

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-

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.

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