

*“A qualitative exploration of the
perceived effects of maternal
psychopathology on adult
relationality”*

user name

Abstract

Rates of maternal mental illness are rapidly rising worldwide, and particularly in South Africa (Manikkam and Burns, 2012; Cooper et al, 1999; Peltzer and Shikwane, 2011). Since the early 1900's psychologists and theorists have been pointing to the important role of the mother-infant relationship on the future development of the child. Past research has shown that children being raised by mothers who suffer from a mental illness experience negative effects stemming from this maternal relationship. However, the lingering effects on adult children of mentally ill mothers have been under researched. This is especially surprising from a psychoanalytic and attachment viewpoint, as many of these theories integrate a lifespan view and hypothesise that poor early relations will carry through to adulthood and hence effect relationality later on in life as well as during childhood (Main and Hesse, 1990; Fonagy, 2003; Holmes, 1996). This study aimed at getting an in-depth understanding of the experiences of adult children who grew up with mothers who were mentally ill. Specific attention was paid to the perceived effects this had on the participants as children, and as adults. A sample of seven adult children were invited and selected to participate in this study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant in order to allow understandings and meanings to emerge and grow. Meaning units and re-occurring themes were selected from the interviews and used for analysis. Results show that, in line with previous research, childhood experiences were fraught with fear and uncertainty. Participants did report lasting negative effects of being raised by a mother with mental illness. Typically, mothers were experienced as frightening, chaotic, unavailable and inconsistent. Due to these characteristics, participants feared not being worthy of love. Because of maternal inconsistency, participants felt they could not trust their mothers, and from an early age seemed to develop strong defenses to protect themselves. Some of these defenses were a physis denial of emotion and social isolation. As they grew, participants recalled further insight emerging, accompanied by strong feelings of anger and depression. Many participants experienced the onset of their own mental illnesses at this time. However, some understanding was reached. Participants still feel the negative effects in their adult lives. They describe having the same core fears and defenses that developed in childhood in relation to their mothers. This is in terms of their own self-esteem; their ability to relate to others; and their process of individuation or functionality in the world beyond their own homes. However, some participants reported some positive aspects, which may be due to certain protective/mediating factors.