

# book reviews

## Significant harm

### Unravelling child protection decisions and substitute care careers of children

Elizabeth Fernandez

Avebury, Aldershot, July 1996

This is an important book as it describes the first major Australian study to explore the long-term outcomes for children admitted to care through child protection policies and practices.

Between 1980 and 1985 the author investigated the care careers of 294 children aged 0-16 years admitted to the care of the New South Wales Department of Community Services. The study looked at the reasons for and the process of making decisions to admit the children into substitute care; the pre- and post-placement experiences of their biological parents, and the outcomes for the children in terms of stability of placement and time spent in care. The study used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies to look at the processes from the perspectives of workers and parents. Personal interviews were conducted with 53 social workers and a random sample of parents of 118 of the children. This data was supplemented by in-depth case studies using participant observation and semi-structured and informal interviews with the key participants to follow six cases for a period of 18-24 months.

The structure of the book follows the format of a research report. A statement of the research questions is followed by a review of the literature, a description and discussion of the methodology and a presentation and discussion of key findings, finishing with a set of conclusions and recommendations, including ideas for further research.

Chapter 1 begins to place the research in context through a discussion of four major value positions on the role of the state intervention in child rearing (*laissez-faire* and paternalism, children's rights and child liberation, defence of the birth family and parents' rights, and state paternalism and child protection). The ideology behind each position is presented, together with an appraisal of its strengths and weaknesses, its implications for policy and practice and how each perspective has at times influenced policy and practice in Australia.

Chapter 2 discusses the major theoretical concepts and frameworks in psychology, sociology and social work that are associated with practice and research in substitute care. Dr Fernandez is particularly critical of attachment and bonding theory here and her alignment with the 'defence of the birth family and parents' rights' starts to emerge. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the difficulties of operationalising the concept of 'the best interests of the child', which has become accepted as the standard for decision making about removal from parental custody.

Chapter 3 discusses the design of the data collection instruments, their reliability and validity, and the analytical techniques used. This is followed by an analysis of the characteristics of the children and families in the study. The data showing the link between class, poverty and state intervention in the care of children leads the author to argue for the state to commit more resources to deprived families to reduce their vulnerability to having their children placed in care.

Chapter 4 describes and contrasts the main and subsidiary reasons given by social workers and parents for the decision to place the child away from home. Parents identified illness and disability more often than workers and tended to describe causes and circumstances that developed over time, while workers focused more on immediate circumstances. Also, parents identified 'isolation' as an important influence, a factor that was not identified at all by workers. The author again argues that these findings demonstrate that poverty is a major factor in parents' inability to care for their children.

The qualitative analysis of six case studies in Chapter 5 explains how workers' theoretical beliefs about attachment and bonding, their discourse on the social context of the parents, the availability of evidence to satisfy a court, parental co-operation (or lack of it), availability of placement resources and organisational pressures and constraints (including staff turnover and stress) interact with the factors identified in the quantitative analysis to produce decisions about out of home placement.

Chapter 6 looks at length of stay in care and placement stability. The statistical technique, Event History Analysis, that is used to examine the likelihood of a change of placement or return home, is described in detail. The analysis shows that large numbers of children spent a substantial part of their lives in care with several changes of placement. Children under five were most at risk of extended stays in care. The longer a child stayed in care, the more vulnerable they were to multiple placement changes.

Chapter 7 looks at the level of contact between children and their parents and describes wide variations. Some parents had little contact, if any, with their children, and some did not even know where their child was placed. On the other hand, where contact was maintained, it greatly increased the likelihood of return to birth family, a finding of most studies of this type.

Chapter 8 analyses parents' reaction to separation, and through the use of cluster analysis, identifies five groups of

parents according to their reaction and other factors such as legal status of the placement and age at placement. Considering her comprehensive referencing in other areas, it is surprising that the author did not include reference to research into the effects on relinquishing mothers of the adoption of their children.

Chapter 9 examines the parents' perception of their involvement in decision making, and their evaluation of the service they receive and their perspectives on what the future held for their children. Overall parents felt excluded from the decision making processes, and over three-quarters were not satisfied with the help that they received from the social worker.

In Chapter 10 the main findings are again placed in the context of other studies in order to discuss their implications for policy, practice and research in the future.

The main conclusion of this work is that being taken into care can be a harmful rather than a helpful experience for many children, and that more support for poor and disadvantaged families would greatly reduce the numbers of children being exposed to what is sometimes described as 'systems abuse'. This is a similar conclusion to that drawn from the twenty major research projects on child abuse and child protection which were launched by the Department of Health in the UK in 1995. They identified the need to shift the balance of policy and practice from narrowly defined child protection to family support for children in need. Those studies have been criticised by Parton (1996) for their lack of qualitative investigation into the processes of decision making. One of the strengths of Dr Fernandez's work is the inclusion of qualitative methods which provide insights into issues and processes that otherwise would not have emerged.

The study uses length of time in care and number of placements as its measures of the outcomes of care. As Dr Fernandez herself states, further in-depth study of the process of restoration and placement breakdown using qualitative methodology is needed. (Unfortunately the text on page 275 reads 'qualitative' when it should read 'quantitative'.) Research is also needed into the global development of children throughout their care career. Work has already been done to look at educational achievement, but the introduction of tools such as the Looking After Children materials, and assessments of children's needs rather than parents' actions at the point of decision making about placement in care (as is happening in Queensland) may facilitate more comprehensive research into outcomes.

One area where there has been significant research into outcomes is in adoption and other forms of permanent care. There is much evidence from overseas that a considerable number of children who have been placed in an alternative permanent family have overcome many of the effects of the abuse they suffered prior to, and during, their time in care. In the Foreword to the book, the removal of children permanently from their families is described as morally

unconscionable. Dr Fernandez suggests that the small number of children who cannot return to their natural family should be placed in 'permanent forms of share care'. However, she does not elaborate on this concept or provide any references to show how or where it has been achieved, or any outcomes.

Overall this work is an impressive contribution to the search for the most effective service for children whose families experience major difficulties in providing them with a secure, nurturing family life. The findings are clearly and logically presented and are illustrated with a variety of graphics and tables. It is comprehensively referenced, with an impressive 27 page bibliography and from the acknowledgements it is clear that the author has sought authoritative advice during her preparation of the book. I would strongly recommend it to all practitioners and managers in protection and care services.

As a social work researcher I was pleased about the amount of detailed discussion of the research methodology and the use of analytical techniques that go beyond simple tests of association and statistical significance. This offers readers the opportunity to assess for themselves the validity and reliability of the findings. The inclusion of qualitative research methods was also pleasing and the findings described in Chapter 5 clearly illustrate the explanatory power of such methods.

Finally, one can only admire Dr Fernandez for the dedication she must have applied to the completion of this work, and her determination to disseminate the knowledge and insights she has gained in the process. Apparently on her own, she has collected an enormous quantity and range of data. She has then placed her work within the context of a comprehensive and up to date analysis of research findings and theory of the processes and consequences of state intervention in the care of children. It is regrettable that such important work has taken so long to reach the bookshelves. Now that it is available, it should be read by all those who have an interest in the well being of children exposed to child protection policies and practices, including practitioners, managers and policy makers. I believe that it would also be a useful resource for teachers and students of social work research.

#### REFERENCE

- Parton, N. (1996), 'Child Protection, family support and social work: a critical appraisal of the Department of Health research studies in child protection', *Child and Family Social Work*, 1 (1), pp 3-11.

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