A Fractured Journey of Growth:
Making Meaning of a ‘Broken’ Childhood
and Parental Mental Ill-health

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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements of the degree of
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Declaration

1. The thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University library, being made available for loan and photocopying subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

2. I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis has been done in collaboration with other researchers. I have included as part of the thesis a statement clearly outlining the extent of collaboration, with whom and under what auspices.

3. I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis contains a published paper of which I am a joint author. I have included as part of the thesis a written statement, endorsed by my supervisor, attesting to my contribution to the joint publication.

4. The work in this thesis was carried out under the supervision of Dr Lynne McCormack, Clinical Psychologist and Senior Lecturer.

Signed: _____________________________

Date: _______________________
Acknowledgement

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Abstract

Scope:

Research in the area of parental mental ill-health is largely problem saturated, focused on psychopathology risks and other adverse outcomes for the vulnerable children who grow up with an unwell mother or father. This thesis reviews the wealth of literature in the area of parental mental ill-health, including the prevalence of parental mental ill-health and impact on family life. It further discusses the effect of parental mental ill-health on the parent-child attachment relationship and the biological, psychological and social risk factors for children of mentally unwell parents.

What is poorly addressed in the literature and the main aim of this thesis is the subjective interpretations of adult children, reflecting on both the positive and negative ‘lived’ experience of growing up with parental mental ill-health. This phenomenon is explored through semi-structured interviews, analysed and discussed.

Purpose

From the adult child’s perspective, the current study seeks to understand reflections and interpretations related to childhood experiences; and to explore the consequences of parental mental ill-health on the emotional and interpersonal development of these participants. The study aims to explore the subjective ‘lived’ experience from both the positive and negative perspective in order to achieve a rich understanding of the phenomenon of growing up with a mentally unwell mother or father.

Aim

The aim of the current research is to contribute to our understanding of the psychosocial impact of growing up with a parent affected by mental ill-health, and whether positive as well as negative interpretations of childhood experiences are possible. Second, we seek an understanding of the impact of childhood adversity specifically in the area of developmental/betrayal trauma and whether growth is possible out of such adversity.
Methodology

From a phenomenological perspective, semi-structured interviews captured subjective interpretations of seven adult children who grew up with a mother or father affected by mental ill-health. Data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA uses a reiterative interpretative framework whereby the researchers strive to make sense of the participant making sense of their experiences. IPA is recommended for investigating unexplored topics where subjective meanings, values and beliefs are important but poorly understood (Smith, 1996).

Results

Analysis of participant interviews revealed one superordinate theme – A fractured journey of growth to adulthood – which overarched six subordinate themes reflecting negative and positive interpretations of growing up with parental mental ill-health. Four themes captured the stigma, shame, social isolation and betrayal experienced by these participants: 1) Who cares, nobody cares; 2) Trauma and betrayal; 3) Transferring the distress, 4) Ducking, weaving and staying safe. Juxtaposed with this, two themes capturing purposeful redefinition of self and psychological growth also emerged: 1) Growing myself up; 2) Transforming a broken childhood.

Conclusions and Implications

This phenomenological investigation has enabled a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of being parented by a mother or father with mental ill-health. It highlights both positive and negative impacts of parental mental ill-health from the adult child’s perspective. The current study found that these children felt shame, experienced betrayal and lived with a heightened vigilance around unmet needs. They were often puzzled by events related to their parent’s mental health difficulties, but instinctively became caretakers when needed. Stigma and social isolation were bedfellows of their young lives.

Conversely, the study also revealed that these participants redefined their distress
when able to form supportive attachment relationships with other significant adults. In doing so, they recognised that autonomy and self-regard could be nurtured through ‘growing myself up’ meaningfully and successfully. Autonomy was sought through distancing themselves from their fear of trans-generational contamination of mental ill-health; and valuing self-determination, goal setting and education for psychological wellbeing and purpose in life. As they experienced their own growth; empathy and a pragmatic but caring distance allowed them to experience a healthy separateness from their parent’s mental ill-health.

These findings build on the growing body of research in the area of parental mental ill-health and highlight the isolation of these vulnerable children and families whose needs are often neglected by current policy and practice. This study captures the debilitating psychosocial distress and sense of betrayal that these participants experienced as children. It also highlights that growth is possible out of such adversity. The ability to redefine the adult self positively despite years of childhood trauma has implications for future research, therapeutic intervention and support.
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