

Talking about Giving Up a Child for Adoption with Nursing Professionals

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Abstract: The subject of adoption is well-studied worldwide. In contrast, when it comes to women who give up their children for adoption, studies are far fewer. The present research aims to investigate how the myth of motherly love affects the ideas and conceptions concerning giving up a child for adoption from the perspective of the nursing professionals directly involved with these women. Also, the aim here is to interfere preventively with these professionals, raising awareness of the conceptions and prejudices related to giving up a child for adoption. Methodologically speaking, the research is designed as a qualitative research, based on the clinical method. The procedure was undertaken using group dynamics carried out with 19 professionals (nurses and nursing technicians). Participants performed a free association activity and continued with two fictional stories on giving up a child for adoption. The results indicate that the ideas derived from the myth of motherly love are indeed present in the professionals' subjectivity and influence their behavior and attitude towards these women. Additionally, financial difficulties and other factors external to these women are provided as the main reasons for giving a child for adoption. Additionally, the intention is also to minimize the negative effects on the psychic life of these women who give their children up for adoption as well as to provide these children with a more sustainable life project.

Key words: Myth of motherly love, adoption, nursing professionals, donor mothers, interactive narratives.

1. Introduction

Although some authors [1, 2] have questioned the fact that the woman's motherhood determinism is a built conception, not an innate one; currently, the idea that a mother's love towards her child is something naturally strong and is related to a biological imperative still remains. Thus, it is believed that every woman instinctively wishes to be a mother and take care of a child.

When Ref. [1] reflects upon the biological imperative and social determinism, she calls the "myth of motherly love" the phenomenon that ascribes the

motherly instinct to a woman and presupposes by nature a woman's unconditional love for her children.

Therefore, when we think of motherhood, we realize that what extent such social representations lead to discursive practices dictating that a woman should take care, love, feed and educate her children, abdicating her interests and desires for the sake of others.

Although "motherly" care and attention are considered important for any child's development, it is not true that every woman/mother is predestined to "offer" this love that children need [3]. This is the reason why, in the field of motherhood, every woman represents a particular case.

Despite all the social transformations, the woman still "carries" today certain ideals present in the social imaginary, which is, the obligation of "being a mother".

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That's why the indifferent mother, or the woman who renounces to have a child, "defies" this logic, causing a duality of ideas in society. On the one hand, one denies the idea that a mother is indifferent to her child and on the other hand, the woman who does not express such a desire of taking care of her child is understood to "suffer" from some sort of pathology.

For a better understanding and a thorough examination of the issue presented above, we carried out an innovative analysis by studying aspects related to giving up one's child other than those normally used to describe these women or their reasons for doing so. Therefore, our purpose is to investigate to what extent the myth of motherly love influences the conceptions held by health professionals on the women to whom they attend, and the effects of these ideas on their professional performance.

We believe that a thorough examination of the influence that the myth of motherly love has on the nursing professionals' conception on giving up a child for adoption will help us prevent difficulties inherent to exposing children to abuse and violence, in situations where women, for whatever reason, do not have the disposition or willingness to assume a child and are then condemned in light of their wishes.

Nursing professionals (nurses and nursing technicians) take part in a significant moment which is the birth and taking care of both the mother and the newborn. In this sense, we noticed how their verbalizations and attitudes can have a major impact on the development of this bond between mother and child. Hence, the reason we believe that it is relevant to study/intervene with this group of professionals.

In light of the above, we decided to work with these health professionals in order to raise awareness of possible preconceptions and prejudices involving giving up a child for adoption. To this effect, a number of meetings were undertaken with nursing professionals (nurses and nursing technicians) that will be discussed more thoroughly below.

2. Meetings and Group Talks with Nursing Professionals

For a month, several group activities were carried out in a public maternity in Grande São Paulo (Brazil).¹ Throughout this period four group dynamics were held with nursing professionals (nurses and nursing technicians). Each one lasted one hour and a half.

At first, the total number of participants would be sixty. Only nineteen professionals (ten nurses and nine nursing technicians) accepted to take part in the groups. All the professionals who participated in the groups were women.

The purpose of the group dynamics was to approach, discuss and reflect upon some psychological aspects concerning giving up a child for adoption to help nursing professionals who deal with this reality at work or may someday face it.

The intention was that such actions were seen, whether prophylactic or therapeutic, as enabling for the raising of awareness of issues and feelings that are experienced by the professionals when they deal with the situation of giving up a child for adoption. We also intended to show that the perception by the nursing professionals regarding the influence of the myth of motherly love on their own conceptions about women who give their child for adoption would improve the relationship and professional attitude towards these women.

The groups started with a free association activity on the issue of giving a child for adoption. Individually, each professional was asked to write down by means of free association, a word, sentence or an idea that crossed their minds when thinking of the situation. Then, each individual was asked to share and explain to the group what he had written.

Afterwards, a smaller group of professionals (three or four individuals) was asked to continue two fictional stories, designed specifically for the research and

¹ Social assistants Rosemeire M. Brito and Luisnete Mathias helped us carry out this study.

related to the dilemma of two women who expressed the wish of giving a child for adoption. The first story was about a woman with a lower socioeconomic status. The second one showed that the woman had a wealthier socioeconomic status. When the task was completed, each group was then asked to share the continuation of both stories. Additionally, a debate/reflection on both was recommended.

We must emphasize the fact that both stories were supposed to be interactive [4, 5]. In regard to the notion of interactive narrative, we used the conception of narrative as the procedure that gives access to the emotional experience and communicating it, as well as the acknowledgment that the fact itself of telling the story is an elaborating process of life—either organizing, planning it, or providing meaning to the experiences.

The narratives are interactive and structured in a transitional field [6]. Like [7] squiggle game, the purpose is to make the narratives happen in the field of playing, where the researcher's squiggle aims at reaching that of the person who is the object of the research originating the coproduction of a story that unveils something of the participant of the research. The goal of the researcher's narrative is to offer a space where the issue is easily conveyed without interfering in the outcome of the situation, allowing the participant to organize the narrative in a free and associative way, reaching the ending of the story which he believes is more appropriate.

As final task, each professional was asked, individually, in a free association activity, to write again a word, sentence or idea on giving a child for adoption. Then the participant was asked to share with the big group and explain why she had decided to keep or change what she had written, after the group reflection and debate.

3. Observation and Analysis of the Group Dynamics

The first aspect that is noticed is the nursing

professionals' difficulty of acceptance and possible resistance (of the sixty positions available, only nineteen professionals accepted to participate) making it clear that this is something difficult to reflect upon and to discuss in this type of institutional context. It is worth emphasizing that many nursing professionals had refused to participate, claiming that they were mothers and could not think about "this issue and with those women".

We also noted that a significant number of the participants associates the fact of giving up a child for adoption with financial difficulties or other aspects external to the woman, which "force" her to have this type of behavior and attitude: "A mother gives her child for adoption because she is not able to take care of the child or she has financial difficulties, she was raped or there was violation." Such data coincide with those presented by Refs. [8-10] who also consider the situation of giving a child for adoption as a consequence of poor social and/or financial conditions.

There is another recurrent aspect present in what was written down, which is a strong feeling of anxiety, despair and suffering in most women who decide to give a child for adoption: "despair", "pain, suffering; sadness". Taking into account this association with suffering, we find in most verbalizations the idea that giving contains something negative resulting from the pressure to which the woman who is led to this decision is submitted. Giving up a child for adoption has to do with having no choice, rather than a choice [11]. It is worth pointing out that the association of giving a child for adoption with a woman's fragile condition, who is "forced" to giving up her child, is also found in authors such as Ref. [12]. She normally sees them as "abandoned women" who confronted with an internal or external fragile situation are led to give their child, and such attitude relates to feelings of anxiety and distress.

It is interesting to notice the relevance of the idea that a woman who gives her child for adoption is primarily led to do so because her social and/or

economic situation is not good enough. As mentioned previously, the professionals were invited to complete two fictional stories. The beginning of the first one suggested that the woman had an underprivileged condition, and the second one suggested a more privileged situation (here the character was a university student, had a car, financial stability, private health insurance). However, some professionals did not take these aspects into account and neglected what they had read. They continued the story whereby the woman was fragile, poor and dependent. “She was unable because she had many children, each one from a different father and one of her children had health problems. She had no stable job, just odd jobs occasionally”; “She had a boyfriend and got pregnant, but when he knew she was pregnant he didn’t want to assume the paternity of the child, so she abandoned the baby. Ana’s family didn’t accept the pregnancy and abandoned her too. Ana was alone, and her financial situation made it impossible to raise the baby.”

This shows that the idea of “being unable” is frequently present, maybe it is just a way of trying to justify something difficult to understand and accept—the lack of motivation of being a mother and the lack of desire of taking care and assuming the child.

It is important to emphasize that when the professionals were aware of having unconsciously “distorted” and denied the information given in the second story, continuing it as if the woman came from a low-income class and had financial difficulties, they said they were “shocked” by their own prejudice and expectations: “The expectations that we unconsciously have jeopardize and interfere in the way we behave and act towards these women”.

On the other hand, there is a dichotomy concerning this issue when the professionals’ understanding on giving a child for adoption seems to divide those who believe that the attitude has to do with abandon/indifference/disinterest: “rejecting the fetus in the womb”; “lack of love”, and those who connect it with an attitude of love—“well-being of the baby (a

new chance); love; devoting oneself; courage; care”.

The other aspect that draws our attention is the fact that in this sample no significant differences are found in the nurses and nursery technicians’ views concerning giving a child for adoption. In this regard, the aspects previously discussed are found in both professional categories, leading us to believe that the professionals’ “words” come from the individual’s singularity, rather than their professional/academic background.

4. Final Considerations

Despite the professionals’ resistance to examine the issue of giving up a child for adoption, it was noticed that most professionals who accepted to participate in the meetings/talks described the activity as positive. They also said that the group’s discussion/reflection had an impact on their opinion and personal perspective regarding the issue as well as in their professional activity.

We noticed that giving new meanings to giving a child for adoption seemingly encouraged reflective/emotional elaboration of the representations of the professionals who participated in the group dynamics. When the issue of giving a child for adoption was discussed in the group through transitional play activities (interactive narratives), the expression of anxieties and fantasies was possible, enabling psychic elaborations.

In the context of this group, conceptions and representations were initially verbalized and discussed, unveiling a prejudice and a moral judgement in regard to women who show their wish of giving a child for adoption. After these verbalizations were respected and contained, a transforming space was created providing changes in regard to the representations characterizing the social imaginary of these health professionals, allowing us to foresee changes in these professionals’ attitude concerning these women. To illustrate it, here are some verbalizations that show the awareness of the need of changes in accepting these women: “more

human and respectful”; “knowing how to listen and not judging”; “it helped me to be in the place of the other and not judging the decision taken”; “break barriers and prejudices on the matter”.

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