What makes a good mother? An interpretative phenomenological analysis of the views of women with learning disabilities

Phoebe Kaspar *,1, Biza Stenfert Kroese

The University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 2TT, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 27 November 2016
Received in revised form 18 April 2017
Accepted 19 April 2017
Available online xxxx

Keywords:
Mother
Parenting
Women
Learning disability
Interpretative phenomenological analysis

ABSTRACT

Background: Parents with learning disabilities are at risk of having their children permanently removed. There are discrepancies between the perceived needs of these individuals as assessed by the parents themselves, compared to the professionals who support them. Little is known about how individuals with learning disabilities view ‘good parenting’.

Method: After gaining informed consent, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight women with a learning disability. Interviews explored their view on what makes a good mother and resulting qualitative data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

Results: Four super-ordinate themes were identified: ‘Mother as provider’, ‘A two-way bond’ ‘Motherhood transcends boundaries’ and ‘The same as anybody else?’

Discussion: Some sub-themes mirror principles of Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1982) including reciprocity, proximity seeking and a close mutual bond. Participants are aware of stigma surrounding disability and parenting and may be at risk of internalising such views to the detriment of their psychological wellbeing.

Introduction

It is now recognised that people with learning disabilities are entitled to live independently, gain employment and generally have ambitions in line with the rights of passage normally expected in adulthood. This is supported by a number of UK government documents, such as ‘Valuing People Now’ (DoH, 2009), which aims to maximise empowerment and inclusion for these individuals. This development has gone hand in hand with a more liberal view towards marriage, sex-uality, and to some degree, parenting by adults with learning disabilities (May & Simpson, 2003; Scior, 2011). The right of consenting individuals with disabilities to ‘found a family’ is now internationally recognised by The Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD, Article 29).

Given this trend, it is unsurprising that the number of parents with (typically mild) learning disabilities in the UK has been found to be growing (Emerson, Malam, Davies, & Spencer, 2005) and with it a small but increasing literature on disability and parenting (Wilson, McKenzie, Quayle, & Murray, 2014). Qualitative research with parents with learning disabilities tells us how valued the ‘parent identity’ is, especially as it provides a role that is distinct from having a learning disability (Baum & Burns, 2007; Shewan, McKenzie, Quayle, & Crawley, 2014). However, parents with learning disabilities are also at significant risk of having their children removed (McConnell & Llewellyn, 2002). They have been found to be the most at risk group for permanent removal when compared to parents with enduring mental health issues and/or substance misuse difficulties (Booth, Booth, & McConnell, 2005).

A recent review identified a lack of consensus on whether children who remain in the care of parents with learning disabilities are at a disadvantage in terms of their development. Some studies report this to be the case, whilst others suggest these children approach the norm in terms of their cognitive and emotional development (Collings & Llewellyn, 2012). Despite a lack of outcome data, a commonly held view seems to be that parents with learning disabilities will inevitably neglect or abuse their children, and lack the potential to improve their parenting skills, even in the presence of evidence that refutes this (McConnell & Llewellyn, 2002; Tymchuk & Andron, 1992).

A review by Scior (2011) found that although modern public attitudes towards sexuality in individuals with learning disabilities are often positive, this changes when the possibility of parenting is introduced and negative assumptions are made about their parenting abilities. Cuskelly and Gilmore (2007) also found that members of the general public were accepting of sexuality in this group, but had
reservations when parenting was considered. Similarly, participants in Esterle, Muñoz Sastre, and Mullet's (2008) study had concerns about the outcome of intercourse amongst those with learning disabilities, including parenthood, rather than the sexual relationship itself.

Professionals may also have reservations or hold biased views about the abilities of parents with learning disabilities. Given the lack of a widely accepted model of 'good parenting', professionals may be at risk of assessing parenting skills against their own standards (Booth & Booth, 1993) and these are unlikely to be compatible with the disadvantaged conditions many learning disabled parents find themselves in. This concern is reiterated by the Department of Health (2000) publication 'Inspection of services to support disabled adults in their parenting role', which highlights a need for services to take more notice of the family context and improve understanding of 'the social implications of disability' (pg. 2).

Negative views and lack of understanding may contribute to tension between the priorities of individuals with learning disabilities and the services that support them in their parenting role. Research by Llewellyn, McConnell, and Bye (1998) suggests there are significant discrepancies between professional and parental perceptions of what help is needed, with professionals consistently identifying a greater need for support compared to the parents' assessment of their own needs. It was also found that whilst parents tend to want support with personal skill development, community integration and making friends, professionals emphasise the need to improve child-care specific skills. Qualitative research also highlights dissatisfaction with social support services from the perspective of families, with mothers reporting they feel criticised and unsupported (Baum & Burns, 2007). Clearly, this group are vulnerable to experiencing tension with the services that are designed to support them.

**Rationale for current study**

Individuals with learning disabilities are sometimes excluded from research studies, due to fears they are unable to provide informed consent or are somehow too 'vulnerable' and require protection (National Disability Authority, 2009). This has meant the supposed views of those with learning disabilities have tended to be represented by others (Atkinson & Walmsley, 1999). However, it is now known that participatory learning disability research can be empowering for the individuals involved (Atkinson, 2004; Munford, Sanders, Veitch, & Conder, 2008) and that formal analytic methods, such as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, are suitable for analysing the data produced by interviewing these individuals (see review by Corby, Taggart, & Cousins, 2015).

Parenthood, and motherhood in particular, is a well-debated and discussed topic (for a review see Mayes, Llewellyn, & McConnell, 2011). Pederson (2016) recently described the pressure in modern Western society to be a 'good mother' and the conflicting ideologies that are presented in the media, including the selfless 'earth mother' alongside the career-balancing 'super-mum'. Pederson's research analysed conversations on a well-known UK online parenting forum and suggested that women can feel pressure to be a 'selfless' and 'ideal' mother, although it was observed that middle-class mothers could to an extent reject this concept in favour of a 'good enough' mother which included support from partners and a fulfilling life outside the home. Research by Dillaway (2006) explored views regarding motherhood amongst women approaching menopause, concluding that these women perceive 'good' active mothering not to 'end or wane' during menopause. The author acknowledges that her sample consists exclusively of high functioning, middle class women.

Research that seeks the direct views and experiences of those with learning disabilities in this area is limited. Edmunds (2000) found that the mother role enabled women with learning disabilities to refute their 'learning disability identity' and similarly, Mayes et al. (2011) highlight how women embraced and enjoyed their new 'mother identity' throughout pregnancy and after giving birth. Shewan et al. (2014) report that although parents with learning disabilities find aspects of parenthood challenging, these are generally related to specific cognitive tasks such as reading letters. These findings all come from research that has focused on the sub-group of individuals with learning disabilities who are parents.

This study uses Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to add to the body of knowledge in the area of disability and parenting, specifically focussing on what learning disabled women think makes a 'good mother'. To the author's knowledge, no other research to date has explored attitudes towards motherhood amongst older women with a learning disability who are not parents themselves. Existing qualitative studies are often with parents who have had aversive experiences with services and court proceedings, meaning there is the potential for the views expressed to be influenced by this.

The current research is not 'hypothesis-driven'; rather the aim is to explore the views of these women. It is hoped this will broaden our understanding of the perspectives of those with learning disabilities and what they view a 'good mother' to be. This type of research can also be useful in addressing assumptions made by individuals, both professional and lay people, whose views may be misinformed (Smith, 2004).

**Method**

**Participants**

Eight White-British women with a learning disability, aged between 44–56 (mean = 48.4 years) participated in this study. All were from an inner city area ranked as one of the most deprived nationally (Office for National Statistics, 2007). Their age and the fact that most live in the community means that they have been exposed to generations of mothers; either women in their own family who have had children or peers who have become mothers. This is likely to have informed their expressed views about motherhood. Table 1 shows the participant pseudonyms along with their ages and a small amount of relevant background information.

**Recruitment**

The women were recruited from a social club for adults with learning disabilities run by student volunteers of a large West Midlands University that meets once a week in the evening. Recruitment took place over a series of weeks, to maximise the opportunity for women to express an interest without feeling coerced to take part.

**Inclusion criteria**

The inclusion criteria incorporated the stipulation that participants had to have a learning disability, which was assumed given they were recruited from a social club intended for this population. Although the club holds no psychometric data about level of disability, the first author, who has experience of working clinically with this client group, considered them to fall within the mild-moderate range of learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Background information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Lives with her mother and sister.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lindsey</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Lives in a residential home for people with learning disabilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dawn</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Lives in a warden controlled flat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Lives in a residential home for people with learning disabilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janet</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Lives with her brother in their family home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Lives with her elderly parents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Lives with her mother.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tracy</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Supported living with her two brothers in their family home.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
دریافت فوری متن کامل مقاله

امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات