

**Joining Families:  
the adopted child, the internal group, and the process of assimilation.**

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**Abstract:**

In this paper I describe how the inner world of the late-adopted child is peopled with a pre-existing group of birth parents and previous carers. The task of adoptive parents is to assimilate this previously internalised group into the adoptive family. I explore some of the difficulties that can interfere with this assimilation and link it with Oedipal issues and aspects of the Oedipus myth.

**Keywords:**

Boarding-school, foster placement, late adoption, sibling adoption, the sphinx, therapeutic communities.

**Theoretical Introduction: the internal group.**

We all emerge from the symbiotic dyad of the first months of infancy through a complex process of attunement and differentiation. When all goes well, mother and baby learn increasingly to move to and fro between a state of mutually attuned empathy and a more differentiated state. In this differentiated state, each can begin to allow the other to have a separate existence, apart from their own, and achieve the beginnings of mutual curiosity and respect. Ideally, this process is supported by a father who can lovingly tolerate the symbiotic dyad from which he is temporarily excluded, but also encourage the gradual process of differentiation through a loving engagement with both mother and baby.

The baby's total dependency makes it difficult for him or her to achieve this individuation without permission and assistance. By offering a loving and supportive relationship to mother, father helps her to give this permission and assistance; and by offering a loving relationship to the baby, father helps the baby to tolerate this process, and experience it as safe, enjoyable and exciting.

Babies (and often mothers, too) have to learn to mourn the loss of symbiosis and to begin to value separateness. They need to retain the capacity for a limited symbiosis – which in adults we call empathy – while also doing the hard work of beginning to create a separate identity.

This process sets the scene for Oedipal conflict and Oedipal resolution. Where differentiation has been supported, the baby's symbiotic identification with mother alternates with an identification with a father who represents the possibility of differentiation, and can tolerate the toddler's Oedipal hostility; and where mother has been supported in a loving relationship with father, the toddler can identify with both sets of attributes in a combination that itself forms a separate entity: the parental couple from which he or she is sometimes excluded.

This triangulation creates the potential for thinking.

*<<Closure of the oedipal triangle by the recognition of the link joining the parents provides a limiting boundary for the internal world. It creates what I call a 'triangular space' – i.e. a space bounded by the three persons of the oedipal situation and all their potential relationships. It includes, therefore, the possibility of being a participant in a relationship and observed by a third person as well as being an observer of a relationship between two people>> (Britton, 1989, p.86).*

All this takes time and hard emotional work, but when it has been achieved, the young child will have created an inner space where mother, father – and eventually siblings, relatives and family friends – can co-exist as a group of internalised figures, available as an ongoing and creative resource.

In order to face life successfully, beyond the family group, older children need to be able to gather up, use and find acceptance for this group of figures with whom they have identified in early life, and who have made them what they are. Such children can then gradually acquire the skills that will help them to join further external groups, and comply with the norms and values of those groups, without losing their own separate identities: they can belong to these groups, and yet remain faithful to themselves as individuals, and to past groups that have been internalised.

### **The adopted child and the Sphinx.**

However, for adopted children, this process is considerably more complicated.

In his paper 'The Relevance of the Oedipus myth to fostered and adopted children' (2003) Hamish Canham suggests that for Oedipus – as for other adopted children – 'questions about his origins gather around the figure of the Sphinx.'

He points out that the Sphinx 'has both male and female features in a confusing way, i.e. both breasts and male genitalia' and wonders if 'the confusion in the figure corresponds to some of the questions Oedipus might have about the relationship between his parents.' He comments that, given Oedipus' early abandonment, 'it is not surprising that the combined parental figure in Oedipus' mind is so confused and so sinister.'

He goes on to say:

*<<The Sphinx is ultimately mysterious, and of course the truth about all people is that they are multi-faceted – having both good and bad aspects. This is the struggle of the depressive position – to reconcile conflicting pictures we have of others and ourselves. For fostered and adopted children to achieve this requires considerably more psychic work, as they have ambivalent feelings in relation to two sets of parents rather than one. Often, in fact, they have considerably more than two sets of parental figures if they have been in multiple placements>> (Rustin, 1999b).*

In my paper 'The Riddle of the Sphinx' (2012) I explore further Canham's ideas in relation to the figure of the Sphinx, the history of the Theban royal family, and the circumstances of Oedipus' birth. I point out a lesser-known aspect of the story:

*<<As a young man, and a refugee, Laius had acted as tutor to a little boy, the son of a neighbour and ally who had taken him in as a guest. He became attracted to the boy, abducted him and raped him... The boy subsequently died>> (Graves, 1995, 110g. - 110h.).*

I suggest that Jocasta, in marrying and bearing a child to a man she knows to be a rapist and a paedophile is – like many mothers whose children are ultimately removed for adoption by social services – more invested in a relationship with an adoring and dependent baby than in a relationship with an adult partner. I ascribe this to a state of mind which demands that the baby remain in a state of suffocating closeness with mother, in order to meet mother's needs; and suggest that the Sphinx – whose riddle about time and generational difference is so hard for the Thebans to answer – represents a mother of this kind. Developmentally, the children of such mothers are still at a stage where they need to fight to achieve their right to personal individuation – but it is a fight against an object who cannot tolerate or permit such an attempt.

The children of such mothers are often unable to cope with intimacy: the relationships they create within foster or adoptive placements may be frightening in their intensity, or may become sado-masochistic. For this reason, many such children move through multiple foster placements, or experience the breakdown of an adoptive placement.

Within a residential setting, it can be easier to offer them the opportunity for developing towards triangulation and reflective thinking. This possibility depends on a staff group that is able to understand the feelings passed onto them by children still struggling to emerge from an undifferentiated state, and to explore the relational splits that develop around them. This in turn requires that staff receive clinical consultation.

John Diamond in his paper 'Creating a “third position” to explore oedipal dynamics in the task and organization of a therapeutic school' (2012) describes the importance of 'the concept of “triangulation” and an observational “third position”.' He comments that 'The need for consultation as a “third position” to “triangulate” and stabilise the relationship becomes apparent' in situations of splitting between individuals and departments, and comments on 'the potential instability of a two-person relationship, where strong feelings can continually bounce between two “positions”'. He concludes:

*<<In the absence of this perspective, the relationship-based treatment might run the risk of re-creating complex and pathological relationships that place the child, worker, and organization at risk of enmeshment>> (op.cit.).*

Mandy is an example of a child of this kind – the daughter of a needy, suffocating mother who held her in a suffocating relationship which she imported into foster families and the therapeutic community group.

### **Mandy: the symbiotic dyad**

Mandy was fifteen – a slight, pretty girl, apparently gentle, submissive, and shy: indeed, it was hard to get her to talk at all, and if she spoke it was barely above a whisper. There was something inauthentic, over-compliant and sugary-sweet about her that many people found intensely annoying. She had been adopted at the age of five, but the adoption had broken down when she was twelve, for reasons that were unclear to the professional network at the time. She was then placed in foster care,

but each foster placement also broke down, in two cases because she had made allegations of abuse. In the process, she had successfully split the network of professionals around her: some had believed the allegations and seen her as an innocent victim, others had seen her as a manipulative and vicious liar.

In the therapeutic community where she was eventually placed, we soon developed a clear sense of what had made her so hard to live with. Mandy refused to participate in group life, staying silent in meetings and class group discussions. Instead, she targeted a series of individuals – usually young adult staff members, but sometimes children – persuading herself – and them – of the totality of her love and need for them. This was never a straightforward or enjoyable experience for the person she chose: each one felt a guilty dread and discomfort that they could not quite explain. Nevertheless, they fell into a temporary state of acquiescence, which Mandy would take as evidence that her feelings were totally reciprocated. The adults soon became scared of the sexual charge she generated. And both staff and children noticed how the children whom she targeted would frequently become violent when anyone tried to intervene in the intense dyad that she formed with them. When we explored this, it became clear that their attacks on others were in part motivated by their guilty wish to escape from the suffocating relationship in which she held them.

We were able to link this pattern with her experiences as a small child. Mandy's mother, too, had spent much of her childhood in care. She – and her mother before her – had become pregnant almost every year, by different men, and had abandoned each toddler and each relationship in favour of the new baby – but not before each new man had abused the older children. The intense emotionality which Mandy directed at the individuals she targeted was a frightening demonstration, we thought, of the quality of the relationship her mother must have had with each baby in turn, as she used each one for her own comfort, satisfaction, and exercise of power, in much the same ruthless way as a little girl will use her dolls. And we suspected that as each baby became a toddler and gave signs of developing a mind of their own, rather than meeting their mother's need for total submission and attunement to her mood, they became useless to her and were rejected and abandoned.

The adults and children discussed this together and separately, in staff and children group dynamics meetings, and in community meetings; over time, this helped both the adults the other children to resist being lured into a suffocating relationship with Mandy. Instead, everyone tried to be more honest in their reactions to her, commenting on what they found difficult about her behaviour, and on the impact her way of relating had on the group as a whole. In response, Mandy became gradually more articulate; but she also became more violent in her attempts to get her own way, breaking windows and doors, and attacking anyone who tried to restrain her. At the same time, she became more authentic – and more likeable than the sugary-sweet little girl that we had first known. 'This is the real me,' she said. 'I've never shown it to people before.' We could all recognise the courage she had needed to own and take

responsibility for this part of herself.

Mandy's insistence on total reciprocal and over-sugary attachments was temporarily successful because it was enforced by the unconscious fear of her hidden violence. This is an experience familiar to many of us who work with children who have come into the care system – often, like Mandy, after several years of abuse or neglect. They are often the children of young women much like Mandy – and her mother before her. Such women are often confusing for busy social workers. They appear sweet, compliant and loving, but what they present as love is in fact something tyrannical, suffocating and murderous, that leaves their children no room for growth or differentiation, but punishes them for any other attachment beyond the mother-infant dyad. That it is based on their own desperate need for attachment is no protection for their babies.

The children of such women have not been allowed to progress towards a healthy Oedipal conflict and resolution.

The group of adults and children living with Mandy in the therapeutic community performed the role of a good father: they supported her in the expression of her authentic feelings, challenged her behaviour, and pointed out the hidden tyranny and aggression behind her protestations of love. They also engaged, sympathetically and compassionately, with her family history and helped her to do the same.

Through this process Mandy was able to move beyond the suffocating and sugary compliance of a baby unable to separate into the violent protest of a jealous toddler, furious about the Oedipal treachery of her abandoning mother.

### **Billy: a 'confused and sinister' coupling**

We had the advantage of having full access to the history of Mandy's early life and something of the history of her mother and grandmother before her. What she re-enacted was a simple scenario compared to that of some adopted children, who may have progressed further developmentally, but who may be struggling with an Oedipal scenario that is difficult to understand when a full history is not readily available.

One eleven-year-old boy we worked with had secretly joined a gang of older boys and taken photos while they sexually assaulted a fourteen-year-old girl from their school. When it came to light, this behaviour seemed inexplicable, both to the professional network, and to his adoptive parents.

Billy's birth mother had been single, possibly inadequate, but not abusive: she seemed to have tried her best to look after him, but had become terminally ill when he was two, and had subsequently died. Billy had been adopted at the age of five from one stable long-term foster placement within an experienced foster family.

His adoptive parents were a loving couple, old-fashioned, but not sexist in their attitudes. His adoptive mother found it hard to cope with Billy's ongoing attitude of veiled contempt towards her: her husband's apparent collusion with him seemed likely to threaten their marriage.

Within the therapeutic community group, the female staff became increasingly clear that Billy provoked something quite perverse in the men, that made them feel unsafe and uncomfortable. One young man was regularly drawn into uncharacteristic sexist banter whenever he chatted to Billy. One of his female colleagues reported how shocked she had been by hearing him say to Billy: 'Yes, that's the way! Just love 'em and leave 'em! Don't let yourself get trapped!'

It was only when we traced the foster-carers who had looked after him for two and a half years until he was five that we discovered that the foster father had recently been convicted for sexually abusing a number of the teenage girls in his care. His wife had had no suspicion of how he was secretly undermining their marriage and their joint work of fostering. We suspect that he had recruited Billy to be an admiring audience.

Billy had no conscious memory of this foster-placement: but he had been a witness to something deeply troubling, that lay beneath the surface of an apparently happy marriage, and had a need to re-enact it in the unconscious hope of having it understood. I imagine that his fury with a mother who had abandoned him had made Billy vulnerable to an identification with a father-figure who demonstrated a secret hatred of women. But Billy had also had some good experience of mothering, and when his keyworker talked to him about what we had discovered he was genuinely shocked. The ongoing conversations he was able to have about what had happened, and how it might have affected him, marked the beginnings of a real change in him, and enabled a better relationship with his adoptive mother and father.

### **Danny: the process of assimilation**

Even when the history is well understood, and when children have had some experience of a loving parental couple, the process of assimilation into a new family can be a difficult one. Their predicament is comparable to that of immigrants, who leave their mother country, their home and extended family behind to settle in a foreign country with an alien culture.

Sarah and Dominic had adopted Danny when he was seven. He was fourteen when I first met him: he lied, stole and got into trouble all the time. He made the wrong kind of friendships: he joined up with other children from troubled and dysfunctional families to smoke cannabis and steal from shops.

His younger brother Peter, on the other hand, was doing well at school. He was responsive and responsible: a pleasure to have around.

It seemed to me that Peter had felt free to assimilate into this new family because

Danny was so successfully holding on to the family history and traditions: like his birth parents, he was lying, stealing and taking drugs.

Sarah, Dominic and I gathered up what we knew of this history. Danny and Peter were not the only siblings: there were three others. The children were finally taken away when the neighbours called in the police; they hadn't see the parents around for days, and they had heard the children crying. When the police arrived they found the house in chaos, the children starving, and the youngest one – the baby – rolled in a rug in the corner of the room, more dead than alive.

It was Danny who had rolled the baby in the rug, not knowing what else to do, he said, and trying to keep him warm, and keep an eye on him, and stop the little ones from being rough with him.

All the children had the same father: the parents had got together when they were both very young. Danny was born when mother was only sixteen: her own mother had died the year before. Though she and her partner had had a tempestuous relationship, they had remained together. But the stresses of family life were beyond their capacities, and they had become dependent on drugs and alcohol. They were both able to accept that their children would be better cared for elsewhere.

Adoptive parents in England have some scope of choice, and I wondered why Sarah and Dominic had chosen to adopt these two boys. They couldn't really answer that: just said that something about them had attracted them.

As I got to know more about them, I was able to guess at some of the resonances in the boys' history that might have contributed to this attraction.

Dominic had also left home at seven, when he had been sent to boarding school. Sarah, like the boys' birth-mother, had lost her own mother who died when she was very young – just before she too was sent to boarding school as the age of twelve. 'Well,' she said, 'What else could Dad do? You couldn't expect a single man to cope on his own with a teenage girl.'

I said that they must have felt that they shared with the boys the experience of losing their homes and families at a young age. They disagreed at first: it was important to them that I should be quite clear that they had been sent away from loving homes, and for good reasons, not because of parental neglect.

I realised that I was treading on dangerous ground. When you start work with a parental couple who are struggling with the task of adoption you are rarely given an immediate mandate to act as their therapist. Parents usually come with the expectation that their child should be the sole focus of therapeutic attention – it's the child that needs to change to fit in with the family. They don't always realise that

successful adoption is a mutual process of change and assimilation: that they too may need therapeutic help to explore their own internal worlds in order to understand and embrace the internal worlds of their adopted children.

So we were on safer ground when we talked about the difference between the cultural expectations of boarding school life and the way that boys behave nowadays in London day schools.

Dominic acknowledged that he was very aware that his own experience of school had been far more disciplined, and that the boys' lives there were more regimented than anything his own boys experienced.

I said that the transition from home to school must have been a bit of a shock for him.

He could accept this, but was stoical about it. 'It wasn't ideal,' he said. 'But you learned to fit in. I remember the second week we used my toy elephant as a football. My mum had made it for me: it was blue velvet.' I had an impression of how quickly and traumatically he had been forced to repudiate his little-boy cuddliness and vulnerability; and the pride it gave him to have succeeded in doing so.

Overtly, Sarah was more in touch with her experience of the transition: but for her, I soon discovered, boarding-school had been a refuge, a way of dissociating from the pain of her mother's terminal illness and death, and her father's subsequent collapse into depression. She had welcomed the 'chumminess' of dormitory life, the feeling of losing herself in a group of young adolescent girls, and like Dominic had taken pride in fitting in.

This experience was something they both had in common. Faced with loss and trauma, each of them, it seemed, had chosen, gratefully, to assimilate: and they had felt no conflict of loyalties in doing so. On the contrary, they both held on to a feeling of certainty that this was what their respective families wanted and expected of them. What's more, they felt that their peer group had supported them in the process of assimilating. Sarah described how another girl in her dormitory had cried every evening, and how disturbing she had found it. But the dormitory prefect had told her not to worry: 'There's always one: someone has to be the misery-guts. You just have to ignore them and leave them to get on with it.'

This, it seemed to me, was the role they had assigned to Danny: he was to be the misery-guts, left to get on with processing feelings of anger, outrage, misery, loss and trauma on behalf of the whole family. As the prefect had told Sarah, someone had to do it!

But Danny, I thought, had had a different role assigned to him in his own family: he had been his parents' trusted lieutenant, cheering his mother up from babyhood

onwards, when he had comforted her after the loss of her own mother, and then chatting to her, and helping to look after the little ones; later still, stealing and scavenging food for his brothers and sisters, as his father did; then lying to neighbours and social workers, trying to keep the family together. And for all his efforts, he had not succeeded: the family was scattered and he had minimal contact with his younger siblings.

I thought that to some extent Danny, like his adoptive parents, had used a group of near contemporaries – his brothers and sisters – as a refuge from painful feelings, as he watched his parents' growing dependency on drugs and alcohol. When we started meeting as a family group, we began to explore more deeply what Danny was re-enacting through the unsuitable friendships he made. As Danny became more fluent in describing how much it had meant to him as a little boy to feel that he was supporting his mother and father, through scavenging, stealing and lying to protect the family, Sarah and Dominic became more sympathetic: and Danny in turn felt slowly able to relinquish some of his delinquent behaviours.

But, perhaps just as importantly, Sarah and Dominic themselves became gradually more aware of their own buried feelings of trauma, anger and loss. I began by thinking that they had chosen Danny and Peter in order to sustain a dormitory culture, that helped them to deny their anger with abandoning parents, but I grew to believe that at an unconscious level they had had a healthier motive: they had hoped, perhaps, that through adopting them they could re-assimilate lost aspects themselves. Maybe in that sense, too, Danny was able to fulfil a role as rescuer to the family.

## **Conclusion**

All of us, however benign our early circumstances, have at some time experienced our first carer as the Sphinx: she represents the reciprocal wish to remain in a dependent, undifferentiated state, where we will not have to face Oedipal fury, the pain of abandonment or the responsibilities of individuation. We can only be rescued from her stranglehold through some version of the Oedipal drama, and it is this, and our consequent struggle to move towards triangulation, that defines our identity and populates our internal world.

Children like Mandy, who have not successfully negotiated this move, help us to understand what courage can be involved in taking the first steps towards achieving an independent mind, and the vital importance of the paternal function.

It was crucial for Mandy that the group was sympathetic to her predicament, to her mother's predicament, and to the predicament of the individuals she targeted as the objects of her suffocating attachment; and that she had people around her who could withstand the fury that was provoked in her – and in her internalised mother – by any move towards separateness. In the absence of a good-enough father, the group itself was able to supply the paternal function of triangulation.

Billy's story, in contrast, provides an illustration of what can happen when a child's need for such a paternal function is met by a perverse validation of vindictive impulses. Billy must have felt that his fury against an abandoning mother was encouraged and endorsed, through secret terrorist activities, by a paternal figure who fully shared his desire for vengeance. This created a situation where the Oedipal configuration had the attributes of a gang rather than a group. Instead of facilitating a benign move towards triangulation, it replaced the suffocating mother with an equally tyrannical father, whose sexual activities provided a graphic enactment of the sado-masochistic, intergenerational coupling embodied in the image of the Sphinx; and which attacked the possibility of any genuine loving attachment to a mother capable of individuation in her own right.

The task of late adoption requires parents to take into their family not only their adopted children but the figures who people their children's internal worlds. When such introjects enforce their child's loyalty with the predatory vindictiveness of Billy's foster father, or with the suffocating symbiotic demands of Mandy's mother, they will inevitably instigate savage assaults against those who wish to adopt their children into a new way of relating. The impact of such internal tyrants can be hard to withstand, for children and adopters alike.

Other children, like Danny, may bring with them a more benign internal world, over which they have some real authority. But this, too, can cause problems. It may be hard for adoptive parents to understand and to tolerate the needs and frailties of an inner-world population whose culture and values are so much at odds with their own. Danny's insistence that his internal figures be recognised, loved and accepted as something more than thieves, liars and drug addicts was a necessary function of his capacity for loving attachment. His adoptive parents needed to acknowledge the justice of this. Only then could they enable an authentic and mutually enriching process of assimilation.

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