

Ann HARTMAN

FINDING FAMILIES

**An Ecological
Approach to
Family Assessment
in Adoption**

 **A SAGE HUMAN SERVICES GUIDE 7**

FINDING FAMILIES

SAGE HUMAN SERVICES GUIDES, VOLUME 7

SAGE HUMAN SERVICES GUIDES

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*Published in cooperation with
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CONTENTS

ABOUT THIS BOOK	7
INTRODUCTION	9
Chapter 1 Permanence for Children	11
Chapter 2 Values and Norms: A Bird's Eye View of the History of Homefinding	17
Chapter 3 Getting Started	27
Chapter 4 An Ecological Framework for Assessment	33
Chapter 5 Assessment in Time: The Genogram	51
Chapter 6 Inside the Family System	65
Chapter 7 Beyond Assessment	83
Chapter 8 Training Staff To Do Family Assessment	91
FIGURES	
Figure 3.1 Developing Relationship Congruence	29
Figure 4.1 EcoMap—Blank	35
Figure 4.2 EcoMap—Tom and Pam Smith	38
Figure 4.3 EcoMap—George Willis	39

Figure 4.4	EcoMap—William Downs	40
Figure 4.5	EcoMap—Singer Family	42
Figure 5.1	Genogram—Frank and Mary Scott	63
Figure 6.1	Boundary Ranges	69
Figure 6.2	Family Diagram—Singer Family	82
Figure 8.1	EcoMap	92
REFERENCES		109
ABOUT THE AUTHOR		111

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Finding Families is Volume 7 of the *Sage Human Services Guides* published by Sage Publications and developed by the Continuing Education Program in the Human Services of the University of Michigan School of Social Work. Professor Armand Lauffer is Series Editor.

The following guides were developed by the staff of Project CRAFT (Curriculum Resources for Adoption and Foster Care Training):

Resources: For Child Placement and Other Human Services by Armand Lauffer with contributions by Bonnie Carlson, Kayla Conrad, and Lynn Nybell (Volume 6, SHSG)

Finding Families: An Ecological Approach to Family Assessment in Adoption by Ann Hartman (Volume 7, SHSG)

No Child Is Unadoptable: A Reader on Adoption of Children with Special Needs edited by Sallie R. Churchill, Bonnie Carlson, and Lynn Nybell (Volume 8, SHSG)

Work on these guides was funded through a grant by the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation. The concepts in each were tested with seasoned practitioners and administrators from child welfare agencies throughout the United States and Canada. A subsequent grant from the Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, facilitated the dissemination of these materials.

INTRODUCTION

Finding Families, together with its three companion monographs, has been developed as a part of Project CRAFT, an ongoing training project conducted at The University of Michigan School of Social Work. Founded with the purpose of developing leaders in adoption and foster care practice, Project CRAFT (Curriculum Resources in Adoption and Foster Care Training) was initiated through the support of a grant from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation. Its sponsorship has been expanded to include federal, state, and local agencies. Project CRAFT owes much to the continuing encouragement of the Clark Foundation and its executive vice-president, Peter Forsythe.

Although all four volumes are directed toward developing increased knowledge and skill in child welfare practice, we hope that they may also be of use to human service practitioners in other areas of service.

Each volume has benefited, to some degree, from exposure to graduates of the CRAFT Leadership Training Program, and to the fifty social work educators who attended the faculty workshops for social work educators. The testing out with practitioners and educators has been invaluable in keeping the materials intimately related to the needs of those working in adoption and foster care.

Project CRAFT has benefited from the encouragement and support provided by Elizabeth Cole and other staff members of the North American Center on Adoption, co-sponsor of these volumes. The project has also been enriched through interaction with its sister projects at Columbia University School of Social Work, headed by Mary Funnyé Goldson, and at the University of Southern California School of Social Work, headed by Carol Williams.

Finally, a personal word of acknowledgement is in order to those who contributed to the development of this volume on family assessment. It is impossible to identify all of the sources of the ideas that are developed here, but some can be singled out. My long association with Carel Germain of the University of Connecticut has been a major influence in the development of the ecological perspective. The translation of this perspective into social work practice with and in behalf of families and children has been enriched by my ongoing collaboration in this area with Joan Laird of Eastern Michigan University.

Concerning the development of the assessment tools, the EcoMap was first developed by the author as a part of my involvement in the Child Welfare Learning Laboratory project at The University of Michigan. The use of the genogram has come out of the family therapy movement, but it was Fernando Colon of The University of Michigan whose work made me aware of the rich potential of this tool in adoption and foster care practice. Kitty La Parriere of the Nathan Ackerman Family Therapy Institute first exposed me to the technique of family sculpture.

I am grateful to Gloria Thomas and Sylvia Grey who gave me the opportunity through the Temporary Foster Care Project of the State of Michigan Department of Social Services to test out the assessment model with biofamilies of children in care and to the line workers and supervisors who took the tools into the field.

The Clark Foundation has made possible the actual preparation of the monograph through the provision of the required time and supports.

I want to thank my readers, Professor Hilda Arndt of Louisiana State University School of Social Welfare, and Louise Curtin of the Maryland Social Service Administration. Their investment of time and their thoughtful criticism contributed much to the final volume.

I want to acknowledge the contribution of the staff of CRAFT: Lynn Nybell worked with me on the original EcoMap and was particularly helpful in developing guidelines for training; Christine Stilwell did the graphics and preliminary typing; Joan Eadie typed the manuscript, and Ellen Saalberg did a masterful job of editing.

Finally, I want to thank Armand Laufer who initially directed Project CRAFT and whose enthusiasm and energy got us going and kept us going.

Ann Arbor, 1979

Ann Hartman

Chapter 1

PERMANENCE FOR CHILDREN

Child welfare services are going through a period of rapid, perhaps even revolutionary change. In every area of service to children and families, the growing demand for permanence for all children is heard. Foster care and child protective agencies are focusing their resources on work with biological families toward the return of children home and the support of the family unit. When it can be demonstrated that families are going to be unable to provide permanent care for their children, agencies are making every effort to free children for adoption so that permanent plans may be made.

Adoption programs increasingly focus on finding permanent homes for the thousands of children in "temporary" care who have, in the past, been defined as "hard to place." The very term "hard to place children" is being questioned as it locates the problem within the child rather than within the dysfunctional service system. This system has tended to define adoption and adoptive homes in a way that excludes all but a very young, generally white child, free of any kind of physical or psychological handicap or even correctable condition.

These changes in the delivery of services to children make demands on agencies for innovative and creative practice and for a willingness to take risks. They also require a continuing effort to expand knowledge and enhance skills in practice situations that are more and more complex. For example, the current conviction in adoption practice that every child is "adoptable" leads to a changing view of the total adoptive process, including new approaches to recruitment and assessment, preparation of children and parents, and post-adoption services.

This volume is presented in the hope that it will be useful to social workers in adoption practice as they enhance their knowledge and expand their skills, particularly in the complex family assessment process that is so central to adoption practice.

WHAT THE BOOK IS ALL ABOUT

A model of family assessment is presented in a step-by-step fashion. This model is conceived of as shared process that takes place between adoptive applicants and adoption workers. The goal of this shared process is creative planning around placement.

Growing out of an ecological systems perspective that views individuals and families as open systems, deeply immersed in their environments, the assessment model includes specific assessment tools that translate the ecological perspective into practice. These tools attempt to capture for observation and exploration the complex dynamics of the family system in space and through time.

The practice portion of the volume begins with a discussion of the first phase of work with adoptive applicants. Contracting is explored with special reference to its relevance to the adoptive applicant's role in the adoption process. The three dimensions of family assessment are presented, the assessment tools are described, and use of the tools is illustrated with case materials.

The first tool presented is the EcoMap, which enables the worker and the adoptive applicants to picture the family in relation to its world. The EcoMap portrays the sources of support, strain, conflict, and gratification that exist for the family in its life space.

The family is a living system that has developed through time and has a life history as individual and characteristic as a fingerprint. The second assessment tool demonstrated is the genogram that charts the family history through time.

Third, we look at the family system itself as a system. Information around boundaries, role, communication, power, and change is identified and examined, particularly in terms of relevance to adoption. Family diagramming and family sculpture are presented as ways of simulating and gaining understanding of the family as a system.

After a brief look at some aspects of decision-making and the relevance of the systems assessment tools to post-adoption services, the volume concludes with a brief guide concerning methods of teaching the family assessment tools to staff development and other training groups.

Before moving on to the presentation of the assessment model, and in order to be consistent with our ecological perspective, we must pause to at least sketch out in broad terms the context within which adoption practice and particularly the assessment process is to be understood. Just as the family is immersed in and impacted by its environment in space and through time, so has this social invention, adoption, been formed by its history and so now responds to the currents of the larger society of which it is a part.

We first describe a few of the major issues that currently have a major impact on adoption practice. We then examine the historical development of the "home finding" process, particularly as this process is expressive of the values of the time and the available or preferred bodies of knowledge and theory.

CURRENT ISSUES IN ADOPTION PRACTICE

Perhaps the major issue in determining the cause and nature of adoption practice is expressed in the question, "Who is the primary beneficiary of this service?" The most important shift in adoption practice in recent years has been the slow and halting change from viewing adoption as primarily a service for childless couples to redefining adoption as dedicated to finding families for children who need them. This shifting emphasis alters the face of adoption.

The following anecdote was reported at the 1884 National Conference of Charities and Corrections and demonstrates the emphasis on serving parents:

Then there comes some little person of seven years who does not suit the place, because the child of the family who died had fair hair and blue eyes and a very bright intelligence. Little Josie has dark hair and is somewhat plain and backward. She will be sent to the primary school to wait for another chance, and meantime will be trained in housework, sewing, and studies and better fitted for going out again. The applicants go to the Primary School, choose a fair haired child with a view to adoption and are well content.¹

The primary recipient of this service is clearly the adoptive family. The effort is to help the couple complete their family, to help them find a substitute for the lost child. As we review the emphasis in adoptive programs since that time, it would appear that there continues to be in child placement practice, an emphasis on building "ideal" families rather than on meeting the needs of children.

A few observations may illustrate this emphasis. Until fairly recently, a large number of children have been considered "unadoptable" by virtue of

age, racial background, or physical or mental disability. Agencies have tended to take the position that there were no adoptive homes available for these children. However, it is possible that it was the social agencies, not the prospective parents, that limited the definition of the "adoptable" child.

Henry Maas' study, in the late 1950s, of adoptive parents found that the "adoptive parents indicated more frequent parental tolerance for difference in adoptive children than the agencies' placement of adoptive children who were different made use of."² Sixty-one couples expressed willingness to accept a child with a physical handicap, but only thirty-five such children were placed with these couples. Sixty-three couples were willing to take a child of two or more, but only thirty-three older children were placed.

The practice of placing babies in "infant study homes" to make sure they were developing properly and had no "defects" before placement was widespread until recently. The effort was to guarantee that the child was adoptable, and this gave precedence over the possible harm to the child resulting from having to move or to the adoptive parent/child relationship through postponement. This concept of the "adoptable" child still seems to inform social workers' thinking and practice.

As recently as July 1975, in reporting a study of workers' judgement in the selection of adoptive families, Brown and Brieland conclude, "In view of the shortage of children for adoption, the judgement process must be made more objective and reliable."³ In the face of discussions about this shortage, it happens that currently there are approximately 120,000 to 140,000 children in foster care who are legally free for adoption.⁴ Clearly, when we talk about the shortage of children for adoption, we must have some image which does not include these children. Such an image may well spring from a continued conception of adoption as a process of finding babies for childless couples!

Running counter to this view has been a growing movement to find families for children, to redefine and expand the notion of the "adoptable child," to refuse to accept as inevitable that hundreds of thousands of children will grow up in "temporary" care, or as one young man said "to have no place to leave your high school yearbook when you go into the army."

A second issue that is having major impact on adoption practice is that of "open adoption" and the rights of children to information about and/or contact with their biological parents. This move toward the consideration of open adoption is a part of an awakening concern for and an appreciation of the importance of continuity to identity and personality development.

In response to this concern, some agencies are considering a variety of models of adoption that preserve ties to biological roots. Many agencies are becoming attentive to the meaning of relationships developed during tempo-

rary care arrangements and are attempting to plan ways of maintaining these ties—important sources of nurture and support.

A third major trend that is affecting all of social work practice and has major relevance for the family assessment process is the move toward participatory consumerism in all service delivery. No more are users or applicants for services willing to be passive while they are evaluated and acted upon. This participatory stance has particular relevance to the entire assessment process that is the primary focus of this volume. Assessment is seen here as an open process of active participation and sharing that takes place in an egalitarian atmosphere between the agency, the social worker, and the potential adoptive family.

A fourth major impact on adoption practice is the change in the American family itself. Family forms are altering and proliferating; the traditional family unit consisting of a working husband, a homemaker wife, and children is increasingly rare. Changes in the family require that agencies rethink their definitions and requirements in the search for families. The variety of children awaiting permanence requires a variety in the life styles and arrangements of families that may be found for these children. This variety is consistent with the pluralism that is fundamental in American life.

In attempting to develop a model of practice that is responsive to our pluralistic society, two definitions of the family are utilized. One, that is relatively simple, is the biological definition of the family as an extended network of blood kin. A second definition of the family relates to function and could be defined as any two people, at a minimum, be they two adults or an adult and a child, who share a commitment to one another of caring and continuity. In the case of a young child, this commitment is initially unilateral.

It is a commitment that may, but does not have to, be sanctioned by law as in marriage or adoption. In a sense, when those involved commit themselves to one another to perform the social, emotional, and economic functions generally performed by families, they are, in truth, a family. Such a definition includes traditional families, but it does not exclude the increasing variety of ways people come together to form families.

The final environmental change that has relevance to adoption practice is to be found in the altered intellectual climate. The impact of systems theory on the social sciences and the increased understanding of family systems, as developed particularly in the family therapy movements, make available a wealth of new insights to enrich our work with families and children. The family assessment model presented in this book draws upon an ecological systems perspective and upon family systems theory and attempts to translate these materials into concrete methods for adoption practice.

NOTES

1. Lesley, "Foundlings and Deserted Children," Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Corrections, 1884, p. 289.
2. Henry Maas, "The Successful Adoptive Parent Applicant," Social Work, 5:1 (January, 1960), p. 20.
3. Edwin Garth Brown and Donald Brieland, "Adoptive Screening, New Data, New Dilemmas," Social Work, 20:4 (July, 1975), p. 295.
4. Personal communication to the author from Child Welfare League of America, January, 1978.