

POST ADOPTION CENTRE CONFERENCE

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The Impact of Broken Attachments on Mothers and Children

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“There are many who would prefer to console themselves by suggesting that it is bad to dwell in the past- however if one seeks to understand the social dynamics of today, one must trace the major processes of history.”(Manley, N. 1974 p 45)

. Through my research and subsequent experience of conversations with women of the ‘Separation Reunion Forum’ I have been able to study the impact of broken attachments on mothers of Afro-Caribbean origin who migrated to Britain . Many of them, adhering to the cultural pattern of sharing the care of their children with their mothers and/or other members of the extended family, left their young children in the Caribbean for varying periods of time and subsequently had the children join them Some of the reunions were traumatic, but that is not for today. (Arnold, E.1993) The focus of my presentation is on how much the experience of slavery of generations has been retained and still influence the care of children today. I begin with a brief historical background

The Debate About West Indian Family Structure.

In a survey of West Indian Family Studies, R. T. Smith(1965) drew attention to the debate between two well known anthropologists, Franklin Frazier and Melville Herskovits (1953). They both agreed that the black family in the United States of America and the Caribbean was especially distinctive in its high rate of marital instability, high rate of illegitimacy and maternal households. Herskovits argued that these organisational patterns were of African derivation, and that they were effects of or correlates of practices derived from institutional serial mating. Frazier countered this argument by collecting data on the social history and situation of the black descendants of slaves in

the USA, to demonstrate the influence of the different social and economic contexts on their families and mating patterns. He pointed to the fact that among the black middle class professionals in the northern cities of the USA marriage was the normal basis of family life and illegitimacy was rare, whilst among rural black families in the south, maternal families and illegitimacy were common and the rates of marriage were relatively low.

Smith stated that the debate between Herskovits and Frazier were inconclusive ; but most students of black families in the New World adopted Frazier's orientation and hypothesis. Simey, who surveyed social conditions in the West Indies on behalf of the Colonial Development and Welfare Department (1945) and Henriques (1945) both accepted Frazier's thesis that the social and economic conditions of slavery precluded the development of stable nuclear families among New World black people and both writers emphasised that in Jamaica and other West Indian societies , illegitimacy, maternal families and common law marriage are socially accepted, and according to statistics, are the patterns of the life of the lower socio-economic groups.

Henriques(1953) suggested that in researching the family in the Caribbean attention should also be paid to the middle class family and he drew attention to the fact that the 'Christian Family' was clearly different from the others, as it was based on marriage and the dominance of the father. Twenty years later Green (1973) remarked that in most accounts of the West Indian family, writers have limited themselves to the study of black families in the lower economic groups and this has led to misleading generalisations. She suggested that it was necessary to study family patterns in the various groups such as Catholics and Protestants, rural and urban families , rich and poor. .

Among sociologists and anthropologists who have written of the West Indian family there was agreement that in the rearing of children, mothers have played the leading role since the days of slavery even though there were full time workers. Fathers were mostly marginal to the family. One of the sociologists frequently quoted is Clarke whose research on family life in three areas of Jamaica is entitled "My Mother who Fathered me." As the name implies mother cared for their children without the help of fathers. Highlighted was the close ties of sons to their mothers, who often lived at home with their mothers rather than set up families of their own. Some mothers expected devotion

from their sons as recompense for their hard work in bringing them up as a single parent.

Braithwaite (1959) warned that there is a tendency to speak of the West Indian family too loosely and reminds us that even under slavery, family life was differentiated and there was a sharp distinction between household and plantation slaves. Among household slaves the tie between mother and child was much closer. This was due to the fact that the children whose fathers were the slave owners, were allowed to live in the plantation house (Henriques, 1973) It is not known how much time mothers were allowed to look after them, but it is fair to assume that the children were able to maintain proximity to their biological mothers, and therefore were so placed to form an attachment provided the mothers were emotionally able to interact with them.

In stark contrast, the children born to the field slaves were gathered together and supervised by elderly women (surrogate grandmothers) who were no longer able to engage in strenuous work. From the age of about 3, the children were trained for work by getting them to pick leaves and put in small baskets thus getting them used to work. It seems that there was little expectation for close relationships between carers and children to develop. There is no mention of whether there was a demonstration of affection to these children or whether they were allowed to play.

At various times and in various islands of the Caribbean during slavery attitudes and policies towards women and child rearing changed. In the early days of slavery the system was not designed to encourage child rearing as this was seen as a distraction from labour. Women after childbirth had to return very soon to their labouring in the fields and often older children were separated from their mothers and sold to other plantations.

Mary Prince (1831) gives a moving description of her experience as a 12 year old when she and her siblings were taken from their mother and sold in the market place.

As time went on and, and the abolition of the transatlantic trade was being advocated, it became more difficult to obtain slaves from Africa, some slave owners realised that it was in their best economic interest to encourage stable families. Historians tell us that in the 18th Century on some of the plantations in the different countries, nuclear families existed, whilst in others, the family consisted of mothers and their children. Missionaries

especially from among the Methodists and Moravian churches tried to promote marriages, but the slaves had come from countries where polygamy was the norm and so monogamous marriages were not successful..(Beckles and Shepherd, P.150)

On large plantations, nursing mothers were allowed to carry their babies tied on their backs to the fields. (Hogg,(1979) So they too could have developed an attachment provided their mothers were able to attend to their needs.

Before we are able to establish what the present day family has internalised it is also necessary to have some knowledge of the African family forms which the enslaved took with them.

As we know, Africa is a vast continent and very diverse. The transatlantic slave trade first centred on West, Central and Southern African but to meet the demands for slaves the traders proceeded to the Eastern Coast (Beckles and Shepherd,(2004 p.79) However most West Indians believe that their ancestors were taken from the west coast of Africa. According to Morrish (1971 ,p.260) the trade centred on areas such as Angola and Senegal, but most of the slaves came from the Congo and Nigeria. With such great diversity it is difficult to generalise.

We are told by historians that the West African where there was a peasant culture, the man who possessed a large number of wives and children obtained the greatest assistance in farming. Socially the polygamist was preferred because he was regarded as wealthy; his prestige rose with the number of wives, and the wives enjoyed his higher reputation..(Ojike). The legitimacy of his children by his numerous wives, would not have been held in question since he was wealthy and would have been able to make the necessary payments which established 'legality.'

Davidson (1961) affirmed that the Africans in the New World were often strong and numerous enough to revive and recreate the customs, beliefs and practices of their homelands. For example when some slaves were given positions of responsibility they continued their polygamous mating patterns (Patterson p 107)

Stapleton (1978 p.15)) expressed the view that that there some factors held in common between the various peoples of West Africa justify a general description that can be regarded as valid.

Family life is based upon the relationships between the extended family. Children were cared for in their early childhood by grandmothers or aunts who are called "mother." There is great respect for seniors, and younger children will learn at an early age to obey their older siblings, who are often responsible for the younger ones. These family patterns resonate with us from the Caribbean.

Race and Colour

The European slave owners selected slave women with whom they mated and eventually the society evolved into one with a pattern of colour class pyramid. The white owner at the apex; their white overseers who assumed the role of the master in his absence, were next in the hierarchy, below whom came those of mixed race(heritage) and the black slaves at the base of the pyramid

In time, lighter skin colour became the criterion for selection for employment such as chamber maids or nurse maids to the children of the owners, or sewing. Some women tended to show a preference for remaining the mistresses of the slave owners as one way of ensuring that their children of mixed heritage were spared the agony of hard labour in the fields.

Attitudes to Marriage

When slave owners realised that the slaves were becoming more expensive to be brought from Africa they tried to encourage nuclear families and missionaries campaigned for marriage among the slaves. Some families were married but this did not prevent the men from engaging in extra marital unions. Some of the women refused to be married as they wanted to maintain their independence.

Theorists have questioned whether the West Indian Family Form is

1 a survival of slavery?

2 a survival of African Family forms?

3 an imitation of early European forms?

4 a development from the pressures of the plantation society?

Braithwaite, L (1959 p.50) claims that African culture had its part during slavery, but he believed the chief influence in moulding the West Indian family was the institution of slavery.

Braithwaite,E.(1970,p.40)points out that in the English islands, the Europeanisation of the black West Indian began during the post emancipation and colonial periods when through education the blacks were influenced by white literate teachers.

The debate continues.

Recent Writings on Women and the family in the West Indies

In the studies of family organisation throughout the West Indies it has been found that the mother role hold high status.(Blake , 1975). Senior (1991 p.50)) tells us of a survey of women in the Caribbean in 1979-82. In it was highlighted the multiple roles played by the mother and the strategies used to care for and support her children, often both her responsibilities. The grandmother and kin networks were very much in evidence and often the process of child shifting. The historical antecedents can be found in some West African countries where a child is considered as belonging to the tribe and a nation and the concept of an 'orphan' is unknown. During slavery as already mentioned ,mothers were expected to return to work as soon as possible after child birth and the children were assigned to older women no longer in the work force.

It became part of the culture that children of the working class are usually reared by others . There is very little knowledge of the effects of child shifting on the emotional well being of the children. There were varying accounts of the care given to the children. For example, one informant said “ Adopted (mostly informal) children were treated the same as other children in the family, same bed, same food, same school.” Whilst

another said “some families took advantage of other people’s children and made them do all of the household chores, and hit them if they were not done.”

In some instances children were shifted back and forth to various homes; this was not conducive to the development of secure attachments. This bore resemblance to the pattern during slavery when children were sold from one plantation to another.

A present day situation of the exploitation of young children screamed from the headlines of the Sunday Telegraph (January, 27 2008). Parents in poor economic situations in Africa were being lured into selling their young children to international traffickers with promises of a better life for them. Some of them were being placed in African households in Britain and made to work as slaves up to 18 hours a day.

Erna Brodber (1974) Jamaican sociologist claims that “passing on” of responsibility for the care of children to grandmothers, extended families or some other interested persons, has been developed to a fine point in the Jamaican culture. She goes on to say that ‘passing on’ is not confined to lower-income method of having children cared for. The ‘boarding out of children with relatives or friends who are able to assist with the child’s social and educational advancement are acts of ‘passing on. (Compare this with the middle and upper classes sending their children to Boarding Schools.)

Examining the phenomenon, Brodber described the ultimate act of ‘passing on’ of children when some mothers abandoned their children to the elements, to hospitals and other places where they were assured that the children would be found and a Fit Person Order made by the Welfare Service. Brodber claims that the action indicated that the burden of carrying the relationship with the child alone was too great for the young mothers who, though physically ready for motherhood, were psychologically unable to perform the parenting role. They were disappointed that their partners broke their relationships on the announcement of the pregnancies and with no support from families who may not have known of the pregnancies, their only solution was abandonment of their babies, with the hope that they would be rescued.

Has this practice of passing on children been transmitted through the generations? Where formerly some children would have been passed on to extended families, did some

families in the early days of living in Britain pass on their children to the Local Authorities when faced with economic hardship?

The Black population of Caribbean origin in Britain came from the several English speaking islands and mainland territories, with Jamaica being responsible for approximately 60 % of the total number. They were a mixture of those with vocational skills, various levels of education; some from the urban areas, but a vast number from the rural areas of their countries. Unlike their ancestors who had been taken forcibly from their countries and made to work, the migrants were invited to come to work and they were eager to do so. Many had visions for their children being educated and being able to enter the established professions and not chained to the low paid and oft unfulfilling jobs which they themselves were obliged to do.

I was very interested to find out how mothers who migrated to Britain and had left their children in the Caribbean for varying length of time before being reunited with them fared. I therefore did a study of some of these mothers living in London. (E.E. Robertson)

There were a number of women who came to England in the early days of the migration but many stayed at home whilst their partners/husbands migrated. They had the expectation that the men's stay would be temporary. When this was not realised women came to join partners, many of them left their young children with grandparents and/or members of the extended family. Since they were young and of child-bearing age, some started families but found it difficult to stay at home to care for them as it was necessary for them to work in order to augment their partner's wages in order to find suitable housing for a growing family, and to send remittances back to their families for the care of the children. Some of the mothers had no adequate parenting skills as they had been teenage mothers, and their mothers and members of the extended family had cared for their children. They therefore resorted to the practice of finding carers, some found unregistered childminders and the care of the children left much to be desired. One mother described discovering that the childminder tied her daughter at the bottom of the

stairs. “ I moved her from there and sent her to another who put her to sit on one spot and her own child attacked and scratched her. (Example of child shifting.)

“I finally stayed at home until she was ready for school.”

This is an example of an individual being able to make choices and not feeling bound by cultural practices.

In desperation , without the help of their mothers and extended families to care for their young children some of these working mothers living in London, approached the Social Services for help. They were given places in residential nurseries mainly in the Counties. When they were persuaded by the white staff that their visits were too upsetting for the children they stopped visiting. To what internalised historical influence can we attribute this relinquishing of responsibility to an other? Was this an unconscious reaction to the custom during slavery of the white plantation owners taking the children as their responsibility .Or was it that they had a feeling that their place in the society was an inferior one due to being black? Did they think that the white carers would be able to care for the children better than they?

Some of the mothers realising that they would lose their children who were becoming attached to their carers, took them home and then looked to a cultural pattern of having older children share the care of young children. they sent for the children they had left behind to join them. Other mothers left the children in the nurseries and subsequently they were placed in children’s homes which were still very much in existence .

Fitzherbert (1967, p 101-2) attributes the reason for mothers’ discontinuation of visiting their children to the West Indian pragmatic attitude to life and she stated that the child out of sight could very easily be out of mind. In my study, mothers spoke of the pain of not being able to care for their children who were constantly in their minds

The culture of the West Indian does not make mothers any less vulnerable when deprived of their children and separated from them by distance and time.

The mothers in the sample stressed their adherence to principles which they said they had internalised, for example, good manners, obedience, respect, honesty. They bemoaned the fact that their children were not prepared to allow themselves to be brought

up in similar fashion and very often this led to conflict between themselves and their adolescent children. Some of the parents believed in the practice of administering corporal punishment as an acceptable way of trying to instil discipline in their children and were very authoritarian.

Gill Gorell Barnes(1977, p 420) writing on working with isolated parents and children in a Nurture group in London, reported that in discussion on discipline parents asked “if you don’t beat them what do you do ? Even though some of the parents recognized that the beatings were not effective, and triggered their memories of their often severe punishments at the hands of their parents they were unable to consider other means of instilling discipline. When it was suggested that they could deprive them of watching television which they liked, “it was obviously too remote a concept, based on the withholding of gratification, for them to consider viable.” Many of them claimed that their parents were strict , and subjected them to corporal punishment and it did not do them any harm. This may have been true for those who had sound relationships with their mothers but for those who had not , they remembered ‘the beatings’ with bitterness.

Care of children during the early years of living in Britain

Many of the young women who left young children in the Caribbean , had not experienced the parenting of adolescents. The memories of their own adolescence may have influenced how they treated their adolescent children when they were reunited. In many instances, the girls were kept in doors to perform the domestic chores and also to be kept safe, whilst boys were allowed more freedom .Without the help of fathers many of the mothers were unable to control the behaviour of the boys especially.

The black West Indian migrant families nuclear and one parent living in the industrialised cities were very socially disadvantaged. Some of the mothers were mentally distressed and there was no alternative but to put their children into the care of the Local Authorities. They stayed in care much longer than their white peers. In 1975-76 a campaign was mounted in order to educate and recruit black families to adopt and foster

black children. The campaign based in London was known as the 'Soul Kids' Campaign. The steering committee was chaired by a black social worker who had worked in Trinidad & Tobago before migrating to London. They believed that black people from the Caribbean with their history of caring for children other than their own should be told of the plight of large numbers of children in need of families.

It was interesting to hear the reactions of some of the women and what they thought about becoming adoptive parents.

They recalled the practice of informal adoption in the Caribbean. They spoke of some of the disruptions when the child was shifted to another home.

They believed that the criteria for adopting were, being married, having a big house and a car, emphasising the material, rather than what was needed emotionally.

They expressed some reservations about adopting children whose parents they did not know.

There were also reservations about social workers, some younger than they who they thought would prescribe ways of treating the children.

The campaign was mildly successful with 153 enquiries from four London boroughs. Some of those who showed interest in adopting withdrew daunted by the formidable nature of the application forms and by the length of time which elapsed between their initial contact with the social services and the follow up by a social worker. Nevertheless ten families were accepted as adopters, five as foster carers and two to befriend children as they prepared to leave the children's home.

As time went on and more agencies, statutory and voluntary recognised the necessity for black children to be helped to develop their racial identity, more black families were recruited. This is continuing and specialist black workers are engaged in assessing who would be adopters and foster carers. In the preparation courses, attachment theory is explained and they are made aware that in parenting adopted children some of their feelings about separation and loss may be activated and that it is possible for them to be helped therapeutically.

Present Day mothers and children

Some of the mothers with whom we come in contact are third generation women. Some of them are fortunate to have the support of their mothers and members of extended family to assist them with the care of their children ,others are not . Many are single parents who work hard and rear their children in spite of all the hardships they encounter. Some upwardly mobile women voluntarily choose single parenthood, and maintain the pattern of 'passing on' their children to the care of others by sending them to boarding schools

Unfortunately there are those who are unable to care for their children for a number of reasons such as ill health, physical and mental, addiction to drugs , or alcohol, or are unable to bear the responsibility of caring for the children alone without partners. Here too the children are passed on , to the State. Some are released for adoption, others cared for in foster homes and some children who are shifted from home to home are placed in children's homes. Very often these children have not been able to attach to any adult.

In preparation for this conference I asked a few mothers their opinion of title of the conference. Here are some of them, in their own words.

Mrs S.." I was taught about slavery at school, as a historical fact. We did not dwell on it. I am bringing up my two children as I was brought up, in a home with two parents, never mind that their father is not too energetic. Sometimes I think that I have 3 children .I have to do all the thinking, and make the decisions. In a way my father was the same, my mother was really the driving force. I suppose I have patterned myself on her and she did on her mother , my grandmother, as I remember.

Miss T. is a single woman who adopted a toddler," I am bringing her up the best way I can as though she were my own child. Loving her, talking with her. I am sorry I have to go out to work but I have a good carer, and I have worked out a routine so that I am able to spend as much time with her as possible in these early years. Somehow it seems that slavery made a bigger impact on some men and they cannot commit themselves to accepting responsibility for a family."

Mrs R

“I brought up my 3 children as I remember how my grandmother brought up her 11 children in the Caribbean. Not very much money but she gave them all that she could and they were all successful in life . None went to jail, nor drank alcohol until they didn’t know themselves, nor were on drugs;. but my mother went away and left me and as a child I asked myself why? When I became older my grandmother told me that my father was one for the girls and because I resembled him she did not like me. Was that sensible? Slavery did not make her do that. You have to look at people as individuals and cannot say black people will do this and black people will do that, some are good and some are bad, like other people.. We have to stop looking back. We need to give our children love and our attention.”

Dr Jacqueline Sharpe, Child psychiatrist from Trinidad who addressed the SRF Conference in 2001 threw out a challenge to the participants in the following words.

“Patterns of family formation and structure of Caribbean people have been consistent for the past 150 years. Many of these patterns whatever their antecedent causes are not serving us well neither in the Caribbean, in the UK, USA or in Canada. Regardless of the origin or historical functions of these behaviours, the challenge facing us is to find ways to change these culturally influenced patterns of behaviour towards children that endanger their mental health..

We need to change these child-rearing practices that are the antecedents of conduct disorders and depression. the practices that may lead to early sexual activity and /or the use of psychotropic drugs which attract young people in search of comfort.”

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