"Do you mean, we're not the only ones?"... Disruption - powerlessness and empowerment

Cas O'Neill

A study of the meaning of adoption and permanent placement disruption for parents and social workers confirmed that the experience is extremely stressful over a long period of time.

Powerful themes evident through the process of the study were the influence on the placement of stress in the parents' backgrounds; the maintenance of the family boundary; triangulation of relationships; the nature and quality of interactions between parents and social workers; relinquishment of a placed child; the immobilisation of possible support; and research as intervention.

Adoption as Myth

In Western culture, relinquishment, adoption and disruption are richly endowed with powerful archetypes. In the realm of fairy-tales, stories abound of children, who are cast out or deserted by evil or uncaring parents; and subsequently rescued and nurtured by caring people, usually of humble origins. These children then mature as good and wise and go on to save or inherit a kingdom. Related to this is the ambivalence inherent in children's perceptions of parents, with the image of the all-giving mother and rescuing father on the one hand, juxtaposed with the image of the vengeful step-mother and weak father on the other [Bettelheim, 1976].

The process of parenting a child from another family is therefore fraught with underlying and contradictory cultural and symbolic meanings, involving both rescue from the original parents and unfairly supplanting them; of breaking families and making them; of escape and reunion; of being lost and found.

The Meaning of Disruption

The meaning of disruption to all participants evokes these archetypes very strongly - to the child, it is likely to mean an increasing realisation of worthlessness, of the fallibility of adults, of the knowledge that there may never be strong and nurturing parents, who are able to banish the hurtful past and lead him or her to a golden future; to the erstwhile parents, disruption places them in the shoes of the original relinquishing parents, being seen as vengeful, uncaring and rejecting, rather than helpful, caring and rescuing; while to the social workers and agencies, disruption is the antithesis of the powerful act of creating new relationships [Triseliotis, 1989], calling into question the archetype of a happy-ever-after ending.

The Practice Wisdom of Disruption

Among Victorian permanent care workers, the 'practice wisdom' or tacit understanding [Scott, 1990] of disruptions, a blend of knowledge, experience and belief derived from previous case patterns, is that these situations are fraught with feelings of pain and failure, but also with possibilities for learning, for all participants. The problem with this particular 'practice wisdom' relates to the fact that the families and children, who are the key participants, have not contributed to it.

This concern, along with the researcher's growing understanding of how the past experiences of traumatised children impinge on the life of a family, led to the study, in the hope that a 'fusion of horizons' [Nielsen, 1990, p. 29], or coalition of common themes for the researched and the researcher, would emerge to enrich the understanding, and therefore the practice, in this field.

Due to the time and energy constraints of a lone researcher, the children of these disrupted placements were not interviewed, although this is planned for the near future. This picture of the experience of disruption, while giving valuable insight into the experience of parents and social workers, is therefore incomplete.

The Sample

The group from whom the parent participants were randomly chosen were single parents and couples who had experienced a disrupted permanent placement [of a child with special needs] between 1 July 1980 and 30 June 1990. Four adoption and permanent care agencies in Victoria were represented in the sample, which consisted of twelve couples [or individuals] in addition to the two couples with whom the study was piloted.

The views of four social workers were also sought to clarify the 'practice wisdom' around the issue of disruptions and to provide a balance to the views of the parents. The four experienced social workers who were interviewed, represented the four agencies which took part in this study. Additionally, they had each worked with at least two of the couples in the sample, although they were not asked for their opinions about particular families.

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The Process

As the primary research question for this study was to look at the meaning of disruptions to parents and social workers, it seemed increasingly appropriate for the parent participants to define their own meaning. This view in fact evolved during the pilot interviews, when the inappropriateness of a structured questionnaire for a family story became increasingly obvious. It is also the main point of difference between this study and other similar studies [Aldgate & Hawley, 1986; Partridge, Hornby & McDonald, 1986; Schmidt, Rosenthal & Bombeck, 1988; Valentine, Conway and Randolph, 1987].

For the social workers, on the other hand, there was already an articulated 'practice wisdom' around the subject of disruptions. Donald Schon discusses 'the dilemma of rigor or relevance', surmising that there is a tendency for professionals to become 'selectively inattentive' to information which falls outside of known and used categories [Schon, 1983, p. 44], categories which may represent practice wisdom. It therefore seemed more appropriate to structure the individual opinions of social workers with a questionnaire which would enable them to reflect on the themes of this practice wisdom.

The Complementary Stories

There was a fundamental difference in the way in which parents and social workers viewed the same events, a difference which is likely to be associated with the powerlessness experienced by both groups, but particularly by the parents.

For the couples, the experience of the placement/disruption as a crisis was still very real, even years after the event. While many of these people had gained more of a perspective on events as time passed, most were still grieving for their old sense of themselves as strong and worthwhile individuals, couples and families, an understanding which had been inevitably altered by the disruption.

The social workers, on the other hand, expressed a shared dread of disruptions, even when there were perceived long-term gains for child and family in separating. Some alluded to a sense of their own powerlessness, which may be seen as a mirror image to the power which social workers and agencies undeniably possess in the assessment and placement process, the power to create families [Kirk, 1981; Ryburn, 1991; Triseliotis, 1989]. One worker commented:

> I don't know what social workers should do...I've sort of hovered around ...I haven't done anything...I've offered to visit and phone...it is very difficult because it reinforces your own pain.

> *For the couples, the experience of the placement/disruption as a crisis was still very real, even years after the event... most were still grieving for their old sense of themselves as strong and worthwhile individuals, couples and families...*

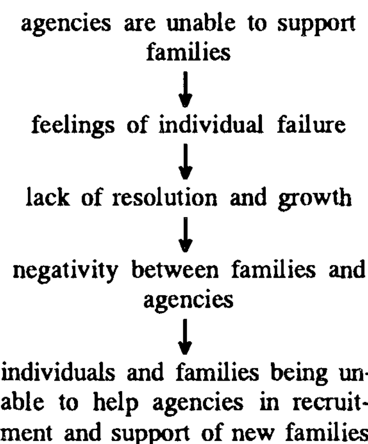
While the couples in this study talked about behaviour which was difficult to tolerate, division and lack of support, the social workers talked of the parents' negative perception of the childrens' behaviour, marital stress and the couples' decreasing openness to support. While the couples often described their own experience of significant past stress, infertility and expectations of themselves and the children in placement, without necessarily relating these to the disruption, the social workers saw these issues as being directly related to the disruption.

A degree of negativity was apparent in many of the comments which couples and social workers made about each other. One man commented about social workers - 'they only saw what they wanted to see'; while a social worker recalled a parent as being 'bizarre'. This is indicative of the very different meanings which some parents and social workers attributed to the same events [Scott, 1989]. However, it also perhaps stems from the disappointment of the high hopes with which all parties approached the initial placement, as well as the nature of the assessment process itself.

In general, assessment of couples for special needs children is lengthy and often experienced as rigorous and disempowering by prospective parents [Kirk, 1964; Ward, 1981]. Completion of the assessment process is seen by parents and social workers as a significant commitment in itself, while approval to adopt is experienced as validation that a particular family is considered to be whole enough and nurturing enough to parent a child who has been seen as unparentable by previous parents.

It is no wonder then, that parents and social workers who see themselves [and believe that they are judged by their peers] as having 'failed' this powerful expectation to heal a troubled child, should express contradictory feelings about the other participants, including the children.

There is thus a cycle of powerlessness, in which:-



In the absence of practice based on this understanding, the cycle will continue.

Themes From the Stories

A number of powerful themes were increasingly evident through the process of the study, namely:-

1. the influence on the placement of stress in the parents' backgrounds;
2. the maintenance of the family boundary;
3. triangulation of relationships in the

placement/disruption process;
4. the nature and quality of interactions between couples and social workers/agencies;
5. the far-reaching consequences for families in relinquishment of a child in this way;
6. support as a resource;
7. research as intervention.

Background Stress

Without a control group of intact special needs placements, it is impossible to discuss the extent of the relationship between a parent's experience of past stress and the likelihood of disruption. It is also not known what proportion of couples bring significant losses of their own to special needs placements, or to what extent past loss contributes to adoption motivation, only that this is thought to be common [Braden, 1981 Cann, 1980; Elbow, 1986; Reid et al, 1987]. Fourteen of the twenty-six people interviewed for this study either talked about, or hinted at, significant past stress. Thus, these were people who had already experienced considerable disempowerment in the past.

Family Boundary

The propensity to challenge rules appears to be characteristic of older children who have experienced many moves [Cann, 1980; Elbow, 1986; Reid et al, 1987]. The children involved with the parents in this study seemed to have an uncanny ability to challenge both implicit and explicit family rules repeatedly, until the family boundary became exclusive of them. One father commented that the child was initially 'part of the oneness', but this changed within a short time, so that the family increasingly 'saw him as an outsider'. Parents and social workers need to be prepared for, and attuned to, these turning points in the placements, so that the possibility is there to work on preventing a disruption.

The children were thus seen as overwhelmingly powerful figures with the emotional wherewithal to disrupt family rules and patterns, which had hitherto often not been identified by family members.

The child's power seems to derive in part from his or her innate difference and behaviour, which may thwart prescribed family patterns and threaten family identity. However, his or her power also stems from the ability to trigger some of the more toxic issues in the parents' backgrounds. The children were therefore seen to have the power to change the parents' views of themselves - 'he brought out a side in me I didn't like'; as well as the power to change how the parents were viewed by others - 'outside people said "aren't they terrible".'

> *...the children only maintained their power for as long as the parents wanted them as members of the family.*

However, the children only maintained their power for as long as the parents wanted them as members of the family [Sprey, 1979]. When either or both of the parents felt challenged beyond their capacity to respond any longer, the decision was made for the child to leave the family, at which point the child lost his or her power.

Triangulation of Relationships

Throughout this study, there was a strong pattern of division and triangulation of parental relationships, which had previously maintained a balance over many years [Cann, 1980]. These relationships appeared to be undermined by the child's ability to challenge family norms, but particularly those implicit norms relating to the mother. This pattern of division, although not relating to a particular parent as in this study, has been identified in a large recent study of disruptions [Barth and Berry, 1988]. It seems to be characteristic of children whose prior experience of relationships is that they are divided and who may in fact blame themselves for past divisions, yet seek to re-create them [Braden, 1981].

Mothers routinely believed that they were more strongly challenged than were their husbands, partly because they were the ones to set and maintain household rules. However, there was also a belief, stated by several parents, male and female, that the children somehow had a greater need to challenge mothers or women in general due to the child usually having been identifiably relinquished by a mother rather than a father. One father commented - [the child had] 'such hatred for females...he worked a woman over.'

Because these situations evoke the archetype of the wicked stepmother, whose evil acts are eventually avenged by the child, they convey powerful cultural messages, which are likely to have a negative impact on the self-image of mothers of these children. They are also likely to perpetuate for the child a destructive view of the nature of relationships between women and children, as well as between women and men.

Division of the parents' relationship was likely to occur as a result of the child's identification with the father, with the mother feeling excluded and unsupported, as a result. This pattern led to feelings of abandonment, rejection, criticism and loss in both parents [James, 1989], making it even less likely that they would be able to reach some resolution over the impact of the child's behaviour on the family unit.

In eight out of fourteen of the couples, triangulation was also perceived to have occurred in the relationship between couple, child and social worker [or other professional].

Couples were often incensed that, not only were they having a difficult time coping with the child, but the professionals involved were seen to be supportive of the child, at the expense of the parents and the cohesion of the family unit.

Parent/Social Worker Interaction

The three couples who felt supported through the placement/disruption process all experienced consistent help from a trusted social worker. While some other couples had experienced some help and support along the way,

changes of workers apparently ensured that the process was not a consistent one. Couples who believed they had a good relationship with their initial social worker were less likely to confide in a different worker when the placement experienced difficulties.

Relinquishment

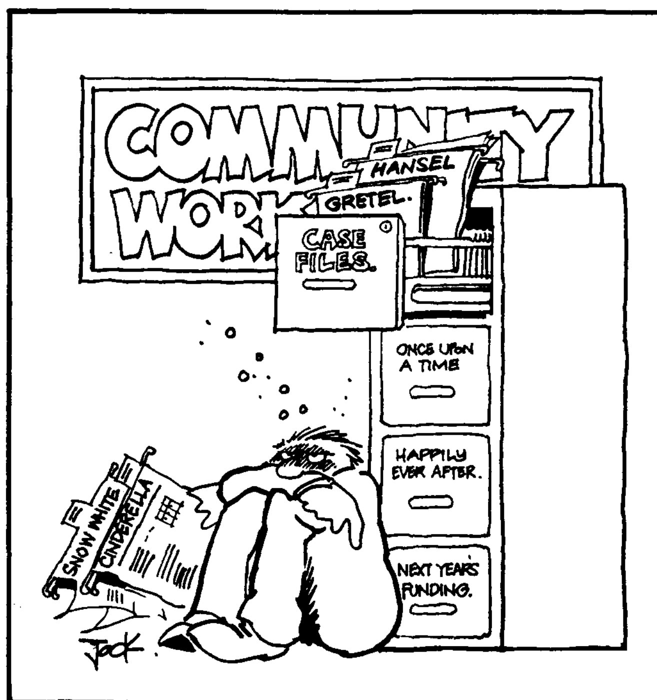
For many of the couples who participated in this study, the relinquishment of the children was still relatively unresolved, as it had not usually been discussed in any depth outside of the immediate family. As the other previously quoted disruption studies had found, the couples needed no encouragement to tell their story and it was obviously a great relief to most of them to talk through the issues with each other in the presence of an outsider. Parts of the stories were imbued with anger, regret, shame and guilt and in this they were reminiscent of the stories of birth parents who relinquished their children a generation ago [Winkler, Brown, Van Keppel and Blanchard, 1988].

However, one of the significant differences between relinquishing birth parents and the parents involved in disrupted placements is that the latter were originally assessed as being able to parent very difficult children. They therefore carried not only their own expectations, but those of social workers, agencies, birth parents and the children. Perceived failure was therefore seen in a very public, and potentially humiliating, light and this fact further deterred parents from seeking help. Thus, in addition to the difficulties of the placement and the crisis of the disruption, most parents were further disempowered by being unable to have their experience listened to or validated.

It seems ironic that the 'bad blood' and the scapegoats of the past in the adoption system may well have been replaced with a new group of disempowered people, who have failed to meet the expectations, often implicit, placed on them by the system.

Support as a Resource

Although some of the couples described themselves as being isolated in terms of having few relatives or friends nearby, prior to, and during, the placement, this was by no means so for all the eleven couples who said they received insufficient support. The impression gained was rather that potential supporters were unable to listen to stories of anger and pain, because the internalised adoption myths of rescue and happy endings were just too resistant to change.



One father said that his sister had blamed him for 'treating [son] badly', when in fact the child was physically and sexually abusing the two younger birth children in the family. A mother commented that 'the adoption caused a rift between me and my mother... [husband's] parents were supportive, but they made it plain that I was wrong [in her view of the child].'

Thus, the external resources which some of the couples had prior to placement seemed to be effectively immobilised by conflict over parenting styles and issues of control and discipline. The cultural myth of healing a troubled child appeared to have precluded relatives and friends from understanding the different nature of parenting which had been undertaken by these parents. When this factor is added to division in the parents' relationships and changes of social workers, most of whom were not seen as helpful, it becomes evident that the resources to deal with an identifiably difficult child, were probably miniscule.

In addition, most of the couples had no idea of the process and prevalence of placement difficulties and disruptions, as they had, on the whole, avoided contact with other adoptive families when they themselves most needed help. They were therefore not able to use access to others with similar experiences, as a resource for problem-solving or coping.

While the couples did not believe they had received sufficient support, they were usually unable to say what support would have maintained the placement or made the disruption easier to bear, beyond making the frequent comment that they needed someone to listen, preferably someone who understood the difficulties – 'we needed people to believe us and support us.' Implicit in this is the assumption that, by telling the story, events can be structured and then restructured to allow resolution to occur [Hartman & Laird, 1990]. However, despite the seeming simplicity of this need, fulfilling it seemed curiously difficult, a situation which suggests that the presence of a group of seriously alienated individuals in the adoption system may act in some way as a balance or reliever of tension for the system [Pinderhughes, 1983].

Research as Intervention

The abandonment of the researcher's questionnaire empowered participants by allowing them to shape the telling of their own stories and to therefore have their experiences heard and validated. This in turn enabled some of them to request a meeting with others who had experienced a similar situation; and to ask for non-identifying information about the child's progress – in short, to undertake much of the process of grief resolution work. Such an outcome

would arguably have been very different with use of a questionnaire [Holman, 1987; Sainsbury, 1987] and confirms follow-up research of this kind as a powerful interventive tool.

Postscript

During the research process, it became apparent that most of the couples had no idea that there were other families like themselves. This was expressed by one person's unforgettable question: 'Do you mean, we're not the only ones?'

Several couples, in fact, stated that they would have found it helpful, at the time of their own disruption, to meet with others who had experienced a disruption and asked if it would be possible to meet some of the other participants who had taken part in the research. A meeting was therefore arranged to share some of the research findings and to enable couples to meet each other.

The meeting was a lively one, with those present talking at length of the similarities and differences in their experiences. The participants decided not only that they would be willing to act as individual support families for future families experiencing disruption, but that they also wanted the group to meet again.

A subsequent meeting confirmed that the group wished to be an ongoing one. Members currently have plans to write about their experiences and perhaps to tape them as a resource for families and agencies, to prepare posters for agencies and to make contact with special needs adoptive parent support groups. One couple also indicated their preparedness to offer respite care to families who have special needs children in their care and who are in need of a break. Thus, in organising themselves to care for others, group members are in the process of gaining further control over their adoption/disruption experience.

It has been suggested by at least one writer that agencies set up their own groups for families who have experienced disruption [Fitzgerald, 1983]. However, given the alienation from social workers and agencies that many of the couples in this study, and others, have expressed following disruption [Aldgate and Hawley, 1986; Fitzgerald, 1983; Valentine et al, 1987], this may not be a realistic possibility without changes in the way in which placements and disruptions are handled.

It seems that the only way such support groups will arise and be motivated to continue is if the impetus comes from the parents themselves [Arntson & Droge, 1987; Gitterman & Shulman, 1986; Lieberman & Borman, 1979; Pancoast, Parker & Froland, 1983; Silverman, 1980; Williams & Shoultz, 1982]. However, given that part of the nature of the disruption experience appears to be one of isolation and disempowerment, this is unlikely to happen, without an unusual precursor such as the present research or a change in the way in which professionals support permanent placements and disruptions of older special needs children.

The story of this research is one example of how healing and validation were offered to disrupted families, to the extent that some of them felt empowered to affirm their experiences together and to reach out to others in need of their help. ♦

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