

'A8' most extreme manifestation of false self

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False self – a rare bridge between object relations and attachment theory

1 Background

Winnicott proposed false self to protect true self which may be allowed secret life but in extremis remains hidden. If conditions dire and true self not expressed, only solution is suicide.

'The False Self is represented by the whole organisation of the polite and mannered social attitude' (Winnicott, 1965: 143).

Crittenden's dynamic maturational model of attachment (DMM; Crittenden 2016) offers gradation from least (Type A1-2) to most complete externally assembled self (Type A8).

Type A8 'involve children changing attachment figures many times (i.e., multiple foster placements) or having no access to attachment figures (i.e., institutionalization) Crittenden & Landini, 2011:177).

This study assessed DMM changes in traumatised children.

2 Method

Our study of 50 children at **Mulberry Bush therapeutic residential school (UK)** used Child Attachment & Play Assessment (CAPA Farnfield, 2015) to assess attachment and developmental trauma at entry and after 2 years.

CAPA uses narrative story stem procedure – a doll play exercise. Coding based on the DMM and Winnicott (playing and reality/potential space/ false self).

Type A8 stories are dramatic with clear indications that child is making them up. Stories act as morality tales about how children 'should' behave or what happens when they are bad *'The whole family had learned not to lie'*. Crucially child takes all parts and does all voices, even imitating mannerisms/accent of interviewer. In between stories children's arousal may plummet with exhaustion before they wind up to have another attempt at giving interviewer what they think s/he wants. Effect on the interviewer/coder is of watching a play. Countertransference often boredom, despite drama as no self-story.

'Compliance is...the main feature with imitation as a speciality' (Winnicott, 1965:147)

3 Findings

Data analysis 8 way distribution of DMM patterns A8 was most common at entry (33%) and second most common at follow up (26%).

First empirical study to identify A8 as dominant strategy in either adults or children and raises important questions regarding care and treatment of children who have experienced abuse and neglect compounded by moves in the looked after system.

Conclusion

Winnicott (1965) emphasised the problems of working with the false self for psychoanalysts and social workers plus the poor outcomes despite sound practice. Main problem is that practitioner only has false self to work with, and progress only made once true self feels it is safe enough to emerge. Considerable time and effort can be wasted if the worker effectively colludes with the client's false self. This is time consuming work based on authentic relationships.



Showing the way with insight

Crittenden, P. M. 2016. Raising parents: *Attachment, representation, and treatment*, 2nd edition. London: Routledge.

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Winnicott, D.W. (1965) Ego distortion in terms of true and false self. In *The Maturational process and the facilitating environment*, International Universities Press: New York.

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