Becoming Invisible: The Effect of Triangulation on Children's Well – Being.

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Abstract

The study explored children's experience of triangulation in their families. Fifteen children aged11 and 16 participated who were attending an early intervention family therapy service. The children's understandings and emotional experience of triangulation were explored by comparing the their responses to pictures from the Separation Anxiety Test (SAT) and a set of pictures designed for the study depicting a variety of triangulation conflicts in families. An interview regarding the children's personal family experiences of triangulation was also undertaken and clinical information about the children's family contexts was also utilised. Statistical analysis was conducted based on eight of children for whom a full data set was available. This indicated that children showed greater levels of anxiety in response to the triangulation as opposed to the separation scenarios. Qualitative analysis supported this finding and revealed that many of the children felt 'invisible' due to parents' preoccupation with marital conflict, felt caught in the middle of conflicts and coerced to take sides. Though able to describe their reactions and showed greater negative emotional responses to the triadic pictures, they were not consciously aware of the negative impacts of triangulation on their sense of well - being. Clinical implications are discussed with a focus on encouraging child – centred approaches to family therapy.

The concept of triangulation has been one of the conceptual corner-stones of systemic therapy (Dallos & Draper, 2009) and represented a fundamental shift from linear to systemic thinking and the suggestion that triads' rather than individuals or dyads, are the fundamental building blocks of family life. Bowen (1978) defined triangulation as potentially occurring in any pattern of family relationships and as a network of inter-locking triadic processes.

Our focus here is on children's experience of conflictual triadic process in relation to their parents or carers. Specifically, triangulation is seen to occur when children become entangled in parental conflict, through coercion from parents to take sides, the child deciding to mediate or attempt to distract their parents from their conflict (Minuchin, 1974). Byng-Hall (1980) has suggested that the child can come to function as the 'distance regulator' of the couple's marital relationship, which implies that the child behaves in ways to attempt to regulate not only the level conflict but also closeness between the parents. This is an extremely important systemic idea since it suggest that the child becomes not simply the 'victim' of the parents' conflict and distress but also can act to keep them apart and escalate negative processes! Research reveals that children can experience severe distress when 'caught in the middle' of their parents' conflicts and tensions expressed for example as internalising symptoms, externalising problems, poor academic achievement, higher levels of depression/anxiety and weak parent-child relationships (Amato & Afifi, 2006; Buehler & Welsh, 2009; Shelton & Harold, 2008; Ng & Smith, 2006; Gerard, Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2006; Buchanan, Maccoby & Dornbusch, 1991). Some contemporary research has suggested that the

patterns are developmentally very early and fundamental. For example, Fivaz-Depeursinge et al 2012) have shown that differences in how consistent and co-ordinated parents responses are to the infant in turn shapes the infant's responses to the parents, especially their ability to manage triadic interactions.

Parents' conflict and distress can distort their ability to function as attachment figures for their child in limiting their ability to offer care, support and guidance. However, attachment theory has essentially offered a dyadic picture of the development of security in children (Bowlby, 1969, 1988) and has not considered triadic attachment. There has been little exploration of how, for example a mother's ability to offer a secure attachment is influenced by the anxieties and tensions in her relationships with the child's father (Dubois-Comtois & Moss, 2008). Not only the mother's ability to respond empathetically, but also the wider context of the security of the child's family life, is threatened by the conflict between the parents: the child runs the risk of losing not only the attachment figure, but their home, family and physical safety. Byng-Hall (1995) has suggested further that the parents' own attachment needs can be mediated by their child who can function as marital 'distance regulator' in managing the nature of the emotional distance between their them. This can involve considerable psychological cost to the child in terms of sacrificing their own attachment needs. We would suggest that a child has an attachment, not just with each parent, but with the relationship between them.

In addition, the conflicts between the parents may be related to permutations of matched and mis-matched attachment strategies employed by the parents (Dallos, 2014) . Where both parents have secure attachment strategies this is relatively unproblematic for the child. However, if both hold avoidant patterns the child may struggle to gain attachment responses from either, or where both are anxious the child may struggle to gain some emotional space. However, adjusting to combinations of mis-matched patterns might be even more complex in that the child is required to develop 'multiple – models' to adapt to the differences. For example, an anxious parent may draw the child in to offer them emotional support against the other parent. In contrast, the avoidant parent backs off perhaps leaving the child feeling abandoned by them or feeling guilty that they have rejected their parent. Interestingly, according to Buchanan, Maccoby and Dornbusch (1991), being close to both parents is associated with low feelings of being caught in the middle, as both

parents may then be more sensitive to their children's feelings and therefore be less likely to behave in ways that triangulate them.

In terms of strategies, a child may attempt avoiding strategies by attempting to try to withdraw from the parents' conflicts although the parents may resist this so that the child feels compelled to side with one parent and avoid a relationship with the other. Children may also attempt to 'mask' or inhibit expressions of distress and reduce their presence in the conflict (Davies & Forman, 2002; Dallos & Denford, 2008) especially when they also feel to blame for parents' arguments. Alternatively, involvement can consist of the child becoming drawn in and attempting to manage the parents' conflicts such as trying to be a peacemaker, trying to calm the parents or being especially helpful. Importantly, Grych (1998) discussed how feeling responsible for marital conflict provides children with a sense of coping efficacy and perceived control over conflict, which increases the likelihood of involvement. The child may also adopt a more angry coercive strategy towards the parents or distract them by engaging in dangerous or disruptive behaviours. Overall, both these strategies of avoidance and involvement have costs as they can cause psychological maladjustment. The word 'strategy' Is used here with caution, since in our clinical experience these are not conscious choices and, to the contrary, children typically appear largely unaware of the distressing and disorienting effect that triangulation has on them.

The patterns of triangulation can be seen to follow a developmental pathway. An infant or young child may express the tensions, conflicts, distresses between his parents in terms of a variety of somatic states, such as agitation, crying, sleeplessness or vomiting. These symptoms may have the effect of distracting the parents from their conflicts and temporarily reduce the emotional tension. With the development of language, in addition to this process, the child may be verbally persuaded to take sides in the conflict between the parents, and older age groups may use avoidance more effectively, perhaps due to the autonomy they have to leave the house or call their friends (Shelton & Harold, 2008). Older children may also be able to see multiple points of view and parents may confide in them or have them relay messages to one another, possibly increasing feelings of being entrapped (Buchanan, Maccoby & Dornbusch, 1991). Buehler and

Welsh (2009) argue that adolescents may need parents to reassure them that they do not expect them to take sides in order to help them avoid become overly concerned and pre-occupied with their parents conflict which can lead to negative consequences for the children's mental health. Ringer and Crittenden (2007) found triangulation patterns were often related to a range of problems, including anorexia. Additionally, Schindler et al. (2007) found that in drug dependant adolescents (DDA's) a "triangulated pattern" was found in two thirds of the sample, characterised by preoccupied strategies in mothers and dismissing ones in fathers.

Despite the centrality of the concept of triangulation to clinical practice there has been surprisingly little research exploring the nature and experience of triangulation. Arguably most of what we know comes from clinical observation of families engaged in family therapy.

The Present Study

The purpose was to explore the children's experience of triangulation and in particular to:

1. Compare the attachment dilemmas and their severity resulting from exposure to triadic as opposed to dyadic attachment conflicts
2. Explore children's understandings of triangulation
3. Gain further understanding of the attachment dilemmas that the experience of triangulation raises for children

Participants and design

The participants were fifteen children aged between 11 and 16 (m=12.13; Female=8; Male=7). The qualitative findings are based on data from 15 children but a full research data set was only available for eight children who feature in the statistical analysis. There were no significant differences between the eight children featuring in the quantitative analysis and the wider sample. The constraints were imposed by the timing of the clinical sessions and availability of the families to attend together resulting from travel and cost issues. The children were approached through a family therapy clinic and identified by the family therapy team as having substantial triangulation

related difficulties. The sample included children of separated/divorced couples, adopted and children living with step-parents. The presenting problems included, anxiety, anger and conduct related problems, phobia, criminal behaviours, depressive symptoms, self-harm and separation anxiety. Consent was obtained from both the children and their parents. All of the children were from a white sample but there were considerable variations in class and economic situations varying from families essentially surviving on benefits to full time professional employment of the parents.

Ethical approval was sought and granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the local University in which the authors were located.

Measures Employed

The children were given a measure of attachment strategies and exploration of feelings and experiences elicited by visual material. The materials comprised a set of photographs designed to assess attachment strategies and triangulation experiences. Each child responded to 9 pictures with 16 measures for each picture (see table 1) and two sets of cards were producing featuring a boy or girl in each of the scenarios. The measures fell into the following groupings: attachment responses – avoidant or anxious pre-occupied; types of solutions, reflective awareness, triadic processes and evidence of traumatic intrusions. The qualitative data was gathered using a semi-structured interview, and the quantitative data was produced through scoring the responses in the qualitative accounts.

The Separation Anxiety Test (SAT) and Triadic situation pictures
These consisted of two sets of pictures (see Table 1)

Table 1 about here

SAT (dyadic pictures): The first set was based on the original SAT (Resnick, 1993) adapted by Wright, Binney and Smith (1995). These included: Child saying goodbye to both parents as he/she

goes away on holiday; Mother going into hospital; and Father getting arrested. These pictures had been previously piloted in our clinical work and a preliminary study and we had found that they had elicited significant attachment responses. The pictures employed in this study show white children in Western dress. Wright, Binney and Smith (1995) have developed a set of pictures of scenarios for ethnic minority families but since this research was conducted in the South West of the UK which has a very small ethnic minority population the original 'western' pictures were employed.

Mother Going Into Hospital   Child going away on holiday

Triangulation scenarios (triadic pictures): The second set of pictures was taken from Smalley (2013). These included: Parents arguing over an inappropriate present for the child; Parents waiting up as the child comes home late; Mother/father listening in to child's conversation with the separated parent; Parents discussing the child's school report; Father leaving after an argument; and Mother leaving to have an affair. These pictures were designed to elicit understandings and emotional responses regarding typical triadic interactions and conflicts. Two sets of pictures were developed: with male or female children in the pictures to facilitate identification with the young people depicted.

Parents arguing over a school report

Child calling separated father – mother listening

Analysis

For both sets of pictures the analysis was based on the frameworks devised by Klagsbrun and Bowlby (1976) and elaborated by Resnick (1993). This was based on the exploration of the children's responses to being asked how the chid depicted in the picture would think and feel, what the adults would think and feel and how the child would respond. This was followed by asking the children how they would respond if they were the child in the situation. Resnick's analysis (1993) focuses on the extent to which the child acknowledges the attachment dilemmas, shows a variety of emotional responses, such as anxiety, anger and sadness and engages in constructive as opposed to destructive or catastrophic solutions to manage the separation and distress. However, we decided that a wider range of indicators derived from other narrative attachment measures, such as the Story Stems (Hodges et al., 2003) and the Child Attachment Interview (Shmueli-Goetz, Target, Fonagy & Datta, 2008), were required and hence incorporated these in the analytical matrix (see table 1).

A key element of our additional analysis was a focus on the children's mentalisation (reflective functioning) which constituted the extent to which they were able to describe the feelings, intentions and dilemmas experienced by the children and adults depicted in the stories. Further to this we added a further relational mentalisation question component whereby the children were asked how they thought the adults in the scenarios would think the child was thinking and feeling.

We called this 'Parental Accurate Empathy' (PAE) to indicate the extent to which the child felt that adults were able to understand the child's feelings and needs in the scenarios.

Table 1 about here

The first author is trained and has achieved reliability in the Child Attachment Interview, Child Story Stems, and Separation Anxiety Test. The first author interviewed the children and also completed the coding of the tests. Inter-rater reliability was also established by scoring the transcripts together (first and second authors) and by discussing all differences in scoring. Independent analysis revealed an agreement of kappa = 0,85 and high qualitative agreement on the descriptive measures, such as indications of trauma. This indicated that the process of conducting both the interviews and the analysis did not appear to unduly influence the coding of the first author.

Quantitative findings

SAT and Triadic Pictures

The analysis indicated that overall the Triadic pictures generated higher levels of attachment distress than the Dyadic ones. A one way within subject ANOVA was conducted for all nine pictures with the 16 dimensions (attachment sub-scales) for each picture. Each dimension was a scale score from 1 to 9 and average scores for the 6 triadic and 3 dyadic pictures were employed for each of the sixteen dimensions. This resulted in 16 repeated measure scores for each child and each picture type (Triadic vs Dyadic). A test for equality of variance was conducted - the Levene's test of Equality – which indicated that variances were not equal across the two groups (dyadic and triadic), so attempts to fix homogeneity problems by transforming data did not work. Consequently, original data was used and treated with caution and significance levels were made more stringent and were reset from 0.05 to .025.

Results revealed a highly significant main effect of Triadic vs Dyadic pictures ($F(1,6)= 28.64$; $p<.025$). Further Anovas comparing all the pictures found significant differences between SAT

Picture 1 (Child goes on holiday) and Triadic Picture 5 (School Report). Significant differences were also found between Triadic picture 5 (School Report) with both SAT picture 6 (Mother goes to hospital) and SAT picture 8 (Dad arrested).

Figure 1 shows a graph of average responses for SAT and Triadic pictures. It can be seen that Triadic pictures produced higher attachment anxiety scores on each of the attachment sub-scales ((the higher the mean score the more anxious the response) with the exceptions of Unrealistically Positive Solutions, Resisting the attachment scenarion , Dismissing the attachment scenario , and PAE (ability to consider that their parent figure understood how the child felt) .

Fig. 1 About here

Figure 2 shows the average scores (on two attachment measures and avoidant solutions) of all participants per picture. The averages have been placed in ascending order, which indicates that the highest mean responses across these central dimensions were produced by Triadic Picture 5 (School report) and Triadic Picture 7 (Argument, dad leaves). All the SAT pictures produced the lowest responses across the dimensions.

Fig.2 About here

Importantly, in some cases in the dyadic (SAT) pictures the children produced responses which would indicate secure attachment responses giving a range of affect, showing good Reflective Functioning and a good relationship with carer. However, in contrast, in the triadic pictures, particularly Triadic picture 5, insecure responses are produced, characterised by self-blame, anger, and very low Parent Accurate Empathy.

Gender differences were found to have a significant effect on responses in both Picture Types (SAT or Triadic). Boys had on average higher scores for Unrealistically Positive Solutions,

Resisting the Attachment Dilemma, Dismissing and Avoiding Conflict, whereas girls score higher across all other dimensions. This supports finding by Minuchin (1974) and Davies and Lindsay (2004), predicting that girls are more affected by appraisals of self-blame and more likely to over-involve in conflict and feel responsible for restoring family harmony.

Qualitative Analysis of Attachment Dimensions

Taking sides and Caught in the middle

Responses to the pictures suggested that children felt very much caught in the middle of family conflict. Rick clearly demonstrated his dilemma in the "ring dad" scenario where he indicates that both the character in the photograph and he himself would feel torn between loyalties and conscripted into a coalition with his father against his mother.

> *He can't just speak to his father without someone listening too. So like maybe he will say something different because someone is listening to his conversation.[…] He clearly wants to say some thing, that he wants to express with his dad. So he could be saying some things like that his mum is being annoying.*
>
> *(Rick 136-142)*
>
> *She was probably shouting at her son because of the results. She was probably saying, "It is something to do with your dad isn't it?" Then he is probably to tell her that it wasn't. But then she just doesn't listen to him and phones him to go round and starts shouting. (Rick 212-215)*

Megan's responses also indicated that she felt drawn in to take sides with one parent against the other:

> *You do not have to go. Because I'm more closer to you than dad. (Megan 554)*

Avoidance and Involvement in Conflict

A common theme found in the conflict situations was that the children would describe either avoidance or involvement in the conflict situations. The findings also indicated that the higher the score on Avoiding Conflict, the lower the score for Catastrophic Solutions; and the higher the score for Involvement in Conflict, the higher the score for Catastrophic Solutions. In relation to attachment strategies, involvement in conflict and catastrophic solutions predicted a preoccupied pattern as compared to avoidance of conflict and less catastrophic solutions which indicated avoidant strategies.

Mediating conflict and Role Reversal

This theme indicated that children would involve themselves in conflict to mediate or resolve it, for example through trying to reason with the adults. In relation to the inappropriate present scenario the child indicates that as herself in the picture she would adopt a parental stance towards her parents arguing:

> *I don't know. I might like five minutes later – just let them cool down. Then I might come in and say, "Oh, just have it. Because I don't want it to make you two fall out just over this little thing." […] Mum would probably ground me. But if dad argues with it, they have a big argument, so I'm just like, "Just ground me."* (Megan 150-152/ 201-202)

This indicates the extent to which the child is aware of mediating her parents' conflict in that she employs thoughtful strategies such as letting them cool down and then going back to reason with them further; and accepting punishment as a form of mediating the conflict, to avoid her parents arguing.

Fluid coping strategies

This theme captured that some of the children appeared to utilise fluid coping strategies, specifically, if a certain behaviour during a conflict situation did not work, they would try a different behaviour:

> *I would either say to them, "Right, if you want me to give it back, I will." Or I would either just go in my room and just – yes, just get out of the situation. […] Well, we just try and walk off and try to just let them calm down and then go back and just say, "Please stop it. We don't like it. We don't want you to fall out."* (Megan 144-6/622-624)

> *No. I was trying to stop them from arguing and then just kept on arguing. So I got really upset and cried and just like, sort of walked off to my bedroom* (Jack:338-340)

At first Megan would try and mediate the conflict, reason with her parents, or just avoid the conflict situation entirely. This could be partially due to her age, as children at the age of 11 are still said to have fluid attachment strategies. This was supported by Dean, who recognised that his coping strategy had changed over time:

I just walk away. He just ___[self-discipline___ 00:13:25] or he'll just talk to us ___[and he] started arguing. […]

Do you think you've changed? Because you said you now kind of walk away. Do you think you've always done that? Or has it-

Sometimes I ask like, why they did it and get annoyed. But I won't do it. (Dean 318-319/331-334)

As children grow up into adolescents, their coping strategies become less fluid and they may settle on one approach that appears to work in high stress situations.

Self-Blame

Self-Blame had a positive relationship with Reflective Functioning and a negative relationship with Resisting the Attachment (This was indicated by responses whereby the child attempted to avoid the core aspects of the dilemma, such as talking about what people were wearing rather than the emotional issues involved) . It was a recurring theme, particularly for Megan, Rick and Kate. For example, Megan shows she is willing to give something up, in this case the inappropriate present, to resolve the conflict. She repeatedly mentions that she would feel at fault for the conflict, as it would be her present the parents were arguing about.

They're arguing over my grades and it's my fault. It's not their fault. Mum can't blame it on dad and mum can't blame it on herself. It's her fault. She's really sad. But angry because they're just arguing when it's her fault. It's not fair. (Megan 284-287)

She appears to look for someone to blame so that once she has found who was at fault, the conflict can be resolved

Parent Accurate Empathy (PAE) and Invisible children

The PAE was found to have a significant positive relationship with awareness of emotional impacts of triadic processes, which in turn had significant positive relationship with triadic thinking and trauma. Overall the children generally indicated that they thought that their parents were reasonably accurately aware of how they felt. However, they did not usually expect their parents to act in a constructive way to help alleviate their feelings. This is an interesting finding. In relation to the scenarios depicting parental conflict where the parents argued over an inappropriate present or school report, the children frequently reported feeling 'invisible' during the conflict situation.

Supporting Ringer and Crittenden (2007), it was found that children felt their parents were preoccupied with marital problems, leaving the child to feel as though the parents were not even aware of their existence in the conflict situation, and particularly that they were not being thought about:

I don't think they will be thinking about him (Dean: 44-5)

For some of the children, Reflective Functioning (RF) and PAE were repeatedly lower for fathers compared to mothers. Peter and Megan show this by the difference in the intimacy they would exhibit towards their mother and father:

> *Probably kiss my mum, shake my dad's hand and then get in the car (Peter:33)*
>
> *The dad, I wouldn't have a clue what my dad would think, I can't really say (Peter:174)*
>
> *His dad is probably thinking… I don't know what his dad is thinking.(Peter:253)*
>
> [Parents would] *Not* [know how I am feeling] *unless I have said.(Peter:188)*
>
> *Yes, my mum would definitely know. But my dad would be like, "I don't know." (Megan 347-348)*

One possible reason for this finding is that the children had predominantly spent more time with their mothers and where there had been separations the children had all lived with their mothers. Possibly, being asked to side with their mother's perspective had created an obstacle when attempting to produce PAE for their fathers, especially given that the father was not present and consequently the child has no opportunity to hear their points of view. This is indicated in Jack's statement:

> *Dad is probably quite upset that she's leaving. He's probably thinking he will have to look after the son now. (Jack306)*

For Jack this indicated that not only is it the mother's role to normally care for him, but also that dad would be an unwilling parent in a situation like this.

However we did find some exceptions to this pattern as well. Though some children did indicate that they felt their mother would understand them better this was not invariably the case. In some cases we knew from our clinical work with the family the relationship with the mother was

conflictual and led child to think that their mother does not understand them. However, some held a belief or hope that the absent father , who they missed, did understand them better.

Two Case Studies

The following two case studies offer an overview of the children's responses to the pictures accompanied by the case material available from the family therapy.

Megan

Megan's responses were largely anxious, self-blaming, with high Reflective Functioning which related directly to her clinical background and being treated for anxiety issues. In Megan's responses, instances of previous family conflicts, possibly having resulted in trauma states, would appear, which were relevant to her clinical profile. Such as:

> *Worried, just in case they fall out and one of them decides to leave or something? ... I want them to do that [smooth things over] so then they don't get in a big argument and then fall out and then just leave* (Megan 120-121/ 133-134)

These experiences manifest themselves through exhibiting a lot of anxiety around the possibility of her parents arguing and one of them leaving. This slight catastrophizing could be due to the fact that her parents really did split up and her father left. Clinically she was very anxious about not spending enough time with her father and feeling that he has let her down. It was also shown in the question about 'Dad Leaving':

> *Really upset and just saying, "Please, dad, don't go. I don't want you to go, because you're my dad. I just hope it won't ___ [0:20:39] our seeing each other still. Because I'm your daughter and it's not really fair if this overtakes our relationship."* (Megan 417-420)

Such evoked dialogue is indicative of arousal as the child appears to be re-living aspects of their own experience, and possibly traumatic memories. Here Megan appears to be pleading with her dad not to leave, which was distressing for her and also appears to express her pre-occupation and sadness about the separation which was apparent in the clinical work with the family:

> *Because my dad left me and my mum when I was three. I don't really know anything then. But it still upsets.* (Megajn 442-423)

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The high instances of arousal are much more evident in the pictures that directly relate to her experiences. In the follow-up interview, she reveals:

> *I normally just say, "Stop it, please." Because instead of saying my dad, my mum and my sister, let's say that, and they were arguing, I try to stop them. I say, "Stop arguing. Because I hate it. I just hate it." I just don't like them arguing.* (Megan 593-596)

Megan was found to be very understanding, and to have a very high Reflective Functioning Score (as indicated in her responses to the picture scenarios regarding the awareness of the various ways that the adults and the child in the picture might be thinking and feeling), especially when talking about what her mother could be feeling. She offered up reasons for her mother's initially seemingly unreasonable behaviour. Such as, in the 'Ring Dad' scenario, she firstly said she would hate her mum, but then offered up an explanation as to why her mum may be acting in such a way as to not let her speak to her dad:

> *But then my mum … having the right reasons though. Because he might have just upped and left* (Megan 258-259)

Rick

Rick scored very highly on Reflective Functioning and showed awareness of triadic processes and their emotional impacts. He was also dismissive, anxious and avoidant but at the same time involved in conflict. He appeared thoughtful and tried to think of further answers to the questions posed, if prompted further. He was identified as the most "difficult" by his parents, but as the most 'sensitive' and most affected by family conflict, by his brother and sister:

> *I think that they could do it when I am like in bed, and they start arguing again or something. […] he wishes they didn't like shout* (Rick 75-76/82)

Rick's answers indicated the influence of his previous experiences in the details that he adds, such as shouting and being in bed, which do not directly appear in the scenario.

In the clinical work it was revealed that Rick's father had been accusing his mother of turning the children against him. Rick's father was also facing charges for looking at

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sexually inappropriate material, which appeared to have been traumatic for Rick. This is indicated in his responses to the "ring dad" scenario:

She would think that she was making sure that everything was safe, like the phone call and everything.

That he is saying good things, so ___[0:13:20] negative things and that. (Rick 165-167)

These responses suggest that he viewed his mother as monitoring the phone call for what is said, to ensure the father does not say anything bad. This indicates triangulation and Rick empathises with what his father may be feeling:

the mum is probably feeling annoyed with his dad, and the dad is probably feeling, "What have I done?"

Or something. (Rick 263-264)

This appeared to be related to the clinical context, as the children in the family were unsure about why their dad was arrested and were confused by antagonism towards him and their limited access to their father. Rick was the child who most appeared to be caught in this conflict and who most defended his father. This situation also appeared to lead to him expressing most distress and anger. In part this was manifest in his resentment at his step-father which placed him in another triangulated position between his mother and step-father. His mother's solution to her own difficult dilemma of protecting her children from their father and balancing her relationship with her new partner was to become angry with Rick and perceive him as problematic and disruptive.

Discussion

This study has been innovative in implementing the use of triadic pictures to generate attachment responses, based on Resnick's (1993) SAT. The Triadic conflict scenario pictures produced significantly higher attachment responses than the original dyadic (SAT) pictures, for children who are triangulated. This finding, coupled with the over-whelming self-blame, behavioural difficulties (John, Peter, Dean, Jack) and anxiety these children exhibit, indicated that they were distressed on a daily basis; demonstrating that the concept of familial conflict is much more arousing than concepts previously deemed as extreme by Resnick (1993), such as mother going into hospital. It

was found that most children reported feelings of being caught in the middle, being conscripted to take sides, or feeling invisible in the face of the parent's preoccupation with their marital problems, supporting past literature (Amato & Afifi, 2006; Grych, Raynor & Fosco, 2004; Ringer & Crittenden, 2007; Shelton & Harold, 2008).

An interesting corollary was that the children displayed significant awareness of their parents' feelings and were also confident that the parents were generally aware of their own thoughts and feelings, which has also been observed in a previous study of disadvantaged children in foster care (Dallos, Morgan & Denman, 2014). It seems that children have not abandoned the idea that their parents understand their needs. However they displayed less confidence that they would act upon their understanding. In fact in this present study many of the children felt that they had to take the initiative to mediate and try to resolve the conflicts in the triadic scenarios.

Findings suggest that children may find conflicts between their parents to be extremely anxiety provoking and the reasons for this may be that the 'ultimate' fear of their parents breaking up represents a massive attachment threat, namely the loss of their family, home, stability and sources of affection. Importantly, some of the children also revealed that they saw their parents as emotionally unavailable and unaware of their needs when the parents were seen to be in conflict with each other. The children at these points felt 'invisible' and perhaps felt that they had lost their attachment figures. Alternatively some of the children did not see their parents as conflictual with each other, but became very anxious that they may have caused conflicts to occur between the parents.

Importantly, the pictures invited children to look at situations they may not have actually witnessed; yet their negative emotional responses were elevated regardless of actual experience, a premise based on Resnick (1993). This suggests that triadic family conflict situations reliably provoke attachment anxieties in children. Importantly, it also indicates that children's 'internal working models' (Bowlby, 1988; Crittenden, 2006) are not predominantly dyadic but triadic.

In terms of development processes, the age of these children is early to mid-adolescence. This is an important period of the development of autonomy and moving to significant relationships

outside of the family. It is important to understand how general representations about relationships start to develop. Theoretically the findings suggest that this important transition is influenced by how much the children are emotionally entangled in the parents (triadic) relationships. For example, for Kate, her autonomy may be impeded by her continual concern and anxiety about her parent's relationship and her role in attempting to mediate their conflicts.

In terms of coping strategies, this study also found that children would generally either avoid or involve in conflict, with some younger children exhibiting more fluid coping strategies and engaging in both. Crittenden et al (2014) has similarly suggested that younger children are more likely to alternate between attachment strategies and come to settle on a dominant patterns. However, in a more distressed and problematic family situation such fluidity may become a fragmented or disorganised pattern where fluctuations are unpredictable and dysfunctional. This suggests that children settle on a coping strategy as they get older, This is again supported by findings in the past literature, for example Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined coping as engaging or involving with the stressor, and Buchanan, Maccoby and Dornbusch (1991) explain that as they get older children become increasingly able to distance themselves from parental dispute, however older adolescents may also feel more caught, possibly due to increases in social and cognitive maturity. We found some indications of gender differences in that boys appeared to be more inclined to avoid and girls more willing to engage with the picture scenarios but given the small size of or sample this requires further investigation.

Critique of the Study

A relatively small sample was employed for the quantitative part of the study though the qualitative part is based on a larger sample. Hence the quantitative findings need to be seen as exploratory and a wider study is required, for example to explore further the differences between triadic and dyadic scenarios. Our sample was a white population and further exploration of whether these findings hold for ethnic minority populations is required. Our clinical observations though are that our findings also apply to ethnic minority populations. For example, one family who were refugees

from Albania showed very marked emotionally anxious responses to triadic situations. This appeared to be related to their sense of threat and the need for family members to stay very closely connected and supportive of each other. Also this was a clinical population and we have not conducted this study with non-clinical samples. However, we have conducted a study with a non-clinical sample of young adults which revealed that they had experienced conflicting emotional processes in response to the conflicts prior to and during their parents' divorce. However, they did not report feeling coerced to take sides in disputes between their parents (Abbey and Dallos , 2004)

Clinical Implications:

In this study, PAE was related to higher scores on SAT pictures rather than Triadic pictures, suggesting that the children felt that their parents understood them less when the parents were engaged in conflict situations with each other. This supports other findings that children display distressed or problematic behaviour when 'caught in the middle' of their parents' conflict (Amato & Afifi, 2006; Buehler & Welsh, 2009; Gerard, Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2006; Ng & Smith, 2006; Shelton & Harold, 2008). Arguably not being able to find feasible ways of resolving the conflicts between their parents triggers symptomatic behaviour in children which is associated with a loss of coherent cognition and Reflective Functioning.

The findings here support our experience of work with children in clinical contexts where children and parents are generally not aware of the processes of triangulation. Even when there is an awareness, the full impact that this has on children's functioning is typically under-estimated by both the child and the parents. For example, in many cases we have found that even when a child describes feeling 'caught in the middle', 'made to take sides' or compelled to intervene in parents' conflicts they do not connect this with the onset of their symptoms. Fostering awareness of the impacts of triangulation is therefore seen as an important goal in family therapy. However, it is also a potentially very sensitive and difficult one since parents are likely to feel blamed, guilty and may become defensive. Our clinical experience is that asking parents to think directly about their own families and children can be too threatening and working with the parents to discuss theory own

childhood experiences can be more productive, for example how they experienced conflicts and arguments between their own parents. This can lead into exploring their 'corrective' scripts in terms of how they have tried to be different with their own children, for example to not involve them in their conflicts. Such exploration for a position of positively framing the parents' intentions can then lead reflections on whether in fact their own children are influenced by triadic processes and their marital issues and conflicts.

Such reflection on their own childhood experiences can help parents to understand how they may also have inadvertently reproduced similar processes of entangling their own children in their marital conflicts. Importantly, many parents hold the erroneous view that since they do not deliberately involve the children in their conflicts and keep their problems from them, that the children are unaware. Reflecting on their own experiences can help parents to understand that despite their best intentions it is very difficult to hide their distresses from their children. At the same time it is necessary to also discuss that revealing too much of their problems to their children and making them confidants can also serve to entangle and confuse them. The therapeutic process needs to involve a consideration of a balance between being open about the conflicts and how the child might be influenced by them and also of reassuring the child that despite conflicts they need not, and will not be expected to take sides.

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Table 1: Analysis matrix for SAT and Triadic Pictures

Ratings 1 →9	SAT			TRIADIC					
Picture number	1	6	8	2	3	4	5	7	9
Line Number									
Picture Title	Holiday	Mum hospital	Dad arrested	Inappropriate Present	Late home	Ring Dad	School Report	Argument-dad leaves	Mum affair
AVOIDANT									
Dismissing – minimising importance of attachments									
Self-Blame									
Resistance – avoiding attachment dilemma									
Idealisation									
ANXIOUS-AMBIVALENT									
Pre-occupying affect - anxiety									
Pre-occupying anger									
Derogation of others									
SOLUTIONS									
Unrealistically positive									
Catastrophic/destructive									
Avoiding the conflict									
Involvement in conflict									
REFLECTIVE FUNCTIONING									
Child re. parent/s									
PAE (Parent Accurate Empathy)									
TRIADIC PROCESSES									
Aware of triadic process									
Aware of emotional impacts of triadic processes									
TRAUMATIC STATES									
Indications of previous traumas									

Figure 1. Graph of Average Responses for SAT or Triadic Pictures across all Dimensions (n=8)
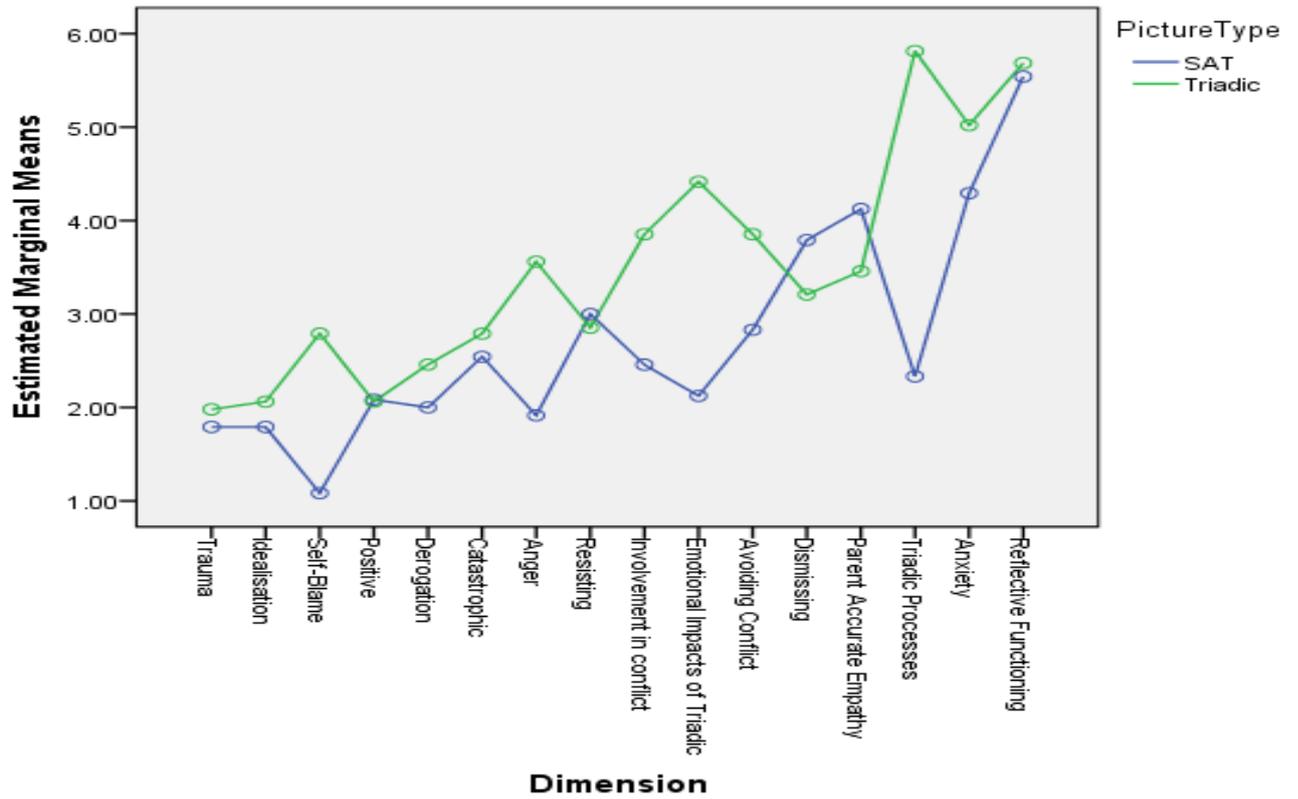
Fig. 2: Attachment Reponses for each picture type