

I see my son – my son sees me.

Aim of study:

This project researches the experience of the father of a child diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder. The research will specifically focus on:

- The day to day experience of the co-researcher and the impact that his son's condition has on his life
- The impact that his son's condition has had upon his expectations of his relationship with his son in the light of the diagnosis.

Methods:

The researcher takes a phenomenological approach to the project. Central to the research will be:

- A one hour recorded interview with the co-researcher which will be fully transcribed.
- One follow up meeting with the co-researcher to obtain clarification and mutual agreement over joint perception.
- A literature review undertaken after the one hour interview. This is done in order not to contaminate early perception and avoid the creation of biased frames of reference.
- Transactional Analysis models are used to assist in structuring the final discussion.

Findings:

The study teases out a number of key themes that document how the co-researcher has come to terms with such feelings as denial, guilt, helplessness and emptiness. Communications between the co-researcher and his son acts as both a source of great sadness and, on the occasions when they connect, of happiness. The study particularly highlights the co-researchers dependant relationship with his son and shows how the co-researcher's feelings of abandonment are rooted in his relationship with his own father. This symbiotic relationship results in transference where the co-researcher's son soothes his father's own abandoned Child.

Introduction

The literature consulted in this project can be divided into a number of areas. First, in order to understand and develop a sound approach to the research , the work of Finley and Evans was referenced (1). This illuminated the structure and process and allowed for definition in the methodology adopted.

Some basic research into the subject of ASD was also conducted. It was clear that there exists a plethora of research projects both finished and in the making that deal with the experience of parents who have children with this condition. A portal to a great deal of this research can be found on the website of the National Autistic Society under the title ‘How living with a person with diagnosis affects the family’ (2). This gave an interesting summary of the main findings of a substantial body of research into parenting autistic children. In particular the research summary concluded that: “There is considerable evidence that mothers experience greater impact than fathers (Sharpley, Bitsika and Efremidis(3): Seltzer (4). Gray (5)found the most striking difference between mothers and fathers was the differing personal impact of the child’s autism....for father, the most effect on them of their child’s autism was through the stress experienced by their wives” (6).

Also referenced was the work of Richard Lathe (7). In his book He introduces us to the “triad of impairments” as presented by Wing and Gould and quoted in Richard Lathe’s text. (8). As Richard Lather explains “the criteria for autism are now widely accepted to involve anomalies in three central categories, known as the triad of impairments as set out by Wing and Gould:

- Deficits or marked abnormalities in social interaction
- Deficits or marked abnormalities in communications including language
- Restricted and often repetitive behavioural repertoires, interests and activities.

(9). Lathe documents the lively debate that still surrounds ASD on its causes and treatments. He reviews such themes as genetics and epigenetics, the presence of metals in the diet and our cultural idea of gender in an attempt to dissect the debate surrounding ASD.

During the last four years the researcher has been undergoing training as a Transactional Analysis Psychotherapist. As part of the research project, and following the one hour interview, several key concepts in TA were revisited in an attempt to give an insight into the project from a TA perspective. More specifically Franklin Ernst’s model known as the OK (10) and the work of Schiff et all in examining symbiosis (11). Finally, the research references James Orton’s article on ‘Contributions to Strokes’ (12) which shows how some people are able to maintain their existence in a stroke deprived world. By visiting these fundamental TA models in the context of the project, what is essentially an interpretive phenomenological piece of research gains some structural analysis.

In the final discussion, reference is also made to Hamisher's work on banal script and how expectations of the role of father in a broader cultural sense may colour an individual's definition of what a father should or shouldn't be (13). This view is reinforced once more by Gray in that expected gender roles appear to also have affect on how different sex parents react to their child's autism, with father more likely to suppress feelings(14)

As TA was to be used as a mechanism of analysis in the broader discussion, a brief search for papers on autism and TA was made. One particular paper Maria Teresa Romanini is referenced (15). In this article she introduces the concept of "frustration marasmus" (16). This represents the frustration experienced by the autistic child in needing to build attachment with those around them.

On a personal note, my reasons for choosing to conduct this research are rooted in my own interest in the father as both an actual physical figure and the internal model of father referenced by the individual. As a father myself and also an only son in a family of female siblings, the subject has particular resonance. Throughout my studies I have been intrigued at the role of the father from a TA perspective.

The co-researcher's expectations of what his son should have been, resonates with my own experience of the expectations of my father and mother and how these have influenced my own life and my sense of identity. Furthermore, I explored how much of the father's relationship with his son is mirrored by his own relationship with his father. This point is fundamental to the project as this reinforces the unique nature of the co-researcher's experience.

The findings hopefully represent a unique insight into the experience of one father. Referencing TA models may help in future studies of this type. The project, however, never sets out to offer any comparative study in the same way that many of the previous research projects have done. It has been the main thrust of this research to capture one individual's experience of the world in such a way as to help them make more sense of it and to tell their story. It is the belief of the researcher that, by offering up this interpretation of the co-researcher's story, will empower them to reinforce their perceived role and place real value on their experience; a value that appears to have been lost or at the very least degraded. The most important factor in this project, therefore, is not the condition or the son but the impact both these have on the co-researcher's world.

The aim of this project, therefore, was to research the experience of the father of a child diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder specifically focussing on:

- The day to day experience of the co-researcher and the impact that his son's condition has on his life

- The impact that his son's condition has had upon his expectations of what he expected to be his relationship with his son.

Whilst the parameters of the research were set out clearly at the beginning of the project, it must be said that the key themes revealed themselves on the journey. One of the fundamental findings and a substantial section of the final discussion is directed towards understanding more the relationship of the co-researcher with his own father and how the subsequent feelings of abandonment have affected his relationship with his son.

Methodology

For the purpose of publication, all names have been changed, besides my own, in order to protect the true identity of the client. The co-researcher (David) is a male professional worker in his early forties. He was married at the age of 30 to a woman two years his senior (Wendy). Within nine months of the marriage they had their first child, a girl (Sally). She is healthy and developing as expected and in line with her peers. Their second child, a boy (Jon), was born soon after the first child. Jon was subsequently diagnosed with Autistic Spectrum Disorder. The co-researcher was a previous work colleague of the researcher. In particular, the researcher has acted as a career coach briefly for the co-researcher and it was through this relationship that the researcher was made aware of the co-researcher's son.

This research was based upon a one hour interview loosely structured around an exploration of two key points of impact on the co-researcher. The first was the impact that his son's condition has on his day to day life as a father and the second was on the impact his son had on his expectations of what a father should be. Within this broad approach the researcher allowed for the co-researcher to guide the interview whilst at the same time the interviewer assisted the co-researcher in specifically addressing feelings. As an interpretative approach this was important.

The methodology was rooted in a phenomenological qualitative approach. The interest of the researcher was in understanding as much as possible the co-researcher's unique experience of his son's condition and how this had been both received by him and had impacted on his life. No attempt was made, therefore, in developing any comparative element to the research. This would remain uniquely David's story.

As I wanted to explore the impact of David's son's condition on him, a conscious effort was made not to read around or research anything concerning ASD or any previous works dealing with a similar subject prior to the interview. This was done in an attempt to ensure that the central one hour interview was not unnecessarily contaminated with preconceptions of the condition and its impact from the

researcher. Besides, this study never set out to offer a detailed exploration of ASD but a snap shot of how one son's diagnosed condition impacts on the life of one father.

I met with David prior to the one hour interview. During this meeting David was made fully aware of the nature of the research. In particular he was expressly asked for his permission to conduct the research and for his participation. This involved explaining the role of the co-researcher and also agreeing a mutual ethical contract around the research proposal which was signed by both parties. In doing so David was awarded a guarantee of professional conduct and ethical protection throughout the process.

The subsequent one hour interview was conducted in a meeting room on the site of David's workplace after the work day had been concluded. This allowed, in the first instance, for David not to be too inconvenienced. Second, it was important that the interview was not conducted at David's home as the presence of family and in particular his son may have had an impact on the nature of the interview. An option to source a neutral venue for both parties was considered but the convenience of the worksite and the fact that the co-researcher felt more relaxed there meant that this option was not actioned. David was comfortable in a work setting and the room was both professional and confidential.

The interview was taped and a transcript drafted from the recording. In transcribing the interview every effort was made to ensure that the general flow of speech was reflected in the written transcript. This means that the transcript may sometimes read a little clumsily and hesitant. At times the reader may even believe that the extracts of the transcript are littered with spelling mistakes. The transcript proved rich in potential for analytical themes. It is acknowledged that further reading and a return to the transcript could reveal even more. Due to the scope of the project, however, this research focuses analysis on a small number of key themes.

As the research was part of a four year study in Transactional Analysis, models from this psychotherapy discipline are also referenced. In particular this involved a discussion around the OK Corral (17), symbiosis (18) and strokes (19). By doing so it is hoped that the researcher is able to offer some structure to analyse what is essentially a unique interpretive project.

Finally, in the reflexive section of the final discussion, the researcher has crafted a poem that encapsulates his experience of David's story and in particular the abandonment that resonates throughout.

Findings and analysis

The nature of the narrative and general observations

Throughout this section reference is made to the transcript of the interview. This original transcript remains confidential and extracts have been amended to protect the anonymity of the client.

I was keenly aware of the reticent nature of the conversation that I had with David. He stumbled over his words and, at times almost stuttered out his replies. I tried to reflect this in the transcript. Throughout the whole of the interview David's body language remained largely closed, almost bashful. Although he was able to reveal a substantial degree of himself and his experience, his delivery seemed almost apologetic at times.

The impact of the day to day experience

A pattern of behaviour had been established in his day to day routine with his son that comforted David, enabling him to anchor into an element of stability and continuity in a sometimes volatile daily life. This routine helped David to define his role as a father. David knows that Jon finds comfort in his routine and in doing so this also soothes David's own anxiety.

David- Well at the beginning of the day he'll wake up andSo he's..he's in his room and basically he wakes up, and he shouts 'mum dad' ..it's five six in the morning, something like that, so we go and get him out.. get him some breakfast and er.. he usually goes down stairs and puts his video on and runs around the house it will get him ..get's in the bath....

David, however, became anxious about any incident that threatened to interrupt this routine. A visit to the dentist had been particularly traumatic and David dreaded the prospect of a second visit. Also, the positive changes that he had noticed in Jon pointed to a future where he would gradually gain more independence from his parents.

David defined a division of labour in the household between his wife and himself. This allowed him to define his role more closely to that which he had experienced of his own father; the breadwinner, the protector of the family and the fighter for the family's rights. This division of labour, however, has also allowed him to face outwards in coming to terms with the situation, seeing his wife as the one who faces inwards in understanding the condition more and facing Jon.

David - But Wendy has researched into them a lot and sort of said ..explained to me as an overview what they are... so...I suppose am..!

suppose I could accuse myself of coping out and letting her advise..advise me of it but the thing is she.. you know..she gets into that and I come to work to earn the money to.. to...to...to sustain the family ...I don't want to make it sound like I'm coping out because I obviously care

Throughout the interview David switched from himself as a frame of reference, to the third person. Moving from 'I' to 'you' almost seamlessly appeared to place distance immediately between the emotional David and the rational David. So the Third person 'you' enables David to develop a shield that contains the emotional impact of his situation.

David- When we got the diagnosis, when.. we... were told he could get into school but he's not in school. But you have to deal with it coz you can't let it... you can't let it effect you because if you give into it...you don't.. if you give into it you're going to be a wreck and you're not able to deal with what needs to be done.... So I suppose what I'm saying is that you need to put a lid on it ..I need to.. you need to keep a lid on it so that you can..

David is profoundly affected by the lack of communication between him and his son, a key feature of the condition. This also reminds David of his past sadness at not connecting with his own father.

David - ...with Jon... you just got this ..completely blank expression. He'll sit..he'll sit watching his videos and he has done since.. as long as I can remember, on fast forward.. anything just fast forward. And you can walk in and you can s... you can go right up to his face an...and.. make eye contact and it's as if you're invisible. And .. two or three.. two times out of ten you might get.. some reaction

This lack of connection is the source of real fear for David

... the only real scare I have going forward now, is that if.. if there's something a matter with him ..like he's hurt himself.. you don't know..you just don't know what's the matter. There's no way he can tell you..

This has led to David becoming extremely sensitive to his son's behaviour in an effort to reach out to his son and complete a connected transaction between them. David acknowledges now that, not only are the incidences of these connections becoming more common, he has also learned to understand when his son is reaching out to communicate. This has been the source of real joy.

David- ... there was a point I remember about eighteen months ago which was.. really, really good... it was probably his first attempt at humour with me and he was taking the piss out of me and it was really, really good because yeh.. it was a deliberate act to wind Dad up and that was so

good. Erm.. I've had a back operation you might know, and I find it difficult to do things . So whenever I have to get down on my hands and knees to plug something out or pick something up, which always happens with kids cos they leave things on the floor, I hadn't realised but.. I'm always sort of going 'oh ah or a sigh or something when I have to bend down. And I was sat at the desk one day and an..an.. and Sally had said something and Jon turned round to me and looked at me and made the noise that I make., and it was like, 'you little devil he's known all along' .. and then he ran off laughing, he was.. it was a deliberate act and that was that was the best.. and it was like for a minute someone had turned the light on.

Jim- Wow!

David- And then it was off again.

Jim- And how did you feel for that..

David- Well you can't express in words can you, it's elation it's fantastic.

...

Jim- I mean yu ..yu.. you live on that now don't you.

David- Of course yeh.. yeh.. But there was.. but since that..I mean that was the first ..the first real instance but since then..... there are times when he comes in deliberately antagonising you in a.. playful way, to react and I know its that's his way of trying to communicate with you and have a laugh with you .

The impact on expectations

In understanding the impact of his son's condition on David's expectations of his father son relationship, he admits to an element of denial.

....maybe I'm just hanging out a big hope out there but even now...right now at this moment in time..twelve years on..I still..I'm still not convinced he's autistic maybe that's me in denial but I'm still thinking that one day this lad is going to wake up there and join with us. And I think that might a just.. a just ..I almost can't not accept that that will happen. I just....I don't want I don't to think that it's maybe me being in denial ...I think..I've just got something in the back of my mind that one day things will work out.

This denial is related to how the condition betrays David's expectations of what his son could have been.

Jim- Tell me a little bit of what you thought his full potential would be...?

David- To be a normal kid and enjoying normal life, going out and playing football in the park and having a kick around.. Growing up erm.. going to school and getting a job, you know.. doing the things that everybody does.. that you have an ideal of doing you know.. y ... you know getting a job, having a family, and..and all the trimmings an and .. disappointed that he will be denied that.

I sense a feeling of guilt that this expectation would manifest itself in disappointment in his son. David is careful to qualify this sincerely by explaining that his son's happiness is what matters to him most. He faces the sadness of the loss of those expectations internally, declaring that the happiness of his son is what ultimately should matter. David has invested so much in trying to understand the happiness of someone else and yet feels a sense of betrayal and guilt for wishing that things could have been so much more in line with his expectations.

Happiness for David is a significant concept. In the first instance, as documented above, there is the happiness abandoned of expectations of his fantasised relationship with his son which has become a source of guilt. This is compounded by the fact that David has had to challenge his own perceptions of happiness and become more empathically attuned to what it is that makes Jon happy in the present.

David..So with Jon.. my immediate worry and concern was that...erm... was he going to be happy?.....Of course.. I realise that that's.. what I've got set in my head for him.. But .. you know..if he.. is the happiest person in the world ... watching his..Bob the Builder videos for the rest of his life does it matter? Because he's happy? And that's where I am now.

Jim- Does it matter to you?

David-...It doesn't matter .. whatever he does as long as he's happy as far as I'm concerned. There will always be a little .. a little bit there thinking ..I just wish..you know .. me and him could go and do things together like.. like..you know .. potentially other parents do.

In defining the impact of Jon's ASD on David's expectations of fatherhood, David's narrative revealed a small but fundamentally important experience of the relationship he had with his own father.

David- ... My idea of father was something. to be like my father was except... and more besides.. My father, I think, was a great father . He did.. everything he could for his kids er.. you know.. he did everything The.. but you know we were pretty much working class family . He had to work hard. He did.. twelve hour shifts doing what he did ..and he worked at ICI in th I th in the kilns. He was a Chief Bricklayer but he was actually

a stone mason? And so.. when he came in from work he'd go out again building fire places and gate posts and whatever else for other people.

Jim- can you remember how you felt as a child?

David- Yeh I was gutted because I couldn't spend the time I wanted to with him. And that's why I set out down this route for me I want to spend all my time with my kids . Make doing ... you know ,.. doing what I could for them my dad couldn't do for us. I don't hold it against my dad because I know why he did it, but.. erm..

Jim- You were still gutted.

David- Yeh. and I suppose that the.. that's the root of my initial thoughts with Jon 'Oh God we can't do.. the things we should be doing'.

David's expectations for his relationship with Jon are very much tied into his internal definition of what a father should be. This is rooted in his experience as a child himself. It is clear that, very early on in his own childhood, he came to terms with his father's absence. This left feelings of abandonment; feelings that seem soothed through the rationalisation of his father's behaviour, I suspect from his mother.

I felt that David tried to reconcile this abandonment by elevating the value of his father's role as breadwinner and helper of others and in doing so devalued the worth of his relationship with his father and subsequently his own value as a son. By doing so he would feel selfish and shamed for asking for his need for an exclusive relationship with his father to be fulfilled. David's feelings of abandonment by his father would have been reinforced somewhat in later life when his father died of cancer.

David was, therefore, caught between a definition of the perfect father that moved between the actual experience of an absent father, the rationalisation of this absence by the third person, his mother, and the child fantasy which was made up of all those elements of emotional closeness that he yearned for as a son himself from his father. David the Child felt abandoned by his father and integrated a father model from the fragments of his childhood experience.

David- ...But I sort of thought.. yeh I had a preconceived idea of what I should be doing. Cos a used to get really hung up about a lot of my friends , well not a lot of my friends, some of them or..or other people not necessarily friends, that have kids, and they just used to get about and .. palm them off carry on doing.. in..in..in it was some people who just erm... have kids. Take them to the grand parents and go off on two weeks holiday together, it's as if we can't be arsed.. with having kids. 'So why did

you have children if that's how you're going to be? 'The whole point in having children and to be a family is to be a family, you do things together.
....

His fear of abandonment is carried through to his relationship with his son. David actually embraces the thought that Jon will be dependent upon him for the rest of his life. In fact this issue of abandonment strikes at the very heart of David's key emotions of emptiness, hopelessness, loss and abandonment. This sense of abandonment and the subsequent feelings of emptiness and hopelessness, begun with his father, have been a feature of other relationships prior to his marriage.

David- Yeh.. erm.... When you were younger... you obviously.... Before you were married you had.. relationships with ladies and there must have been some that didn't work out that you wanted to work out and it was the feeling inside you that.. you know.. the thought of disappointment and loss? ...hole... that's what it's like.

David, understandably, feels comforted by the prospect that Jon may be reliant on him for the rest of his life and this eases the abandonment anxiety for David. This anxiety raises its head once more at the thought of Jon becoming increasingly independent.

I can see a future where... erm... where he's with us for the rest of his life...the rest of our life. Which is... a.. some might say it's a burden I see it as a bit of a blessing because..... I don't mind having him I just want to be with him... Wendy's feeling the burden at that, and she sees it in a different way. Like she sees him,. you know she wants to make sure that he's alright and find a nice community for him to go to , one of these sheltered communities but I can't get past the.. he won't be around.. and in fact it was very difficult for me coz he goes to residential... about two or three years ago he went.. on a residential stop over on a Wednesday night.... my God, it was hard for me to let go. In fact now, he was he was there last night.... So I went up to bed last night and past his bedroom door and it was empty and it was like.. (clutches chest with hand and breaths out quick) .. you know.. I still feel it.. even now.

Jim- Yeh?

David- It doesn't upset me but just get a bit of a.

Jim- Doesn't upset you?

David- Well ok.. a a a mmm maybe a a a..(breath out again) it does, it must do ...There's an emptiness..

This emptiness is key to understanding the true impact on David's feelings of his son's condition. The condition plays to his own feelings of loss, hopelessness and emptiness. David defines the condition through his own experience as a child, his need to put things right in order to avoid abandonment and ultimately his self blame for not managing to do this and not managing to keep control of the situation.

David- ...when I say you know, it disappointed me about Jon in the future.. it's almost as if.. being told like I was told that my parents were gonna die because my dad was gonna die because he had cancer. And he died and and you like phew... and that's the sort of feeling that hits you. You sort of... utter.. emptiness the hole.

David- Oh there's a loss yeh it it's emptiness.. and.. it it stays and then it it goes and other things replace it and you get better, and then.. further down the line there'll be something else.....Yeh total. Out of control, loss, emptiness whatever you call it. Just a horrible feeling of, you just can't do anything to help this.....

Jim- What's behind that though?

David- ...Just a horrible feeling of helplessness. You can't do anything about it, it's out of your control. You.. i.. it's almost as if if you see him really suffering you'd rather take it on yourself than have him suffer it.....

This feeling of helplessness or lack of ability to help and solve, to put right , runs through all the interview with David. It is perhaps most evident when he discusses an incidence where Jon self harms:

David-.....I felt.. scared? I felt.. inadequate because I couldn't do anything to stop it! I felt erm..... yes just completely useless.... with Jon it was biting his hand really bad....powerless, powerless, useless...because there was nothing I could do. ...And you just felt. .you just.. inadequate, and sad.

So David is impacted by his son's autism in several ways. His day to day experience has meant that David has found, a sense of routine despite the sometimes volatile nature of his son's behaviour. In his search to connect and build a relationship with his son David has had to alter is expectations of the father son relationship that he had modelled largely from his own experience of his relationship with his father. There seems a profound anxiety rooted in his feelings of past and future abandonment. From this emanates feelings of emptiness, helplessness, loss of control and powerlessness.

Discussion

Findings in the light of previous research.

When specifically referencing the body of research on ASD and the impact on parents' it is clear that this project offers little in the way of a comparator. That said, it does reinforce some of the historical findings. For example, there is a clear parental division of labour in David's house. This is something Gray identifies in his research as partly a product of stereotypical gender roles (20). Hamisher writes in a similar vein when discussing the concept of a banal script in male sex roles: "A man is strong and solid and potent' this is probably the most typical banal script message and usually contains a clause which states that feelings and uncertainty are weak and unmasculine....'the rock' the man who is consistently in control, of himself and situations and who is rarely known to reveal helplessness or sentimentality" (21). This quote explains a great deal when observing David's approach to his sons' condition. His use of third person in verbalisation, the parental division of labour in an effort to suppress feelings and remain in control are obvious throughout the interview.

This banal script, however, is pierced when David eventually talks genuinely about his feelings of hopelessness, emptiness and powerlessness, all which reinforce both Hamisher's and Gray's findings. Furthermore, the project did not examine the impact on parents per se. It, therefore, did not attempt to build a comparator between mother and father.

Transactional Analysis

Franklin Ernst's (22) model known as the OK Corral reveals the four possible life positions we adopt and this acts as a starting point from which to develop Adult to Adult transactions. In TA the only authentic life position is that of "I'm OK and you're OK".

David's perception of his relationship with his son has been a journey from the position of I-U- through to an increasing acceptance of his son's condition and a movement towards the occasional authentic position of I+U+. When David talks about his feelings of hopelessness and helplessness, especially when faced with a new challenge in his son's life such as a second visit to the dentist, initially his position is one of I-U-. He finds both Jon and himself in a place where neither are OK. This is swiftly dealt with through his Controlling Parent moving in, placing David in an I+U- position, especially when dealing externally with authorities and fighting for his son's rights. Furthermore, at home, David takes control but understands that Jon remains not OK.

Finally, in those moments when both David and Jon connect and when David talks about the joy he feels when discussing his son, David arrives in an I+U+ place. In this position David accepts fully his son for whom he is and values totally. In this position David still remains Parent but in a positive and nurturing sense, only wanting his son to find happiness in his own way. Interestingly, there are small glimpses of David adopting the fourth position of I-U+. This can be seen in David's sense of abandonment when discussing his son's increased independence and is related to his symbiotic relationship discussed below.

The interview traces a strong feeling of abandonment that appears to have transferred from David's relationship with his own father, onto his relationship as a father to his son Jon. In understanding this further it is helpful to discuss this abandonment in the context of a second order symbiosis (23). Using this model it is suggested that David excludes his son's Parent Ego State at P2. This may be out of necessity in that Jon's condition inhibits his ability to develop a functioning Parent ego state. In doing so David builds a symbiosis that is meant to encourage his son to Parent David's own somatic Child in P1 from his son's P1 and A1. By doing this David hopes to soothe his feelings of abandonment that he felt so strongly as a child and which recur throughout his relationships since.

It is natural, therefore, for David to see his son's reliance upon him as a good thing. Whilst all parents would feel a certain degree of upset and abandonment when their child becomes independent of them, for David this is all the more poignant. David searches in his somatic Child to fill that emotional void that he yearned to be filled by his own father. Jon's dependence on his father, therefore, sees Jon playing that role. Ironically Jon may have become the emotional parent in this relationship. The question of course is, how developed is Jon's P1 and A1? As there is no research on this aspect of ego states, therefore, any conclusions from this must be extremely tentative.

It became clear during the interview that David had learned to expect few direct strokes from his son. Many individuals learn to live on a small amount of strokes like water in a desert. They have become adept at wringing the maximum value out of their strokes. In David's case, Jon's ASD meant that David remained constantly vigilant for any indication that Jon was acknowledging David's

existence and consequently stroking him. In understanding this, James Orton's article on 'Contributions to Strokes' (24) shows how some people are able to maintain their existence in a stroke deprived world. This is exactly what David does.

Second hand strokes (25) Orton defines as those treasured memories that we often reference as individuals. Memories perhaps best illustrate the power of a transaction that includes a stroke. These have currency and can be used again and again when we recall the memory: "...compulsively lonely individuals repeat to themselves statements made to them and relive intimate episodes of the past...Many people are tempted to live in the past following divorce, death of a spouse or in old age"(26). David holds his own historical catalogue of a small number of treasured moments when he was actually seen by his son. These he references, wringing the maximum value from them.

Orton then discusses what he terms as "Fairy Strokes". These are the 'daydreams or fantasies"(27) that we all tap in to. We often forget our capacity to stroke ourselves through the use of our imagination. We can all recall times when we have fantasised the happy ending to a particular situation we find ourselves in or how we would have loved to be treated. "The use of Fairy Strokes may be a measure of one's ability to survive in a stroke barren world"(28). Occasionally David still allows himself to fantasise about what happiness would look like for Jon.

Reflexive analysis

I sensed that David didn't want to lose control of the process. This loss of control resonated with me as it had been an issue in my own life. I felt a level of anxiety about the possibility of losing control of the interview process and this may have been one of the reasons for my own tentative style in asking the questions. As part of this I would surmise that I mirrored the David's verbalisation, partly empathically but also in an attempt to reinforce feelings of safety. Basically, we met together in a safe space that allowed us both to maintain control and soothe our mutual anxiety. It also gave permission to reveal and nurtured a normalisation of hidden feelings in David. The Child in me at times, however, felt an element of jealousy in that my own feelings remained in the background of this process

When discussing transference, at times I felt that I played the role of David's Child and yet at other times, especially when David opened up and talked of his feelings of helplessness and emptiness, I reverted to the role of Nurturing Parent. This is a familiar role in my experience of psychotherapy and coaching.

In the exploration of David's expectations of what he wanted his son to be I referenced my own issues as a son. The expectations of my parents before my birth have had a profound effect upon my own life. David gave me an insight into,

not only the sense of guilt felt as a parent for wanting your child to be what he obviously can't be, but also the sense of bereavement and mourning that a parent must encounter for that expected child that did not come.

I felt genuine frustration at times with David's ability to divert from feelings and emotions to narrative and I believe that this was evident in some of my questioning.

David's expression of the emptiness, helplessness and powerlessness impacted greatly on me. The recent diagnosis of my wife's secondary cancer and the feelings of emptiness, helplessness and powerlessness that I felt and still do at times mean that I truly did understand and could fully empathise with this aspect of David's experience. David was eventually able to articulate those emotions in such a way as to speak for me as well. In this sense his demeanour, his verbalisation and facial expression combined perfectly in summarising the emptiness of loss and powerlessness that I feel when confronted with the prognosis of my wife's condition.

From this place of empathy I constructed a poem of David's experience of his son's condition that I felt encapsulated his feelings of abandonment and struggle to be seen.

A silent room, he was not there
Alone I felt a childhood scare.
A time gone by when I was small
Waiting in a lonely hall.
Waiting for a father's face
To touch my cheek in full embrace.
With your bricks you built for all
But you also built another wall
One that small hands could not climb
And gave up trying over time.
My absent father did impress
Feelings of loss and helplessness.
Once more those feelings touch my heart
Now son and father are apart.
So I rejoice when Jon is here
He laughs with me and soothes my fear
And while I know those times are few
He does what you could never do.
But you only did what you thought right.
You earned a wage and worked the night
Provider and protector too
All reinforced my love for you.
But all the time you did for me
I was the son you couldn't see.

Relevance

From the outset an effort was made to avoid contaminating the central interview. It was important that the story that was told in the interview by the co-researcher was as free from the preconceptions of previous research as possible. As mentioned earlier, the researcher, therefore, did not attempt to read around the condition of ASD or access any research concerning the impact of ASD on parents. It was felt that this approach allowed for me as the researcher to be more open to the story that unfolded. In this sense the interview was more a co-creation with the researcher, on the whole, allowing the story to unfold rather than directing it too much towards any preconceived questions or conclusions.

This key strength, however, could equally be a weakness. Lack of knowledge of the subject did, on occasion, lead to the researcher guiding the interview towards their own 'comfort zone' of knowledge. The researcher's own training in TA psychotherapy, whilst a strength in the processes, did occasionally decide the direction of some of the interview questions.

Furthermore, no attempt was made to pre-structure the interview process. This allowed both parties the freedom to take the time where they felt they wanted. The researcher's experience of interviewing clients in a psychotherapy environment aided this approach. What is important here, therefore, is the psychotherapy training. Researchers who do not have this competence may find this unstructured approach difficult to manage.

On an intellectual level, this approach may not appear to be rigorous. In defence it is argued that this is the very nature of qualitative, phenomenological and interpretive research. It was never intended to be a comparator. Its value may lie in the use of structures later in the discussion to suggest how the experience could be contained and understood from a perspective other than that of the father. So we end up with a diversity of perspectives.

As with all projects of this size, it is hard to achieve all that you may set out to do so, especially in the light of the original aims. It was intended to capture the unique experience of the impact of a son's condition on his father. The project introduced a number of themes that could be explored in greater depth but the restrictions of the project would not allow this. There are two comments that can be made about this. First, the transcript from the one hour interview with the co-researcher is rich in content and there are many further themes that beg to be investigated. There is enough material in this transcript alone for the researcher to produce a more comprehensive picture of the co-researcher's experience. Second, the I could have returned to the David and developed a longer relationship around the research. This would have enabled them to dig deeper and wider into some of the themes discussed. In doing so, the project would have probably represented a far more comprehensive and accurate picture.

That said, the project certainly achieved the aim of opening up a door to the world of the co-researcher. It has made a start in unravelling David's unique story and illustrated how the impact of even a condition such as ASD in David's son will be defined as much by factors such as the historical experience of David as a son himself as well as the condition itself.

There were few problems encountered in the process of the research. At times it proved particularly difficult to find the time for both parties to meet. However, it was only necessary for the researcher and co-researcher to meet on a small number of occasions. Furthermore, whilst effort was made to review previous research on the subject, it did appear that the specific approach adopted for the project had not been pursued in its own right. There have been many interviews undertaken of parents' with autistic children, but these have been conducted as part of wider and comparative studies. Whilst in one sense this could be perceived as a problem, it actually aided in efforts to limit the contamination of the original interview and the subsequent analysis offered.

Any piece of research and its conclusions will be guided ultimately by the methodology. In this case, the method of open interview allowed for the co-researcher, in turn to open up in a way that he had not done so before. If the interview had taken on a more robust structure the outcome may have been easier to build comparators from but this would have been at the expense of the quality of the recorded experience. This approach allowed David to tell his story as he experienced it. Had I interviewed David's wife as well for example, my interpretation of David's interview would have been qualified by observations and comments made by a third party. This would have, no doubt, de-valued David's narrative. Research such as this, therefore, will always come with a 'health warning'.

It would be difficult to understand how the methodology of the project could be modified bearing in mind its aims. Perhaps the interview could have been conducted in a completely neutral environment, although David was comfortable in a work setting which allowed him to ground himself. A possible study of the body language may have revealed other nuances, especially in the case of David as his body language was very closed and subtle. This could have been achieved by using video tape and would certainly be a consideration for future projects such as this.

The project intimates at a rich seam of potential future work. First, in the case of this specific piece of research, further interviews with the co-researcher in the light of this project could be undertaken. This would, no doubt deepen and widen David's recorded experience. Second, it appears that this approach to assessing the impact of ASD on parents may be new to the study of ASD. It may, therefore, prove useful to share this approach to the wider ASD community. In the case of Transactional Analysis, a wider study of ASD and its impact on ego state

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development in parents would certainly contribute to the discussion concerning TA, and its application in understanding how diagnosed mental health disorders impacts upon other family members. Finally, from a qualitative research perspective, the study could add to the greater body of qualitative research in reinforcing the value and importance of everyone's view of the world as it impacts on them.

In concluding, I thank David for sharing his experience and allowing me to tell his story. It was a pleasure to be able to articulate some one else's view of the world from their frame of reference. If nothing else, I hope that this project has helped to reveal how our individual and unique responses to the challenges that our lives encounter are a product of our individual and unique upbringing. David's story, in this sense, will never be repeated and is, therefore, a real treasure.

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