

The Tracing Problem:

An aspect of outcome studies in Child Welfare

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Between the years 1960 and 1972, well over one thousand children in all spent a period of residence in the St. Vincent de Paul's Children's Homes situated at South Melbourne and Black Rock in Victoria. One wonders about the circumstances which brought these children into care and one also wonders where they are now, 20 or 30 years after leaving St. Vincent's. How have they coped with the stresses of life during those years? Questions such as this led the author to embark on a research project. Few reports of research of this nature are to be found. The following description of one aspect of that project, the task of tracing the subjects, may go some way toward explaining the scarcity. It shows though, that tenacity can have some rewards.

The study itself has three main objectives:

1. to understand better the family crises that precipitated the original placement at St. Vincent de Paul's; to examine in retrospect, the experience of being resident at St. Vincent de Paul's; and to estimate the long term effects.
2. to discover what strategies they have used for coping with stresses they have experienced in the course of later development; what stresses they have faced and with what results. Who and what helped the most after they left the children's home?
3. to consider the implications of findings in relation to child and family welfare policy and practice.

The approach to data collection was through in-depth interviewing, but first, some subjects had to be found. To trace the whereabouts of the total number involved was beyond the resources of

this study, but, by focusing upon an objectively selected population of thirty, the task was reduced to a manageable scale. It soon became clear that reducing the population to a manageable scale is only part of the task. The current location of possible respondents was not readily available, certainly accounting for one of the reasons we lack follow-up studies. This paper is about the experience of tracing former residents. As things stand, it required the expenditure of substantial time and funds, but with some success. The procedures used may be of interest to other researchers.

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The size of the population to be located was the first issue. The next key question was, not just where were the respondents, but who were they? Some had married and had changed their names and, as was subsequently found, twelve had moved interstate. One was overseas, engaged in his own search for a father whom he had never seen. Five were scattered round Victoria in small country towns and twelve were living in the suburbs of Melbourne. It was necessary to travel to Sydney, Brisbane, Cairns, Cooktown, Darwin, Perth and Tasmania, as well as to distant country towns in Victoria like Mildura, Bendigo and Benalla to complete the interviews.

There had been no contact between the agency and some of the study population for 20-30 years and this time lapse made the search more difficult. The ages of the study population at the time of the search ranged from twenty-four to more than forty years. One of the former residents selected into the study population had died in a car accident when she was 24 years old, but her husband agreed to be interviewed.

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The initial strategy adopted was to search agency records and many hours were spent extracting likely leads. A record of the names and addresses of the persons to whom each child was discharged had been kept at the Administration Centre of the agency, however the information was often vague, eg, 'to Father' c/o a small country post office in Victoria, or 'to Mother' at an address, that she had long since left. The second strategy entailed following a network of contacts. Holiday hosts, who had kept in contact, proved to be one useful source of information, as were former staff members, cottage parents, hostel staff and former residents who had kept in touch, even though the information was often out of date. This strategy often led to further examination of the records to seek information which gained relevance from clues given by these informants.

Another set of considerations which are important and cannot be avoided, but which inevitably slow the tracing process, are the steps which had to be taken to satisfy ethical issues. Twenty-four of the respondents were Wards of State at the time of their placement and it was necessary to seek permission from Community Services Victoria to access their files under the Freedom of Information Act.

Permission was given under certain conditions, the more important being:

1. that a written research proposal was submitted;

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This experience prompted her to chose An Outcome Study of thirty adults who resided in St Vincent de Paul's Children's Homes as the topic for a Ph.D thesis.

2. that the researcher is properly qualified to carry out the research, or, in the case of an undergraduate, is under the supervision of a qualified person;
3. that the project is authorised in writing by the University;
4. that confidential material is treated as such and no client or former client is identified by name or description in any published material;
5. that a copy of the final research document is made available to Community Services Library.

A similar request was made to St. Vincent de Paul's Children's Homes, Black Rock. The only other request was made to The Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages for information that might indicate the married names of the five respondents who the researcher has been unable to trace so far. The Acting Registrar did not see the proposed need as sufficient reason for access. He stressed the fact that the information was confidential and would not be released to non relatives.

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Frustrations about the tracing difficulties involved in follow-up studies have been expressed by other researchers. Trudy Festinger (1983) wrote of the problems this kind of study poses, following a five year follow-up investigation she carried out on a group of 277 young adults who had spent some time in foster care in the New York Metropolitan area in 1975. The response from the selected population of 394 adults in her study was 277, while 117 failed to respond. Another author stated:

Because studies of this kind are extremely difficult to execute, reports of such undertakings are relatively rare in the professional literature. Follow up studies pose many problems: location of the subjects, obtaining their co-operation, developing reliable and valid measures of adjustment ... The complexity of attempting to link back to the foster care experience some of the variations in the child's current adjustment is also viewed as a formidable problem. Fanshel (1966:101)

Ferguson (1966:125), deplored the fact that "little attempt has been made to ascertain how young people fare after they pass out of care," but in attempting a study of his own, he had great difficulty tracing a group of children who, having been under the care of the Glasgow Local Authority, had reached their eighteenth year. He found the lapse of time since their discharge and the mobility of the respondents, a severe obstacle in his search for their whereabouts. Many of the young people, who had been placed in country areas, had drifted back to Glasgow in search for employment, as there was little opportunity in the country. Some of his respondents had migrated with their foster parents to other countries and now were beyond the scope of his study and probably beyond his available resources.

Skeels (1966) re-inforces the idea that great ingenuity and tenacity is needed and that researchers have probably devised ingenious solutions. He was untiring in his own search, travelling long distances to follow up former addresses, enquiring at local post offices and local petrol stations for information about long time residents who might have known the families to whom the children were discharged.

Unfortunately, researchers rarely report their methods of tracing. Festinger (1983:14) writes about "mountains of telephone directories for an initial check on all names". Ferguson (1966) reports the finding that some respondents had migrated to America or Australia, which in his case, ended the search. America and Australia have the problem of vast distances to contend with, while in the British Isles, the density of the population may provide its own difficulties. Skeels (1966:32) found that the mobility of these children added to the task of tracing his respondents in adulthood.

After some time, the author in this research abandoned the strategy of following up old addresses as a fruitless exercise. It was not only time consuming, but frustrating to arrive to find the house had been demolished to make way for a freeway, or the person sought was unknown to the present occupier.

At times, it was worth driving over one hundred kilometres to follow up the only clue available. In one case the only address on record was that given by the father when his children were released to his care. A letter was addressed to the country post office on the address. It had not been returned, in spite of the writer's address being on the back of the envelope, so it seemed a chat with the post master was the next thing to do. He knew the man who had grown up in the area, but said he had settled in another State some years before. He then volunteered the information that one of the daughters still lived in the district. Within an hour, the writer was knocking on the door of the eldest daughter in a neighbouring town, who, although not a member of the population for this research, was able to give another sister's address in another part of the country, which eventually led the writer to an address in Melbourne, only a few suburbs away. It seemed a roundabout way of getting there, but by the time she was contacted, the respondent had been prepared for the visit and was happy to participate in the study.

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About half of the former residents at St. Vincent de Paul's Children's Homes had kept in touch with at least one other former resident, and this provided another source of names and addresses. Over the years there have been several reunions, where information had been gleaned about old friends and some on-going social patterns had been developed, such as lunch in the city on a regular basis. Even so, this would have included only a small proportion of those who had remained within reasonable distances.

Finally, a list was drawn up of those respondents for whom addresses had been found, including those who had moved interstate, those who had married, those who were still single and those who were within easy travelling

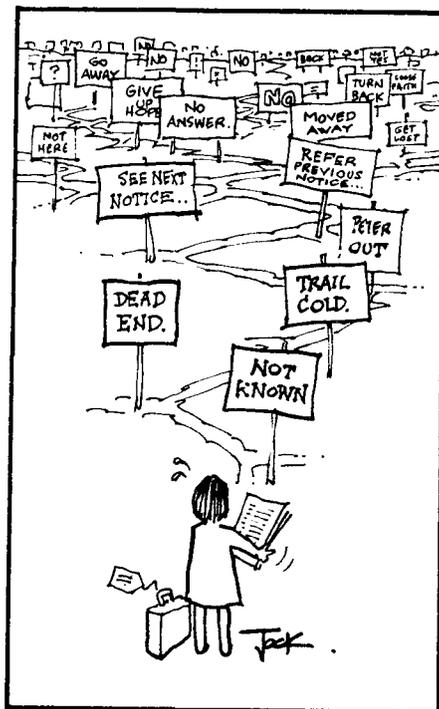
distance. The young man who was overseas was traced via occasional cards he sent to an aunt, who then relayed information about his movements. This enabled a chain of correspondence to be set up as he made his way home.

Letters were sent to all respondents explaining the purpose of the project, requesting their participation and asking their permission to gain access to their records. Enclosed was a form to be signed with a stamped addressed envelope for a reply signifying their consent or otherwise. The only person who refused at that stage, later agreed to see the researcher when in her locality. Several did not reply to the first letter, but after a suitable lapse of time, the letter was followed up by a telephone call. There was no unwillingness to co-operate, but usually the letter had been put aside and forgotten. In some cases respondents felt it would have been impossible to come to Melbourne to be interviewed and dismissed the idea as being impracticable.

Thanks to a grant from the Lyra Taylor Fund (administered through the Australian Association of Social Workers) it was possible to put a plan into operation, which enabled the researcher to visit the respondents wherever they were. They were given the choice of being interviewed in their own home or at an alternative venue. Fourteen chose to be seen in their own home and the others chose an alternative, usually where the researcher was staying. There were advantages either way. A visit to the respondent's home gave the researcher an opportunity to meet husbands and children and sometimes in-laws. One interview was taken with a four year old sitting contentedly on the floor with her colouring book, while her younger brother watched a video in the next room, occasionally wandering out to see what was going on. With a little reassurance from his mother and a cool drink he returned to watch Bugs Bunny. The father was on shift work and came home in time to take the children out for a game.

On the other hand, where the interview was held away from the home, the respondent was free from minor distractions. The choice seemed to depend on the temperament of the respondent more than anything. Where the interviewee lived in another State, the visit was

planned to allow some time for socialization with the family, regardless of where the interview took place. It was a splendid opportunity for participant observation.



There was one disappointment when it was found that one of the respondents, previously living in Sydney, had moved to a country town with no definite address. By the time a friend of the researcher who lived in the area, was able to locate her by doing a round of the schools, the family had left for Queensland. Relatives lived in Brisbane and it was assumed, she may have gone to visit them, but a telephone call revealed that this was not the case. This seemed like a lost opportunity and further frustration, but the news of the enquiry had pursued the respondent and, somehow or other, a letter eventually arrived with an address in Northern Queensland. This was after the researcher had returned from a round trip of Australia, where she had interviewed respondents in Sydney, Brisbane, Cairns, Darwin and Perth.

After more correspondence, a late night flight was arranged to meet the lady concerned. After a preliminary interview she announced that she had come down from the far north and was on her way back to be with her children. Having got so far, it could not be left at that, so the arrangement was to follow

her. After enquiries, it would seem there were two alternatives - either to go by plane or on the Quick Silver, a catamaran that ran a service between Port Douglas and Cooktown. The Quick Silver was a real bonus, as it was a four hour trip up the coast of Queensland on a beautiful sunny day with the mountains reaching down to the sea. Quick Silver was the nature of this lady, who had eluded the writer for so long and it was with some misgivings that the researcher undertook the trip. The respondent had described her life style as that of a gypsy. Would she be there?

As the boat drew into its moorings, there she was, looking very much like a gypsy and, after a warm greeting, she led the way to a vehicle on which she had hitched a ride to get to the town. After a quick snack, we looked around for somewhere we could talk in private. The best that was offering was a seat under a shady tree on the side of the road, where we were undisturbed for a couple of hours. When it was time to return to the boat, she hitched another ride back to the pier for us in time for me to go on board. The crew were waiting to pull in the gangway.

Every find was a bonus and it felt like 'Desperately Seeking Susan', but things did not always turn out so well. There were times when it seemed that all avenues had been exhausted and the pursuit would have to be abandoned. Sometimes, however, mere chance seemed to be on the writer's side. One long weekend in the country with a friend unexpectedly brought us along a route with a sign that seemed to lead to nowhere, but the name was firmly imprinted on the writer's mind as a place where a relative of one of the respondents had lived. It was an unusual name and as the records had been scrutinised so carefully, it came up over and over again. Here again it was not the law of chance that came to the writer's aid, but the law of probability. It was quite probable that somebody in the area might have some information as to the whereabouts of this family.

There were one or two farm houses along the way. At the first one there was nobody at home, but further down the road, the owner volunteered the information that the lady being sought,

who was the great aunt of the respondent, had died a month earlier. He added that her great nephew was still living in the district and gave directions as to how to find him. He said the house could not be missed as it was opposite the football ground. We set off with high hopes. The football ground was there all right, but so it seemed, was everybody else. Each house was closed up except one, where a young girl kept the dogs at bay while we explained our mission. She assured us we were at the right house, but her father was at the football and so was her mother. So off we went to the football and approached a group of people to ask if they knew of the gentleman. Immediately, on hearing his name, he came over and introduced himself. After some explanation, he offered to call the mother of the respondent in question from the telephone in the club house.

This was not entirely satisfactory, as it did not give the researcher the chance to explain to the respondent herself, the purpose of the study. The mother would not give her daughter's name or address, but agreed to ask her if she would be willing to be interviewed. It was no surprise when the answer was negative. However, the information volunteered from the mother and the relative seemed to indicate that things had gone fairly well for her daughter. She was happily married with two children, but this gave no indication of how she had coped with the stresses of life or of how she felt about her life as a whole or of her general sense of well-being.

One of the most difficult of the respondents to find was a young woman who had joined the Armed Forces. Enquiries made through the routine army procedures drew a blank. It was not that the correspondence did not reach her, but she was so far away in another State that she had put the letter aside and did not bother to follow it up. Further enquiries through the Army Chaplains were more successful, and she agreed to be interviewed when she found this did not mean a trip to Melbourne which would have been impossible.

As this lady was stationed on the route being followed, an attempt was made to engage her on the telephone number that had been given. Each call ended in a referral to another number. After a

TABLE I**Case 1:**

- Step 1.* An address was obtained for a country town from a sister-in-law.
Step 2. No trace found there. Had left that position.
Step 3. Adoptive brother was approached who gave his father's address.
Step 4. Telephoned the adoptive father, met with a refusal.
Step 5. Met up with a former cottage mother in West Australia and obtained an address in another State.
Step 6. Drove down a country highway looking for the address. Could not locate the number. Enquired at a restaurant for a young man recently arrived in the area and employed as a Chef in that location. Referred to the hotel on the other side of the road.
Step 7. Enquired at the Hotel. Not employed there, but was known. Referred to the house on the other side of the road.
Step 8. Knocked at the door of a private house which had been indicated. Was invited in. He was there.

Case 2: The tracing of another respondent is worth mentioning. This was a thirty-nine year old lady whose address and telephone number were known to the researcher who had visited her previously while on holiday in her locality, which was in another State.

- Step 1.* Wrote to the known address, but there was no answer.
Step 2. Followed up with a telephone call. No answer. Assumed the lady had moved.
Step 3. Tried to locate her married sister in a neighbouring suburb. A similar result.
Step 4. On route round Australia visited the address, but found everything locked up. The residence was a flat above a shop which had to be entered from a back lane. Enquired at the shop and found she still lived there.
Step 5. Assuming she was at work, returned at a later hour and met a neighbour returning to his ground floor flat, who let me in.
Step 6. Climbed the rickety stair case and knocked on the door to find she had been there all the time.

She had been in a psychiatric hospital on and off for some time and the telephone had been cut off, as the bill had not been paid. She had been living there more or less as a recluse. Arrangements were made to visit the next day.

number of these calls without result, a more helpful person took the trouble to speak to the lady herself and to make sure she would answer the telephone when the next call came.

An average of twenty hours per respondent was taken up with the initial search and an average of three to four hours per person was spent in interviewing, not to mention the hours of travel involved, which alone covered a period of nearly three months. This means a researcher has to have not only time at her disposal but also considerable funds.

The experience in this study thoroughly backs up the view expressed by Trudy Festinger:

...the task of locating people...was a time consuming job, taxing the morale of staff and filled with frustrations. It required dedication, imagination, luck and above all persistence. Festinger (1983:16)

So many steps had to be taken before discovering the actual whereabouts of the respondents - two examples are given in detail in Table I.

This article has been an attempt to outline the process of tracing the respondents for this type of research and to highlight the difficulties incurred. There has been no thought of

publishing any findings at this stage. Five respondents have still to be found, but there is very little information to justify the continuation of the search.

There have been few systematic studies of what has happened to children who have received services in the Child Welfare system. The gap in our knowledge is regrettable, as revisions in child welfare are being made without full awareness of the effect of past practices. One of the reasons for the lack of information about outcomes, is the great difficulty in tracing people some years after they have been discharged from care. ♦

References

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