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Birth parents and adoptive parents: who are the 'real' parents?

Fairytales and mythology reflect basic patterns in our thinking about parents, who are not 'real' parents in the biological sense of the word. Remember the jealous stepmothers of Snowwhite and Cinderella. The older, and more gruesome, story of Oedipus tells about 'real' parents who abandon their child. Little Oedipus is rescued by a shepherd/social worker who rescues the child, and entrusts him to a royal but childless royal couple. They adopt him, rename him and take good care of him. Oedipus thinks of them as his 'real' parents. The story is not about them, however, but about how fate punishes his birth parents. It does so through the hands of Oedipus himself – even though he is not aware of what he does. The messages seem clear: giving up one's biological child cannot go unpunished, even optimal adoption does not make one a 'real' parents, and the only 'real' parents are birth parents who raise their own child. Stepparents are not worth any mention in this respect.

What, or who, is a 'real' parent?

Adoptive parents themselves often wonder: am I a real parent, or a surrogate? Is my parenting the real thing? When authors in our field write about parenting and child rearing, they usually have the prototypical, biological parent in mind. Long-term foster parents or adoptive parents may be included through phrases like 'parents and their replacements' or 'parents and other parental caretakers' - the implicit suggestion being that these are not parents in the true sense of the word. Many an adopted child voices the same message at some point: 'You are not my real parents. My real parents live in Bogotá'. And whenever there is a problem with their child, adoptive parents are reminded of their tenuous status. When a biological child stirs up a crisis in the parent-child relationship, the relationship itself is not an issue. It is a given. With an adoptive child, a row is not only about rules or demands, but also about the relationship. The parental position is at stake.

The birth parents, though biologically tied to the child who has been adopted, often wonder whether they have the right to call themselves parents. And if they don't have such doubts themselves, others will, and will express these. After all, parents who do not bring up their own child do not fit the most basic definition of parenting: 'parenting is the behavior and roles of mothers and fathers' (Harkness & Super, 1995). They do not behave as parents, and gave up most, or all, of their parental roles.

But is parenting, indeed, a matter of behaviors and roles, and an unwavering relationship? Of biological ties? Of concrete responsibilities? These seem legitimate questions for the clinician who deals with the uncertainties of birth- and adoptive parents. As such, they pertain to more than the particular problems of particular adoptive parents. They go beyond the subject of 'adoption' itself: to the question what it is that makes a person become a 'real' parent, any person, regardless of biological or legal ties, and regardless of parental or un-parental behavior. The essence of being a parent is the central theme of this article; not

specific circumstances such as adoption. Ample attention is paid, however, to the ramifications of my argument for professional work in the area of adoption.

A definition of 'parent'

I define a 'parent' as a person who has an awareness of being responsible for a child. This awareness, and its all-or-nothing quality, distinguish a 'parent' from those persons with children who are *not* 'parents'. Being a 'parent' means that a man or woman can no longer be indifferent to a particular child, even if the parent should want to become indifferent. Such a state is no longer possible. Once a 'parent', one can only acknowledge an unconditional and timeless '*me voicí*' towards the child.

But 'how can anyone be responsible for a future that is not yours and which, nevertheless, is put into your arms? How can anyone be responsible for someone who is utterly separate – simply because he or she is someone *e/se*? I think that exactly this paradox is the basis and foundation of what we call "bringing up a child" or "being a father" or "being a mother"' (van Rhijn, 1999). Usually, parents have this *non*-indifference without their conscious knowledge. It is, indeed, not a matter of making a choice or decision. That which is experienced consciously, is the awareness of already *being* responsible.

Unconditionality and timelessness of the parental awareness of being responsible

Thus, the person who has an awareness of being responsible for a particular child can never again be indifferent to that child, regardless of who the child is and what it does, regardless of who the parent himself is and of his capacities and circumstances. The unconditionality of *me voicí* thus encompasses *both* being responsible *and* not in control, *both* being at a loss *and* accountable, *both* helplessness *and* authority. Parents have little factual control over a child's life. They have to feed a child, but cannot make it swallow. They have to ensure that it adjusts to certain norms, but to reach this goal they have to say at some point: 'Figure this out for yourself.' And then they wonder: 'Was this the right decision? Was this the right moment?' And when a child is different from the child one hoped for: ill, disturbed or handicapped, being a parent implies an even more intense awareness of being responsible.

Once parents accept being responsible for a child, the awareness of their commitment is not only unconditional; it remains with them throughout the child's life - and even after the child's death, until the parent dies. '*Once* responsible, *forever* aware of being responsible', as parents will testify. This awareness is not to be viewed as a continuous state or as an attitude; it is, rather, a repeatedly renewed consciousness of one's non-indifference towards this child.

When and how does it start? By definition, it precedes conscious awareness. Also, parents have different timetables for 'acquiring' the awareness of being responsible. It does not come automatically when a woman discovers that she is pregnant, nor necessarily immediately after the child's birth. It can, on the other hand, be acutely present before the child is born. Parents who mourn a stillborn child sometimes feel accountable for his untimely death, and they certainly consider him to be *their* child. In the following example, a first-time father describes his first conscious awareness of being responsible.

'Halfway through the bottle, all of a sudden she laid, on the left and on the right, a minuscule little hand on my large hand that held the bottle. Those little hands were less than one-tenth of my hand; it was a wonderful experience. Immediately I made up my mind: no less than unconditional love. Whoever has this kind of experience, should no longer carry on about hair in the drain or who is going to do the shopping on Saturday. He should not carry on either about divorce and who has the children which weekend. He knows his task: take very good care of these riches' (Kager, 1993).

The father suddenly senses that this child's well-being is up to him, and him alone. He translates this awareness into the words 'unconditional love', and the importance of this assignment outweighs the importance of almost anything else. Things about which he got worked up until then - hair in the drain, his freedom on Saturdays, and marital bliss - pale beside being responsible towards this child.

But the baby was already several days old! Did he lag behind out of lack of interest? Was he not aware of being responsible prior to this bottle-feeding experience - or not yet *consciously* aware of it? Several authors on the transition to parenthood (Michaels & Goldberg, 1990; Cowan & Cowan, 1992; Belsky & Kelly, 1994; Feeney, Hohaus, Noller & Alexander, 2001) refer not only to different timetables for mothers' and fathers' commitment to parenthood, but also to the different paths men and women seem to take as soon as parenthood looms on the horizon. Cowan & Cowan (1992) found that men tend to express awareness of being responsible by attempting to secure more income for the future family; women by nest-building. If ever gender roles push themselves to the fore, it is with respect to tasks related to parenting! But the fact that, for centuries, both schedule and program have differed for male and female parents does not detract from the timeless quality and unconditionality of *both fathers' and mothers'* awareness of being responsible.

What does 'having an awareness of being responsible' imply?

Being a 'parent' seems like hubris and humility rolled into one.

It is *hubris*, because the parent signs, so to speak, a blank contract with an unknown person: 'Whoever you are, however you turn out, I'll vouch for you. Always. No strings attached.' Is this not sheer recklessness? What makes a person think that he or she, of all the people in the world, is going to be a 'parent' to this child! Probably for that same reason, custom prescribes in most primitive cultures that grandparents, women of the village or neighborhood, or the entire tribe actively assist in turning the parental awareness of being responsible into responsible child rearing. So-called 'allo-parents' (Hrdy, 2000) fill in the birth parent's blanks. Adoption is not an issue.

Being a 'parent' is *humility*, because the elevated aim, its limitlessness and vague contours, are almost synonymous with failure. Parents sense this, although for sanity's sake they forget that every day is a day of reckoning, and that humiliation is waiting on their doorstep.

But what *is* 'being responsible'? - My definition refers to a present and future where, in both an abstract and a personal way, the indefinable best interest of the child *equals* the best interest of the parent, and where the best interest of the parent serves that of the child. On this level the interests of both

converge, while in the reality of daily child rearing the short-term interests of parent and child clash every few minutes (Dix, 1991). At those moments, the awareness of being responsible functions merely as a compass needle quivering in the direction of that distant and never-to-be-realized entity: the best interest of the child.

'Nature offers no clues about the concrete rights, duties or responsibilities of parents', states philosopher Van Rhijn (1999): these are not a given of *nature*; they come with *culture*, and cultural conditions vary greatly. Of all norms and values, those regarding parenting are particularly changeable. It is specific for the human species that our behavior is prepared, but *not* predetermined, by biology. Nor is a biological or genetic tie a prerequisite for an awareness of being responsible, as I define it. Biological ties and the awareness of being responsible belong to different categories of relationships: biological and ethical. Being an aspect of culture, the parental awareness of being responsible does not belong to the categories of rights, duties and generally assumed responsibilities and abilities, which require parents to be in control, and hold them *formally* accountable.

Thus, a stepparent may be a 'parent' according to the definition, as may a permanent foster parent, the adoptive mother and the mother who gave up the child for adoption – and also those parents who have been divested of parental authority because of blatantly incompetent functioning. A real parent may also be the man or woman, single perhaps, or homosexual, whose path was crossed by a 'cast-away' child and who said: 'Come in, I'll take care of you'. I have known several – like the older sister who, together with her husband, legally adopted her two much younger sisters who had been neglected by their parents. All these persons are postulated to be 'parents' because they hold themselves unconditionally and timelessly accountable *vis à vis* a child and his best interest.

In view of my focus on the ethical quality of a parent's stance *vis à vis* a child, I briefly consider the philosophical approach to responsibility of the Lithuanian-French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. Although his ideas were not specifically concerned with parents, his thinking enlightens my definition of the word 'parent'; it also offers a philosophical foundation for the structural unrest and unease of parents.

In his lifelong search for a philosophical interpretation of responsibility, Levinas endeavored to find terms which would break through the restrictions of the Western philosophical *discours*, with its focus on man as a rational being. Levinas argues that 'in being responsible I am confronted with an other who resists being fitted into my world view and who remains absolutely different' (*in* Kalshoven, 1998). For Levinas, being responsible always means '*I am* responsible', or the French 'me voici': here I am – without and before any explicit appeal from the other. Not any Other is responsible; but only I. My definition of the word 'parent' points to the same realm: a relationship to an Other whose face and interest we can no longer not-acknowledge. Levinas summarizes this relationship as a 'hostageship': it makes us insecure - not in the psychological sense of this word, but structurally, because we are responsible *beyond our reach*.

The reader may feel taken aback by the ethical tenor of the definition, and to avoid misunderstanding of the word 'ethical', I shall outline briefly what it does and does not imply in the context of speaking about parents. It does imply that a person has an unremitting uneasiness regarding the 'goodness' of his

functioning as a parent. However, this uneasiness does not give any clue or direction regarding 'sound parenting'. 'Ethical' is not *about* anything, like concrete qualities and responsibilities we tend to associate with parenting. Being a parent 'only' implies that the child's fate has become the parent's fate, irrevocably, and that the center of gravity of the parent's existence has shifted.

Levinas assumes two 'deliveries': a child is born, and there is the ethical, equally birth-like event of finding oneself a 'parent'. And Levinas does not use this kind of terminology in a naïvely optimistic way; he does not expect the parent who gives birth to be automatically ethically 'intrigued' by the infant; nor does he expect the ethically 'intrigued' parent to be automatically a good parent. On the contrary: for Levinas, being responsible fundamentally means 'being late' (Kalshoven, 1998), and any awareness of being responsible is at least one step behind some *irresponsible* fact.

Parents have no reason to expect that their being responsible will ever be fully realized, not even the adoptive parent who so consciously chooses to parent. But not actualizing one's responsibilities does not preclude an awareness of being responsible. In other words, parents may act irresponsibly towards a child, without having lost the awareness of being responsible. For Levinas being responsible does not exist on one side of a chasm, with behavior on the other. Rather, being responsible *is* 'being late'. Every parent is familiar with the experience of a divide, sometimes a deep one, between being responsible and actualizing one's responsibilities. Thus, where Levinas sees 'being late' as the deepest meaning of 'being responsible', the deepest meaning of being a parent may be the humiliating experience of never quite living up to one's awareness of being responsible – while divining what one ought to do, and striving to accomplish this, in a '*surplus de conscience*' (quoted in De Boer, 1988, p.55). Parents in this sense of the word, and in my definition, know themselves to be responsible, certainly before others talk about responsibilities in the traditional sense, and they know themselves to be accused before making any mistake.

Phenomena of parenting in relation to the proposed definition

Concomitant with this definition, one may assume that some biological parents do *not* have an awareness of being responsible – but who are they? I briefly discuss some of the various ways in which biological parents seem to justify this assumption.

Absent biological parents

Some men who have donated sperm, many men who have directly sired a child, and some women who have had an abortion, or who gave a child up for adoption, do not seem to consider themselves parents. They appear to have no awareness of being responsible for the child. The number of biological parents-who-do-not-parent is unknown; therapists and other practitioners do not usually meet them professionally; nor have these parents, as such, been the object of research. For the purpose of this article, I want to stress that it would be unwarranted to judge their stance as lacking in responsibility. We simply know too little about them.

Many birth parents, though, do count the absent child among their children, and consider themselves parents, albeit undeserving ones. TV-programs dedicated to finding lost parents illustrate time and again that these parents' main concern was, and is, that the child lives and is happy.

The first words an American mother spoke when she learned that her child, who had been adopted, was trying to find her, were: 'Is she alright?' – after which she expressed immense relief about the good news, and her wish not to see the child.

*The first words a Peruvian mother spoke after reunion with her son, adopted by Dutch parents, were: 'May I call you my son?' In other words: 'May I still call myself "parent"?' Her's may be the plight of a great number of birth mothers (indeed: *mothers*) who gave up a child for adoption: they expect to be judged non-parents.*

Parents who put parental care on hold

We know more about the phenomenon of parents who put parental care 'on hold', or who do not immediately feel affection but do seem aware of being responsible. In the rural Brazilian poverty cultures which Scheper-Hughes (1985, 1992) describes, mothers keep a 'protective distance' from any newborn with signs of weakness, until it is evident that the child will live. When the child dies, the mother is supposed to refrain from crying. Her 'single responsibility is to thrust a candle into the dying infant's hands to help light the path on the journey to afterlife' (p. 383). These mothers weigh the best interests of the weak child against those of the other children, and of the family as a whole, and are supported in this by their family and community. Adoption is not an option. Hrdy (2000), in a sociobiological study of motherhood, states that under certain conditions this is 'an adaptive rather than a pathological behavior', and 'millions of infant deaths can be attributed directly or indirectly to "maternal tactics" to mitigate the high cost of rearing them'. *Not* to lack of awareness of being responsible.

Parents who put 'me voicí' on hold

Robson & Kumar (1980) report on an initial indifference towards their baby as not uncommon among mothers. It is not intentional, and of short duration. In a group of 119 British primiparae, these authors found that about 40 % 'recalled that their predominant emotional reaction when holding their babies for the very first time had been one of indifference. ... [It took most mothers one week] to develop affection for their babies' (p.347). 'All were married or had stable relationships, most had wanted and planned their pregnancies and had been through careful preparation in ante-natal classes' (p.352). And yet 'a number of women likened their early feelings of indifference to "baby sitting" and some said their babies hadn't really belonged until they got home; in a very few instances the "strangeness" did not dissipate until 2-3 months later. Guilt about the early feelings of detachment was rarely admitted although mothers often recalled feeling puzzled and distressed at the time' (p.351). They performed their motherly duties and took good care of the child, but 'without feeling'. In Levinas' terms: biological birth had taken place, but not yet the ethical event of a 'me voicí' towards the child. The mothers had not yet become 'parents' in the sense of my definition.

Similar reactions are reported by the Dutch author Duijves (1999), who interviewed 15 mothers of different ages, social class, and culture about becoming a mother:

'I did not think at all "What a sweetie". I even felt a slight disappointment at first. I swear to it. I did not permit myself to feel it, but I still remember thinking: she is not at all attractive'.

'I was scared to pick her up. They said: pick her up and I thought: do I have to? Can't you people do it? You take care of her. ... For a long time, I had this feeling that I could not accept that I had a child. For about a year'.

The findings of Robson & Kumar, and Duijves' findings may point to the 'being late' that, as Levinas suggests, is implicit in the awareness of being responsible. Or to present-day social expectations of motherhood: that one should feel comfortable with it and intuitively know what to do. These mothers *did* 'baby sit', though, or *did* admonish others to take care of the child.

Awareness of being responsible prompts very poor parents to refrain from 'complete' child rearing until it is clear that the child is worth the investment; it prompts mothers in more affluent societies to feel distressed when they do not feel affection immediately. They 'baby sit', or ask others to take over. It suggests that giving birth to a child, taking care of the child (perhaps in the sense of 'baby sitting'), feeling affection, and having the awareness of being responsible, are very different phenomena. These activities refer, respectively, to a *biological* process, child rearing *behavior, emotions*, and to a stance that belongs in an *ethical realm*. They do not represent a temporal or causal sequence in which, for example, the arrival of the child triggers affection, prompting parents to have an awareness of being responsible, which then sets off child rearing. Rather, the awareness of being responsible does not seem at all related to biological ties between parent and child, or to affection, or to actual child rearing or the signing of adoption papers. It is not biological in nature, not behavioral, psychological, legal or emotional – but ethical.

Parents who (try to) flee from acting responsibly

The proposed definition implies no more than it states: an awareness. It is not prescriptive. It does not assume acting 'responsibly' or any of the qualities we tend to expect in parents: insight, competence, altruism, self-control, etc. On the contrary, following Levinas' view, being aware of being responsible implies having already acted *irresponsibly*. With parents this can take a mild and innocent form, as in the first of two examples.

'My husband and I had absolutely no experience with babies. I felt overwhelmed. All I could do without feeling extremely anxious was to breast-feed the baby. "I am the only one who can do this," I told myself, "nobody else can do this in my stead." Those were the only moments that I felt a tiny bit competent as a mother' (personal communication HM, 1996).

It can also be more dramatic, as in the next example. This child has Down syndrome. His parents are experienced, but family and hospital staff suggest that it would be unwise for them to bring their son up themselves - instead of helping the parents cope with the shock of giving birth to a child with whom 'being responsible' will be an immense task, and instead of helping the mother nurse a child who does not suck well.

'... She had tried to nurse her baby in the hospital, but he had poor sucking reflexes. As she increasingly left his care to hospital staff, some of them hinted that she might refuse to take him home. Family members advised her to leave the baby. The new child would ruin his sister's future' (Bardin, 1992, p.75).

The parents stopped even the most minimal 'baby sitting' in the hospital. Parental care and affection were put on hold. After several mistaken efforts at

counseling, a new therapist focused on the ramifications of *not* taking the baby home: they were in fact giving him up for adoption. The pain which came with the sudden realization that they had deserted their son during those weeks was gruelling.

'They finally began to deal with their child's existence, their feelings of attachment and responsibility, and their dislike of themselves for not living up to their own values. They felt that they were now unable not to care for their son. Their tears turned to sobs and then to a wailing of despair that neither had known before' (ib. p.76).

Adoption was the last thing they wanted. It would have made them feel bad parents.

While parents learn to know themselves better through daily parenting, a fifth or sixth child is equally as unknown as their first. In 1809 this was subtly expressed by an English mother, some days before her sixth child was due: 'Martha has sent me a beautiful robe for the young stranger whom I expect' (de Jong-IJsselstein, 1999).

Expectation and apprehension go hand in hand, even the sixth time around, and the awareness of being responsible may exacerbate feelings of incompetence, as in the inexperienced mother of the first example, or when the surrounding network is not helpful, as in the second one. When apprehension turns into overwhelming insecurity, child rearing may deteriorate to a bare minimum (Webster-Stratton & Herbert, 1994), or less: neglect (Weille, 1994). We assume that in many adoptions executive parenting is permanently delegated because a parent is not, or does not feel, adequately equipped to bring up the child – perhaps due to deleterious circumstances.

Delegation – to grandmother - took place in the following vignette of a deeply insecure young mother, despite optimal circumstances. The father went along, and their flight from actual parenting was masked by the resources that can be employed by the very rich.

'It never occurred to my nineteen-year-old mother or to my forty-four-year-old father that it was in any way singular, immediately after my February birth in New York, for them to take off to Europe, leaving my maternal grandmother and my Irish nurse to take the newborn to Newport, mother and father not returning until August in time to supervise the annual fancy-dress ball, given at my father's 240-acre estate ... When we did get to know each other a little towards the end of her life, [mother] told me how frightened she had been of me as a baby, afraid to pick me up, to hold me' (Gloria Vanderbilt, 1997, pp. 9 and 44).

Although Vanderbilt's mother was too frightened even to hold the baby, she did see to it that Gloria was well taken care of.

But what is one to think of the mother who leaves her family: does she have an awareness of being responsible? Jackson concludes from interviews with some sixty mothers who left their family that 'the circumstances that compel the separation are always complex and far-reaching, and usually more by default than by choice or design. Contrary to popular assumptions, I found that *no mother leaves a child lightly, easily, entirely willingly, or in cold blood*. Many mothers are separated from children involuntarily, or through selfless decisions about what seems to be in the children's best interest' (Jackson, 1994). A smaller group of Dutch mothers who had left their families was interviewed by Van Hennik (1996). Each of these mothers emphasized that she had known that the father would take good care of the children. Could the same be true for the

fathers who 'desert' their family without leaving a trace? We tend to doubt it, but in fact we lack knowledge on this subject.

'Parents' with handicaps or psychiatric disturbances

Can a person with a mental handicap or psychiatric disturbance be a responsible parent? Often, they are handicapped in relation to the execution of parenting on the work floor, and may require compensatory measures in terms of daily help. These conditions need not, however, affect these parents' awareness of being responsible. Their fear that they are not providing good enough care, and that the future may bring a worsening of the situation, may be a heavy burden and worsen their condition.

In sum, the awareness of being responsible for a child does not tell a parent *when* to do *what*, or *how*. Nor does it prevent parents from being misled by social pressures, anxiety, or discouragement. Arranging one's life in accordance with an ethical stance requires qualities which do not automatically flow from the stance itself. Instead, this stance makes parents vulnerable. The more a parent misses the mark, the more painful the awareness of not actualizing one's responsibility. Falling short may lead parents to rant and rave defensively about the child, to welcome the offer of grandma to take over - or to wait for professionals to force a take over.

For adoptive parents, it may be reassuring to realize that their awareness of being responsible for the child is in line with, and of the same kind as, the birth parents' awareness of being responsible. The adoptive parent is not a surrogate parent; nor is the birth parent of their adopted child a second-rate parent. Both are 'real' parents.

The issue of professional ethics

The idea that an abusive or neglectful mother can be approached as having an awareness of being responsible stirs up scepticism among practitioners, if not alarm. In this section I shall explain why the safety of child, parent and practitioner may best be guaranteed when those who work with parents adhere to my definition.

At regular intervals a pendulum swing takes place in the helping professions regarding family violence. The pendulum moves from an understanding and psychological approach to a moralizing, law-and-order approach, and back. Among the 'soft' approaches towards parents I reckon 'partnership with parents' (Sheppard, 2001). Kaganas (1995) expresses a similar concern: 'There are very serious obstacles to meaningful partnerships with parents. On the one hand, if workers cling too faithfully to its tenets in practice, partnership might place children at risk. And on the other hand, the discourse of partnership might be developed as rhetoric to mask the very real coercive power that responsible authorities have over families judged to be irresponsible'. The risk of being lenient towards parents is as real as the temptation to hide professional authority and power behind a smokescreen of 'partnership'. Worse, the notion of 'partnership with parents' suggests a sharing of responsibilities, which runs counter *both* to the parents' awareness of being responsible *and* to the practitioner's professional responsibility. The concept of partnership with parents treats the two responsibilities, parental and professional, as if they were comparable and equal. But these responsibilities do not belong under the same heading. The parental awareness

of being responsible is not comparable to a professional's responsibility, and remains inviolable regardless of a parent's behavior. Whether parents are young or old, at home or at work, driving a truck or presiding over a meeting, they hear the call of duty of their being responsible at every moment, and the practitioner should never cease to be aware of this.

Yet, a parent's *functioning* may be such that a child-protective intervention is unavoidable, to protect both child and parent against further mishaps. I subscribe to S. & H. Kempe's statement: 'We firmly believe that a child's rights must be independently recognized' (1982, 105), and I believe equally firmly that it may be up to a professional to make decisions that go against a parent's immediate wishes. However, when professional power is used, for example, to enforce a permanent foster placement, the worker should keep in mind *a)* that malfunctioning parents, too, have an awareness of being responsible, and *b)* professionals are accountable to parents in much the same way as the parents are accountable to their child.

Entirely in line with my definition is the concept of the 'working alliance' (Sanders & Childress, 1992). It is a stance in which *both* the parental awareness of being responsible *and* the responsibilities of the professional are acknowledged. Within a working alliance, a child-protection worker may, if necessary, remove a child from the home against the parents' wishes, but he will never call into question a parent's awareness of being responsible. The working alliance remains intact because the concept itself opens up space for cooperation - a bond even - between professional and parent, despite these differences in responsibility and power.

How to maintain this stance? A professional's empathy, however determined one is to 'stick with the parents', soon runs thin when confronted with parental dysfunction, or with one's own inability to effect change. To be fully able to appreciate a parent's experience and at the same time fully appreciate the seriousness of a problematic situation, while not falling prey to negative countertransference, moral indignation, disapproval, or the wish to escape it all in the emotional denial that goes disguised as 'understanding' or 'empathy', I propose that those who work with parents treat my definition of 'parent' as an axiom. The Greek root of the word axiom suggests that 'deeming worthy' has precedence over 'judgment', and 'this applies to both the parent-child relationship and the practitioner-parent relationship. It is not relevant that I *know* of the parent being responsible, but that I *respect* it without saying "you are accountable" and regardless of whether the parent himself *knows* it' (Kalshoven 1998). Thus, the postulate of the parental awareness of being responsible - when used as an axiom - forces practitioners to think at least twice before judgmentally labelling parental behavior that does not seem to serve the interest of the child. It reminds them of the fact that even the gravely dysfunctional parent once had the best of intentions - and still has them.

Clinging to the proposed definition as an axiom prevents being moralistic. 'An *ethical* climate is a different thing from a *moralistic* one. Indeed, one of the marks of an ethical climate may be hostility to moralizing' (Blackburn, 2001). The axiom need not change a professional decision, but will change one's tone of voice during its execution, and one's choice of words in reporting about it. Parents respond accordingly, and thus a child protective measure need not be detrimental to the relationship between parent and helper. Child protective interventions will always be necessary, and practitioners will need at times to question a parent's behavior, judgment or feelings, but they are never entitled to

question a parent's awareness of being responsible. Child protection and parent protection need not clash.

The following example of an informal, never officially acknowledged 'adoption' may illustrate how the parental awareness of being responsible may remain intact even when parents dysfunction -- and why a helper's professional ethics or the legal prescriptions of child protection should never call this into question.

Rosie's teenage parents married because of the pregnancy, and divorced when Rosie was six months old. One year later the mother deposited Rosie at her father's doorstep. Father and his girlfriend did not know what to do with Rosie, took her along to bars or locked her up in her bedroom with a bowl of food. They considered placing her in a children's home, when friends - who could no longer bear the sight of Rosie's neglect - offered to be her foster parents. They took Rosie in when she was five years old. She was a difficult child, and the foster parents applied for help at our agency. Rosie received psychotherapy, and I worked for five years with the foster parents. Father was not interested in further contact with Rosie.

When Rosie was about fourteen years old, she told her foster mother that for several days an unknown woman had been waiting near her school, watching her intently. The foster parents had feared something like this for a long time. Rosie's mother worked as a prostitute, Rosie was stunningly beautiful, and mother might want her to 'work' with her. The unknown woman - indeed the mother - hired a lawyer to demand visiting rights. The lawyer called our agency for advice. With the consent of the foster parents, I offered to discuss our view-point directly with Rosie's mother. She agreed, and so it happened that I had a long talk with her about what had gone amiss in Rosie's early years, and how she had developed since then. I explained that from Rosie's vantage point it was too early for a reunion with her mother. The precarious gains of her stay with the foster parents, and of her therapy, might be put in jeopardy by that experience. Contact might be possible after Rosie's adolescence, but preferably not yet. I wrote these considerations down for the mother, without blaming anyone and without obscuring any of the unpleasant facts. Mother withdrew her request.

Six years later, Rosie called to get information about her troubled childhood. She was grateful to hear that her 'irresponsible' mother had, after all, acted in Rosie's best interest.

While painful experiences which a child has had with biological parents should be acknowledged, and never slighted, no child should ever get the message, spoken or written, explicitly or between the lines of a report, that her parents did not deserve respect. A child's affection is never wasted, even if she gave it to parents who raised her badly, or chose not to raise her at all...

It is the task of those who work with parents, any parents, to postulate that they *have* an awareness of being responsible, without their having to offer proof.

Parental resilience and vulnerability

Awareness of being responsible renders many parents capable of more patience, endurance, fighting spirit and courage than they knew they could muster – stronger and more resilient. It can also lead to 'resistance' in the face of a helper's good intentions – to stubbornness. The parents do not agree with a diagnosis, refuse a treatment plan, and demand (or refuse) placement in an

institution. Whether parents are valiantly holding on to their own good judgment, or are misled by some belief or anxiety, the underlying force, probably, is the awareness of being responsible.

Parental resilience need not be expanded on here, but another aspect of parents' awareness of being responsible does deserve attention: the vulnerability which comes with the daunting, if not reckless nature of the *me voicé*. Commitment can lead to high achievement, but also contains the possibility of failure; the chance of breakdown, and of the concurring feelings of shame and guilt, tends to be proportionate to the height of the aim. While aiming at the lofty goal of raising an infant to full adulthood, one learns to know one's own best and worst features. Each foible in one's personality becomes magnified. If the parent does not notice those himself, the child will point them out, or the other parent. Family, neighborhood and wider society, however supportive, look over parents' shoulders: are they doing what they are supposed to? Also, in public and in scholarly debates one tends to forget some sober facts.

- Something is amiss with one out of every four children, intellectually, physically or emotionally (Meadow-Orlans, 1995, p.58; Verhulst, 1985). Parents never fail to wonder 'is it *my* fault?' and they expect an embarrassing assessment from real or imagined representatives of the larger society. When things go well, they thank the child for it.

- Healthy and unhealthy, strong and weak, perfect and imperfect children are rather randomly distributed among healthy and unhealthy, strong and weak, perfect and imperfect parents. Being a 'parent' may come to appear absurd, or futile, when one's best efforts meet with the 'indifference' of the autistic child (Reid, 1999), with the unswayable differentness of any child - not to mention the final 'message' of a confused child who commits suicide and seems to say that it was all for naught. And in any child's life a trauma, large or small, can occur. Traumatic events, such as an act of violence, sexual abuse outside the family, a traffic accident or the sudden loss of a parent, occur regardless of the child's ability to take them in stride, and of the parents' capacity to cope with the after effects.

- Today's parents are yesterday's children. The awareness of being responsible does not necessarily change them into more mature individuals, or cure their psychopathology. They belong to the same vulnerable species as their child. And, just as the child they once were, ten or fifteen years earlier, they deserve understanding and trust, sensitivity and patience. As professionals, we are hindered in this by the fact that 'the conflict between self-interest and the love of the child which is felt by the parent, which is no simple reawakening of infantile narcissism but a conflict accompanied by the capacity to destroy the child - for the parent possesses the power the infant dreams of - is a conflict unrepresented in developmental models of the transition to parenthood' (Datan, 1982). Each and every parent, however, knows the defeat of having acted monstrously, or of not having acted when action was called for.

The shared, unfamiliar child

When encountering problems of adoption, the professional deals with the 'best' and the 'worst' among parents: those who dedicate their life to bringing someone else's child up, and those who cannot manage to raise their own child. These two groups of parents appear to be worlds apart; in fact they have important things in common.

The child - Each 'set' of birth parents and adoptive parents shares at least one child.

The un-'family'-arity of their child - For the adoptive parent there is the mystery of the child's unknown background: genes from a different family, and untraceable characteristics. For the birth parent who is still in touch with the child, her clothes and speech have become unfamiliar. This parent does not know the names of classmates or teacher. When the child is adopted abroad, the parent may not even have a clue of where the child lives, and the child looks forever like the baby or toddler of years ago.

The experience of failing the child - The adoptive parent cannot undo what has happened to the child; the birth parent cannot repair having failed the child.

The awareness of being responsible - In the ethical sense of my definition both birth parent and adoptive parent are 'real' parents. It is the professional's responsibility to be, and to remain, aware of this, and hopefully my definition will help in this endeavor. My definition does help to explain both the fallibility and the resilience of everyday parenting. It makes one sensitive to the tension behind one parent's violent efforts to straighten out a child, and behind the passive neglect by the Vanderbilts and by both of Rosie's parents. These parents' deeply hidden tension was a product, this definition assumes, of their shameful experience of having failed the mark.

The definition does not in and of itself explain the dynamics which enable one parent to succeed, and cause the other to falter and fail. It does create space, however, for a value-free theory of parenting (van der Pas, 1996, 2003, 2005), and for professional work with parents without a moralizing agenda.

Conclusion

I have attempted to capture the core experience of being a parent by proposing a definition which would reflect the experience of prototypical and atypical parents themselves, and which could enlighten professional work with adoptive or birth parents - any parents. This definition focuses on the ethical kernel of the typical parental stance *vis à vis* a child, and distinguishes 'parenting' both from procreation and from actual child rearing. Thus, the word 'parent' can be broadened to encompass both non-biological parents, and parents who do not themselves bring up their child. Certain practical implications of this definition, and some methodological misgivings, were addressed. And, more particularly, how the proposed definition may be of use to the professional who deals with adoption.

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