A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO THE EXPERIENCES OF ADULT CHILDREN OF PARENTS WITH SERIOUS MENTAL ILLNESS

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ABSTRACT

Children of parents with mental illness (COPMI) are a substantial, yet until quite recently, marginalised group within society. Whilst extensive empirical research has been conducted into their risk for adverse psychosocial outcomes as well as potential for resilience, there has been relatively little focus on their personal experiences and understandings of such experiences. In recent years, national and international mental health service policies and guidelines for service provision have been developed to address the specific needs of families and children where parents have mental illness, including serious mental illnesses such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. These policies and related service provision guidelines have appropriately focused health professionals’ attention on the needs and importance of prevention and early intervention for COPMI.

There has not, however, been an associated focus on the needs and experiences of adult children of parents with mental illness (ACOPMI), who have remained significantly marginalised in respect to policy and mental health service provision whilst also demonstrating an increased risk for psychosocial adversity yet potential for resilience. Thus, there has been a gap in knowledge of the experiences of adult children with parents who have mental illness, and their needs have not been served adequately.

This narrative inquiry set out to extend the limited understandings of the needs and experiences of adult children of parents with serious mental illnesses (ACOPSMI) such as schizophrenia and major depression. These illnesses have been recognised through research as having potential for long-term and often adverse impacts on children. A lengthy unstructured narrative interview and member check process was conducted with nine ACOPSMI in Australia over a nine month period. The inclusion of the researcher’s experience through the use of auto-ethnography resulted in a total of ten participants in the study.
Postmodern assumptions have provided a framework for this inquiry and so in this thesis multiplicity, diversity and attending to the voices of those on the margins have been privileged. In order to identify the concerns of ACOPSMI using methods that allowed their voices and stories to be heard from multiple perspectives, a dual analytic process was developed. As per Lather’s (1997) recommendation of doing a ‘double science’, a conventional or realist interpretation of participants’ experiences was initially performed. Field texts were analysed according to van Manen’s (1990) interpretive phenomenological thematic approach. This initial analytic phase sought to develop and build upon the existing literature which had used similar approaches. In order to thicken interpretations and add a fresh dimension to conventional understandings, the postmodern or alternate story of their experiences was then illuminated through a postmodern narrative analysis. This approach employed an analytic framework developed from the work of several other postmodern and/or narrative writers.

From the initial analysis, four phenomenological themes of participants’ experiences were uncovered. Consistent with previous literature, these adult children experienced a number of difficulties in growing up with parents with serious mental illness, including assuming responsibility for their parent and family, experiencing negative emotional impacts and developing their own mental health problems, and finding it challenging to connect emotionally with their parents and others. They also, however, demonstrated considerable resilience and effective ways of coping with their experience which assisted many of them to forge productive lives and overcome negative impacts of their past.

This thesis discusses these participants’ experiences from both conventional and alternate perspectives, as well as addressing the inter-textuality of meanings that may be found between the spaces of such findings. In the light of participants’ experiences, recommendations have been developed for health professionals’ practice which seek to inform and guide them in working with adult children and families where parents have serious mental illness.
STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university.

To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material

previously published or written by another person

except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

.....................................................
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As with many challenging long-term endeavours, this work owes much to the support and contributions of others.

To Associate Professor Margaret McAllister my appreciation and thanks for your innovative ideas, impressive understandings, and willingness to explore novel conceptual and methodological frontiers. I admire your talents and have learnt a great deal from working with you.

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To the other adult children who participated in this study, thank you so much for your generous, frank and courageous sharing of your experiences, from which I, and now hopefully others, can learn.

To my workplace James Cook University, thank you for greatly facilitating my completion of this thesis through granting study leave and providing funding for release from my teaching responsibilities. I have also very much appreciated the support of my colleagues and friends in the School of Nursing Sciences who have patiently listened to my regular updates in the tearoom, often sent me articles they thought might be useful, and been so encouraging of my endeavours.

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## GLOSSARY OF TERMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Term Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACOPMI</td>
<td>Adult Children of Parents with Mental Illness. A broad term encompassing all forms of mental illness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACOPSMI</td>
<td>Adult Children of Parents with Serious Mental Illness. A specific term referring to serious and often long-standing mental illnesses such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and major depression.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COPMI</td>
<td>Children of Parents with Mental Illness. A broad term encompassing all forms of mental illness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COPSMI</td>
<td>Children of Parents with Serious Mental Illness. A specific term referring to serious and often long-standing mental illnesses such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and major depression.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative</td>
<td>The structure, knowledge and skills needed in order to construct and tell a story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PMI</td>
<td>Parental Mental Illness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story</td>
<td>A re-presentative account of peoples’ experiences and actions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FORMATS AND STYLES USED IN THIS THESIS

This study is informed by postmodern theoretical assumptions and concepts, and as such, emphasises multivocality, values multiplicity and difference, and privileges alternative representations. Subsequently, I have used a variety of writing styles throughout the thesis to re-present scholarly, personal and creative aspects of this work. In the spirit of postmodern bricolage, I have constructed the thesis within an eclectic musical and poetic pastiche where each chapter is introduced with musical lyrics or a poetic excerpt which I have used to re-present various aspects of the topic and discussed in terms of the chapter content. Throughout the thesis, auto-ethnographic stories and reflexive accounts at times also interrupt scholarly writing. I have chosen two main font styles to differentiate the various genres.

Musical lyrics, poetry, reflexive accounts, and reflective writing have been written using Century Gothic 11 pt normal font, and auto-ethnographic writing is in Century Gothic 11 pt italics. All other scholarly writing is in Times New Roman 12 pt normal font.

Three ellipsis points (…) indicate that material has been omitted from direct quotes from the literature, from musical lyrics, and from interview and other field text.

*Italics* have been used to denote quotes from participants.

‘Single inverted commas’ have been used to re-present words I acknowledge as having multiple meanings or with which I have some query, or to indicate words or phrases used in non-conventional ways. They are also used to indicate the name of published and unpublished works within the text.

Hyphens ( - ) have been used with particular words and terms in recognition that this may inscribe different meanings, and in acknowledgement there is more than one way these words can be interpreted. Forward slashes ( / ) have also been used between some words to acknowledge the potential multiplicity of what is often written as singular.