaniec 2005 pg. 117).

The most consistent findings suggest that parents/caregivers who abuse their children have often been abused themselves (Iwaniec 2004 pg. 31). These caregivers can bring a model of child rearing to their parenting that is cold, unresponsive, and lacking in sensitivity and appropriate support responses in all areas of their children's lives. This is often a mirror of their own childhood experience and as such, they often lack sufficient knowledge of their child's developmental needs and the skills necessary to enable their children to have a happy childhood.

Methods and Methodology

The methodology chosen for this research was qualitative research, underpinned from an interpretative perspective, using a paradigm of Social Constructivism. Qualitative

research is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that the researcher study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Rather than assuming that ‘reality’ exists independently of people and can be measured, qualitative researchers believe that ‘reality’ depends on how people experience and interpret life (Alston and Bowles 2003 pg.10).

Interpretive studies generally attempt to understand phenomena through the meanings that people assign to them and interpretive methods of research are *"aimed at producing an understanding of the context of the information system, and the process whereby the information system influences and is influenced by the context"* (Walsham 1993, pg 5). In relation to the research study this approach was used in the context of the knowledge and experiences the interviewees brought to the subject matter. The interpretative paradigm falls under the heading of Social Constructivism. In this world view, individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. They develop subjective meanings of their experiences – meanings directed towards certain objects or things.

Method

In undertaking this research I took a non-probability purposive sample of five child care professionals currently working in the fields of child protection, education and disability. In purposive sampling, the researcher samples with a *purpose* in mind and will usually have one or more specific predefined target groups. The sample units are chosen because they have particular features or characteristics which will enable detailed exploration and understanding of the central themes and puzzles which the researcher wishes to study such as behaviours, roles etc. The five interviewees in this study work professionally with children who have behavioural problems, attachment issues and have at some time experienced psychological maltreatment.

Data Collection Method

The data collection method for the research was performed by using semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interview has been variously described as naturalistic, autobiographical, in-depth, narrative and non-directive. At the root of interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience while at the same time allowing the researcher to use inductive analysis to discover important categories and meanings (Blaxter 2004 pg. 171). Interviews therefore, generally focus on how the interviewee understands the world and can explore the thoughts, feelings and actions of the interviewee.

The chosen interview, qualitative interview, contains many open-ended questions and can include *summary techniques* (in which you summarise what the person has said) and *controlled non-directed probing* in which the interviewer can ask further questions thus offering the interviewer more freedom to present questions. This makes interviewing a flexible and adaptable way of finding things out (Sarantakos 1988 pg.263). For the purpose of this research I designed ten questions specifically aimed at trying to understand the opinions and understanding which each child care professional had on the topics of psychological maltreatment and attachment disorders. These questions ranged from children's developmental processes to assessment in child protection settings, educational indicators and foster care placements. All of the interviews were tape recorded and took approximately one hour.

Research Findings

Defining characteristics

In defining the term psychological maltreatment there was agreed consensus from all of the interviewees that the term centered more on parental behaviour rather than the consequences and outcomes for children. Another defining characteristic presented

supported the understanding that motivation to harm a child is not necessary and that psychological maltreatment exists on a continuum. Following on from that the interviewees agreed that children need consistent and congruent levels of emotional support to meet both their physical and mental developmental milestones and that the quality of interaction between the child and the primary caregiver is paramount to the child's developmental process. All of the interviewees agreed that the lack of consistent emotional support resulted in poor growth, problematic psychosocial development and extreme emotionally disturbed behaviour.

Indicators

From the answers given all of the participants agreed that behavioural difficulties was the main indicator in school going children that psychological maltreatment was present. For younger children (babies) it manifested in failure to thrive, and for older children again it was seen in their behaviour and the quality of their attachments to other people. However, there was also the held view that harmful parental traits and forms of ill treatment contributed to the factors of psychological maltreatment. This view is supported in the literature review by Glaser and Prior (1997) where they identified three main indicators of psychological maltreatment.

Analysis of the findings would suggest that extremely neglectful identifiable primary caregivers who show persistent disregard for the child's basic attachment needs (through severe neglect and unavailability) are necessary but not sufficient to explain the development of an attachment disorder but would explain behaviours which are associated with it. Not all children reared in adverse conditions go on to develop attachment disorders though some will be classified as having an anxious, avoidant or insecure attachment to their primary caregiver. The extent and quality of sensitive responsiveness of the parent to the child will determine either secure or insecure attachment.

Long-Term Effects

The research findings have suggested that the long-term effects of psychological maltreatment present in a number of ways. Neglect and rejection during infancy are associated with insecure and anxious attachments Ainsworth (1980). This is reflected in the literature by Brassard (1987) who suggests that at toddler age maltreatment may delay language development and distort personality formation. The findings in the research support this view in terms of outcomes for younger children who have not had sufficient stimulation in the first three years of their life. Brassard (1987) again suggests that in middle childhood the maltreatment will contribute to poor performance at school, learning difficulties, lack of motivation and behaviour problems. This view is also supported in the findings by all of the interviewees who agreed that behaviour and behavioural difficulties such as emotional outbursts or extreme withdrawal are common traits in children who are being psychologically maltreated.

A further issue identified in the finding as a probable future concern for children who have been subject to psychological maltreatment related to mental health issues. Cicchetti and Toth (1995) argue that psychological maltreatment can compromise young people in these most important developmental undertakings and can significantly interfere with subsequent adaptation resulting in a host of problems for the young person and the wider society. Thus identifying children exposed to psychological maltreatment is important not simply in terms of protecting the child but also in terms of the possible negative effects this child's behaviour may visit upon wider society in later life.

The experience of psychological maltreatment for any child will in some way contribute to a setback in the development of psychological adjustment and well being (Iwaniec 2005 pg.123). Brown (1999) suggests that a history of psychological maltreatment in childhood is a strong predictor of mental health problems such as depression, hopelessness, and low self-esteem in the teenage years. It was evident and upheld in the findings that through their work practice the majority of the

interviewees agreed that children who have been exposed to psychological maltreatment usually developed either avoidant and or/disorganised attachment problems including mental health problems such as depression, drug/alcohol abuse and homelessness.

Links to maladaptive attachment behaviours

In terms of attempting to understand the relationship between psychological maltreatment and attachment difficulties it may be useful to consider the relationship in terms of the person who maltreats and the person who receives the maltreatment. Consensus this far has found that there was a positive link between psychological maltreatment and the development of mal adaptive behaviours in that “psychological maltreatment creates the environment for the development of attachment disorders”. *Therefore it may be truthful to state that children who develop attachment difficulties have been subjected to psychological maltreatment.*

Generational dysfunction

It was strongly felt amongst the interviewees that generational dysfunction can be perceived as a significant indicator that a child may be exposed to psychological maltreatment and that parents who were psychological maltreated during their own childhood are at increased risk of bringing with them a model of parenting which is cold, dismissive, unresponsive, lacking in sensitivity and appropriate responses for their children. The quality of parenting is often a mirror of the experiences parents had as children (Doyle 2001 pg.387). Though research to date has not established a very clear picture about the types of families that experience increased risk for psychological maltreatment, it is more prominent in families where stressors exceed supports and where risks are greater than protective factors (Belsky 1980 pg.320).

Foster care

Children who come into care are clearly at risk of emotional damage through lost or disrupted attachments in the home. There are two principle placements for such children in Ireland; residential care and foster care. It would be immediately obvious to many that foster care with its family setting would be more likely to be able to provide conditions for the growth of alternative attachments than residential care with its institutional structures. However, this did not meet with the agreement of the interviewees during the research process.

As seen in the findings, there was consensus among the interviewees that the foster care system in Ireland was insufficient to deal with children who are psychologically maltreated and who may present with attachment problems. Many of the problems which children encountered were due to their inability to form new attachments usually causing the foster parents to disengage from the fostering process. This in turn has led many children in care to be placed in several different foster care placements thus creating a further unsafe environment for the child. Another critique of the foster care system was that the children put 'into care' were frequently mismatched with the family. This was due to several reasons, the most obvious being the severe lack of available foster placements around the country. The finding also suggest that this leads to another form of inconsistent parenting resulting in further damaging the child sense of 'self' and can be seen as a form of indirect psychological maltreatment.

Child protection and welfare

The findings showed that all of the interviewees held the opinion that the current assessment process in the area of psychological maltreatment in the area of child protection was inadequate and too slow. There were conflicting views as to the type of assessment models currently carried out in social work under the child protection remit. *'The framework for the assessment of children in need and their families'* was cited as one model which is used. However, one of the interviewees argued that under the current embargo from the H.S.E. this model was 'obsolete' in that most of her

cases were now approached from a ‘crisis intervention’ perspective, at the cost of a comprehensive assessment of any nature.

Conclusion

This research study has considered wide-spread assumptions that reflect existing knowledge regarding the relationship between psychological maltreatment and attachment difficulties. This research study has provided an opportunity to explore the concept of psychological maltreatment in the development of maladaptive behaviours in children based on the information and interpretation of five child care workers. As stated in the literature review psychological maltreatment is at the core of all major forms of abuse and neglect with long-term psychological effects. However, it is still not serious enough to warrant prompt intervention as this is the most difficult area of child abuse to measure with reasonable accuracy.

During the analysis and interpretation of the research data other areas of interest directly related to this topic have surfaced introducing more questions which deserve further investigation. A suggestion for further research may entail investigating children who have attachment issues that are placed in foster care or children who leave residential care units without any support or after-care. A comparative study with another European country into the therapeutic services available for children who have suffered psychological maltreatment and attachment issues may further highlight the problems which need to be addressed with this type of abuse.

The knowledge gained in this research study has shown in some way the consequences and costs associated with psychological maltreatment and attachment disorders both to the individual and society. However, taking into consideration the limitations of time on this study more research needed in the future to add to the existing body knowledge presented here. The implications of this work serves to bring to light an area of child abuse which has not had the same consideration as other forms of maltreatment and the consequences associated with it. Finally there

was agreed consensus among all the interviewees that there was a positive link between psychological maltreatment and attachment disorders in that “psychological maltreatment creates the environment for the development of maladaptive attachment disorders”.

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