Avoiding saying too much

The complexity of relationships between permanent parents and social workers

Cas O'Neill

Relationships between social workers and foster care, permanent care and adoptive parents are based on a combination of knowledge, power, partnership and support, the 'mix' of which is likely to change over time. Different interpretations of what each side contributes to these relationships during assessment and post-placement contact, add to the complexity which parents and workers negotiate.

In a longitudinal research project on support in permanent placements, avoiding saying too much was an important part of these relationships. 'Good' and 'bad' parenting, expectations, blame, physical punishment and not coping are just some of the issues which were not spoken about.

This article explores the gap between the things which can be said and the things which are rarely said, and looks at how this gap affects relationships between families and workers.

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D. [social worker] was so nice, so calm, the perfect mother – I couldn't imagine her yelling and that made me feel worse ... you want to appear to be perfect to the social workers and everyone (permanent mother).

C. (social worker) said she would like to pop in to see W. (permanent mother) on the way to somewhere else – W. asked 'how often should you be coming out?'. C. explained that it was variable and became worried that W. was 'so defensive'.

These excerpts give some idea of the things which aren't said between permanent parents and social workers. 'Good' and 'bad' parenting, expectations, blame, physical punishment and not coping are just some of the issues which are not spoken about. There is often therefore a gap between the things which can be said and the things which are rarely said and this gap inevitably affects relationships between families and workers.

This article draws upon some of the findings of a longitudinal, action research PhD project, which explored the support needs of birth parents and grandparents, children, permanent parents,[1] teachers, social workers and therapists in situations where the children had been removed from their birth families by the child protection system.

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[1] In this study, there were two adoptive parents and twelve permanent care parents who had (or were moving towards) a Permanent Care Order within the provisions of the Victorian Children and Young Persons Act 1989.

The findings reported here are based on 47 discussions with 16 permanent parents and 24 discussions with 14 permanent care and foster care workers.

REALITY AND MEANING

The validity of everyone's views – what they say or write – is true for that person at that time and provides a window into the situation. Even so-called 'facts' can be interpreted very differently (summary of discussion with permanent care worker).

'Reality' has many sides, depending on who experiences it and how it is interpreted and described. Not surprisingly, the dominant reality is that which is described by the most powerful players in any system (Hartman 1995a), although clues to other interpretations are never far away.

The meaning which individuals attribute to people and events is constructed according to their inner conversation (Penn & Frankfurt 1994), their personality, background and the sociocultural values of the groups to which they belong (Scott 1989); while the meaning which a family gives to stressful events often extends beyond these events and is likely to lead to a changed view of their world (Patterson & Garwick 1994).

(Social work) practice is an intersection where the meanings of the worker (theories), the client (stories and narratives), and culture (myths, rituals and themes) meet (Saleebey 1994, p. 351).

The social work task can therefore be seen as working with consumers to externalise subjugated meaning – 'that

is, to bring it to bear on the circumstances of their lives' (Saleebey 1994, p. 358).

In reviewing what has been written in the professional literature about adoption and foster care, it is noteworthy that, while the experience of those involved is often discussed in case examples, the varied meanings of events for individuals and groups are rarely mentioned.

THE ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT OF ADOPTION AND PERMANENT CARE

The intertwined themes of knowledge and power are an intrinsic part of social work practice, influenced as it is by 'social policy's translation of the dominant discourse into programs and procedures' (Hartman 1995a, p. 191). Social workers, and other child welfare professionals, can choose whether to be subject to these discourses or to challenge them (Hartman 1995a). However, these choices are rarely straightforward.

While social workers undoubtedly have significant power in their practice, it is also true that they may feel disempowered by the policy and practice context in which they are employed. Nevertheless, when this situation is associated with organisational structures which involve a sense of partnership between management and workers, the professionals in this study gave every indication that they saw their work as being useful and valued. This finding is consistent with other research (Shera & Page 1995; Thompson, Stradling, Murphy & O'Neill 1996).

On the other hand, professionals in organisations where there was little sense of partnership between management and workers, talked in terms of a stressful and negative environment, pressure to reach work 'targets', and supervision which was inadequate and disempowering. Again, these findings are consistent with earlier research (Collings & Murray 1996; Thompson et al 1996). Interestingly, the professionals who were considered least supportive by permanent parents in this research were those who in turn talked about the lack of support in their organisations. This

echoes the 'parallel process' discussed in the empowerment literature (Gutierrez, GlenMaye & DeLois 1995; Shera & Page 1995).

Social workers' power is not only derived from the dominant discourse inherent in policy, but also from knowledge about the individuals and families who are consumers of social work services. Kirk (1981, p. 85), writing of the power of social workers involved in adoption, discusses the concept of 'guilty knowledge' (intimate knowledge of the body, social and economic actions, behaviour and feelings of other people) which social workers share with doctors and some other professionals.

Allied to this is the discourse of success,[2] which tends to dominate social work practice, especially in adoption.

In considering the organisational context, there is a further complexity to be negotiated:

> the dilemma for child welfare workers is that the interest of the child may be in direct conflict with the interest of the parents and may also conflict with agency goals and federal mandates (Litzelfelner & Petr 1997, p.398).

All of these issues inform the reticence between permanent parents and child welfare professionals.

ASSESSMENT

Family assessments for adoptive and foster parents serve a gate-keeping function (Brieland 1984) and tend to use a mixture of psychodynamic theory and systems theory, with tools such as eco-maps and genograms (Hartman 1995b; Hartman & Laird, 1983). However, while Kirk (1981) believes that this process can give some insights into individuals and families, he and other writers do not see it as predictive of the future (Brieland 1984; Kirk 1981).

There has been a more recent emphasis on group preparation and some degree of self selection (Stevenson 1991). The issue of workers' values (and how these affect selection of parents) and the analysis of power relationships is also a new trend in assessment philosophy and practice (Clifford & Cropper 1997; Ryburn 1991; Selwyn 1991).

While some writers (Kaniuk 1992) believe that partnership is possible between workers and pre-adoptive families (within the overall context of the agency having the power to give approval), others do not. In fact, Selwyn (1994) sees workers and parents as almost inevitably confused about the relationship between them, based as it is on the task of investigation in what is supposed, at the same time, to be a supportive environment. In this climate, workers may take on the roles of 'informers', 'spotters' or 'double agents' (Selwyn 1994, p.45).

Adoption assessment is also seen by some writers and researchers as a market process, which 'ranks prospective parents from top to bottom in terms of relative desirability' and that this system is biased 'in favour of a biologic parenting model as well as a socially traditional family model' (Bartholet 1993, p. 70). Bartholet, an adoptive parent, also states:

> it is only in the area of adoption that our system proudly proclaims not simply the right to discriminate (on marital status, sexual orientation, race and religion), but the importance of doing so (Bartholet 1993, p.72).

On the same theme, Kirk (1981, p.92) writes:

> an adoptive couple's chance of acceptance by an agency is determined not so much by objectively discoverable merits ... as by luck in being interviewed by a congenial agency staff member.

Pre-adoptive parents may also enter into this power process in subtle ways. The unspoken 'rules' of assessment are seen by Bartholet (1993, p.65) as learning 'how to shape my life story' and understanding 'that there are appropriate and inappropriate reasons for wanting children'. Other writers have also stressed this point (Ryburn 1991).

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[2] Spellman and Harper (1996) have written about the discourse of success in therapy. Although there appears to be nothing written about a similar discourse in adoption and foster care, the literature is replete with case studies of happy endings and titles which emphasise success (Groze 1996; Smith 1989).

While most of the parents in this research thought that the assessment for permanent care or adoption was professionally undertaken and ultimately positive, the sense of having their lives on hold while other people made important decisions about them, was disempowering.

Common to all permanent parents in this research, was the sense of seemingly endless waiting:

> We tried to be patient and after about five weeks we started to ring up. And it was 'this one's not here' – all this sort of stuff. Seven weeks had elapsed, no-one was ringing us back so Y. (wife) started ringing – ten times in 3 or 4 days. I started the next week and I must have made 10 or 15 calls in 3 days – in the end I said 'if I don't get any action this minute, I'm going above your head – we've had it' (permanent father, talking about the wait for allocation of a new social worker).

In addition, one couple felt that what they were saying during the assessment was not being heard:

> I sat forward and said 'stop twisting what we're saying – open your ears and listen to what we're saying – we're being totally honest and we're giving you the straight answer – don't go reading between the lines and trying to reverse it'. I got really upset about that (permanent father).

POST PLACEMENT CONTACT

There is an enormous lack of clarity about what agency workers actually look for when they visit permanent families after the placement of children, even though manuals such as the Victorian Department of Human Services (DHS) Adoption and Permanent Care Procedures Interim Manual (1992) give guidelines for this.[3]

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[3] 'To carry out statutory guardianship responsibilities by ensuring the child's development is promoted within the caregiving family; to assess the adjustment of the family and the child, and of the level and type of support required; to provide support to the family in meeting the needs of the child; to identify local support services and provision of assistance to the family in forming linkages with these services where appropriate; to enhance the family's appreciation of adoption/permanent care

What makes a placement successful or even reasonable from a worker's point of view? Is it simply a feeling that 'things are OK', which is then formally clarified for reports with descriptions of the child's happiness or the observed attachment between parent and child?

There is an enormous lack of clarity about what agency workers actually look for when they visit permanent families after the placement of children...

This somewhat nebulous situation is further complicated by issues of personality and experience (in both workers and parents) and by staff turnover,[4] as well as whether the placement takes place within the adoption and permanent care system (at the relatively 'private' end of the spectrum) or whether it occurs as the continuation of a foster care placement (at the more 'public' end of the spectrum).

The issue of whether their role was to supervise or support was complex for most permanent care workers in this research and it seemed as if this depended to a large extent on the families they were working with:

> It's a monitoring role ...I guess there have been a few instances in this (particular) case which have been a bit concerning, and I guess we would want to feel satisfied that those issues have been worked on and that we're not needing to be involved (permanent care worker).

The workers not only worried about intruding into the private lives of families, but were paradoxically also

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issues' (Adoption and Permanent Care Procedures Interim Manual 1992, no page numbers).
[4] Frequent staff changes mean that the communication between parents and agency needs to be re-established with each new worker.

concerned about what they weren't being told:

> It is a worry when parents don't share everything – but P. (worker) then asks herself 'do I need to know?', in terms of parents' privacy (summary of discussion with permanent care worker).

Occasionally, workers in fact discussed the issue of intrusion with permanent parents:

> B. (worker) acknowledged to N. and O. (permanent parents) the ongoing intrusion into their privacy – 'they probably expected that that would end once the assessment was over' – and they agreed that they had thought this (summary of discussion with permanent care worker).

The permanent parents had varying experiences of the supervisory aspect of placement. All of the parents talked about at least one worker with whom they had considerable rapport and who they trusted (as far as they felt able to trust a non-peer) to enter their family life. However, changes of worker meant that their experience varied considerably over time, in terms of the perceived intrusion into the life of the family. It was also interesting to note that the same worker was sometimes perceived very differently by different parents.

> I feel comfortable with E. (permanent care worker), because E. knows my problems – E. knows everything. Maybe she didn't know before, but at least we've worked together since Day One – and even though I could have talked to someone else, I would have preferred E. (permanent mother).

> There was a visit pre-access, and then there was access, then we went away and this letter turns up and there's to be an impromptu visit – and then she wants to visit me again ... I said 'we really seem to have had a fair few visits'. I asked her what is it (supposed to be) and she said 'every six weeks or thereabouts for the first six months'. And so I said 'so we shouldn't need a visit for a while then' ... and she took the point I think (permanent mother).

Expectations of others (professionals, family members and friends) complicated this situation further, leading to the permanent parents

learning to avoid saying too much, as well as worrying about what other people thought of them.

> T. (permanent mother) says 'sometimes you can sense that maybe the worker is more the other way'– ie, for the child. T. says 'I would like to be able to sit down and be totally honest and talk as myself – and say things like 'sometimes I want to murder the child'. But, you have to be careful and say things the right way, because they'll think you're a lunatic (summary of discussion with permanent mother).

> I automatically feel like reacting and of course you can't – I have to hold back my instincts and that's when I get angry and I end up yelling – and then I think 'oh, the neighbours!' (permanent mother).

However, while avoiding saying too much meant that the parents retained some control over what others thought of them, it also meant that they limited the availability of potential support.

Most parents managed to regain a degree of control over the relationship with agency workers. This occasionally occurred when parents felt confident enough with a sympathetic worker to tell her or him exactly how they were feeling, which subsequently led to acknowledgment (and fulfilment) of their needs.

> L. and N. (permanent parents) told D. (permanent care worker) 'we're supersensitive to what's being said' and 'how susceptible we are to signals' and 'permanent care parents are very vulnerable' (summary of discussion with permanent parents).

This conversation in fact led to a great deal of support from the permanent care worker.

However, regaining some control was not usually such an open process. When parents had access to other permanent parents, they talked together about ways and means of subverting agency supervision – and came up with some interesting strategies in the process, which changed the power equation, even if only temporarily.

> Someone (another parent) said 'why don't you just make up a problem that you've got, so she'll (permanent care worker) go away and think about it and

think you're normal and leave you alone' (permanent mother).

> She rang me and organised a day and I said 'yes' ...but I rang her back and said 'I shouldn't make arrangements without my calendar' ... she was trying to fit it in on the Friday and I just said 'make it next week' – and she did, but she didn't want to. And I said '6 weeks, 7 weeks, what's the difference' (permanent mother).

SUPERVISION, SUPPORT OR SURVEILLANCE?

In this research, contact between workers and permanent families was a mixture of support, supervision and surveillance depending on the relationship between parents and worker and on where the placement sat on the public-private continuum. This added a varying degree of tension to the relationship and inevitably affected its quality.

One of the most potent areas which all participants avoided discussing with each other was that of physical punishment...

While there is a range of possible working relationships between agency workers and permanent families, it is useful to consider two very different kinds of relationship, both of which (as well as some in between) were exemplified in this research.

In some situations, parents felt 'watched' by the worker (one mother said that she felt that her worker was 'peeking over the fence') and, as discussed earlier, did their best not only to minimise contact with the agency, but also avoided telling the worker anything which might have led to a greater intrusion into family life. Workers worried about what they weren't being told and permanent parents were nervous about worker reactions to issues such as physical punishment.

Workers can make the best of this situation by reassuring parents that they are unlikely to use their residual power to remove the child and by conveying confidence in the parents – however, even the need to do this points to inequalities of power which are likely to be inconsistent with a sense of partnership.

Where there is a scant sense of partnership between parents and worker,[5] then there seems to be little point in the relationship apart from the agency's legal mandate to report to Court at the time of legalisation. After all, what can really be seen or deduced by a worker from two hours contact with a family per month, per fortnight or even two hours a week – especially if both worker and parents are wary about what they say?[6]

However, in other relationships described in this research, there was a significant degree of partnership between parents and workers (particularly workers in the foster care system). Parents trusted their workers and talked about them as confidants and friends. Both workers and parents looked forward to their contact and parents sometimes said that one of the reasons that they didn't want to legalise the placement, was that they would see less of their worker. Parents also knew from experience that any concerns they had, particularly concerning practical support, would be acted on quickly. In these kinds of relationships, parents were more likely to know something of the workers' private lives and, in some situations, also had their worker's home phone number.

Where there is partnership like this between workers and permanent families, regular post-placement visits do offer a real window of opportunity for workers to notice any sense of desperation or despair in the child or parents and to offer appropriate support.

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[5] Although this was more of an issue in the adoption and permanent care system, there were also examples of it in the foster care system.

[6] In the absence of trust and partnership between themselves and the family, when workers sensed during their contact with families that relationships were troubled, they felt relatively powerless to even speak about it.

These two extremes of worker-permanent parent relationship, as well as the relationships which exist between them, have significant implications for the way in which support is offered to permanent families.

AVOIDING SAYING TOO MUCH

One of the most striking themes in this research was the way in which people avoided saying too much. Research participants talked about what they *had* said, as well as what they felt they could *not* say in particular circumstances or to particular people; while, at the same time, they wondered and worried about what they were *not* being told, as well as the unspoken nuances of what they *were* being told. There was thus an undercurrent of everyone choosing their words carefully, yet hoping that this was not obvious and, at the same time, sensing that everyone else was doing exactly the same thing. Relationships between children, permanent parents and teachers, agency workers and permanent parents, birth parents and therapists, permanent parents and birth parents were all seemingly stuck at times in a conspiracy of silence caused by fear of misunderstanding, judgement and rejection.

Some of the particular areas which participants avoided discussing with each other, but which were nevertheless talked about (in varying degrees) within the research process, were:

- the issue of permanent mothers feeling excluded by an alliance of their husbands with the children;[7]

- fear of harming the child, either emotionally or physically (permanent parents);

- the disappointment of lost dreams (permanent parents);

- concern about how the placement was 'really' going (agency workers);

- whether they were seen as supportive by service users (agency workers);

- dislike of each other (all participants) – even though participants sometimes criticised each other, dislike was seemingly more difficult to express.

The agency workers who were considered to be the most supportive by permanent parents were those who combined the warmth of a friend with the knowledge and authority of a professional.

While the meanings which participants attached to the possible consequences of 'saying too much' were idiosyncratic to individuals, there were nevertheless indications of what these might be:

- permanent parents wanted to be seen as 'good' parents who were coping well and did not want the children to be removed from their care;

- agency workers, teachers and therapists wanted to maintain some degree of communication with parents, children and each other, without the complications of unpleasant interactions.

PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT

One of the most potent areas which all participants avoided discussing with each other was that of physical punishment – which accords with a general community ambivalence about discussing this issue (Saunders & Goddard 1998). Permanent parents were aware that they weren't supposed to smack the children, yet at least one parent in the adoption and permanent care system recalled some literature he had been given during the assessment which had words to the effect of 'when you first smack your child ... '.

Permanent parents in this research almost never talked about punishment with their workers[8] and workers gave the impression that they didn't really want to know about it.[9] However, although the workers avoided asking about it (even though they assumed it did occur), sometimes the subject came up anyway. This created a dilemma for workers who were bound to uphold agency policies against physical punishment.

S. (permanent mother) pinched E. (child) a couple of times and said 'how would you like it, this is what it feels like'. E. (also) talked about being hit and W. (worker) had a session with S. and T. (permanent parents) about this. They were angry that something they had discussed and justified with the previous worker was being brought up again. W. was concerned that E. would see the smacking as similar to his past abuse, while S. and T. were adamant that he knows the difference between a smack and abuse. The discussion went 'round and round in circles' with W. saying that 'any form of hitting isn't on' and S. and T. insisting that hitting is appropriate in certain circumstances. W. thinks that hitting probably happens in most permanent care families, but she found it alarming that S. and T. not only didn't hide it, but justified it (summary of discussion with permanent care worker).

Parents felt that they were expected to be more perfect than the average (biological) parent and that this was unreasonable given the known challenges which these children brought to placement:

I know I'm not allowed to smack him ... I'm not afraid of saying it, because if I was, I wouldn't be able to move on ... I'm not the only parent who's smacked a kid' (permanent mother).

Discussing a training day for permanent parents, in which an American therapist

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[7] This is a relatively common theme in the literature (Delaney & Kunstal 1993; Irving 1998). With their sense of self eroded in this way, the role of nurturer became far more difficult for these women (Barbee et al 1993; Flaherty & Richman 1989; Schilling 1987).

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[8] They were more likely to discuss this issue with therapists.
[9] If workers know about physical punishment, they must then act on it. While initial discussions would probably be held with the family regarding what had actually occurred (as happened on two occasions during this research), notification to DHS Protective Services is the next step.

talked about the need for very firm consequences for children with challenging behaviours, one permanent mother said that many people in the community would see some of the consequences talked about that day as child abuse. She then added, 'and so would most of the social workers that deal with them'.

The meanings which physical punishment evoke in permanent parents and workers are therefore worth exploring, in the light of their beliefs and expectations about permanent care prior to placement.

Assessment is a process which is approached with high hopes by all involved and, during it, potential parents tend to present only positive expectations and intentions about the future. One foster care worker, who expressed her subsequent disappointment about a couple, said, 'in the assessment, they presented as hearts and flowers and violins – I was just so thrilled at such a variety of levels'.

When parents are approved by agencies to care for children, this is seen, especially by parents and their networks, as a public 'validation that a particular family is considered to be whole enough and nurturing enough to parent a child' (O'Neill 1993, p.14). As the discourse of success is relatively pervasive (Groze 1996; Smith 1989), discipline in general, and physical punishment in particular, are a direct contrast to the earlier expectations and therefore challenge the parents' view of themselves as the 'good' parents they had hoped to be.

During most of the research process, parents tended to talk about the negativity which the child had brought to the existing family system, a theme which is in agreement with some of the literature (Delaney & Kunstal 1993). However, towards the end of the research,[10] parents were starting to mention to me their doubts about how much their own behaviour might have contributed to difficulties. Nevertheless, their avoidance of talking to the

workers about these anxieties meant that they had not been able to explore them in any formal sense.

The fact that none of this was talked about with the workers meant firstly that support was not even potentially forthcoming from the agency workers. However, more importantly perhaps, due to the fact that workers sensed what was happening and worried about it, it tended to magnify any existing lack of partnership between parents and workers.

Thus parents were at times trapped in polarised 'good-bad' interactions and self ascriptions. Most of them did not know that these patterns were shared with other permanent care families and they were not given opportunities to affirm their experience with peers. This is an issue with huge consequences for permanent family support.

CONCLUSION

In Victoria, as elsewhere, an enormous amount of time, energy and goodwill goes into the protection of children and their placement in alternative care, if they are unable to stay with their birth families. One of the criteria for success in permanent placements is that the cycle of abuse and neglect, which the children have experienced, will be broken – to the extent that the children, as adults, won't abuse or neglect their own children.

Support along the way needs to achieve at least this. Crucial to this endeavour is the dispelling of fear, shame, blame and secrets, so that destructive interactions have at least the possibility of being transformed into more positive outcomes.

The agency workers who were considered to be the most supportive by permanent parents were those who combined the warmth of a friend with the knowledge and authority of a professional. Parents who were lucky enough to work in partnership with such 'professional friends', and who also had access to peer support, felt less of a need to censor what they said and were therefore more likely to receive the support they needed.

Although it is not suggested that all parent-social worker relationships should, or even could, be like this, it is

clearly instructive to look at what made these partnerships so positive. Firstly, the workers were clear about the nature of the relationship and parents were able to trust that, although the professionals had a legal mandate to 'supervise', their primary goal was to support the placement. Secondly, workers were open about their own lives and permanent parents felt that they knew them as people. Thirdly, the workers were able to talk about some potentially challenging issues, such as physical punishment, in a warm and unthreatening way.

However, these relationships do not occur in a vacuum. While it is likely that permanent parents are better able to support their children when they are well supported by professionals, research has clearly shown that social workers are more able to empower service users when they are themselves well supported by their managers. The challenge therefore for adoption, permanent care and foster care agencies is to recognise and act on these parallel processes in the interests of children. □

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[10] The longitudinality of this research allowed a relationship of trust to grow between the participants and myself, which meant that there was an increasing depth to the discussions over time.

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Cheque/money order enclosed **OR** Debit Bankcard ☐ Visa ☐ Mastercard ☐   Expiry date .... Amount $..............

TAX INVOICE REQUIRED? ☐

Cardholder name.. Signature...

PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY

Send to: Children Australia, PO Box 7020, Dandenong, Vic 3175   Date.....................

Enquiries: Larraine Redshaw Tel: 03 9791 5423 Email: l.redshaw@ozchild.com.au