

The Subjective Experience of Abusive Mothers Who Were Abused in Childhood: Life Stories and Family Drawings

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The body of research regarding childhood physical, sexual and emotional abuse and neglect is quite wide- scale. Most studies demonstrate that child abuse executed by a parent has long term effects, which tend to harm emotional functioning in adulthood, and in some cases, parental abilities. The introduction of the present study focuses on the phenomenon of inter-generation transmission of abuse among women, considering variants of exposure to childhood abuse and gender stereotypes as distinctive factors from styles of coping with abuse among men. Later, the main theories existing nowadays that provide explanations for the phenomenon are described, such as the social learning theory and re-traumatisation.

Unfortunately, there are only a few studies that deal with the experience of abusive mothers who suffered from abuse during their childhood, from their own perspective, while in most cases that experience could be indicated upon indirectly, for instance- out of their children's testimonies or their reactions to the exposure of the abuse. The difficulty in obtaining information on the matter is most likely a result of its sensitivity. The field of art therapy suggests a solution for this problem by means of distance from the painful subject, as well as knowledge about specific indicators of different phenomena. For these reasons, many studies that combine the field of art therapy with the field of familial abuse have a tendency to use projective tests, as does the present study.

The objective of the present study was to examine the experience of abusive mothers who had been abused in their childhood, by verbal and artistic means. The nature of this study is qualitative- narrative, and it included the participation of 10 women that meet research criteria. Each mother was given the opportunity to tell about the experience of abuse, as a victim and an aggressor, using two tools: First, a Life Story Interview. Second, a projective test- the RKFD (Regressed-Kinetic-Family-Drawing) for evaluating the familial experience in childhood, and the KFD (Kinetic-Family-Drawing) for the evaluation of the motherhood experience.

The findings of this study have uncovered complex mental and behavioral dynamics within the familial conduct of participants, as they transit from victim children to abusive mothers. The difficult childhood experiences have imprinted a post-traumatic anxiety within these women, which attached to their parental functioning in adulthood. With the absence of an internalized positive maternal model, mothers operate out of their deprivations and unfulfilled needs, to which their children's attention is directed, thus recreating the lack of parental attention that the mothers were exposed to during their own childhood. The reoccurrence of abusive patterns was found to be very much depended upon an emotional connection to the traumatic past, and an involvement in a long- term therapeutic framework effects its prevention greatly. The making of and observing at the family drawings provided participants with a possibility for an emotional enmeshment in the familial experiences over time, an opportunity to transcribe them, and a cognitive space for processing and achieving insights. However, further exploration is

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required regarding the meaning of color usage and the size and distance relations between characters. It is also recommended in future studies that combine verbal and artistic tools to examine the influence of the presentation order of drawings.

Keywords: Inter- generation Transmission, Abuse, Mothers, Life Story Interview, Kinetic Family Drawings

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