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A story of stories

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CHAPTER 2

Theoretical and methodological framework

The consequences of child sexual abuse

Several studies highlight the traumatizing effects of sexual abuse on children. In 1985, Finkelhor and Browne described four traumatizing dynamics of child sexual abuse. These trauma-causing factors (traumatic sexualization, betrayal, powerlessness, and stigmatization) cause distortions in children's orientation to the world, the people surrounding them, and themselves. Especially suffering sexual abuse by a trusted person on which the child depends, has very negative impact (for instance, Etherington, 1997; Peter, 2006; Tyler, 2002; Young, Riggs & Robinson, 2011). The intrusiveness of the abuse (for example, fondling, oral sex, digital or genital penetration) and the use of force or humiliation also add to the experienced severity of the abuse. Although each sexual abuse experience is influenced by a child's age and gender, and abuse experiences differ in frequency and duration, it is described by survivors as a frightening, shameful, and isolating experience (Hornor, 2010; Putnam, 2003; Young, Riggs & Robinson, 2011).

Child sexual abuse impairs a child's cognitive and behavioral development, additionally, it can result in several internalizing and externalizing problems, as well as health issues. Examples of reported short-term and long-term problematic outcomes for children are: sexualized behavior, post-traumatic stress symptoms, depression, dissociative disorders, drug and alcohol dependence, anxiety disorders, poor self-esteem, and conduct disorders (for instance, Dubner & Motta, 1999; Olfason, 2011; Tyler, 2002). Furthermore, children who have been sexually abused are at increased risk for other adverse life experiences (Cook et al., 2005; Dong, Anda, Dube, Giles & Felitti, 2003; Vanderfaeille, Vanschoonlandt, Van Holen, De Maeyer & Robberechts, 2014). This seems particularly evident for children who are placed in out-of-home care.

Foster parents in a study by Grietens, Van Oijen and Ter Huizen (2012), estimated that their foster children had an average of eight adverse life experiences. These adverse life experiences concentrated around loss (for example, a separation of biological parents), school (for example, failing a year of school), and interpersonal violence (for example, repeated sexual abuse). Similarly, Greeson et al. (2012) found 70% of the children in their research group to have complex trauma, meaning these children have suffered at least two different interpersonal trauma's perpetrated by caregivers. Of the foster children with complex trauma histories in this study, almost 60% was sexually abused or assaulted.

Fostering a sexually abused child

Parenting a foster or adoptive child with a history of sexual abuse has an impact on the whole family (Macaskill, 1991; Erich & Leung, 2002; Nalavany & Ryan, 2008). For example, Macaskill (1991) states that even families with a considerable knowledge of parenting experience stress due to the 'sexual component' in foster parenting a sexually abused child. The author states 'the children touched the central nerve of family life' (p.70), as they evoked strong emotions in their foster family members. In addition, parental perception of family functioning appears low for those who cared for a victim of childhood sexual abuse (Nalavany & Ryan, 2008). Several prior studies give insight into families' experiences of fostering a victim of child sexual abuse and highlight the challenges faced by all family members involved in the fostering process.

A family's experience is influenced firstly by the status of the abuse or the amount of information given to them about a child's abuse history. As illustrated in detail in chapter four of this dissertation, foster families differ strongly in terms of the information they have prior to placement of a child. Some families have no knowledge of the sexual abuse history of their foster child, even though many authors stress the importance of having full information about sexual abuse incidents in a child's past (for example, Farmer & Pollock, 1999, 2003; Hardwick, 2005; McFadden, 1989). Many authors emphasize the necessity of having information on the extent and severity of the abuse, the relationship a child has to the abuser, and the location of the abuse. In some cases sexual abuse is suspected in a child's past, however, this is not always communicated to a family (Farmer & Pollock, 2003), making it more difficult to meet these children's needs (Hardwick, 2005; Steenbakkens, Ellingsen, Van der Steen & Grietens, 2018). In addition, when foster families lack adequate knowledge of a child's past, this "can result in situations which jeopardize the safety of both foster parents and child" (McFadden, 1989, p. 96).

As described in previous sections, children with a history of sexual abuse are at risk of developing several problematic behaviors. The majority of studies focus on traumatic stress behaviors and sexualized behaviors. Farmer and Pollock (2003) illustrate how the occurrence of sexualized behaviors among victims of sexual abuse range: Two-third of their sample of foster children with a history of sexual abuse showed sexualized behavior, whereas one-third did not. Examples are: excessive and/or public masturbation, inappropriate touching of children and/or adults, indecent exposure, or seductive behavior. Hardwick (2005) argues that sexualized behavior needs to be modified 'in order for the children to develop a sense of what is normal and healthy, and to facilitate their sense of well-being.' (p.34). However, Octoman, Mclean and

CHAPTER 2

Sleep (2013) found sexualized behavior to be difficult for foster carers, as ceasing, reducing, or modifying these behaviors requires intensive interventions. Moreover, Farmer and Pollock (2003) suggest four areas of activity to effectively manage inappropriate sexual behavior of children: close supervision, sex education, modification of inappropriate behavior, and therapeutic attention for a child's unmet needs. With regard to sexualized behavior the authors urge the need for adequate preparation of foster families, as the emergence of, for example public masturbation, "could be very disturbing for caregivers" (p.107).

As a child's view is dramatically shaped and altered by traumatic experiences with sexual abuse, it is important to consider how a child relies on this knowledge to interpret everyday family life. For example, the adequate interpretation of intimacy, touch, or acts of intimate care seems to be complicated, as these everyday family life acts can easily be misinterpreted. McFadden (1989) illustrates that children with a history of sexual abuse are at risk of misinterpreting normal child-rearing behaviors, as they could "appear to involve sexual content to a child whose only physical nurturing came through sexual contact" (p. 95). Hence, several studies focus on how the risks of allegations of sexual abuse impact foster carers. In the study by Inch (1999) for example, foster fathers voice concerns about their behavior being misinterpreted by a child. Especially when men fostered an adolescent girl, they experienced a risk of misinterpretation, and thereby, allegations. Furthermore, the narratives of the foster fathers in the study of Heslop (2016) contain reflections on how showing affection and the delivery of personal care to foster children are risky activities, as a child might misunderstand the carers' intention and accuse him of sexual abuse. Gilligan (2000) illustrates how the simplest touch embodies a risk for male foster carers. A common observation is that foster fathers, as a consequence of the presence of these risks, distance themselves from certain child-rearing activities to minimize the risk of being seen as sexually interested or abusive.

In numerous studies foster carers' biological children describe the positive and negative effects fostering had on their lives. Part (1993) for instance, describes how for some birth children of foster parents, a foster child's difficult behavior was the worst part of fostering, followed by the reduction of parental attention and the lack of privacy. Similarly, Thompson and McPherson (2011) found birth children to experience tension in their family, a loss of closeness with family members, and parental time and attention. As to fostering a sibling with a history of sexual abuse, birth children mention how they would rather not have been exposed to the sexual abuse history, as they simply did not want to consider such an issue (Spears & Cross, 2003). Birth children's innocence is also reflected on by foster parents. For instance, in the study by Macaskill (1991), foster parents observed how the negative focus on sex destroyed

their birth child's sexual innocence. In addition, foster parents report their concerns of a foster child's behavior damaging their birth children. Although several studies report on the fostering experiences of birth children, very little attention is paid specifically to those who foster a sibling with history of sexual abuse. This dissertation provides some insights in this specific group of fostering birth children (chapter five).

Fostering a victim of sexual abuse impacts family life, hence many authors stress the need to create a safe place for all involved in the placement (for instance, Farmer & Pollock, 2003; Masson, Hackett, Phillips & Balfe, 2014; Pollock & Farmer, 2001). This could be achieved by adequate supervision of a child's contacts with others, setting clear physical boundaries, teaching children which behaviors are to be kept private and which are 'normal'. The majority of studies of fostering a child with a history of sexual abuse have focused on individual family members' experiences or on groups of family members (for instance, Farmer & Pollock, 2003; Macaskill, 1991; McFadden, 1989). However, from the reported experiences we learn how a child's past affects not only individual family members, but also has an impact on family relationships and the family as a system.

Overall, this dissertation builds on prior studies centering foster families' stories (for example, Macaskill, 1991; Masson et al., 2014; Nutt, 2002; Spears & Cross, 2003). However, unlike prior studies, this dissertation reviews the impact of a foster child's putative experience with sexual abuse on the intrapersonal and interpersonal level, as well as the level of the family as a system. In the following paragraph some methodological considerations of Project Iris as a family-oriented narrative study will be described.

Methodological considerations

In Project Iris a narrative approach was adopted, as foster families' life stories are the main source of information. Narrative approaches are cross-disciplinary and can be defined in several manners. They can draw from various epistemologies, theories, and methods, and include different types of analysis (Riessman & Speedy, 2006). Etherington (2007) writes that a narrative study generally entails 'gathering, analyzing, and re-presenting people's stories as told by them' (p. 599). Different fields within narrative research exist, one of which operates from the framework of narratives as dialogically constructed expressions, not as expressions of internal cognitive or affective states (Tamboukou, Andrews, & Squire, 2013). According to Flick (1997), the reconstruction of experiences into narratives requires internal negotiation (within a person) and external negotiation with a storytellers' audience. This results in 'contextualized and socially

CHAPTER 2

shared forms of knowledge' (p.3): Stories are co-constructed by a storyteller and their audience (Riessman & Quinney, 2005; Salmon & Riessman, 2013). Tamboukou, Andrews, and Squire (2013, p. 18) state that 'people answer the questions which they think we are asking them, and we respond to the answers with which we think they have provided us'. Thus, the meaning of a story is never constant and invariably subject to reinterpretation.

In this dissertation, a constructivist's standpoint was adopted (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), as working from the field of social pedagogy, we believe a persons' reality is a result of transactions among an individual and their surroundings (Knorth & Ruijsenaars, 2018). Thus, reality is considered to be subjective, dynamic, and contextual. Research is a joint product of researchers, participants, and their relationships, and stories are constructed by both parties within a particular social context (Finlay, 2002). Consequently, the researcher is considered as much a part of a (re)construction process of reality as the participants in a study. The family context was an important, influential and leading factor in the Iris Project.

In the Iris Project, we aimed to gain insight in the impact of foster children's putative history of sexual abuse on family members. In addition, we strived to understand the impact of a history of sexual abuse on the family as a system of interrelated persons. Although the shared, contextual influence on a person's experience, and consequently on their narrative of it, is undeniable, an individual's narrative was a first focus (Smaling, 2010). A family is a heterogeneous unit of individuals 'coexisting in complex and fluid relationships with each other' (Warin, Solomon & Lewis, 2007, p.122). In a family, very different individual realities can co-exist (Ribbens McCarthy, Holland & Gillis, 2003), as the family as a unit is a social construction dependent upon individual context (Pickin, Brunsdon & Hill, 2011). Moreover, an individual's experience can be marked by a person's features as age or gender, or by familial features as a person's siblings or social position (Sands & Roer-Strier, 2006). Thus, to understand the impact of a history of sexual abuse, it was necessary to consider, compare, and contrast individuals' narratives, families' narratives, in addition to the narratives of certain social groups, for example birth sons and daughters.

Several authors illustrate the value and the hardships of utilizing multiple perspectives to study family life (for instance, Perlesz & Lindsay, 2003; Ribbens McCarthy, Holland, & Gillies, 2003; Warin, Solomon, & Lewis, 2007). In general, the important role of the researcher is emphasized in this type of qualitative family research. For example, the bird eye view on data, or the interpretation of the disagreement and agreement among family members, enables the researcher to come to detailed understandings (Ribbens McCarthy, Holland, & Gillies, 2003). Comparing, contrasting, and combining several perspectives provides the opportunity to

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

'validate accounts as a form of triangulation', as Warin, Solomon and Lewis state (2007, p.123). Perlesz and Lindsay (2003) argue that the likelihood of dissonant findings in family research is high. It is suggested to consider the context and the research process in the interpretation of data. Moreover, researcher reflexivity throughout the research process is of great importance (Warin, Solomon, & Lewis, 2007). Chapter three suggests the use of meta-data in the process of co-constructing narratives.

