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"An issue of grace" : mental representations of self and others in emerging young adults exposed to domestic violence in childhood

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Abstract

Exposure to domestic violence in childhood is believed to have deleterious effects upon child development and long term adult functioning. The implications for disturbed relating and intergenerational transmission patterns of violence are considerable, yet few studies thus far have comprehensively examined the personal stories of young adult South Africans exposed to domestic violence in childhood with a view to understanding the effects of this domestic violence from their perspectives, and how they have made meaning of these experiences. The individual case studies of seven such adult women are investigated within this study through a psychoanalytic lens which explores attachment states of mind through the Adult Attachment Interview, object representations through the psychoanalytic research interview and sense of coherence through administration of the SOC-29. Experiences of domestic violence in childhood by participants were characterised by role reversal dynamics between parents and children as well as diminished quality of parenting at times. Adaptation to this entailed marked caregiving and protective roles being adopted by children which extended into adulthood relationships. Earned security of attachment was present in most cases, with expressed fears of intimacy and compromised trust in others. The latter being made evident in the exploration of outlook on life and sense of coherence scores. Forgiveness for parents and memories of benevolence characterised oscillations between paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions, this being a developmental transition process for participants, which appeared to have been made more complex by the domestic violence and the relational trauma that ensued.