Neurofibromatosis Type 1 (NF1): Family Experiences and Healthcare Management of a Genetic Syndrome Characterised by a Highly Uncertain Phenotype

Submitted by Daniele Carrieri, to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology, October 2011.

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(Signature) ……………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………
Abstract

Neurofibromatosis Type 1 (NF1) is a dominantly inherited disorder (births incidence: 1/3000) with a high spontaneous mutation rate. NF1 has been described as a condition without parameters; physical features, cognitive symptomatology, and complications such as malignancy, are highly variable, both within and between families, and over the lifetime of affected individuals. This thesis explores the significance of the recent classifications of NF1 as a ‘genetic syndrome’, in terms of the subjecthood of affected individuals, their family experiences and the way it is managed within the healthcare system. The research is based on qualitative semi-structured interviews of NF1 individuals, their families (n=30) and healthcare professionals who work with NF1 (n=11) and employs Grounded Theory and Narrative Analysis inspired methods of analysis. As such, it provides an empirical investigation of many of the sociological theories which have been developed in response to genetic disease, particularly genetic responsibility, biocitizenship and the medicalization of the family.

NF1 was still experienced by patients and treated by the healthcare system, as a condition without parameters i.e., as a disparate set of symptoms with uncertain meaning, rather than as a ‘whole’. The majority of the respondents - regardless of the severity of NF1 - rejected NF1 genetic identities, employing diverse downplaying strategies to normalise it. NF1 was salient at certain critical junctures in individuals’ lifecourses, especially in relation to reproductive choices, disclosure and management of pressing symptoms. Family experiences with genetic conditions, the relations of family or kinship, health behaviours, familial surveillance and disclosure did not necessarily follow the lines of biomedical knowledge and genetic inheritance. The analysis also revealed a degree of mirroring between the structure of the healthcare provision for NF1 and patients’ constructions of the condition, for example the lack of illness identity. The example of NF1 shows that the identification of the genetic basis of a condition does not necessarily provide patients and healthcare professionals with more parameters to manage it.
Acknowledgments

I would like to begin by thanking Dr. Peter Turnpenny and the Peninsula Clinical Genetic Service for showing their interest in my research and for collaborating with me. Their support has helped to bring this thesis to fruition and I am grateful for their making me feel so welcome among them.

The people in Egenis - and the environment itself - have provided a quiet and stimulating atmosphere that helped me to find the peace to write, think and to grow up.

I am deeply indebted to all the participants of my study; they simply are the core of this work. I did learn a lot from them and talking (actually listening) to them has been the part of this research project I have enjoyed the most. I hope this study will prove to be useful to them and to other individuals and families with NF1. I will continue to do my best to make sure this happens.

I had the privilege to meet Dr. Susan Huson, Lindsey Rennard and other people from the Neuro Foundation. Their incredible enthusiasm towards my project and findings truly helped to inspire me in the last ‘writing–up’ phase of my research.

Apart from making a few years of this PhD fun, living with my housemates and friends Mattia and Pierre-Olivier allowed me to see and appreciate what it means to have passion for academic work, the pleasure of doing research and to think about the roots of the ‘need’ to write. The same can be said for Mila, apart from the fact she has not been my housemate.

If the participants are the core of my research, my co-supervisors Hannah Farrimond and Susan Kelly have been marvellous guides and role models. Patience, commitment, stunning brightness, thoroughness and kindness are among the qualities I appreciate the most in them. I genuinely feel lucky to have been able to work with them during these years and I think it will still take me a while to realise how much they thought me (I can be a bit slow, they know that...).
A special thanks to my dear old friends Jean and Andy for proofreading the thesis... it really sounds much more English now!! Thanks also for their wisdom, many meaningful conversations, and friendship.

I am grateful to my parents, two very clever and sensitive people. They have always believed in me, and managed to love me but at the same time make me discover my independence. Their support, patience, and unconditional love play a major role in all my achievements.

Abi has been the person who - without asking me to - convinced me to open my heart (and my whole Self) to the outside world and life in general. This is probably one of the most brave and difficult things that one can do; with her beside me, it has been and still is a wonderful and moving experience. Thank you for having witnessed all my (PhD) doubts, and joys and for loving and inspiring me. Life can really be blessed and magical!

And thanks to whoever and whatever helped me who/which I cannot - or forgot to - mention in these few lines.
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