

PRESTIGE IN THE RELATIONSHIP OF NATURAL AND FOSTER PARENTS *

by HELEN RUBENSTEIN

Jewish Child Care Association, New York, N. Y.

THE role deriving from the creative capacity for parenthood has three unique distinctions: first, it is directly dependent on a relationship with another person in order to exist at all. One cannot be a parent privately. Furthermore, it involves an irrevocable act, the birth of a child. Lastly, because it is of necessity highly social, involving life itself, it gathers around it values, jurisdictions, titles, influence and finally, prestige. Failure or success in a parental role is not private nor is it endured as an internalized process alone. The role is related to the most valued social trust—the seriousness of producing another life; it calls forth a multitude of social dictates on how that life is to proceed and to be cherished to adulthood. The role of parent then, as contributor to another's growth, means participation in interpersonal relationships and activities which are highly prized for survival of life itself. To the successful ones in this role, society does not remain indifferent, but accords the fullest pride and prestige given by man. To the failures in this role, society allows no privacy either, and assigns social dis-

approval leading to the most serious loss of self-esteem. For our use, I should like to understand prestige as the social recognition enjoyed by someone who carries a valued role in society. It includes a sense of worth, effectiveness, and ultimately, happiness.

We see furthermore, that, like beauty, prestige also lies in the eyes of the beholder in the sense that prestige is not only attached to the particular parent who owns and earns the positive features of this status, but more generally, and irrationally sometimes, to any one who assumes the role.* Therefore, the thought alone of mother or father conjures up a picture of benevolent living, a setting of an intact family, economically and psychologically protected. The reality may actually include nothing of this, or so minimally that it cannot support the social fantasy. These qualities of security and devotion are practically assigned to the parent by the culture even if he does little to assume them.

* For general discussion of attributes related to role, see:

(1) John P. Spiegel, "The Social Roles of Doctor and Patient in Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy," *Psychiatry*, Nov. 1954, pp. 369-376.

(2) Erving Goffman, "On Cooling the Mark Out," *Psychiatry*, Nov. 1952, pp. 451-463.

* Presented at the National Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Atlantic City, N. J., May 22, 1955.

The parent in turn finds some social obligation to take the role assigned. To the degree that he realistically achieves the qualities of tenderness, protection and direction in the parental role, he maintains prestige. To the degree that he fails his role, he feels less to himself and others. Prestige and social acclaim are more vividly and crucially associated with individual self-approval in carrying the parental role, than in many other human endeavors. Therefore, we should not be surprised to find that any deviation, interruption or conflict in managing the role will become more noticeable, or distorted here than in other failures of living. In other words, if we accept the premise that parenthood is a significantly public phenomenon, to fail parenthood is to advertise disaster. This in turn complicates the unsuccessful parent's total burden by pouring salt on his wound.

This paper is based on the following considerations: it is assumed that the foster child's well-being is vitally tied in with the healthy modification of all parent-foster parent conflicts. Also, it is exploratory, rather than definitive, since it attempts to describe and suggest tentatively a few patterns of response. The parental role is understood as the one which operates most conventionally in our life in the United States today, that is, as the care and rearing of children under their natural parents' immediate supervision, in the intimacy of the natural parents' own home. In the placement agency, we are primarily confronted with deviations in carrying this role, and our attention will be focused here on those conflicts arising between the natural and foster parents which emerge from loss and gain of prestige. This material is not so much a description of unique predisposition of an individual parent or foster parent, as of the larger, more universal climate of esteem as it surrounds both in a place-

ment setting. The broader, more pervasive social aspects of prestige, as they affect every parent in the community, will be discussed. It should not be assumed that prestige is the only dynamic a caseworker is cognizant of, in work with parents. I want to emphasize again that the problem of prestige must be seen as but one component in the total psychological set which determines the progress of a placement situation. This paper is directed, then, to an examination of some possible patterns of interaction between natural and foster parents springing from feelings of prestige changes in their respective roles. What are some of the very special conflicts between them that hinge on variations of parental status? Are there any special hardships for the natural parent as he reassesses himself in a placement setting? Here, losses and gains in status are more sensitively exposed, suffered and exaggerated.

We have already reviewed a little how the parent takes on his role—by having borne a child he has certain attributes and status automatically thrust upon him. In an attempt to conform to the values set for him and thereby gain approval, he tries to make them realistically his own. He knows that he should be responsible, tender, strong, loving and more than anything else—dedicated to the child. He may have had solid capacity and deliberate wish to carry out all the attributes of constructive parenthood as outlined for him by society, or he may not. In either case, he consciously cannot afford to belittle them because it would put him too far outside social approval. He tends to borrow strength from allegiance to the social platform, and to internalize it as his own value. Rarely, and then in extremity only, may he abandon it.

Parents who find themselves unable to perform their role for either realistic reasons of death, desertion, illness, or

for more subjective omissions, finally ask relief and help from a foster care set-up. The overwhelming experience of the natural parent will tend to be a sense of loss, deprivation, lowered self-esteem and social worth. When the parent who has been telling himself and others that he can take care of his child, suddenly finds that this belief is untrue, he feels shocked, ashamed of what he cannot sustain, and thereby vulnerable to criticism. His own bubble of adequacy has collapsed, perhaps through no fault of his own. Furthermore, the outside world knows about it. Attending this partial failure of the natural parent to keep a child in his own care is his qualified withdrawal from many parental identifications.* Here may be some very special experiences of loss not frequently duplicated. Most apparent is that the failure hangs on a vital issue and social concern—the next generation. Failure here is acute, cannot too long be tolerated, so that the factors of importance, time and urgency press upon the natural parent.

Secondly, since our society is loathe to interfere with parental rights, unless grievously offended, and then only through formal legal channels, the unfortunate natural parent must mobilize himself, declare his lacks and initiate this step. For the very reason that no authority usually forces the parent, his activity is attended by severe conflict and anxiety. Generally he cannot just break down, but with all reservations and doubts must exert further effort toward the responsible conclusion of asking for placement. Having made the decision, the sad loss of pride cannot stay internalized, confined, unconscious. The natural parent can find no real comforting retreat in unconscious security devices, since the act of placement articu-

lates the parent's sense of depreciation, and operates in the area of awareness. When the placement is effected, there is always publicity, an audience to witness the tensions of the natural parents as he resigns his post, whether it be neighbors, friends, relatives, formalized agency or all of them.

This last point brings the natural parent into an environment where his sharpest conflicts around status and social worthiness will be exposed—the foster home. In this lowest interval of self-depreciation, anxiety, and anger, almost before casework help can take hold, the natural parent is introduced to the foster parent, who is both his most formidable "competitor," as well as the instrument of his relief.

Already hurt by the implied derogation of altered rank and responsibilities, the natural parent plays out most dramatically his intimate shortcomings and vagaries before this new audience of foster parent. Here is another special factor where placement burdens adjustments in self-appraisal: the change occurs in a prejudiced highly charged and subjective place. The parent must not only revise his feelings about himself and the opportunities offered his child by the foster family, but he must do this difficult thing, confronted by the currently superior adequacy of the foster family. He acts in a comparative setting of greater expectation and performance than he can match himself. While most therapeutic settings strive for an objective, permissive tone, the experience the natural parent has in visiting a foster home early in placement is hardly that. Of course, there is some tempering of this inconsistency through office visits, but the foster parent, however absent he is physically from these visits, still attends as a potent influence in the child's life, or as a fantasy in the natural parent's. Subsequent revision of his role, and the

help given him by the caseworker to reassess his behavior and feelings, is undertaken with the natural parent under taunting, rivalrous conditions. He is faced with sifting out what he can or cannot do for his child in the presence of others who frequently seem to be able to do everything much better. This highlights the natural parent's own eclipse. Unless firmly supported by the caseworker to appreciate and exercise his unique contribution to placement, it is very easy for the natural parent to feel threatened and to feel he carries a secondary position.

This troubled engagement of natural and foster parent is intuitively experienced by everyone concerned with placement, even though it may not be verbalized as such. No deep insight is needed by either parent to appreciate the position of the other. The contribution of the caseworker is to help bring both parents to a better understanding of the new and modified role each is likely or willing to assume. The very aim of casework help to both parents is to prune away irrational prestige burdens, to redefine realistically each one's appropriate role, and to appraise with each, the valid attributes of his role in terms of motivations, capacities and satisfactions.

A few case examples will reflect the conflict of role prestige described above. We shall focus only on the weight that prestige adds to the total burden of placement. Here are different ways in which parents and foster parents have carried their feelings of worth into their relationship with each other.

The first concerns a 35-year-old mother. Here we see many parental capacities, neurotically denied prior to placement, later affirmed and used as the very vehicle towards self-respect, a feeling of worth, and community approval or prestige. Mrs. B had separated seven years previously from her husband after a stormy marriage. She left with him their two adolescent daughters whose anger and sense of desertion were only provoked by the mother's

sporadic, half-hearted attempts to see them occasionally. Her own family who had always regarded her as a black sheep, abandoned her in turn, branded her as a bad mother and turned her away with horrified disapproval of her out-of-wedlock relationship and the child she bore in it.

Mrs. B asked placement for 4 year old Marty, after threatened abandonment by his father. An intelligent, vibrant, though emotionally undeveloped woman, she was highly outspoken of her feeling that she was "no good" as a mother, adding supportive evidence of absence from the two older children, and now, her placement of the youngest. She noted that she was "so bad" that even her own mother would not see her, and she went on to tell of her own ignorance and the exasperation in the youngster's care. Yet, she gave an extremely sensitive and knowledgeable medical and social history. She asked if she were a good mother, why then would she want to be free, have a good time by herself and go dancing?

Mrs. B cooperated closely in the placement of the child to his foster home all the while preoccupied with her anticipated shame in visiting later, because "what will the foster parents think of me for doing this?" Marty's foster family consisted of a young childless couple who had gone through a lengthy, intensive home study to prove their conviction that they could rear a foster child. Exhilarated by final agency-community approval and family acclaim, they were nevertheless modestly open-minded in their reception of Mrs. B.

The first tense visits demonstrated to the foster parents that they could afford to be so because the mother moved with pitiful self-doubt of her right to continue in her son's life. While they had superior accomplishments in other fields, as parental figures they felt novices, particularly since they had not produced a child of their own. The uncertainty of success and approval disciplined the foster parents' competitive feelings sufficiently to allow the mother's most constructive participation. Mrs. B was happily impressed with this foster mother's acceptance. The foster mother was not only accepting but liked Mrs. B and encouraged her resourcefulness—which in itself was a therapeutic experience. Both the foster mother and caseworker were impressed with this mother's very experience as a mother, proved by her sensitive interpretation of Marty to both of them, and her consistent support and honesty with him.

* See Eric H. Ericson, "Childhood and Society." W. W. Norton & Co., 1950. p. 231.

The respect shown Mrs. B by these foster parents enabled her to develop a beginning sense of community acceptance, if not sympathy. With casework help here, Mrs. B's subsequent rise in self-esteem was proportionate to the increasing recognition of her true value to her child, her satisfactions and qualifications to be a parent in a modified role. She experimented with jobs, and unproductive leisure periods which gave her no enduring happiness. Failure to find a suitable partner turned her increasingly to the satisfactions and gains from parenthood. In the year and a half of placement, Mrs. B began to achieve some sense of competence in the community—she became self-supporting, and was praised at her work, and by the caseworker. She began to realize the specialness of her relationship to Marty, and her support of him, which no one else could duplicate in his life. She approached her older children, sought out her sisters, and gained some recognition for her more responsible behavior. Finally, she was helped to initiate and follow through on an application with the public welfare agency, resisted their disapproval and her bad record there, established a home by herself and took Marty back with the conviction that the role she had once abdicated because she could not fulfill it conventionally was actually the role that was most rewarding to her. Follow-up showed that she was functioning as an adequate, devoted mother.

The second case illustrating the parental carry-over of business success to a managerial role in the foster home concerns Mr. V, a 40-year-old widower left with Betty, whose birth resulted in the wife's death. Mr. V was a very successful business man, above average in his social and business relationships. He looked upon himself with pride for carrying the care of his youngster so responsibly while she had lived with maternal grandparents and relatives for the first few years, and thereafter private placements. Discouraged by the uncertainties of private placements, which he had arranged, and controlled, he finally requested the service of the agency. He saw his need as stemming from no fault of his own, and he expected the agency to become the instrument of his executive directions. This was the way he had been a parent before. He had not only discharged his parental duties reliably, but had been supported by the knowledge of public praise for having done so under very difficult conditions.

Mr. V's attitude towards the foster parents was one of disdain and elevation deserved in

his own mind by his superior competence and proved business experience. He paid full cost of care which encouraged the "business as usual" quality of his movement. He sought to make the foster family and agency become his formalized housekeeping department while he encouraged Betty to come to him with all her difficulties for his direct intervention and solution. Earlier, in the private placements, Mr. V had found this mode of operating to be realistically appropriate procedure in discharging his fatherly duties. His unmodified authority set by proven success and unaltered community status were very threatening to the foster parents. They were average parents, underscored by a good service record with the agency. The foster mother observed frequently the greater discomfort in her relationship with Mr. V than with any other natural parent she'd known. This was finally epitomized in the foster mother's anxiety during her own illness. During those scattered days of improvised meals and routine she felt as though she were constantly under "scrutiny" by Mr. V, through his child's eyes. The foster mother was preoccupied with meeting the high expectations of a fantasy audience or losing face as housekeeper and mother. Mr. V is seen as inattentive to the modified role expected of him in placement. Yet his assurance, though exaggerated, is always reality based.

Casework direction did not question Mr. V's ability to carry parental responsibilities, but left him and his reputation intact. However, it did require him to alter the way in which he used the ability. Mr. V was helped to appreciate that some dependence on and cooperation with another person was not weakness or failure, although it was a big departure from the familiar, individualistic, self-contained concepts of business enterprise. Mr. V experienced some beginning trust of his child to parental competence outside himself. Here, prestige does not alter from fiction to reality though Mr. V graduates to a new exercise of parental interest—different but not necessarily less credited.

A third case, in contrast to real success, is the defense of an illusory, omnipotent system of parental power, so threatened by loss of status that the placement could not endure. Mr. T is similar to Mr. V in the sense that he, too, a 48-year-old widower, required placement ostensibly because of the face-saving misfortune of having no mother to care for his two young children. Here the similarity ends because Mr. T's pretensions to carry a parental role were not reality based. He was a musician,

so his uncertain low earnings were generally accepted in the community as casting no reflection on his competence as breadwinner. Mr. T's background, however, showed considerable personal disturbance and inability to effect sound relationships. His reliance on the prestige of an artist, and the so-called cultural refinements of his circle to cover his inadequacies, were evident in the over-evaluation of his rights and qualifications as parent. He exploited the prestigious fiction of his position as father, and dramatized them to the excess that no parental figure could even match him in devotion and responsibility. Possibly as distraction from his own lacks, he exaggerated the foster family's smallest mistakes, insisting on concrete signs of their respect and attention. He wanted his picture squarely placed on the children's dresser; he wanted furniture rearranged to accommodate the piano he never provided.

Mr. T's discovery of endless petty deviations in the youngsters' diet, physical care and clothing, were embroidered to prove his watchfulness as a parent. In his efforts to support the irrational fiction of authority as father, he found the foster homes unacceptable, and contributed toward their dissolution, each in turn to be discredited as less than his perfect standards required. When, finally, a foster home was found where the children were best served, Mr. T felt most damaged. So extreme was the father's anxiety in establishing his preeminence as parent, and the role which supported his sense of worth, that despite the excellent adjustment of his children, he finally took them home prematurely, following remarriage. Shortly thereafter the new home broke up. Turning from the children's noticeable lack of care, Mr. T preferred the myth of his parental adequacy, and the uninjured self-approval he derived from this, to a more realistic provision for the children. He saw this as depriving him of the honors assigned the conventionally structured parental role, which he borrowed to puff up his own dignity and lustre.

More briefly, another situation is an instance of minimal identification with a parental role, resulting in an amorphous, irrational assumption of valued attributes which are too heavy, forbearing, and require casework help to relinquish. It concerns an out-of-wedlock mother, Miss A, 22 years old, who became from extreme deprivation in childhood and youth, including abandonment by her own family to foster care and periods of institutionalization in a mental hospital. She had already surrendered three babies for adoption prior to

requesting placement for her fourth, a girl of three months.

Miss A was a bright, disturbed woman with low sense of self, coupled with a weak drive to gain respectability, attention and an insured end to loneliness by keeping her baby. Her assumption of the maternal role was diaphanous in the sense that she sometimes saw the baby as an extension of herself, or as a toy, or sometimes as a resource for later life. The foster mother with whom the baby was placed was a warm, accepting, young woman with unusual capacity for protection and tolerance of others. The natural mother used this setting for a haven for herself, and began a symbiotic relationship with her baby there, wanting to be cared for on a physical basis and to be dependently encouraged almost like a sister to her own child. She was completely conforming to the foster family who represented the ideal of parenthood, and from this identification she gathered strength. When this pattern became clear to the caseworker, an attempt to define the mother's place more realistically resulted in her serious rivalry for the foster mother's attention, querulous statements of her legal and social position as mother. She was too disorganized for independent action to gain an acceptable status outside the foster home or the agency. She lived in a furnished room without dependable relationships to count on, and spent her time in aimless over-dependent or hostile activities with neighbors or chance acquaintances. She returned to Public Assistance after working two weeks. Her only connection with stability and respectability was through the foster home, and this she could achieve only in the role of mother to her child.

Since she found it impossible to make any reasonable contribution to the baby's care, Miss A sought to substantiate her motherhood on the premise of the "rights" she had by virtue of having borne a child and all the automatic status implied by this. To insist on this mother's involvement, would only have encouraged more irrational application by her of parental clichés. The casework help went, therefore, toward a valid diagnosis of Miss A's potential in order to help her assume whatever constructive relationship with the baby it could support, and thereby gain a minimum of self-respect and importance for which she so hungered. However, she needed so much for herself that she was unable to carry even a modified role with the baby; so that failing again, casework thought proceeded to the consideration of her resignation from the maternal

responsibility she could not carry. Attentive to Miss A's extreme need for some social approval, casework emphasis was put on the community respect due to someone who gives up an unrealistically assumed trust, and thereby provides her child with a chance to grow safely and happily.

If the observations described in this paper are correct, casework help towards resolution of these conflicts and towards more appropriate interaction between the natural and foster parent would seem to proceed along the usual acceptable generic lines but with some additional attention given to the following: The natural parent requests placement at the very lowest point of personal adequacy. He feels something less for not being able to be a parent in the conventional sense. He has lost his perspective and adjustments which served him, however poorly, up to this time. He is now in a state of considerable disorganization and may exaggerate the real and implied social disgrace he feels in failure. He will need very articulated evidences of support from another person,* a sympathetic ear that can listen to what he may not even be able to express. Respectful of what he really is able to contribute, I think the casework help should be abundantly directed and clearly structured, to avoid adding burdens to an individual who is already losing or modifying his own internal structure. The help at the beginning needs to be as positively geared as the parent will allow, to emphasize the helper's respect and concern for him who is not sure he deserves it. This is also not the time for lasting decisions, since the trend is toward doubt, not yet affirmation.

Secondly, casework help needs to include the strictest diagnostic thinking about the extent to which the natural parent really qualifies for the role he once carried, and continues to claim.

The caseworker has a responsibility not to fall into, and support the large social illusion of positive maternal concern in work with a young, reluctant out-of-wedlock mother who may feel forced to assume her role out of irrational status pressures to gain rank through conforming. Another special area would be to provide a foster home which is as diluted, non-judgmental and sympathetically matched as possible to decrease the "yardstick" tone while the natural parent finds his tentative comparative way with the foster parents. More thought might go to a longer wait after admission before visiting in the foster home is started, to allow the natural parent a little more time to recoup some of his lost self-esteem, and hopefully, take strength from the caseworker's reassurance. The caseworker can be attentive to the exaggeration of self-depreciation, particularly in the early period of placement; and furthermore as a symbol of community standard, the caseworker can initiate and provide an experience of more valid authoritative approval than the natural parent ever knew previously. Great emphasis can be put by the worker on precise information and data where the natural parent actually suffers no loss of right or reputation. In the distortion of despair, the natural parent might easily continue inattentive or even ignorant of parental attributes that he still possesses.

With the foster parent, too, the caseworker needs to watch against exploitation of authoritative approval. When foster parents rationalize their own insecurities with reliance upon the agency's endorsement, their misuse of authority becomes too effective as a weapon, and too disastrous for the natural parent to resist. He, in turn, while he may protest secretly, against their real lacks, falls into doubts and ends by confusing the foster parents as

true bearers of prestigious standards and privileges, which he wishes he, too, could attain. That his child continues in placement is evidence to him of continued failure. But foster parents, too, need support. Just because their increased prestige was earned, through proof of adequacy, and attributed through the formalized channels of a community agency, by the same token it can be taken away if they cannot sustain the trust. They need encouragement in their efforts to demonstrate their capacities, and maintain their performance. Their prestige then becomes even more tenuous in a sense than the natural parent's, since it depends solely upon proof rather than assumption.

In conclusion, I have attempted to explore the derivation of prestige usually associated with the parental role in our society. I described four patterns, namely: (1) spontaneous self-depreciation changing with casework help to

recognition of realistic worth in excess of the original estimates; (2) defensive activities including depreciation or withdrawal from the foster home because of its significance as a standard of approved parenthood; (3) little loss of self-estimate resulting in inattention to the need for an altered parental role in placement; and finally, (4) an unrealistic assumption of parental attributes, too burdensome for endurance which require casework help to abandon. Here are some of the special problems and conflicts for the individuals who participated in a parental experience which deviates from the conventional one of caring for one's own children in one's own home—in this case, foster care placement. It highlights the gross intrusion of values related to social approval and disapproval in the placement setting which may operate generically and apart from an individual's unique behavior patterns.

* See Erving Goffman, p. 456.