

Original article

The Positive Effects of Parents' Mental Illness on Their Children: a Qualitative Study

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Abstract:

Objective: The main objective of this research is to explore the positive consequences of parents' mental illness on their children. **Material & methods:** This study was a part of a more comprehensive study performed based on grounded theory. In this work semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 participants selected by purposeful and theoretical sampling approach. Data were analyzed using constant comparative analysis suggested by Straus and Corbin (1988) method. **Results:** Despite negative effects of the illness, the children have been perceived positive effects from their parents' illness. These findings categorized in two category of "independence" and "considering the others needs". **Conclusion:** Application of these findings in care plan of patients and families, particularly their children, can offer more efficient coping with mental illness.

Keywords: child; mental illnesses; grounded theory; positive aspects; posttraumatic growth; stress related growth

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Background

Mental illnesses, which are seen almost in all societies and communities¹, are among widespread problems in contemporary societies². The average worldwide prevalence of this illness is 20 cases for every 100 normal populations per annum³. In Iran, prevalence of mental illness is estimated as 20 %⁴, where about 1 % of them need hospitalization services⁵. Disregarding high spread of these problems, it must be noticed that their consequences are not limited to only to the patients but is involves all the society⁶. In families who have patients with mental illness the children are in critical situation. These children face with various problems which might be less noticed, as this group is called "hidden population" susceptible to the mental illness⁷. It is generally believed that giving healthcare services for these children is a section which is generally neglected by the health care systems⁸.

The studies conducted on children of patients with mental illness are mainly about consequences and negative effects of the illness on them and less attention is paid to the potential positive effects of the illness on children⁹. It is no surprise that why mental illnesses have demonstrated a negative image in mind of society¹⁰ and why they have this much widespread stigma¹¹. However, there are also few studies focused on positive aspects of mental illnesses¹². Regarding less deal of studies conducted on children of patients with mental illness, particularly in its positive aspects, in this paper a qualitative research was conducted on Iranian patients. It must be noticed that this study just reports the positive aspects of parents' mental illness and the other findings, pattern, and the emerged theory will be separately discussed in another paper.

Method

This study was a part of a more comprehensive study conducted based on grounded theory approach. The

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main study was performed to explore needs of children of parent with mental illness. In this research grounded theory approach was selected due to this fact that it allows the research to study phenomena in their social contexts²; besides, this approach is very efficient in description and presentation of the fields in which adequate amount of researches have not been conducted and in clarifying relationships between different parameters¹³.

In this study purposeful and theoretical sampling was performed. To do so, the participants were selected among children with age range of 15-25 whose parent had mental illness and was hospitalized at least once in a mental unit. Another requirement for the participants is their living with their parents. Moreover, the children themselves should not have any experience of mental illness. Based on mentioned criteria, the participants selected among children of patients in a psychiatric hospital from Qazvin, Iran.

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a large country in Middle East of Asia with an area of over 1648000 Km². It comprises 31 provinces with 76 million populations. 32.16% of population is under the age of 19 years and 5.72% over 65 years. The population grow rate is 1.29%. Urbanization has been on the rise; 71.4% of the population lives in urban areas and 28.6% in rural areas. The official language is Farsi (Persian) and 99.4% of the population is Muslim¹⁴.

In 1986 National Program of Mental Health (NPMH) was defined with main strategy to integrate mental health in PHC¹⁵. Patients were treated in mental health services with multidisciplinary team approach. Team members include psychiatrist, psychiatric nurse, psychologist, social worker and counselor. The leader of team is a psychiatrist. Although other members have some challenges especially in defining their dominion, this model is dominant.

In their statements, children mentioned challenges in their lives when dealing with various problems such as marriage, interaction with healthy parent, and caregivers. The healthy parent, those children spouses, nurses, psychologists, and counselors were also participated in this work since the relevance of the emerged data. Through this research, 17 people were interviewed including children of parent with mental illness (n=10), their families (2 healthy parent and 1 spouse of a child with mentally ill parent), and professionals in mental health field (2 nurses with a master's degree in mental health nursing, 1 clinical

psychologist, and 1 psychological counselor). To start this work it was first approved by Research Ethical Committee of Iran Nursing and Midwifery Faculty. To respect participants' rights, the objectives of the study were previously explained to them in a separate session and then they were asked to sign informed consent sheets. After receiving informed consent sheets, the background information of the families were gathered for overall description of the samples. During the interviews, the privacy of the participants was completely considered. Based on their own will, interviews with patients and caregivers were carried out in hospitals and their work place, respectively. Data were gathered based on semi-structured interviews and observation. Each interview was 45-100 minutes in length where the average effective length of each interview was 60 minutes. Data collection process was conducted in a 16 month period from September 2008 to February 2009. The interviews were recorded by a digital voice recorder and then were immediately transferred to computer and verbatim typed to preserve data integrity and reduce tendency by the researcher. This was started in a maximum 24 hours after the interview. Memos were written for each interview.

Interview guide was designed based on initial reviews of the literature. After transition from the primary steps of the interviews, data gathering process was commenced by asking a general question such as "what happened that your father/mother was hospitalized this last time?" The next questions were planned based on participants' responses. After reaching data saturation, also three interviews were conducted.

During the interviews, to receive information about background conditions and description of diverse behaviors of the children, in each case observation was also applied. Theoretical sampling was conducted based on questions emerged in the data analysis process.

Analysis and coding of each interview was performed immediately afterward and before starting the next interview, as the trend of each interview was determined based on data and concepts from context of previous interviews. The data were analyzed based on constant comparison analysis according to Straus and Corbin method (1998).

Factors such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were considered as measuring criteria of qualitative researches¹⁶. Data

analysis and collecting process took 17 months. Data and method triangulation, use of maximum variation sampling, observation, and published literature review were as the sources applied to confirm this study's credibility¹⁷. Besides, two experts were asked to confirm dependability of this research by its auditing and review. To perform transferability step it is upon the readers to examine the original context, participant characteristics, data collection and analysis, as well as appropriated quotations described in the Method and Results sections. After completion of the phenomenon description, it was rechecked by 8 participants. Accordingly, the confirmability of the current study was established according to Guba and Lincoln's (1989) definition, which defines achievement of credibility, transferability, and dependability as the establishment of confirmability¹⁸.

Findings

Although the term "illness" creates a negative concept in the mind, it can have also positive effects. The children of parents with mental illnesses, despite many negative consequences of this problem, have also benefited from some positive aspects of their parents' illness. The first positive effect is independence. In this regard one of the participants explains:

"So, I partially became independent; you know when there is nobody to help you, you have to solve most of your problems by yourself. For instance I had an accident and have to go to Tehran (capital city of Iran) for insurance errands. But, I didn't say even a word about this to my mom. It feels good when I don't say my problems to the others anymore. If my mom didn't have such a condition, I would never go to Tehran. This has made me stronger and less dependent during the problems".

Another positive effect of the illness is considering the others' needs; that is more remarkable in these children after their parents' illness. About this, one of the participants says:

"Well, I think that now I'm more compassionate; you know now I'm kinder; I listen to him more carefully and respect him more; even more than the girls whose dad is healthy".

Another child explains his/her positive experiences of the effects induced by his/her mother's illness as: *"If I could I would like to help even other people; when the others help us it makes us happy so we should help them too".*

Discussion

Illness is among the concepts with negative mental

effects; however, like any other phenomenon, it also has positive consequences. The concepts including "posttraumatic growth"¹⁹ and "stress related growth"²⁰ have been emerged to explain this. Posttraumatic growth has been defined as the cognitive process by which those who have experienced trauma apply positive interpretations and changes to and find meaning in the traumatic event¹⁹. These changes are described in three aspects including individual changes, changes in interactions with others, and changes in life philosophy²¹, which are mainly obtained through studies on physical patients²².

The findings of this study showed that children of parent with mental illness had also benefited from positive aspects of their parents' illness – as well as impinging by the negative effects. Their first experienced effect is independence. Although being responsible for giving care for their parents might have negative effects on children, it can help these children to be more independent. Although this finding is not common in the similar studies, it is in agreement with few other studies in which the children reported that their parents' illness and their responsibility for keeping the family and giving care to their parents have developed some skills in them which leads to their further independence and ability to deal with problems²³. Another positive consequence is considering others' needs, strengthened in these children after their parents' illness. This can even affect future of these children. According to a study conducted by Beardeslee and Podorefsky (1988), 6 number of participants had been absorbed in social care systems, 3 of them were nurse, 2 of them were working in help centers, and finally one of them were occupied in psychology²⁴. However, these results might be induced by the sampling process, since half of the individuals were selected among those participated in mental health conferences. In a study performed by Muhlbauer (2002), parents of children with mental disorders reported that their child illness has made them sensitive toward others needs²⁵. This finding is similar to the "empathy" concept emerged through the studies conducted by Galvez et al (2001)¹⁰, Shamay-Tsoory et al (2009)²⁶, Malhi et al (2008)²⁷, and Moran and Diamond (2008)²⁸ who studied the positive effects of affective disorders in patients.

Studying the positive effects of mental illness on the patients is a field recently interested by the researchers and even some studies have been performed in this regard. However, studies concerned children of these patients are scarce. It is hoped that

findings of this research motivate further works in this area. Application of these findings in care plan of patients and families, particularly their children can lead to better handling “illness” concept.

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