



# Children removed from home by court order: Fathers' disenfranchised grief and reclamation of paternal functions



Nehami Baum\*, Irit Negbi

The Louis and Gabi Weisfeld School of Social Work, Bar Ilan University, Israel

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 24 March 2013

Received in revised form 7 July 2013

Accepted 8 July 2013

Available online 13 July 2013

### Keywords:

Court-ordered removal

Fathers

Child's removal

Paternal identity

Loss

## ABSTRACT

The study, based on in-depth interviews with 15 fathers in Israel, reports on fathers' emotional reactions to the court-ordered removal of their children from home. The findings show that all the fathers experienced the removal as a traumatic event, which utterly devalued them and annihilated their paternal identity. Although they suffered intense pain and loss well after their children were removed, their grief was disenfranchised as friends and family accused them of allowing the removal to happen. With this, most of the fathers acclimated to the removal and even reported an expansion of their parental identity. The discussion suggests some theoretical conceptualizations of their intense feelings of pain and loss.

© 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

The court-ordered removal of a child from home has implications for the child, the parents, and the family as a whole. Most of the attention of practitioners and researchers has been on its effects on the child. The relatively sparse study of its effects on the parents has focused on mothers (e.g., Freymond, 2003; Scott, 2003) or presented its effects on mothers and fathers together without distinction (e.g., Haagenstad, 1991; Höjer, 2011; Schofield et al., 2011). The only exception known to the author is Jenkins and Norman's (1972) book *Filial Deprivation and Foster Care*, which reports the findings of their five-year longitudinal study of 390 mothers and 390 fathers with children in foster care. Documenting the painful "filial deprivation" experienced by both parents, the book provides separate statistics on fathers' and mothers' feelings and behaviors. It constitutes the first recognition by researchers of the suffering that court-ordered removal of a child causes fathers, no less than mothers. The study is over four decades old, however, and entirely quantitative, which means that it cannot capture the nuances of the parents' experience. The imbalance is consistent with the gendered approach to the family in child welfare. Even where the father is present, child welfare tends to focus on mothering (e.g., Brown, Callahan, Strega, Walmsley, & Dominelli, 2009), while fathers remain excluded and invisible (e.g., Dominelli, Strega, Walmsley, Callahan, & Brown, 2011) even where they are involved with their families and despite their increased role in active parenting in recent decades (e.g., Lamb, 2004).

This paper reports findings of a qualitative study of 15 fathers whose children were removed from home by court-order. It focuses on the fathers' experience of loss. This is one of the most powerful experiences, perhaps the most powerful, of parents whose children are removed by court order (Burgheim, 2002; Haagenstad, 1991; Schofield et al., 2011). Yet, to date, the subject of parents' loss has been discussed in-depth, only in a small number of clinical studies and in an even smaller number of empirical studies.

The clinical studies detail the feelings of the parents whose children were placed in out of home care. Along with feelings of loss and grief, they describe the parents' feelings of pain, guilt, worry, fear, and, in some cases, relief (Hess, 1982; Mandelbaum, 1962; Shapira, 1995; Siu & Hogan, 1989). They also describe the injury to the parents' parental self-esteem (Littner, 1975) and sense of parental competence (Maluccio, 1981). A vivid and detailed description of the loss of parental identity is provided by McAdams (1972), who tells how she lost her belief in herself when her children were placed in foster care.

The empirical studies consist of four qualitative studies: an unpublished Master's thesis in Hebrew and three recently published papers. The Master's thesis, by Ilana Lavi (2000), examined mothers' experience of separation in the wake of their children's placement. On the basis of interviews with 36 mothers in Israel, Lavi reports on a range of emotions, including pain, emptiness, anxiety, restlessness, guilt, bitterness, anger, helplessness and a sense of meaninglessness, and, on the other hand, relief, satisfaction, gratitude, hope, and happiness. But the dominant emotion, she writes, is the sense of loss: loss of *joie de vivre*, of maternal role, and of the warmth and affection they had received from the child. Of the published studies, Buchbinder and Bareqet-Moshe (2011) interviewed 12 couples (24 parents) in Israel whose children had been placed in residential care. Their key findings

\* Corresponding author at: The Louis and Gabi Weisfeld School of Social Work, Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan 52900, Israel. Tel.: +972 9 7676360.

E-mail address: [nehami@hotmail.com](mailto:nehami@hotmail.com) (N. Baum).

are that the parents viewed the placement as necessary, acknowledged positive changes in the child and the family, feared that the child's return home would cause the family to regress, and reported that their sense of guilt impaired the couple relationship. The authors also briefly quote parents mentioning their sense of loss and mourning, but do not comment on these feelings. Similarly, Höjer (2011), based on a focus group with 13 parents (12 mothers, 1 father) whose children were placed in foster care, reports that most of the parents experienced strong anger, despair, guilt, and helplessness. Although she cites quotations that tell of their sense of loss, she does not name this feeling in her list of "crisis reactions". Schofield et al.'s (2011) paper, whose title features the issue of "managing loss and a threatened identity," is the single exception to this trend. The paper synthesizes the findings of three parallel studies, in England, Norway, and Sweden, which together interviewed 62 parents, either mother or fathers, whose children were in foster care. It reports that feelings of grief at their separation from their children were vividly described by all mothers and fathers, and provides poignant quotations. It also describes in detail the parents' loss of parental identity and comments on their disenfranchised grief. The focus of the paper, however, is on how the parents managed their sense of loss and on the help they need from social workers. Moreover, in none of these papers are fathers discussed separately from mothers.

It is important to study the losses of fathers whose children were removed from home separately from those of mothers, for three reasons. One is that there is evidence that men respond to life events differently from women (Baarsen & Groenou, 2001; Walsh & Horenczyk, 2001), so we cannot assume that the feelings reported by mothers are the same as those felt by fathers. Another is that despite men's greater assumption of parenting tasks in recent decades (Cabrerá, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000), the traditional view that the parental role is more central to mothers than fathers still prevails (e.g., Arendell, 1997; Milkie, Bianchi, Mattingly, & Robinson, 2002), even among social workers (Davidson-Arad, Peled, & Leichtenritt, 2008; Höjer, 2011). Separate study of fathers' losses is needed to better understand the place of the parental role in their identity. A third reason is that children in placement who remain in contact with their parents, and especially with their fathers, generally return home sooner and to re-integrate better into the community afterwards (Gershtenman-Shelef & Lazar, 2006; Malm, Zielewski, & Chen, 2008). Studies of divorced fathers show that for them to remain in contact with their children, it is vital that they be able to cope with their loss (Baum, 2004). To help fathers whose children are removed from home to cope with their loss, it is important first to know what those losses are and how they experience them.

This study focuses on fathers who were living with their children at the time of the removal and whose children were removed by court order. This focus was adopted to enable us to learn from those fathers who actually experienced the forced removal of their children at first hand.

## 2. Method

The study was undertaken with the approval of the Child Welfare Services of Israel's Ministry of Welfare and of the Ethics Committee of the university.

### 2.1. Procedure and study participants

To ensure their privacy, the study participants were located by social workers who worked with families whose children had been removed from home. The social workers contacted fathers who met the following six criteria. 1) At least one of their children had been removed from home within the previous three years. 2) The removal was carried out by court order. 3) They were living with their children at the time of the removal. 4) They were in contact with a licensed child welfare worker at the time of the removal. 5) The removed child ranged in

age from birth through 12 years old – this is to avoid issues that arise in adolescence. 6) The father spoke Hebrew.

Based on information provided by the researchers, the social workers explained the purpose of the study to fathers who met all six criteria and asked whether they were interested in participating. All of them expressed interest. They were telephoned by the second author, who informed them that we were interested in hearing about their experiences regarding the removal of their children from home. All 15 agreed. Interviews were scheduled at the father's home, a synagogue, or a welfare bureau, in accord with his preference. No further fathers were sought, as saturation had been attained.

The participants ranged in age from 33 to 69 ( $M = 47.9$  years). All were Jewish. All but one, who was born in Morocco and immigrated to Israel at the age of 13, were Israeli-born. Two had eight years of schooling, six had between nine and eleven years, six had a high school education, and three had two or three years of post-high school. At the time of the interviews, six fathers were working, six unemployed (two of them because of disability), and one retired. Ten were married or living with a partner, five were separated or divorced and had been awarded custody.

The reasons for removal were reported by the fathers in considerable detail. Most of them told of more than one reason. All the fathers, both those who were raising their children themselves and those who were raising them with the mother, told of both the mother's and their own failings as parents. Those raising their children on their own reported highly conflictual relationships with the mother and/or the mother's severe emotional problems or mental illness. Of those raising their children with the mother, six reported mother's mental illness or severe psychological problems; one reported that the mother was young and immature. Two gave their alcoholism as a reason, another his former substance abuse, and another two their violent physical punishment of the child. Other co-parenting fathers told of joint parenting problems: that neither they nor the mother was able to cope with the child's emotional and behavioral problems.

The number of children removed per family ranged from one through seven. For 11 of the 15 fathers, this removal was the first. Of the other four fathers, two reported that the child was removed in infancy and then again later on; two reported that the first removal was when they were living with their wives, the second when they were living on their own. In 4 of the 15 cases, no other children remained at home. In eleven cases, siblings of the removed child remained at home; in four of these, one child remained, in two cases two children, in the other seven, between four and six children remained. Eleven of the removed children were placed in residential care, two in an emergency facility, and two in foster care. The time elapsed since the removal ranged from two to three years among eight fathers, and between one and six months among seven fathers (Table 1).

### 2.2. The interview

Semi-structured interviews were conducted. At the beginning of each, the purpose of the study was again explained, and the fathers were promised confidentiality and informed that they were free to stop the interview at any time. The signed informed consent to participate in the study.

The interviews allowed flexibility, dialog between interviewer and interviewees, and easy movement from subject to subject, to accommodate what the interviewee wanted to say. The interviewer began by asking the fathers to tell about themselves and the child or children who were removed from home, about their experience of fatherhood, and the reasons for the removal. Also queried were the fathers' experiences on the day of separation and the meanings and repercussions that the removal had for them. The fathers were asked about their feelings and experiences both in the immediate aftermath of the removal and over time.

متن کامل مقاله

دریافت فوری ←

**ISI**Articles

مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات