

Using psychoanalytic concepts to understand a father-son relationship: The importance of biography

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Overview

- Qualitative interviewing
- Psychoanalytic theory
- Father-son case study (interview with 'Sam')
- Data analysis: constructing and defending masculine subject positions
- Critical reflections

Qualitative Interviewing

- Critique: researcher-led; artificial; abstract responses...
- But, interviews can be designed to elicit rich, person-centred accounts
- Hollway & Jefferson (2000): Free Association Narrative Interview
- Relevance of early experience to current 'self'
- Utility of psychoanalytic concepts re identities, relationships etc. – especially re families



Psychoanalytic theory

Psychoanalytic social psychology:

- Henriques et al (1986/1996)
- *Hollway (1989; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000)
- Walkerdine (1987)
- *Frosh (e.g. Frosh et al., 2002)
- Parker (1997)
- Billig (1997)
- *Georgaca (2005)

... and social science:

Connell (1994); Craib (1987); *Gadd (2003)
psychosocial studies



Psychoanalytic theory

Psychoanalytic theories

- rich material on parent-child relations
- importance of early experience
- explicitly gendered
- Freud: father-centred model (Oedipus complex), but father-son relationship ambivalent
- Object relations: pre-Oedipal mother = original, strongest relationship which is then repudiated (in part)
- Lacan: phallogocentrism, but phallus = 'imposture'



Psychoanalytic theory: Caution!

- Avoiding 'wild analysis'
- Begin with induction
- Use selectively – must fit with data
- Avoid essentialist, psychologistic and pathologising deployment - use discipline of discursive sensibility

- PA useful for tracing investment in particular discourses and subject positions in light of biography



Father-son case study (interview with 'Sam')

Free association narrative interview format
(Hollway & Jefferson, 2000):

- History of father-son relationship (earliest memory to present day)
- Open, narrative questions ('Tell me about...')
- Free association ('What comes immediately to mind when you think about your father?')



Father-son case study (interview with 'Sam')

- 'Sam' and father both interviewed once
 - Sam = former university student, aged 21, heterosexual, white, interested in academic career, father from working-class background
 - Interview lasted 1 hour approx.; conducted in a university room
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- Informed consent etc.



Data analysis: constructing and defending masculine subject positions

- Initial, bottom-up thematic analysis then informed by relevant (but not pre-ordained) concepts from DA and PA
- Focus on Sam's chain of associations, repetitions, patterns...
- Informed by my own engagement and puzzling over the text



Data analysis...

Key pattern:

- A refusal to criticise father much despite ostensibly serious and painful omissions, transgressions and malpractices;
- Instead, father's shortcomings minimised, rationalised and counterbalanced.
- Also, lack of emotional response by Sam re father's failings, despite his self-positioning as emotionally articulate

Pattern can be partly explained with reference to discursive resources and practices (e.g. ideological dilemma between loyalty and betrayal; a rational masculine assessment etc.)...but, can also be read as conscious effort to ward off (unconscious) resentment of father with roots in early experience of loss, and an attempt to defend against the guilt experienced at assaults on the father.

The resentment, however, cannot be totally expelled; indeed, it is suggested by the holding back of strong emotional responses to painful experiences of loss and abandonment; and it returns throughout the text and disrupts a coherent, balanced narrative ('coerced'; 'forced' etc.; critique of father idealization)



Elements of a gestalt

1. Father malpractices – various examples
2. Repression of emotional reactions re malpractices, some directly compromising Sam
3. Anxieties about betraying father
4. Hesitations re critique of father
5. Rationalising father's failings
6. Counterbalancing father's failings with positive features
7. Early father emotional withdrawal
8. Disidentification from father/ heg. masculinity – mother preference
9. Rejection of father idealisation by other sons



Data analysis

PA can link the elements [including discursive practices] together via operation of the unconscious, the other other which speaks the subject - the elements are presented to perform defensive functions, prioritising the rational over the emotional and protecting the speaker from confronting hostile feelings re father, (but which are nonetheless manifested?)

Analysis which follows works up psychoanalytic gestalt via

- Ambivalence towards father – oscillating portrayals of father
- Guilt re unconscious resentment – explains compulsive rationalisation
- Melancholia re distant father – explains lack of emotional response (depressive position?)



Data analysis

1. Father malpractices:

- father's apparent declaration of love, immediately renounced (Sam aged 3/4)
- Father being aggressive with revered mom; Sam intervenes (aged 3/4)
- house 'falling down'/ no holidays/ utilities compromised
- Sam 'coerced into sport' (repeated)
- Sam 'dragged through the shit' (re father's business)
- police visit where Sam has to bail out father with money for fine



Data analysis

5. Rationalisation

P:Um (.) well, I mean, there's the whole sort of monetary thing which has always been a big problem, um I mean, he struggled to um (.) to kind of get out of [area] and make a decent life in the north of [city] I guess, um he's really struggled to put us sort of all through private education. John [brother] actually had to leave because we couldn't sort of support it any more.

BG: Right.

P:Um (.) but I mean, there's a lot of stuff that's suffered I think as a result of that 'cos it's so expensive to send your kids to that, even when you're on assisted places where you work as (COOS), you know, when the Labour Government came in, the subsidies for that kind of reduced quite substantially anyway (.) um so I'm told, um (.) but yeah, there's been quite a lot of compromises because of that obviously so, you know, we didn't have holidays for ten/fifteen years, you know, the house kind of fell in bits, um (.) still is in bits (laughs) um (.) and you know, it's (.) it's just little bits like that, the house has nearly been repossessed kind of a few times and it's, you know...[p8-9]



Data analysis

6. Counterbalancing:

so there's always that kind of stuff happening with my dad, um (.) he cocks up a lot where there's (.) where there's that kind of thing going on, but (.) but on the flip side of it, as I say, he does kind of look after me and my brothers and (.) wherever he can. Um (.) I mean, he's bought me a fantastic guitar for my twenty first birthday, you know, and he does listen to sort of what you want and so on and so forth, um but yeah, he just kind of cocks up and doesn't (.) he doesn't really think about, he just sees it as unimportant I guess and um (.) [p10-11]



Data analysis

7. Father's early emotional withdrawal:

S: um (.) I remember when I was really young, he had an argument with my mum and um (.) he was getting quite irate and me and sort of a bunch of friends went down sort of (.) tried to sort all that out (.) 'cos it was getting quite heated. I can't for the life of me remember what any of the details were so =

BG:= How old were you, do you think?

P: That would have been really quite young. I'd have been sort of four years old/three years old, um (.) I remember that, um (.) other stuff, um (.) there was one interesting thing I remember about him, kind of **all the time**, its (.) it's quite a weird one, again I was quite young, um (.) and I remember I was sort of half asleep, half awake and um he came sort of sat on my bed and he was like, 'oh, precious boy', thinking I was asleep and then I sort of turned around and he sort of tried to turn it round and make it look like it was a bit of a joke and that so, again, that's kind of one of the masculine traits I guess he's been trying to hand down and (.) whether successfully or not, I don't know (laughs), um ... [p7]



Data analysis

9. Rejection of father idealisation by other sons:

BG: Okay, last question. Any final thoughts on contemporary father-son relationships?

P: Um (.) [material omitted] there are friends of mine, it's just seems very kind of over the top how attached to their dads they are, um (.) they come out with all kinds of weird and wonderful stuff about, you know, how perfect their father is and so on and so forth, I think that's, that's quite an interesting thing, you know, I think, I think you should really look to see the positives in people, but I think to just blind yourself to the negatives is a little bit foolish and I think um (.) I think men, yeah, do sometimes tend to do that with their dads.

BG: So what do you think your friends might be glossing over? What kind of issues?

P: Um (.) I don't know, I guess (.) I guess every father-son relationship has very different kind of issues so, you know, with mine, there was the emotional containment. I think that's probably one that does (.) kind of run throughout as I've said just now, you know, that I don't think men have got really a grip of how to be emotionally supportive of one another and their families, not to the same degree that women have emancipated themselves, um (.) so I think (.) I think a lot of men perhaps do struggle with that still and you do see it because um (.) the only way they can (.) a lot of sort of people I know can express themselves in any affective ways by going out, getting hammered and you know, um (.) (laughs) just going off on one, um going absolutely wild, um kind of losing your senses, but I don't think that's perhaps the best way to deal with it, um you know, I do like to go out and whatnot, but I think you've got to take care of your head a lot more and I don't think men are taught to do that very well, um so I suspect that's fundamental tension in father-son relationships, um (.) I also think the discipline with a lot of dads, I mean with my dad, he wasn't an authoritarian at all, he was quite, you know, he (.) he played with us nicely, occasionally he did go mad, as I say, about stupid things, but (.) but I think that's more just him trying to contain himself and then it all flits out, um but you do, you do hear about these horrendous fathers, don't you, who are um disciplinarian and um like to give their sons a lot of um (.) well (.) a lot of guidelines, strict guidelines, shall we say, and I think perhaps a lot, a lot of men do defend that kind of dad, um (.) from those kind of actions, um but I think it could be anything, kind of hegemonic 'cos that gives you this unrealistic ideal to live up to and um (.) and you know, that can do bad things I think, um so I think that's probably a problem with a lot of (.) a lot of sons.



Summary

All father-related elements identified can be understood in conjunction as a gestalt organised around defending against father hostility borne from early (and ongoing) experiences of paternal rejection and withdrawal.

The deployment of intellectualisation, rationalisations, counterbalancing, minimisations etc. , in the context of Sam's biography (where father is other and sees Sam as other), suggest a defensive function – these discursive strategies work to repress guilt and anxieties regarding resentment of the father.



Critical reflections

- Speculative quality to psychoanalytic interpretations
- 'Flooding' with analyst categories
- Anxiety about slips into essentialism
- Reflexivity: my responses to Sam (and his father)
— based on my own biography

