A Qualitative Exploration into Young Children’s Perspectives and Understandings of Emotional Difficulties in Other Children.

Abstract

This thesis reports on an exploration of young children’s perspectives and understandings of emotional difficulties in other children.

The literature, spanning 35 years, on children’s attitudes and perspectives towards mental health problems is reviewed, with results covering children’s perceptions of the causes of mental health difficulties, their knowledge and understanding of mental health problems and their attitudes towards them. Methodological issues associated with the studies reviewed are discussed. Despite a number of studies including samples with young children outside of the UK, no comparable research into attitudes and perceptions solely towards people with mental health problems has been published with children under 10 in the UK. It was considered that as little is known about how this group of children perceive and understand such difficulties, a qualitative exploration was necessary, particularly given that just under 1 in 10 British children under 10 years old will experience a mental health problem.

The research paper explores young children’s perspectives and understandings of emotional difficulties in their peers. A total of 25 children, aged 8 and 9 years, took part in five focus groups. Vignettes, detailing hypothetical characters, formed the basis of discussion. Transcripts were analysed using an interpretative phenomenological approach. Four themes were identified: searching for an explanation; thinking about and ‘doing’ emotions; empathy versus blame; and consequences and solutions. The children drew on their own emotional experiences in their sense-making. The extent to which they held the
character responsible for their behaviour was particularly important in influencing their responses towards the characters.

The critical review presents a reflection on the process of the study, and includes discussion of the methodological issues associated with the use of focus groups and vignettes with children, and consideration of theoretical and methodological matters concerning IPA.