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**Experiences of Separation and Divorce Amongst Foster and Adoptive
Families: The Need for Supportive Responses**

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Abstract

Separation and divorce are realities facing many families. Yet in the case of foster or adoptive families, only a small number of studies have focused on experiences of separation or divorce. This paper seeks to make an initial contribution to filling this gap by exploring the experiences of foster and adoptive families in both Australia and the United States. A thematic analysis of both primary and secondary data collected by the authors identified three themes: 1) that foster families experience variable responses from service providers, 2) that some adoptive parents may perceive that separation or divorce compounds adoption-related losses, and 3) that some adoptees may challenge the assumption that adoptive families have unique experiences of separation or divorce. The paper concludes by advocating for the provision of clear guidelines to foster families who may experience separation or divorce, and highlights the need for supportive community responses to foster or adoptive families who experience separation or divorce.

Keywords: divorce, separation, foster care, adoption

Introduction

As practitioners and researchers in the area of foster care and adoption, we are aware that separation and divorce can have significant implications for both foster or adoptive parents and children. With the significance of this topic in mind, a thorough literature search and our own experience identified a gap regarding practice guidance and research findings in this area. Through careful consideration of ways that we might address this issue (mindful of the challenges in identifying members of the target population and the difficulty of accessing them), we offer in this paper an initial attempt at filling the research gap in the form of a small exploratory project. Perhaps understandably, given the challenges of accessing such a hard to reach population, there are limitations to this project due to size and scope. Nevertheless, the tentative findings that we report below help to indicate what some of the gaps might be. We think that the results, even though limited, suggest some implications for the development of future practice and research, as we explore in the discussion section.

Background

In countries such as Australia and the United States, increasing numbers of children are growing up in foster or adoptive families. Potential foster or adoptive parents are subject to stringent screening processes and training prior to approval.

Once approved, and in the case of foster care, foster parents assume the responsibility of providing a safe, stable and nurturing environment for the children in their care, but are not considered the children's legal guardians. Consequently, foster carers are subject to ongoing scrutiny by government or private foster care agencies (Blythe et al., 2012; Riggs, Bartholomaeus & Due, 2016). In the case of adoption, whilst legal guardianship is transferred to the adoptive parents, this does not mean that such parents are entirely free from government or third party scrutiny, particularly in the context of open adoptions.

With a majority of foster or adoptive parents being married (Rodger, Cummings & Leschied, 2006), and where in some jurisdictions this is a requirement of approval, and given that married or coupled foster or adoptive parents are not inherently more or less likely to separate or divorce as compared to other couples, it is likely that separation or divorce occur in some foster or adoptive families. In both Australia and the United States, statistics indicate that approximately half of all marriages end in divorce (ABS, 2014; CDC, 2002). Yet despite the relative likelihood that separation or divorce will occur in a significant proportion of foster or adoptive families, this phenomenon has been largely overlooked in previous research. Beyond citing separation or divorce as a potential reason for foster or adoptive placement breakdown and/or cessation of care (e.g., McArthur,

2014; Blythe, Halcomb & Wilkes, 2014), almost no research has been conducted to date regarding experiences of separation or divorce among foster or adoptive families (Andersson, 2001). In the following section we review the small body of research that has addressed separation or divorce among foster or adoptive families.

Previous Literature

As noted above, there is very little research on separation or divorce amongst foster or adoptive families. Although not specifically investigated as a topic in its own right, however, the occurrence of separation and divorce amongst foster and adoptive parents has been noted in the literature. In Blythe et al's (2013) study, for example, 20% (n= 20) of the foster mothers were divorced. O'Connor et al (2000) similarly report rates of divorce (13%, n=188) amongst a sample of adoptive families. These rates of divorce are comparatively low when compared to the general population (ABS, 2014; CDC, 2002). However, Andersson (2001) suggests that it may be incorrect to assume that separation or divorce rates are inherently lower in foster or adoptive families.

Research has provided some insight into the experience of separation and divorce

amongst adoptive families. There is some evidence suggesting that adoptive families may be less negatively affected by divorce. When comparing the effects of divorce on biological and adoptive families, O'Connor et al. (2000, p. 435) examined child adjustment, behavior, substance use, self-esteem, social competence and achievement. Results indicated that the adoptees in the sample scored significantly higher on a range of positive adjustment measures compared to non-adoptees. In particular, O'Connor et al. report adoptees as having a lower incidence of internalizing and externalizing behaviors associated with divorce compared to non-adoptees. In comparison, Amato & Cheadle (2008) report an increased incidence of behavioral problems amongst children of divorce in general, and did *not* find any significant differences between adoptees and non-adoptees in this regard.

Method

Materials

A survey, focused on Australian foster carers was designed by the authors and hosted on SurveyMonkey. As a hard to reach population who receive frequent requests for research participation, our thought was that a survey might result in a

greater number of responses than a call for interview participants. The survey included questions about 1) household demographics, 2) awareness of Australian foster care guidelines specific to separation or divorce, and 3) experiences of support following separation or divorce. The survey was open from March 2015 until January 2016.

Despite our assumption that a survey would generate more responses than a call for interview participants, this was not the case. To supplement the small number of survey responses, a Google search was conducted in order to identify first person accounts of separation or divorce amongst foster or adoptive parents, either within Australia or internationally. One open access forum thread on foster care and divorce or separation was identified (happy2bjustmommy, 2012), and one open access blog post on adoption and divorce (and the accompanying comments made on it) was also identified (Philyaw, 2014). Both of these sources of data were from North America.

Procedure

The Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee granted ethics approval for the survey. Following approval, a flyer advertising the

survey was widely circulated through foster care agencies in South Australia, New South Wales, and Victoria. It was also circulated via the personal networks of the authors, and on social media. In January 2016 all responses were downloaded from SurveyMonkey for analysis.

Given the secondary data sourced through a Google search were from open access blogs and forums, ethics approval was not sought for this form of data collection. There has been significant debate over the practice of using online data without the express approval of the content authors, however it is generally agreed that open access (as opposed to private material that requires subscription or membership) may be reasonably considered publically available information (Hookway, 2008). The blog and forum data were all retrieved in January 2016, and collated into one document for analysis.

Participants

Despite extensive and repeated attempts at disseminating the call for survey participants, only 10 people completed the survey. Of these, six were men and four were women. The average age of respondents was 45. Three respondents came from New South Wales, three from Victoria, two from South Australia, and two

from Queensland. On average respondents had been foster carers for seven years, and had on average two children in their care. All were providing long-term care. In terms of separation or divorce, four of the respondents were married at the time of separation, and four of the respondents had re-partnered since separating. None of the respondents were aware of foster care-specific guidelines about separation or divorce.

In terms of the blog and forum data, a total of 61 comments were made in response to the blog, and 17 made in response to the forum post. With regard to the former, only those written by posters who self identified as either adoptees or adoptive parents were included for analysis (n=8). With regard to the forum post, only those posters who provided comment specifically on service responses to separation or divorce were included for analysis (n=5).

Analytic Approach

For the purposes of the analysis reported here, the survey responses about experiences of support and the forum post on foster carer registration following divorce or separation were analysed together, given they focus on relatively similar topics and relatively similar cohorts. The blog post about adoption and the

comments made on it were then analysed separately.

The analytic approach applied was thematic, following the outline provided by Braun and Clarke (2006). The data were read by the first author, in the two groupings outlined above. Initial coding took two forms. First, the blog post comments were coded in terms of the apparent identification of the poster (i.e., adoptive parent or child or not). It was not considered useful to analyse comments made by those outside of the cohorts of interest. The forum post was similarly coded so as to distinguish between comments that simply wished the original poster well, and those that actually offered advice. Having coded for relevant and extraneous data, the remaining data were then examined for any themes evident. One theme was identified from the foster care data, and was named 'Variability of service responses'. In terms of the adoption data, two contrasting themes were identified, one named 'Divorce as compounding adoption-related losses' and one named 'Divorce as no different for adoptees'. These three themes are now explored in detail, using illustrative extracts.

Findings

Variability of Service Responses

This first theme, focused specifically on service responses, highlights the variability that was apparent across both sources of foster care-specific data. Whilst not all responses included under this theme explicitly mentioned variability, what was apparent was that service responses to foster carers who separate and divorce appears to vary both by location, but also according to the views of individual agency workers. In terms of respondents who specifically mentioned variability, the following extracts highlight the potential impact of such variability:

It really depended on who we spoke to. Some workers really normalized the experience and offered whatever support we wanted (or didn't want). Others almost seemed to discredit us as carers, to the point where we felt concerned about whether they might end the placement (Female survey respondent, 45).

I'm sure it varies drastically agency to agency. I know a couple of circumstances in our area where they removed the kids immediately as soon as [the agency] found out about the pending divorce. Here, you have to be a year distanced from a 'life changing event'. So, they don't

allow any future placements until a year after the divorce is finalized
(‘Tras’, forum response, posted June 3, 2012).

Here if you get divorced they revoke your license. I know of a specific couple that informed their worker they were looking to divorce and their kids were moved two days later (Mommy2None, forum response, posted June 2, 2012).

In all of these extracts variability is not simply a cause for anxiety in the abstract. Rather, both the survey respondent and the forum responses suggest that there may be a very real risk that, dependent on the views of agency workers, children may be removed from foster placements if a separation or divorce occurs.

Other extracts included in the sample did not specifically mention variability, but when viewed together demonstrate variability in practice, with some foster carers reporting supportive responses, and others reporting concern over the inadequacy of service responses:

They listened and were understanding to a certain degree or on a superficial level, though more broadly they appeared to be driven by

risk management (Male survey respondent, 42).

At no point did anyone offer to speak with the children, which we thought was odd. Not that we necessarily wanted this, but it is noticeable that it did not occur (Male survey respondent, 36).

I was really happy with how the agency responded. They supported us through the separation, there didn't seem to be any judgment, we never felt that the placements were under review. Overall positive (Female survey respondent, 39).

Of all of the extracts included in the foster care sample, only one was unilaterally positive. This positive response, however, must be located in the context of other responses which were much more ambivalent about how agency workers engage with foster families through separation or divorce. In the first extract above, support appears to have been provided but largely in order to 'risk manage', whilst in the second extract the children in the family were not engaged with. Again, this variability has very real implications, with a focus on risk management potentially failing to attend to the emotions associated with separation or divorce, and the lack of attention to children potentially failing to meet their support needs.

Divorce as Compounding Adoption-Related Losses

Turning to the blog post about adoption, the woman who wrote the post – an adoptive mother – was centrally concerned about the potentially compounding effects of divorce upon children who are adopted. A sensitively written piece, the blog focuses on both acknowledging that divorce may be especially difficult for some adoptees, but that adoptive parents must nonetheless accept the dissolution of a relationship if it is best for the family. Yet despite acknowledging this, it is clear in the piece that the mother struggles to manage what she refers to as her ‘mother guilt’ related to divorce, as can be seen in the following extract:

To have been adopted and then become a child of divorce has added another layer of complexity to my daughter’s struggles... What I can glean from my daughter, she not only questions whether she belongs in our family, there’s also the logistical question of which of her parents she belongs to on any given night. Which home is home this weekend? And even though she shares the experience of our divorce with her older sister, to her it’s different, because her sister is our biological child... This a lot for a child. And on my worst days, I think: I did this to

her. I worry that I've failed my daughter; that, by getting divorced, I've further undermined her already fragile sense of belonging as an adoptee. Is her forever family somehow diminished because it exists across two households? (Philyaw, 2014).

It is notable that comments on the blog post largely fell into one of two camps. The first affirmed that in some cases separation or divorce is necessary, and that the mother had done the right thing. The second, by contrast, admonished the mother for not 'sticking to it' for the sake of her children. As noted above, these two sets of accounts are not considered here, given they primarily featured the voices of non-adoptive parents/non-parents/non-adopted children. With regard to the two extracts included in this theme, both were written by adoptive mothers (both the blog author and one commenter). As can be seen in the comment included below, divorce is viewed by some adoptive parents as compounding the stressors associated with being adopted:

I'm the mother of an adopted daughter and her father and I are divorced. (We have a good collaborative relationship, but that doesn't change the fact that we're divorced.) I am really just writing to say what a relief it is to hear that someone else has these same concerns; the two

issues definitely overlap and cause complications for our family. We belong to a community of adoptive families in our area and we are the only divorced family. It can really feel very isolating for all of us, but of course it affects our daughter the most ('M', comment on blog post, January 13, 2014).

For this mother, there is concern primarily for her daughter, but also more broadly for the family who feels isolated in adoptive family communities where they are the only separated family. This highlights that support for separating adoptive (and indeed foster) families is necessary not only from agencies, but potentially also from adoptive and foster family networks.

Divorce as no Different for Adoptees

Whether or not divorce compounds issues faced by adoptees, however, was viewed differently by adoptees who commented on the blog when compared to adoptive parents who commented on the blog (and the blog author herself). Of the few comments made by people who identified as adoptees, two challenged the assumption that divorce was uniquely different for adoptees, as can be seen in the following two extracts:

I was adopted at birth, an only child, and my parents divorced when I was 12. Yes, it was extremely painful, but my status as an adopted child didn't enhance my pain or make it somehow different. If I was different in any way it was because it was the 1960s and we were Catholic and not a single kid I knew had divorced parents. I am always puzzled at the characterization of adopted people as uniquely damaged and broken because of the fact of adoption. Why is this? ('Cianne', comment on blog post, January 16, 2014)

Wow, I never knew I was such a minority. Adopted child (at birth), and a child of divorced parents here! Both my parents and I are white (as is my younger adopted brother), but I felt, and do still feel, that missed connection of having any blood relative. That doesn't make me love my parents any less. And going through a divorce, when I was 12 and my brother was 6, I don't think it felt much different as an adopted child than did my other friends who were going through the same thing with their biological parents ('Emily', comment on blog post, January 15, 2014).

Both of these comments reflect that what might be different for children whose

parents separate or divorce is whether or not separation or divorce are common in their social circles, echoing the comment by 'M' in the previous theme. For the first commenter, divorce was atypical, whilst it would appear that for the second commenter divorce is not atypical in her circles. Importantly, this is not to suggest that some adoptees do not experience adoption as a trauma, and that for some people divorce may compound that. Rather, the suggestion made here, based on a very small sample, is that this may not be true for *all* adoptees, and that experiences of adoption and divorce are potentially shaped by how others respond to the fact of their adoption and/or their parents' separation or divorce.

Discussion

Whilst drawing on a small sample based on both primary and secondary data, there is a common thread that runs through the data reported in this paper, namely that other people's perceptions play an important role in foster and adoptive family's experiences of separation or divorce. In the case of foster care, it appears that whether or not agencies view it as their role to offer support to the entire family, and whether or not separation or divorce are viewed as inherently a matter of concern, shapes the experiences of some foster families. Likewise, with regard to both adoptive parents and adoptees, it would appear that responses

from community members and broader social circles shape whether or not both adoption and separation or divorce are responded to with support and inclusion, or result in marginalization.

Obviously we must be very cautious in making bold claims from the data reported here, given the small sample sizes limit how much they are likely to represent broader foster and adoptive communities. It is likely that those who responded to the survey or who commented on the blogs or forum are relatively invested in the subject matter. Further, the data reported here do not give us an adequate indication of how common separation or divorce are amongst foster and adoptive families. Further research is required to more clearly ascertain the rates at which separation or divorce occurs, and to canvass a potentially broader range of viewpoints, including different types of carers (e.g., short-term vs. long-term and/or kinship care).

Nonetheless, the findings reported here would suggest that foster care agencies, both within Australia and across the United States, would better serve foster parents by providing clear and reasonable guidelines about what they can expect through and following separation or divorce. The Brighton and Hove Fostering and Adoption Service (2016), located in the UK, for example, provide clear guidelines

for foster carers and agency workers. These include that an interim report is made at the time of separation, and an annual review conducted within six months of the separation or divorce. Guidelines may also usefully include information about when a placement may be terminated following separation or divorce (i.e., if abuse is occurring), so as to minimise anxiety amongst foster carers who may avoid separation (or avoid reporting it) so as to prevent placement termination. Persons consulting such guidelines should do so with the understanding that each family circumstance differs, requiring individualized support rather than a formulaic response. To best understand how the separation and divorce of foster carers is currently managed, future research should also seek to understand the experiences of agency and support workers.

Moving beyond agencies, it would seem important that foster and adoptive communities, and the friends and families of foster and adoptive families, understand the importance of providing support if separation or divorce occur, and that such support is non-judgmental. Separation and divorce are typically difficult experiences for all family members, and this may be compounded if family members experience marginalization or exclusion by their support networks.

In conclusion, the initial exploratory findings presented in this paper suggest that,

on the one hand, there may be aspects of separation or divorce that are relatively unique to foster or adoptive families (i.e., assessments and interventions). On the other hand, however, it would appear that for at least some foster or adoptive families who experience separation or divorce, and in terms of the personal family emotional and psychological journey, it may be largely similar to that of other families.

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