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*Who are the parents of
the fostered child ?*

Family Placement in France, heir of two traditions :

- ▶ **A tradition in child protection**
- ▶ **A tradition regarding family organisation and the very concept of family**

Our research : Hypotheses

- ▶ **Cultural mutation impact individuals and families**
- ▶ **From collective–dogmatic to individualistic–liberal framework**
- ▶ **Disruption of parenting**
- ▶ **Parental distress calling for assistance**

Change as an opportunity

- ▶ **But social workers and practitioners are impacted as well....**
- ▶ **Therefore our practices are under scrutiny, too.**
- ▶ **Such mutation is an opportunity to reconsider our vision and practices around parenthood and parenting**

Simple questions, complex answers

- ▶ What does it mean to be a parent ?
- ▶ What kind of environment does a child need ?
- ▶ Who are the parents of the fostered child ?

Facing impasses in Placement...

- ▶ **Agressiveness of the child towards the carer**
- ▶ **Agressiveness of the birth parents towards carers or carers' children**
- ▶ **Pain generated by the loyalty conflict**
- ▶ **Rejection of the family of origin**

Questions raised :

- ▶ How can the child refuse a nurturing environment ?
- ▶ How can exhausted or rejecting birth parents disapprove placement ?
- ▶ Why does the foster child feel so guilty and might even refuse to take the chance ?

Two paths to find answers :

1. Try to adjust REALITY to our VISION :

- ▶ Labelling parents : pathological incompetent...
- ▶ Labelling the child : inadequate, mean, victim,...
- ▶ Accusing foster parents of too much bonding and the fostered child of too much attachment, if the child adjusts to foster family and rejects birth parents...

2. Try and question our practices and vision, as possible causes of the failures of placement...

Family placement, heir to a culture defining parents and family

- ▶ Placement as a solution for deprived, abused or abandoned children : **giving shelter, home, table and affection**
- ▶ Spitz, Bowlby, Aubry : **the need for attachment in the foster family, a « substitute » family**
(Satisfactory/failing, good/bad, present/absent...)
- ▶ **A stable and timeless concept of family : man, woman, marriage, children, education, repetition of a transgenerational roadmap**

A turning point in family placement

- ▶ In France, Myriam David and Michel Soulé introduce the concept of **primary attachment** (birth parents) and its lasting effects
- ▶ Therefore, we can understand the pain of the child in care :
 - ▶ pain of **separation** and the breaking of primary bonds,
 - ▶ desperate quest for idealised parents
 - ▶ Reluctance to attach to the foster family

Family Placement : a « necessary evil » ?

- ▶ Replacing defective parents
- ▶ But harming the child via separation
- ▶ Therefore maintaining a relationship to the birth parents
- ▶ And creating a possible hostility of foster parents

Harmful consequences of such model :

- ▶ Placement happens only when all preventive measures have failed...
- ▶ Placement must be the exception, **preventive measures prevails** (« against » it)
- ▶ Placement means the **disqualification and sanction of birth parents**

- ▶ Placement objective must be to restore the initial situation : **Family reunion** is paramount objective

More harmful consequences :

- ▶ **Narcissistic injury of the birth parents**
- ▶ **Agressiveness of birth parents towards the decision and its implementers (social workers, foster carers)**
- ▶ **Suffering of the child, attuned to birth parents, opposed to the measure and caught in a painful loyalty conflict**

A baby Zebra story, by Michel Soulé

« A baby zebra loses his parents in a fire, in the bush. He is very upset. Fortunately, he meets another family, who is willing to take care of him. But one day, his parents, who had not died, find him. The baby zebra is embarrassed: who is he going to love now ? »

Questioning our conception of family placement:

- ▶ Is such conception still valid today ?
- ▶ What about the practices deriving from this conception ?
- ▶ The 7 years old little girl...
- ▶ Family substitution, or maybe another model is to invent ?

Family no longer is what it used to be

- ▶ From stable to transient and temporary
- ▶ No more complying with the traditional model
- ▶ Multiple bonds, stages, characters and models today
- ▶ Relativistic
- ▶ Disorders related to « incestuous » situations

What if i say...

...What should we say ?

What we can do...

is reconsider our theories and use this opportunity to try and distinguish between :

- ▶ diverse and contingent family configuration
- ▶ universal and necessary structure of family ties

Who are the parents of the fostered child ?

- ▶ What do parents mean to the child ?
- ▶ What is « building a family »?
- ▶ Or otherwise said : under which social and affective conditions can a human subject grow up?

An anthropological invariant

- ▶ As French Psychoanalyst Françoise Dolto named it, the child needs to be « the fruit of crossed desires »
- ▶ NOT the unique object of an exclusive parental desire
- ▶ Triangulation : the sharing of the child
- ▶ parents and parenthood are plural

Reconsidering Family Placement

- ▶ not as a substitution of a family by another, or parents by others,
- ▶ but by the combination of parental figures among which the child will be shared.

Therefore :

- ▶ work with birth parents,
- ▶ the wellbeing of the child relies in the quality of the relationship between the foster parents and the birth parents,
- ▶ the objective of placement to perpetuate the sharing of the child between birth and foster parents, as long as necessary, and inventing the modalities along the way

Conclusion

Family placement of a child today can be envisaged as :

- ▶ a process of co-education,
- ▶ Of co-parenting
- ▶ A cooperation between birth and foster parents
- ▶ in the best interest of the child.

Thank you for your attention!

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