

The Impact of Separation and Loss on Children Whose Parents Were Left Behind

Lennox Thomas

Separation and Reunion issues are so prevalent that we can consider them commonplace and not acknowledge them as a concern. We tend to follow the “we all went through it so what?” attitude. Or we cannot recognise these issues because of our personal experiences.

Separation is an underlying concern for many who migrated to the UK and the USA in the post war era from West Africa, the Indian Subcontinent and the Caribbean Region. There is a whole silent population of children who also experienced separation when they were sent to the UK on the *Kindertransporte* to escape Nazi persecution.

What is interesting are the varied outcomes that can be observed in the children who were left behind and how they behave as adults with their own offspring. It is not a single picture and the quality of these relationships can be read about in research work by Elaine Arnold (1997).

As a clinician in child and family psychotherapy what has been noticeable is that the actual experience of separation alone does not determine emotional behaviour or psychological outcomes but the context and quality of the separation and reunion as well as other matters (i.e., child abuse, the Cinderella Syndrome, or simply being placed into a new family).

The generation of children who were left in the care of others are now themselves parents and grandparents. Many have made good transitions and recognised that they wanted to raise their own children differently. The picture for others has been grim. The net effect being unsatisfactory family relations and the intervention of the state welfare system.

Moreover, I do not believe that it is at all easy for parents who belong to black and ethnic minority groups to raise their children in this country. There are complications of being part of a minority group: being invisible or not being featured, racism, parental fear of racial violence. For example, the relation between identity development and poverty, low expectations, the effect that the market forces have on the poor and minorities all play their part. These things take place even when separation and loss are not factors.

Trapped between the long-term goals of wanting to make a better life for themselves and their children, and the pain of not being with them when they were

small and in need, had kept parents from talking to the children they were reunited with. Whilst a great deal of emotional energy has been put to a general damming up of emotions and keeping silent.

In many cases, there was a conscious denial, choosing not to recognise and address the trauma of separation. There has been a taboo about the difficult times and nobody wants to dwell on them for too long. Although a public and private dialogue about the missing years is what can facilitate healing, it is of course the most difficult to initiate and share.

Sons and daughters as well as mothers and fathers have found that talking to each other about their time apart is personally hurtful because it seems like they are trying to accuse each other.

Reminiscent of the Jewish Holocaust experiences, separation and reunion issues between Caribbean and African people have become taboo, and families choose not to touch them and therefore keep their personal feelings unaltered.

It was not until the late 1970s that the offspring of Holocaust survivors were daring to ask their parents about their experiences only to be met with silence. Feelings of being challenged to open a box that had been closed shut had been registered by parents who had survived. They were not able to fully understand what effect their silence was having on their children.

The Case of M.

M. was persuaded to see me by her mother who believed that her daughter needed some counselling or guidance. M.'s mother had heard about me through a friend of a friend - the usual. Her parents came from West African and they themselves came as early adolescents to join their parents in the UK. Both parents were very involved with a pentecostal Church and had dedicated their lives to this. M. was at University and her younger sister planned to do the same.

The complaint was that M. has changed. No longer respects her parents and is not a good daughter. She is going out with friends from University, many of whom mother sees as of dubious character. M. says that mother is overprotective and prefaces her admonishments with "There are things that a good Nigerian girl should not do".

As the narrative continued, it transpired that M. was not encouraged to spend too much time around her grandmother who lived in the same part of the town as they did. M. had been trying to find out why there was such a cold formality between her mother and grandmother and realised that her insistence to know her grandmother in recent months had made her own mother unhappy. Knowing this had only led her to speculate on why this might be the case. She spoke to her grandmother who gave no clue, so she then plucked up the courage to ask her mother. Mother was unusually offended and said "This girl would be my ruin". Father intervened and let the secret out: left in Nigeria, with an aunt and her family in the maternal grandparents' home, M.'s mother felt abandoned at the age of eight. She was always second to her aunt's children and her grandparents who tried to make her special were elderly. She believed that her aunt did not like her and that she took all her best clothes and a particular doll sent by M.'s grandmother for her own daughters. M.'s mother said that

her mother did not believe her story when she eventually came to the UK and she continued to send things to her aunt. She felt that her mother had not taken her side. She also felt betrayed by her mother and had never forgiven her.

M. was told to keep out of her business and that it was all too late now. Useless as it might seem, M. challenged her mother about her Christian forgiveness. Her mother seemed to be locked in a time capsule fearful of change, yet sent M. to therapy having told her that she was the problem.

Nothing has changed yet between mother and grandmother, but M. will not give up. She felt that family history was getting in the way and that her mother's overprotection was as a result of feeling that she was on her own raising her family without support. It was clear that M. was a bystander to a problem that existed between her mother and grandmother.

The Case of P.

P. was referred to me over a period of 1 year. He refused to come until he received a second caution by the Police. His mother is close to the business of counselling. P. felt uncontrollable rage at his mother and at school and he often regretted his behaviour.

Mother has raised her son alone since he was 4 years old. Mother and father met as teenagers. Both were children of those children who were left in the Caribbean and who subsequently joined their parents. P.'s young parents lived together from their late teens until P. was 4 years old - a total of 6 years.

P.'s relationship with his mother is rich and intense but his relationship with his father is very poor. He rings his father who does not remember to call him. P. said that his father smokes dope all the time and wastes his life. Both parents had done some professional training. He despairs of his father who he feels is not at all interested in him. P. feels isolated - he longed for a good relationship with his father and his mother tried to get this to happen but no one was holding their breath.

P. mentioned that he did not have many cousins and that his paternal grandmother had lived in the USA since his Dad was 11. So it was possible to see a pattern in his father's life of repeated separations and losses. His grandparents left a daughter in the Caribbean who then came to Britain. P's father was left in London in the care of his grandparents - who in turn left his son P. The latter seems to be complaining about this in his therapy and wishes to put it right.

What can we say to those who experience loss and separation as a result of war and trauma now (for example, in Somalia, Kosovo, and Sierra Leone). As professionals, it might be a good idea that we engage with separation and loss issues, so that people will not have to pay the high social and psychological price of broken and damaged relationships.

References

Arnold, E. (1997). 'Issues of Re-Unification of Migrant West Indian Children in the United Kingdom'. In *Caribbean Families: Diversity among Ethnic Groups*.

Roopnarine, J., & Brown, J. (eds.) *Advances in Applied Developmental Psychology*.
London: Ablex Publishing Corp.