

PERSPECTIVES ON ASSESSMENT IN ADOPTION

by

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Introduction

The assessment process in the field of adoption has received scant attention in the literature. This may be a comment on the lack of confidence felt by professionals working in this field, but it all reflects a lack of accountability both to their colleagues and their clients, the prospective adoptive parents and the children being placed for adoption. One of the few studies in this field "Adoptive Screening, new data, new dilemmas" (Brown and Brieland)¹ points to the need for a much closer examination of the assessment process, highlighting in

particular the way in which social workers may be influenced by their own values as well as by agency criteria. The study goes on to point out that in general "agency practices in this sample reflect substantial caution about placements"². The Child Welfare League of America Standards for Adoption Service: Revised, states that "It is every child's right to have protection. The kind of care that meets his needs and which he would ordinarily be expected to receive from his parents. The family, the community agencies, and the states have responsibilities related to the assurance of this right". If we take this statement as reflecting the values and assumptions underlying practice in adoption service, obviously the assessment process has a key role to play in protecting the right of children. Hence, it is a service which is essentially child rather than parent-oriented and which can create conflict when the needs of both prospective parents and children have to be balanced.

In Melbourne the recent and growing involvement of parent groups at all stages of the adoption process has led to an intensive examination of assessment and in particular its role in the relationship between social worker and parents, and children.

Description of Study

In order to explore this role, a small sample of six couples were interviewed for approximately two hours. The couples were interviewed, as couples, in random pairs in informal settings in private homes. The pairing of couples whilst random, was a deliberate strategy on the part of the interviewers to accentuate differences in experiences and perceptions. The interviews were structured for the purposes of comparison, but questions were open-ended in order to allow full elaboration of responses and feelings. All interviews were

taped, and written notes were taken at each interview. The couples interviewed were selected to give as representative as possible a range of applicants seeking adoption. There were two childless couples, two couples with biological (Natural) children and two adopting for the second time. Within each of these groups, one couple had been assessed recently and had not yet had the child placed with them. The other couple had been assessed some time earlier and had their child placed soon after. To compare and contrast the understanding and responses of the couples to the assessment process, a social worker was interviewed with a similar format to gain her impressions and perspective from a professional standpoint.

Findings

The questionnaire was structured under three main headings:— pre-assessment, assessment and post-assessment. Questions were designed to explore feelings, prior to assessment, in relation to how couples saw themselves, how they might be seen by the social workers, and how they perceived adoption in relation to themselves and the child. In the section on assessment, questions explored how the assessment process operated, and reaction to this process. Post-assessment looked specifically at possible attitude changes resulting from assessment and elicited direct comment on the role of assessment in adoption.

Pre-Assessment Finding

All six couples expressed a degree of confidence in themselves about the areas on which the social worker might focus. One respondent mentioned that he felt the assessment was "an investigation of worthwhileness" but was not deterred by this. Couples indicated unifor-

mly a considerable amount of insight and self-examination. One couple commented that this self-examination "starts with what you think the social worker would want to know but goes beyond that to things you need to discuss yourselves". Couples expressed no conflict between themselves about their motivation and expectations.

One couple were concerned that a brief separation period in their marriage might be seen in a negative light by the social worker. "We feared we would not be able to communicate to the social worker our confidence about our marriage". Others fears expressed were the perceived "power of veto" the social worker held, particularly when the couple was childless, and the ever-present possibility of rejection.

Couples saw adoption in two ways. The childless couples saw adoption as a natural progression: "If we couldn't have biological children we would adopt". Two couples saw adoption as a goal irrespective of whether they had children themselves and all saw it as providing a family for a child.

Assessment

Couples assessed within the last twelve months expressed satisfaction with procedures generally, although some delays in the process caused anxiety. All expressed positive feelings about the interviews, the manner in which they were conducted, and the relationship which developed with the social worker. Couples assessed earlier experienced frustration and anxiety resulting from often lengthy delays between application and assessment, and between interviews, and poor communication between themselves and the agency. They highlighted a need and an ability to be persistent. These couples expressed dissatisfaction with some aspects of the relationship, such as overt checking by the social worker

of possible inconsistencies and repeated questioning in relation to areas such as health and childlessness.

Post Assessment

All couples were unanimous that assessment had been a growth-producing experience. As one couple put it "a great deal of trust developed between us and the social worker. As a result we regarded the interview, not quite so much as an assessment but rather as a weighing-up of ourselves and of the change of lifestyle that we hoped to embark on". Another couple said "We learned a lot about ourselves. Delving into your relationship brings out things you've only guessed at before". Couples seemed to feel that the assessment process really helped to identify strengths within their relationships, and all regarded it as a valuable experience which in most cases broadened their understanding of adoption.

Discussion

In the light of recent public criticism of the assessment process the interviewers were surprised at the overwhelmingly positive response of the couples. Although questions were structured and elicit and encouraged negative responses, with emphasis on factors such as delays, hearing of interviews and fears about the social worker, the couples consistently indicated that overall assessment was personally and educationally rewarding. Delays, timing and length of interviews, and, for some couples, apprehension about the social worker, created high anxiety. All stressed that these factors were insignificant in retrospect once the relationship with the social worker had been established. The couples offered constructive criticisms in relation to these factors and showed insight with the pressure the social worker was under. An important factor which appeared to both alleviate

anxiety and provide an opportunity to discuss information and issues about adoption was the recent introduction of discussion groups. These took place before couples began assessment, and were held in a non-agency setting. Couples had the opportunity to talk informally with the assessing social worker, a non-agency social worker, and a couple who had already adopted. Those couples who had attended a discussion indicated a comfortable acceptance of the assessment procedure, and little or no anxiety about any subsequent delays in the prospective meetings with the social worker. Several couples commented that the discussion group introduced the concept of parenting and indicated they considered this issue could have been further explored in subsequent groups, particularly for the benefit of childless couples.

The Social Work Perspective

Just as the couples had indicated growth and change as a result of the assessment process, so did the social worker who was interviewed. She indicated a broadening of her views in relation to preparing couples for both assessment and possible rejection. A key area of change for her has been a more explicit attempt to identify strengths rather than weaknesses in prospective applicants. The social worker felt her own attitude had changed in that she now saw assessment less in isolation as an exclusively evaluative process. Although still retaining this element she was more aware of the impact of assessment irrespective of its outcome. Provision of services for rejected applicants has become a major area of concern. She felt in particular, that this experience, if appropriately handled, need not be irrevocable. She indicated a heightened awareness that timing of applications, for some couples, is important, and that deferment could be of benefit. In this respect,

she felt the discussion groups played a particularly vital role, in allowing couples to decide for themselves to postpone the decision to adopt by removing the pressure to undergo the potentially humiliating process of assessment and rejection. In addition the groups effectively removed any mystique about the role of the social worker and enabled the relationship to begin on a more positive note.

Conclusions

Although the sample used was small, the study undertaken indicates a number of important factors:—

- (1) That assessment, for all couples interviewed, was an enriching experience.
- (2) Procedures in the assessment process were shown to be inconsistent and therefore anxiety-provoking.
- (3) Parent groups have played a significant role in both increasing the accountability of the social worker in relation to assessment, and improving and broadening services to prospective couples. Parent groups have also highlighted the need for provision of appropriate services and rejected applicants, and focussed particular attention on finding families for children rather than the reverse.
- (4) Discussion groups have proved an effective means of
 - (i) communicating information
 - (ii) “demystifying” the role of the social worker
 - (iii) providing a forum for discussion **before** formal application is made
 - (iv) allowing couples an opportunity for re-appraisal of their decision and possible deferment.

References:

1. **Brown E.G. and Brieland D. (1975)** Adoptive Screening: new data, new dilemmas. **Social Work** July 1975 pp. 291-295
2. Standards for Adoption Service (Revised, 1973), Child Welfare League of America.

Luke Silverplate & Stainless TABLEWARE

Luke PREMIER TABLEWARE

SIX PLACE SETTING

Luke 'Surrey' pattern

GUARANTEED BY K.G. LUKE AUSTRALIA