

The marginal child

A study of socially disaffiliated children in the South Pacific

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Introduction

This research is about children who live apart from their natural parents. It describes their case histories, life experiences and the vulnerability of their situations. It is part of a longitudinal research project into the sociology of childhood and child social work within the context of child care and protection issues, rights and social policy. It is intended as a contribution to good child care practice.

Child focused research principles (Boyden & Ennew 1997) have directed the research. The data were gathered by participatory methods between 1997 and 1998 by school counsellors, child social workers, youth workers and sociologists. We focused on 30 core cases in the greater Suva area of Fiji. This work was supplemented by comparative data drawn from elsewhere in Fiji, Nauru, Solomon Islands, Kiribati and Tonga.

The research is not intended to show the range and extent of child abuse and neglect or to compare the situation of children in the South Pacific with other societies, although such studies have informed it. Rather, it is concerned with the specific problem of children who for whatever reason have been separated from at least one of their natural parents and live with other family members. What follows is an attempt to locate these children

theoretically as a distinct category of the child population and to demonstrate their condition through the use of three ethnographic descriptions before presenting the results of a more detailed interview survey.

The research is situated against a background of rapid social change. South Pacific societies are undergoing major transformations typified by urbanisation, wage labour economies, consumerism and global communications. For example, in the relatively short period of just 50 years Fiji has changed from a largely rural self-sufficient village community based society to become approximately 50 per cent urban, and with this the nature of childhood has dramatically changed. A traditional aspect of kinship in the South Pacific has been for some children to live away from their natural parents. While this was, and sometimes still is, a great strength in South Pacific societies and accepted ways of support in communities and families, in the changed contemporary context children who live away from their natural parents are in considerable danger of becoming socially disaffiliated and marginalised.

The problem of children who live away from home

For a long time there has been considerable factual and anecdotal evidence that a significant number of children live with relatives other than their natural parents, and that this situation is a cause for concern. For example, a survey by the Tonga Ministry of Education found that 40 per cent of school children were not living with both parents because they were overseas, separated or remarried (Lomu 1995). The existence of this situation and the problems faced by these children is specifically cited by Ward as one of the consequences of increasing migration throughout the South Pacific region (1996). One participating researcher, a school counsellor and teacher, reported that at least 10 per cent of students all at a low income Suva high school were living away from their parents. These children constituted her largest single problem group.

In a report on needy children in Fiji who have inadequate home care, Chand draws attention to their growing numbers and the failure of development policies to cater for them. He refers to children of divorced parents, broken de facto relationships, single parenthood and broken down family structures. Specifically, he cites the link between these children's vulnerable situation and physical and sexual abuse (1995). Another influential

report, *A Situation Analysis of Children and Women in Fiji*, commented on children deprived of a home environment:

Usually the biggest problem for the child's welfare is the poor definition of who is responsible for its care and, as the child moves freely from one guardian to another, his or her nutrition, health and social development may well be neglected. (UNICEF 1996)

This UNICEF report clearly identified, although it did not quantify, an emerging social problem of children living away from their natural parents. The issue of the poor definition of care and protection responsibilities, and of children moving freely between guardians, was elaborated further in the *Fiji Poverty Report Summary*, which described the problem in the following way:

Because there are very few other arrangements to look after children when their families cannot manage, some children 'float' from one household to another doing menial chores. (UNDP 1997)

The growing problem of children who move freely or 'float' from one family to another, while now recognised, has not been adequately addressed by research, social policy or child legislation. The Coordinating Committee on Children is the responsible body for initiating child legislation reforms. Its 1995 report on the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child noted that the Government department with the mandate for child care and protection has no responsibility to intervene in a child's situation unless a magistrate issues a care or protection order.

There is no legal mechanism to review a child's situation unless he or she was actually placed in care by the Department of Social Welfare. Even then, the Department has insufficient staffing resources to conduct regular reviews. Most children are placed with some member of the extended family and there is no further monitoring of the situation. (Coordinating Committee on Children 1995)

It appears that there is no policy for care and protection intervention strategies for a significant group of children who are not living with their natural parents and who 'float' around the periphery of the extended family. This is despite the fact that all nations of the Region are ratified signatories of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, and therefore subscribe to the international legal requirements set out in the Convention. Article 9, for example, deals specifically with children's rights to a normal family upbringing, provided by their parents wherever possible; and Article 2 makes it a responsibility of the State to ensure these rights are protected (UN 1989).

Social disaffiliation and homelessness

But what is social disaffiliation and why is it important for a child to experience a normal family home environment? Social disaffiliation is a sociological concept developed by researchers concerned with the social problem of homelessness and the effects this has on the social identity and well being of those involved. The homeless as a social category and homelessness as a phenomenon have always presented sociological researchers with definitional dilemmas (Mills 1975).

Shelter, be it domestic or institutional, does not necessarily constitute a home, in the sense that the term implies the presence of a whole spectrum of social and emotional relationships ranging from kinship to neighbourly and community affiliations. Home in this sense is like community, an emotive term that has popular meanings beyond its various sociological definitions. The popular sayings, 'Home sweet home', 'Home is where the heart is' and 'There's no place like home!' richly portray this emotive and idealised connotation. But the mere physical and social structures of a home do not necessarily create the emotional environment of home or provide individuals with that essential sense of 'belonging' to which sociologists of community refer (Bell & Newby 1972). However, there is no shortage of research to show that the popular concept of home—a private domestic and usually family residence situated in a community setting—is not necessarily home for all. Research accounts of social relationships within, and attachments to, residential institutions such as boarding houses, hospitals, hostels, prisons and special care facilities have portrayed situations where residential institutions do constitute home for some (Stephens 1976; Goffman 1961).

The phenomenon of homelessness has been equally difficult for sociologists to define. On the one hand homelessness can be an entirely temporary or attenuating situation and an exception to a normal lifestyle. On the other hand, homelessness can be a permanent situation, and a normal condition of life. For researchers, the investigation of homelessness and associated issues involves a complex of problems. The transient location of homeless individuals, as we see later, can carry with it a degree of social stigma and shame and is almost inevitably intertwined with a range of other individual and social problems, such as poverty, ill-health, social rejection, unemployment, destitution, dependency and exploitation.

Attempts by sociologists to conceptualise homelessness have varied enormously, and range across social problems and social welfare perspectives, the sociology of the family, social deviance and community studies. Important classifications of homelessness have included typological analysis, child and human rights approaches, family poverty cycles and social careers, among others. In an important attempt to construct an omnibus definition to cover the whole range of the homeless condition, Bahr, in *Skid Row: An Introduction to Disaffiliation*, conceptualised two opposing theoretical types (1973). The individual living in a house, integrated into a network of social and emotional affiliations, with family and community and a strong sense of belonging and attachment, was seen in opposition to an individual with neither shelter nor a permanent location, without family and community attachments, and isolated as a marginal individual from mainstream society.

By placing emphasis on 'affiliative bonds' Bahr moved the definitional debate on homelessness from physical environment descriptions of housing and shelter to being more essentially concerned with the nature of an individual's social and emotional relationships; social interaction and a sense of belonging and attachment. Bahr described 'affiliative bonds' that linked the members of his 'Hobohemia'. Supplementary investigations of our research and earlier investigations into the lives of 'street kids' in Suva confirmed Bahr's descriptions. They did find youths living on the streets, belonging to street gangs, or being cared for in a youth refuge, who felt that their sense of belonging and affiliative bonds to these institutions far outweighed those with their families (Monsell-Davis 1986; Vakaoti 1998). They felt 'at home' in their irregular situations. Social disaffiliation is then a concept of homelessness not so much concerned with physical amenities,

although recognising how important these may be, but rather with a sense of social and emotional well being. Or, as Bahr defined it:

A situation of detachment from society characterised by the absence or attenuation of those affiliative bonds that link settled persons to a network of interconnected social structures. (1973: 64)

The socially disaffiliated child

In all societies children have, to some extent, a special social status compared with adults. This is usually provided on the simple grounds that children are unable to speak out for themselves and make reliably wise decisions, although there is no shortage of historical or contemporary examples of this status being abused. While acknowledging the importance of the historical debate concerning the status of childhood, and its separate social existence, from writers such as Ariès (1962), deMause (1976) and Pollock (1983), it must also be recognised that children have always needed special care and protection simply to survive. The education, care and protection that accompany the status of childhood, whether informal or institutional, have often been a feature of societies for reasons of cultural reproduction (Silvey 1982).

Child social work, the child rights movement and the professions concerned with child care and protection issues are recent phenomena, at most just two centuries old. While it is true that we know relatively little about the history of child abuse and neglect and social responses to it, general history is nevertheless peppered with various governmental and ecclesiastic legislation and decrees to protect children. Contemporary child rights movements and child care and protection organisations are a product of the social changes, such as urbanisation, industrialisation and the age of empire, that overtook Europe and later North America from the beginning of the nineteenth century. This era gave rise to what Corby described as a 'flurry' of activity around the issue of child protection (1993). Compulsory primary school education was introduced in Northern Europe. In Britain, philanthropic child protection societies were formed, typified by Dr Barnardo's Homes for vagabond children, the Salvation Army's concern with child prostitution, and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. Such bodies provided basic care for children while at the same

time lobbying governments for legislative changes and social policy initiatives for children. Similar organisations and social movements also took root in many European countries and North America.

The term 'disaffiliated child' may be modern but the concept is certainly not new. We can look back to a long tradition in popular literature of characters such as Cinderella and her hopelessly reconstituted family in which there was a very 'poor definition' of who was responsible for her care. A popular issue of concern for philanthropic organisations, such as those mentioned above, was the disaffiliated child. The works of Charles Dickens, the doyen of nineteenth century literary social conscience, are replete with children whose normal affiliative family relationships have been broken or attenuated, and who have subsequently fallen victim to abuse and misfortune. We have only to think of *Oliver Twist*, Pip in *Great Expectations* and David Copperfield. The stories of such characters were a vehicle for drawing public attention to the plight of the weak and the vulnerable in a rapidly changing society, and made known the variety and complexity of child neglect. Regrettably, the happy endings that such stories often portray are frequently untrue in real life.

The Victorian era of child care and protection movements was particularly concerned with the importance of home and family to the child, and the policies and intervention strategies for which they lobbied were the product and reflection of specific social transformations in those societies at that time. These were modified and reformulated as those societies underwent later changes. Subsequently, for much of the world outside of Europe and North America, child legislation and care and protection policies were often entirely based upon child legislation introduced by departing colonial administrations. They were in essence alien, inappropriate and for the best part unworkable for societies with different social structures and at a quite different stage of social development (Mills 1989; Mills et al. 1992).

More recent initiatives—such as the 'First Call for Children' ideology of the World Summit for Children, the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, and the activities of a host of other international agencies concerned with child protection—now offer to the South Pacific and other societies confronting similar development problems a blueprint for policy reforms. However, though extremely worthy, they exist largely as external prescriptions for change rather than incentives for local engagement in the

process of constitutional self-determination and self-reliance in the process of formulating appropriate child care legislation and policies by the societies expected to take them on board (Cruikshank 1980). In a developing country, individuals and groups who are struggling to engage in child care problems and explain them in terms of their own country's own social development may justifiably still feel they are being dominated by the metropolitan powers. They can complain that they are being 'beaten around the head' with child rights by international experts who understand little of local administrative problems and the nature of the social problems with which they are dealing.

We would argue then, that to describe and define child social disaffiliation, or any category of child need and the appropriateness of intervention strategies to deal with these problems, must properly take into account the historical conditions that have shaped these problems. This includes the social response and nature of the contemporary society in which the problem is situated and the changes that are going on within it. The situation of children in the South Pacific is only understandable within the context of this history, particularly the recent history of the Region and the current rapid social changes, which seem at times to be overwhelming it.

Our assumption is that ideally in traditional South Pacific societies local economies were village oriented and subsistence-based, involving a complex of reciprocities of goods, services and communal responsibilities governed by highly structured social status systems, which were also inclusive and mutualistic in terms of social responsibilities. Amongst those reciprocities, child care, protection and nurturing were a responsibility of the whole community. That is, it was the duty of everybody in the village and particularly in the extended family, which governed village life, to keep an eye on all of the village children. Modernity has brought rapid urbanisation, geographical mobility and wage labour economic relationships, which have severely eroded the basis of traditional society, particularly reciprocal economic relations. Within these changes, we hypothesise that communal child care and protection as a reciprocal economic relationship is no longer so tenable. Although it is expected that children can be left safely with relatives and members of the same village to be cared for as though they were their own children (in the South Pacific tradition of 'caring and sharing'), this has become an increasingly less reliable option. This is despite the fact that a sense of obligation to undertake this responsibility still

exists. In the words of many of the researchers and respondents, when asked what their response would be to a member of their family asking them to take care of their child for an extended period: 'We cannot refuse'.

We suggest that a significant number of children who are living with relatives are socially disaffiliated and that these children constitute a distinct category of need. For the purposes of this research we have defined this condition as follows:

A disaffiliated child is one who is significantly disadvantaged because the normal social and emotional affiliative bonds to his or her immediate family, or alternative social arrangements that can adequately compensate for immediate family, which are crucial to a normal childhood and a child's sense of security, have been broken, disrupted or attenuated. (Mills 1997)

The process of marginalisation

In referring to the marginalisation of disaffiliated children, we are describing a social process whereby a child acquires a special or second class social status within the family. This is a result of guardians and other family members making differential decisions over the distribution of the scarce material, symbolic, emotional and nurturing resources of normal family life. Marginalisation is a much used sociological concept, which has been employed, for example, by Giddens, and particularly Park when he describes a migrant living fully neither in one social world nor another as a 'marginal man'. It has also been used to portray the social situations of individuals and groups who exist on the periphery of social grouping and processes (Park 1950).

As a result of urbanisation and the concomitant increase in geographic mobility, which is also a result of the growth of a wage labour economy and the commercialisation of domestic economies, providing for a child's needs has become much more complicated and demanding than it once was in traditional society. As other services in society have become commodified, such as education, housing and labour, so too in a modern home, parental nurturing and child care have been subject to the same forces. Much has been written in feminist theory about the existence of the unrewarded and

unaccounted domestic economy based upon household and child rearing labour (Oakley 1974; Jalal 1994). We would propose that the commodification of motherhood has turned parental nurturing and child care into a scarcer resource. For the working mother, who must usually leave the house most days, her limited nurturing resources must inevitably be much more fully focused on her own children than on other children she might be caring for. As a result, as we shall see below, children can become keenly aware of this differential provision of care, and feelings of rejection, isolation, resentment and second class status can easily build up.

Child care costs money, and can cripple a family's domestic economy. One factor here is school fees. For both poor and middle income families the cyclical panic to find school fees is a major problem. When there is insufficient cash in the family, hard choices have to be made about who will go to school. In general, when such a decision has to be made, this has mostly benefited the boy child at the expense of the girl child. When parents are caring for somebody else's child, such a decision would, not unnaturally, frequently benefit their own and disadvantage another's child. Who gets schooling and what quality of schooling will make a fundamental impression upon children and their perception of status within the family unit.

We already noted the existence of children doing 'menial' chores around the home rather than being at school. Children are an important commercial market, and we are daily bombarded with advertisements for child targeted products. Twisties, Coca-Cola, McDonalds, ice cream, cinema shows, are all examples of things that children come to expect to receive as part of a normal lifestyle. There are ongoing children's fashions in technological toys, amusement arcades and clothes. It is not only a question of distribution of these items between children in the same family, but also who can share and participate with them in the home. The issue of discipline is another factor in the marginalising process. As we shall see below, there is a tendency to discipline children of a different status in the family in different ways. To remind a child of his/her guest status within the household as a means of discipline can be a contributing factor and, when taken with the other instances of discrimination mentioned above, can cause emotional withdrawal from family participation and the internalising of a belief in an inferior status.

The ethnographic research

The disaffiliated child and the village safety net

When I first arrived in Fiji I was frequently told a piece of popular sociology, which some reports believe has a basis in fact (UNICEF 1996). It goes like this:

When an Indo-Fijian woman has an unwanted child or a child she cannot support she will get no help from her family, and will put the child into a children's home and forget about it. But, when a Fijian woman has a child like that she will send it back to the village where there is always a place for it in the extended family. This is part of the South Pacific tradition of 'caring and sharing'.

At the start of the research I stayed as a guest of the chief on a small, traditional and relatively isolated island off the east coast. One of the first things to be noticed was the relatively large number of children and old people compared to adults of child rearing age. When I asked the chief why this was so he burst out: *'This can't go on. This just can't go on. They are destroying our traditional Fijian way of life'*. He went on to explain that although the island had plenty of subsistence agricultural and fisheries potential, cash generating activities were scarce. Young people regularly migrated to the capital in search of a cash income. Then, often as a result of poor housing, a breakdown in marital relations or single parenthood, their children were sent back to the village to be cared for by the extended family, usually the grandmother. 'Wasn't this the traditional Fijian way?' I inquired. The chief explained that while, within the context of the village, caring for a relative's children was quite normal and that an orphaned child would be properly adopted by a member of the family as a matter of course, what was happening now was an abuse of this tradition.

He explained his dilemma like this. Those who remained in the village made a contribution to the village through shared activities such as farming, fishing, house building and road, school and medical centre maintenance, and their reciprocal economic activities were the basis of the island's economy and very existence as a community. Those who had migrated to the capital were not making these contributions, and although technically

part of the community in so much as they remained a member of their extended family, without a village level contribution they had no right to benefit from the community's resources. In respect to the children being cared for, he asked how he could possibly treat them the same as the children whose parents had remained behind. Their parents were contributing to the local economy and they quite naturally expected their children to get preferential treatment in times of need, such as when school expenses had to be found. He spoke with sadness of there now being two groups of children on the island, those of parents who had remained and those who had been sent back from the city. He was being forced to make decisions about the welfare of children, and those children who did not have their parents with them were, he believed, often the most in need. A strong element in this decision making responsibility had to be about whether the children's parents were living on the island or not; when this was not so, it tended to give them an automatic second class status. The chief's dilemma was that he was crucially involved in a process that was marginalising a group of his own children, and that he was unable to address the burden placed on remaining families, particularly the elderly, by the presence of these children. The chief told me that recently a grandmother had said to him, somewhat jokingly, '*You should put a big sign on the beach, NO MORE CHILDREN!*' The chief talked about the slow build up of resentment in some families who were having to care for many extra children. The chief remarked, I suspect somewhat reluctantly, at the end of my stay, that many of these children were neglected, some had been abused and many were badly behaved and disrupting village life.

This account illustrates the persistence of constructions of tradition. Fiji is going through a process of rapid social change, as part of which people are deserting the villages to participate in the urban way of life and its cash economy. Yet the traditional belief is still strong that you can leave your child to be cared for by relatives as a reciprocal responsibility. It also shows that this course of action may be unfair and inappropriate. Modern times present parents and families with different, often cash based, responsibilities, necessitating difficult decisions about the allocation of resources, which can affect the relative status of a child in the family and within the community.

Child 'caring and sharing' in the squatter settlements

The 'informal' housing settlements (or squatter settlements) of Suva would elsewhere be called shanty towns. They constitute 25 per cent of all households, and are home for approximately 12,000, the poorest one-in-eight of the population. They are unplanned, semi-officially occupied tracts of land in and around the city and are typified by overcrowding, poor amenities, poverty, unemployment and domestic violence (Bryant 1992; Suguta 1983). They provide fascinating examples of the ways in which recent migrants to the city have blended traditional village ways of life with modern living. We note particularly in this respect the ways in which the extended family, village relationships and the reciprocal responsibilities that go with them have remained, but often in a modified form (Monsell-Davis 1998). The following account, which exemplifies the strengths and dangers associated with extended family relationships and responsibilities, came from police officers I met when conducting a training course in child care and protection issues in community policing (Mills et al. 1998).

They were a young couple of settlement dwellers—he a casually employed gardener, she a part-time waitress with two young preschool children—living in a typical complex of corrugated iron and makeshift material huts. For whatever reason, their marriage relationship was breaking down and a bout of domestic violence occurred. She unexpectedly ran off, allegedly to the village to visit her mother, leaving him to care for the children. As he did not see child care as a traditional male responsibility, he did what he believed to be the obvious thing: he dumped the children on his sister next door to look after. She, in the tradition, was unable to refuse them.

The sister, however, as a single mother struggling to bring up two school-aged children on her own, needed to work, so she began leaving the toddlers alone in the house, with instructions to a neighbour to keep an eye on them. The neighbour in turn got called to school, where her child had been accidentally injured, so she left the toddlers with a friend at another settlement. Unfortunately she found that she had to remain at the hospital for several weeks to care for her child. The new guardian had to return to her village for

a funeral so she took her 'new' children with her, where they remained with her extended family for several weeks, until a visiting village health nurse demanded to know what the situation was. She found that there was only the vaguest notion of who was ultimately responsible for the children, and great uncertainty about who the children were and where they came from, other than the fact that they were children that somebody's sister was taking care of.

Perhaps the most remarkable fact of this story was that during all of this time the parents, their sister and the neighbour did not specifically know where the children were. This did not seem to have worried them, having been told that the infants were staying with the family back at the village. On the one hand, this story says a great deal about the sense of responsibility of many of the actors and on the other, it is a frightening tale of child neglect. The sister, the neighbour, the neighbour's friend and the village simply exercised traditional community child care responsibilities. On the other hand the mother, the father, the neighbour and the neighbour's friend all exposed the children to potential abuse and neglect. As far as we know no harm came to the children, but this fragile chain of events could have easily led to quite different outcomes. What effect did this series of events have upon the children? How did they feel about their voyage around the periphery of the extended family, and eventual incorporation into families in a village to which they had no attachment? The number of 'what ifs' in the story is almost unending. The point we wish to make, however, is that the idea of shared responsibility and trust in traditional extended family child care responsibilities has been incorporated into modern urban living. The ideology is alive and well, no matter how unsatisfactory and unsuitable this might seem to those professionally concerned with good child care practice.

Cema's story

Births to young and unmarried women are increasing throughout the South Pacific Region. In Fiji's largest maternity hospital it is estimated that 60 per cent of births are to young unmarried women, and the rate is increasing (UNICEF 1996). They are often unplanned, unwanted and can have severe

consequences for the future development of both mother and child. This constitutes a major social problem in itself (UNICEF 1995). While South Pacific societies do not condone out-of-marriage pregnancies, neither do they often reject the mother and child outright. As we have seen in the previous story, a place is usually found for the child in the extended family somewhere. Our next story demonstrates that this is so for illegitimate as much as legitimate children.

Cema was born in another island nation to a young unmarried woman. Not knowing who the putative father should be, a male friend volunteered to register his name as the father, in the cause of the child's future respectability. Several months after the birth the mother tired of her maternal role and, dumping the child on the now legal father, went overseas. The legal father, not having ever wanted this role and rejecting the role of child-minder, took Cema overseas to Fiji and dumped her, in the traditional way, on his own mother, the social grandmother.

After approximately one year, the grandmother, feeling the stress of motherhood in old age, removed to Nadi to live with her widowed daughter and her four children, in order to pool resources and bring the children up jointly. After approximately another two years, friction between mother and daughter over good child rearing practices became increasingly apparent in their joint parental role. The issue of violence in discipline, in particular, caused the family unit to break up. The grandmother took the now three-year-old Cema to the other side of Fiji, far from what had become her brothers and sisters and joint mother. Grandmother found that she could not cope with Cema alone and gave Cema back to the legal (but not natural) father, who took her back to her original island nation home. He faced the problem of who should look after Cema. He took Cema to his sister, who was a busy career woman and could not really cope with another child. She in turn commissioned her domestic helper to care for Cema in the servant's quarters, where she will now presumably grow up in that domestic role. We do not know what happened to Cema after that. Some people have said that the real mother has returned and visits her child.

While this story is almost a glowing testimony to the strengths of the extended family network to find a place and care for a small child, for Cema at such a young age this could well be described as an emotional and psychological catastrophe. In the short space of three years she had one father and five mothers, and temporarily four brothers and sisters. What was clear to some of us involved in this case of Cema was that the child craved affection and clearly felt rejection all around her. Another interesting point in Cema's short career drifting around the periphery of an extended family, which was not in reality hers, was that there were serious offers of fostering and adoption from experienced and wealthy families who could have become responsible for her guardianship. These offers were rejected on the grounds of family pride. Yet another important question was what was Cema's official identity? For those who made offers of adoption, there were also problems such as which jurisdiction could make such a decision, and which government department had the authority to assess their suitability as parents.

The interview survey

To confirm or redirect our original hypothesis, which had largely been based upon general ethnographic enquiries, illustrated by the above accounts, the research conducted a more rigorous undertaking. This involved interviewing children from a large prestigious secondary school who were living away from their natural parents with family and friends. The children's guardians were interviewed separately. Secondary school education is still a privileged and expensive undertaking, so we may question how representative of Fiji generally our secondary school was. However, participating researchers working at other schools and with school drop-outs, of whom another ten were interviewed, believed the findings to be both typical and representative of the cases they dealt with.

Enquiries were made in each class in the seven grades about how many children lived away from their parents. This produced a fairly consistent result of approximately 10 per cent. The findings were at first a little lower than this, a fact we attributed to what we later learned to be a sense of embarrassment or shame amongst children at not being cared for by their natural parents, which in some cases was a disincentive to volunteer information. This group were then invited to volunteer and gain their guardians' consent for both them and their guardians to be interviewed.

This resulted in a subgroup of 20 participating children. The interviews were carried out within the context of the duties of a school counsellor, and were non-directive and unstructured.

Children lived apart from their natural parents, with relatives or family friends, for four major reasons: divorce or family breakdown, parental death, to secure better educational opportunities or because it was believed by guardians that they were living in undesirable domestic situations. However, it needs to be added that each child's story was in some measure unique, and in some cases there was a mixture of the above reasons.

The issue of financial responsibility was almost always complex, and acutely felt by children and guardians alike. Although natural parents in principle accepted financial responsibility for their children's upbringing and education, guardians frequently found that this promised money was not forthcoming, whether through a lack of means, forgetfulness or an underestimation of the cost of child rearing. The issue of inadequate finance often put stress on the guardians, particularly for those in retirement, on an average or low income, or with large families of their own to support. The strain in turn aggravated their relationship with the parents. This was a rubbing point that children seemed to be able to identify easily, and one that caused them embarrassment, for want of a better term. This in turn undermined their confidence in their status within the family unit.

Those children who had lived with guardians, especially grandparents, from birth or early childhood were much more emotionally attached to them than to their real parents. This placed these children in stark contrast to children who had joined their guardians at a later age, who, by contrast, did experience settling-in and adjustment problems, were much less emotionally attached to their guardians and did not conduct themselves with ease and confidence in their new family environments. It was notable that children who had experienced a career of living with several families were at risk through being beyond control, were badly behaved, stayed out late at night and had started to drink alcohol.

Sexual abuse, while not a reported issue in these children's current domestic arrangements, was an issue that we were very aware of from other research and professional practice. We had supposed that a disaffiliated and marginal child was inevitably more vulnerable to all forms of abuse, and this was to some extent confirmed by other ethnographic enquiries. However, while not an immediate issue in this particular interview survey,

the issue did emerge in a different context. It appeared that sexual abuse, or suspected abuse, was a significant reason for some children being placed with guardians. In these cases it would seem that the extended family had organised amongst itself to relocate the child, for protection against father or step-father abuse. This again spoke of some of the strengths of the extended family system of reciprocal child care.

Personal contact with their real parents, whether by mail, phone calls or visits, was an issue of great importance and frequent despair among the children. They did crave this contact and reassurance to reaffirm their belief that their parents still cared for and loved them. In many cases a 'hidden anger' was detected when children felt that their parents had forgotten, overlooked or just could not be bothered to maintain contact. Guardians frequently referred to the dismay they experienced when they knew a child felt forgotten, and the effect this would have on a child's behaviour and sense of security.

In the majority of cases children lived in crowded conditions, although this may have been equally the case in their natural parents' homes. But as guests in the household, the children felt that they had lost call on personal space, and this was cited as a reason for difficulties in studying. Personal space, and the right to personal space, was an issue of which children were keenly aware and one that made them conscious of their own disadvantaged position.

Guardians felt they lost a lot of privacy with their own immediate family when they took care of other children. This loss was often acutely felt. Immediate family privacy seemed to take precedence over, and be more valued than, the distribution of material things such as food, clothing, toys, school materials and luxuries such as soft drinks and confectionery. Some parents cited the fact that in attempting to be 'fair' to the extra children they were caring for, they would offend members of the immediate family. The well being of the guardians and their natural children was being placed at stake because they had to care for a relative's child. Guardians who experienced this situation recognised that this resentment could not be covered up within the context of home life and that this too had negative consequences on the child's sense of security and belonging.

Family household responsibilities such as cooking, laundry, dish washing and other chores seemed from what we were told by guardians to be fairly delegated to all members of the household. In some cases parents

stated expressly that they were mindful of not giving the 'guest' child the feeling of exploitation by being turned into free domestic labour. This claim was not always confirmed by the children. The researchers did come across cases outside of this particular survey where there was no money for schooling, and girls were expected to spend the day doing domestic chores, while boys were told to remove themselves from the house during the day in order to raise some money. If, in such cases, there were other children in the household who were attending school, the (exploited) children keenly felt their second-class status and were resentful.

The issue of discipline was vexatious to both guardians and children. While this usually took the form of 'grounding', in some cases physical violence including the 'stick' was used. Guardians were frequently very conscious that this was not their child, and handling behaviour ranged from treating the children with greater laxity than they would their own, to being over severe because they had been trusted with the task of good parenting. For the children, especially those who had received physical violence, there was obvious resentment that someone other than their natural parents should be punishing them. Some children mentioned the fact that their guest status in the household would be used as a form of discipline or reprimand. This made them feel different from other children, and in turn increased their sense of insecurity and detachment.

The interviews revealed that many of the children felt very angry about their situation and this was, to various degrees, noticed by many of the guardians and teachers. The children's anger was expressed in different ways and had a noticeable bearing on their school and domestic behaviour. Some teachers had even complained within the context of the discussions generated by this research that they had too many 'away from home' children in their class, and this was having a disruptive influence. Sometimes the children expressed this anger by withdrawing socially and becoming moody and difficult. For others it resulted in vehement verbal outbursts, particularly on the telephone. At times this anger could be related to a pattern of destructive behaviour at school. If the research can identify an emotional disposition linking most of the children, besides that of resentment at not living with their parents, it was this 'silent anger', as the researchers came to term it.

Frequently the children felt ashamed of their status, particularly if it was the result of separation or divorce, and would attempt to hide this from school friends and teachers. This is one of the reasons why the researchers believe that the number of reported children was lower than the number who were actually living away from their natural parents. Clearly children in this situation felt that they were in some way abnormal and disadvantaged. Although not a question asked in this survey, children in the research did mention the fact that other children would refer to their status and remind them mockingly that their parents had given them away or did not care for them.

Finding sociological constants in these children's lives, other than the fact that they were socially disaffiliated and to greater or lesser extent marginalised within their adoptive family situations, confronted the research with many problems and was not made a priority. The sample was small and doubtfully representative of the whole child population. More importantly, all these children's stories were different and had shaped their own development in different ways. For example, the few orphaned children old enough to remember parents who had died had learned to appreciate what was being done for them and accommodate their situation by not asking for luxuries, by being helpful around the house and by developing a polite attitude with good manners. By contrast, children who had lived through the experience of a painful parental separation would recall tears, screams and arguments, and claimed they were only too glad for alternative living arrangements: nevertheless, they wished their situation was not as it was. However, for children who were living with the extended family away from natural parents who were still together, nothing could compare with the contentment they felt they could get from living with their own parents. By contrast, children who were too young to remember their real parents and homes had nothing to compare their situation with and were happy with what they had and the relatives who cared for them, despite the fact that they were still conscious that they were living 'away from home'.

Conclusion

The research comes at a time of renewed concern over child abuse and neglect in the South Pacific. Our specific concern with children living 'away from home' was originally sparked by the issue of child sexual abuse, particularly the circumstances that could lead to this vulnerability. Moving on from our initial observations that children living in irregular family circumstances did figure disproportionately in sexual abuse cases, we realised the situation of these children had also been noted by other research. This led us to the question, why do so many children seem to be living away from their immediate families? When we asked colleagues and friends this question, we were invariably told that this was a traditional aspect of extended family life, and there seems to be no doubt that this is true. In many ways this tells of the strengths of kinship. The difference is, of course, that this used to happen in the context of traditional rather than modern society.

Certainly for many, if not most, children there is a place somewhere in the family should their immediate family be unable to care for them, or special arrangements need to be made for education. However, by focusing research on the children involved, their life stories, feelings and understandings of events, we learned that for many such children (and we have no means for quantifying this) living 'away from home' did not simply increase their vulnerability. It could represent a childhood that was significantly different from what we regard as a normal family life, almost irrespective of how much the guardians believed they cared for and protected the child. In all of the cases we came across, with the exception of the few where the child had been adopted at a very young age, the lack of affiliative bonds to their natural family was acutely felt.

The concept of relative deprivation is important here. No matter what degree of care and attention a guardian might provide, if other children are being cared for by their natural parents in their family home, and particular children are not, this fact cannot go unnoticed and unfelt by those 'ward' children. They will learn that they have a different social status from other children, and modify their behaviour and sense of security accordingly. The children we researched usually did not feel fully part of their adoptive families and believed—and in many cases this belief was self-evidently true—that they were getting a second-class deal in terms of emotional care compared to children living with their immediate family. This in turn led to

the 'silent anger' of resentment we so often came across, and withdrawal from normal social participation, which sometimes had profound consequences on a child's domestic and school behaviour.

We would contend that the best place for a child is usually with his or her immediate family: if this is not possible a child may become vulnerable to various forms of neglect and abuse. It is no longer enough to assume that the extended family is willing or able to cope with 'floating' children. The best interests of the child must be considered. What happens to children who live 'away from home' is a cause for concern.

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