

## PARENTS WHO ABDUCT

### A QUALITATIVE STUDY WITH IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE\*



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*Little is known about parents' motivations for abducting their children and going into hiding. In-depth interviews were conducted with 17 parents (nine fathers and eight mothers) to learn of their relevant experiences. Reported reasons for abduction included unsatisfactory contact with court-related professionals, revenge, and fear for the child's safety. Some abductors, after the abduction had been resolved, had increased contact with their children.*

If we conceptualize custody decisions between divorcing parents on a continuum from the harmonious to the acrimonious, at the latter extreme would be those that result in parental abduction. Parental abduction has been defined as "the taking, retention, or concealment of a child or children by a parent, other family member, or their agent, in derogation of the custody rights . . . of another parent or family member" (Girdner & Hoff, 1992, p. 1). When a parent snatches his or her child with the intent of going into hiding, the parent is depriving the child not only of contact with the other parent but with the child's accustomed surroundings (home, toys, school, neighborhood), as well as friends and family members. Because these children are typically young, with almost 40% being five or younger (Finkelhor, Hotaling, & Sedlak, 1991), such disjunctures, even for a relatively short period of time, can be harmful to the child's emotional development (Greif & Hegar, 1992). As abductions often occur at a time of high family conflict, that is, during a custody battle or as a marriage is breaking up, they can have an additive effect on the level of stress for all family members. Particularly with an abduction of significant duration, the suffering on the part of the adults and the child involved can be enormous.

Abductions have become recognized as a significant social problem. The United States Justice Department

has allocated millions of dollars since the late 1980s to study and develop programs to cope with them (see, for example, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1993). Estimates of family-related abductions have ranged as high as 350,000 annually (Finkelhor et al., 1991). Given that such an event affects three people at a minimum (two parents and a child) and potentially many more (other family members, agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], court-related resources, and international governments), abductions merit extensive research. Despite the emotional, financial, and intellectual resources that have been expended on this issue, little is known about the abducting parent's perspective on the circumstances leading up to and stemming from such actions.

The dialogue about parental abduction has been dominated by the so-called "searching," or left-behind parent. It is he or she who contacts the police, the FBI, private investigators, lawyers, and missing children's organizations in attempts to locate the missing child. Searching parents are also willing to participate in studies. Many believe, whether they have recovered their children or not, that their participation in studies geared toward understanding the phenomenon of parental abduction will help themselves as well as others (Greif & Hegar, 1993). By contrast, abductors, after the location and return of the chil-

dren, have been difficult to find and often refuse requests to be interviewed. They are difficult to locate because the searching parent, who is usually the contact person, must first agree to give researchers the name of the abductor. Searching parents are often loathe to do this, as it may inflame an already tenuous relationship. Abductors, if they are found, are reluctant to participate when contacted because they are often distrustful of someone contacting them through the searching parent and are suspicious of government-funded research. Although the total number of abductions is substantial, few court jurisdictions handle enough cases to make court-based research fruitful, and such local data have other inherent biases, such as the manner in which abductions are reported and the idiosyncrasies of the bench in that jurisdiction or of the laws of the state.

The purpose of this article is to present the findings from qualitative inter-

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views with 17 parents who abducted their children. The reasons abductors gave for their actions are highlighted. This study begins to fill a void in our understanding of what can be a life-changing and, occasionally, life-threatening event.

## REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE CONCERNING ABDUCTORS

What is known about abductors and their motivations has been drawn largely from case records, the searching parents' reports, the abducted children, and a handful of anecdotal interviews with abductors. Sagatun and Barrett's (1990) description of 43 abductors (25 mothers and 18 fathers) was derived from interviews with counselors and analysis of court files in one Los Angeles county. Sagatun and Barrett conclude that abductions occur for purposes of revenge against the other parent, because the abducting parent wished to be pursued by the searching parent as had occurred during courtship, and because the abductors have psychologically merged with the child to an unhealthy degree. In the latter situation, the child assumes a disproportionately important role in the abducting parent's life. In addition, some abductions occur because of fear for the child's safety.

Agopian (1980, 1981), in a review of 91 California cases in which children had been parentally abducted, also reported a history of criminal activity among the abductors. The offenders tended to be male, in the 27-to-35-year old range, and employed. In one case, Agopian suggests that the father was justified in abducting his child because of the mother's drug-abusing behavior and sexual acting out in front of the child.

Janvier, McCormick, and Donaldson (1990) analyzed responses from 65 searching parents identified from a survey of five missing children's organizations. Abducting mothers tended to kidnap domestically, while abducting fathers tended to cross international borders. At the time of abduction, joint custody was in effect in one third of the cases, with a similar number of mothers having sole custody. Court-ordered custody arrangements were not in effect in most of the other cases. Abductors were believed to have rarely acted alone and to have made prior threats in almost half of the cases.

The parents left behind, when asked to choose descriptors of the ab-

ductors from a list, tended to indicate that the abductors were impulsive, revengeful, manipulative, and controlling (Janvier et al., 1990). The abductors were also frequently described as having mental problems and having been products of dysfunctional families (these descriptors should be considered in light of the parent-left-behind's potential bias). About one-quarter of the abductors had abused drugs and alcohol, and domestic violence characterized 60% of the preabduction relationships.

Long, Forehand, and Zogg (1991) reviewed telephone transcripts from 86 parents who telephoned a national hotline that was established to prevent child abduction. Domestic violence was present in about half of the marriages. Callers were split evenly between mothers and fathers, with mothers more apt to have custody at the time of the call. The parents provided up to four reasons for considering abduction: protection of the child (54%), a desire to be with the child (46%), the other parent's refusal to comply with the visitation order (32%), and dissatisfaction with court ordered visitation (21%). Of the parents who gave protection of the child as a reason, 63% were concerned about emotional abuse, 32% about physical abuse, 26% about the other parent's abusing drugs, 21% about alcohol, and 11% about sexual abuse (multiple responses were possible).

Johnston, Sagatun-Edwards, and Girdner (1993) are currently gathering data about risk factors for family abduction from 630 cases in two California counties. In a preliminary analysis, they found that families where parents have had prior "contact with the criminal justice system, are unmarried, have little income and education, and have concerns about the well-being of their child with the other parent" (p. 6) were most at risk for abduction. Psychological factors did not appear to play a significant role in differentiating families where there was an abduction from those where there was a divorce but no abduction.

Greif and Hegar (1993) gathered information about abductors through two methods. The first method was similar to that of other researchers, asking parents left behind for their descriptions. The second method, unused in other research, involved interviewing four abductors in depth over the telephone or in person. Three hundred seventy-one searching parents had responded to a survey mailed from 15 missing children's organizations throughout the United States and Canada. A slight majority (55%) of the abductors were male, 84% were white, and 87% were born in the U.S. Half were described by the

searching parents as having been raised in a home with a substance-abusing parent, one third had been physically abused, and one fifth had been sexually abused. At the time of the abduction, half of the abductors were said to have been unemployed, and 40% had some education past high school. Over half the marriages were characterized by domestic violence, with left-behind parents saying they were the sole victims in almost all cases.

When asked about the abductor's level of involvement with the children during the marriage, almost half were depicted by the left-behind parents as being "involved" or "very involved" with the children's physical care, with females depicted as being more involved than males. An even higher percentage was described by the left-behind parents as being close emotionally with the children. Preabduction visitation between the abducted child and the abductor was fairly frequent, with two thirds seeing the child at least once every other week.

The reasons the left-behind parent gave for the abductions (they could give more than one) tended to focus on revenge motives; 77% believed the abduction occurred to hurt the searching parent. Less frequently given reasons included: "anger over the breakup (23%); a desire to be with the child (16%); pressure from others (13%); dissatisfaction with visitation (13%); and the new marriage or relationship of the parent left behind (9%)" (Greif & Hegar, 1993, p. 34).

Four case studies based on in-depth interviews with abductors show a different side to the issue (Greif & Hegar, 1993). Two of the abductors, one with custody and one without it at the time of the abduction, reported that they were spurred on by the unresponsiveness of the court system and concerns about sexual abuse. Three of the four were concerned with how the children were being raised: in one case as recluses, in another to hate their mother, and in a third to deal with life passively rather than actively. One mother acted because she also feared that her children were going to repeat her own experience of having been raised without a mother.

The literature provides a portrait of abductors that is varied and complex. Searching parents frequently describe abductors as revengeful and angry, while the few abductors who have been interviewed say that they are concerned about their children and find that the courts are unresponsive to their concerns. This retrospective study attempt-

ed to learn from parental abductors who were no longer in violation of a court order related to their abducting behavior their reasons for their actions and their experiences while in hiding.

## METHODOLOGY

Recruiting a reasonably sized sample was difficult. Respondents were gathered from a variety of sources. First, searching parents who had participated in a previous study (Greif & Hegar, 1993) and who had located their children were contacted for permission to telephone the abductors. Out of approximately 180 parents who had recovered their missing children, 25 eventually gave us the telephone numbers of the abductors. Out of the 25, some numbers were no longer valid. In other cases, the abductor refused to be interviewed because either the abductor wanted to put the experience behind him or her, did not trust us to maintain confidentiality, or was angry at the searching parent for revealing the telephone number. This left a pool of 13. Four more respondents were found from contacts with missing children's organizations and from personal contacts arranged through speaking engagements.

The respondents were interviewed for between 90 minutes and 3 hours using a semistructured interview schedule that sought information about a range of the abductors' experiences from early childhood, courtship and marital history, relationships with children, successful instances of coping, and other events leading up to and stemming from the abduction. Standardized scales (Beck Depression Inventory, Trait Anger Scale, Attachment Scale) were also administered during the interview. Respondents were paid \$50 for their participation.

Given the difficulty in locating a sample, the lack of representativeness, and the time that had expired since the abductions, generalizability to other abducting parents must be undertaken with great caution. Rather, what these parents offer are 17 views of parental abductors' behavior, a seldom heard, yet important, perspective. Qualitative interviews were the best method to use in beginning to formulate new hypotheses about this difficult to locate and interview population.

The 17 abductors (nine males and eight females) ranged in age from 20 to 50 years old and had kidnapped 26 children who were between 1 and 13 years old. With the exception of one woman born in Puerto Rico, they were U.S.-born Caucasians with a variety of religious

backgrounds. Sixteen of the parents were residing in the U.S. at the time of the survey, with the seventeenth a resident of a Central American country. The abductors' educational levels varied greatly from 10th grade to the doctoral level, with 10 having some education past high school. Income varied accordingly, with two women receiving welfare at the time of the interviews and one man earning over \$80,000. When they abducted, most were unemployed or marginally employed in work that could be easily transferred to another location. Only the holder of the doctorate, a professor who never went into hiding, was employed at a level commensurate with his educational level.

The parents hid for between 1 week and 11 years, with the mean duration being almost 2 years. The time since the abductor had been located also varied greatly, from 9 months to 11 years, with the mean being 6-1/2 years. At the time of the abduction, eight abductors did not have custody, seven had joint or shared custody, one had sole custody, and one's child was in foster care.

## FINDINGS

### *Early, Marital, and Abductor-Child History*

We wondered whether abduction-related activity, which can be considered in some cases to be impulsive and abusive, would be linked to early childhood events, such as abuse and trauma, being a member of a divorced family, or witnessing parental domestic violence or substance abuse. Although the parental abduction literature is equivocal on the effects of early upbringing on later behavior, much of the research has not considered early familial factors in depth. Johnston et al. (1993), whose research is still in progress, did not find a link between early upbringing and later behavior, but Janvier et al. (1990) reported that a substantial proportion of abductors (over 70%) were described as coming from dysfunctional families. Other studies have established the potential link between: (a) being a victim of abuse as a child and having a greater potential for abusing a child as an adult and (b) witnessing violence between parents and later being abusive as an adult (Gelles & Cornell, 1985; Saunders, 1994). In addition, anecdotal reports establish the potential link between being abused as a child and using violence against a partner when an adult (Browne, 1987). Although people who grow up in families where alcohol has been abused often come to abuse alco-

hol (Kaufman, 1985), there is no clear link between alcohol abuse and a violent act like an abduction (Gelles & Cornell, 1985). However, alcohol has been linked to family dysfunction (Kaufman, 1985). For these reasons, early childhood experiences were explored in this study.

Only limited support for the link between early childhood experiences and later abduction-related behavior was found among this sample of abducting parents. Given the more than 30-year age range of the sample, it is difficult to compare the incidence of such events with the general population of divorced adults. Six abductors spent some time in a single-parent family when young, a proportion slightly higher than the national average for the 1950s and 1960s, though not necessarily than that of the 1970s (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1991). Six reported witnessing domestic violence that included hitting or more violent acts between their parents, a slightly higher proportion than that cited in Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz' (1980) research where marital violence was reported to occur at some point in 28% of marriages (Gelles & Cornell, 1985). A similar number were physically or sexually abused during childhood (well above population estimates by Gelles and Conte [1990]), and five said at least one parent abused substances (one of every 11 Americans has been estimated to have a substance abuse problem [Kaufman, 1985]). A few experienced the death of a key family member while young. Only five of the 17 experienced none of these disruptive influences and events.

Courtship histories also did not seem to be predictive of later abductive behavior. They varied a great deal; some cohabited with their future spouses for years, while others married soon after they met. Four said that they married because of a pregnancy, and only a few said that they were ever happily married. Eight reported some domestic violence. Almost half felt that their marriages changed significantly for the worse or terminated with the birth of the first child. Some of these parents said they divorced because of unhappiness with the parenting style of the other parent or with that parent's lifestyle choices (drug abuse, overinvolvement with in-laws, neglectful behavior). As these marriages ended in divorce, it is not surprising that they were unhappy. It could be, however, that when poor parenting of children is responsible for divorce, there is a greater likelihood of abduction if later custody decisions are unsatisfactory.

Five of the nine fathers thought that their level of parenting involvement before abduction increased in reaction to their wives' withdrawal from parenting or because of maternal incompetence. The other four fathers viewed their involvement as being no greater than that of fathers in general.

The eight abducting mothers presented a less consistent picture, with two describing themselves as initially uninterested in parenting. Three mothers who were primary caretakers viewed their husbands' involvement as being typical of other fathers and competent. The final three mothers also viewed themselves as the primary caretakers and perceived their husbands as being typical in their level of involvement, but incompetent.

It was, thus, rare for the abductors, whether male or female, to describe themselves as notably uninvolved in child rearing. In addition, the abductors gave the impression of having a close relationship with their children. In some instances, interviews left the impression that emotional boundaries between them and their children were blurred to a dysfunctional extent and that the children, prior to the abduction, filled a gap in the abductor's life to an excess. For example, one father said that being a father "was the most important thing in life. It made up for many past mistakes and a failed marriage, so I took it seriously. It was a feeling and experience I had never known. I would die for her."

No clear psychological distress (depression, abnormal attachment to the ex-spouse, or anger) was noted following the administration of the Beck Depression Inventory (Short Form) (Gould, 1982), a measure that explores attachment between ex-spouses (Kitson, 1992), and the Trait Anger Scale (Spielberger, Jacobs, Russell, & Crane, 1983).

### *Reasons for Abduction*

Although the complex fabric of parental interactions makes it difficult to discern the patterns that may promote abductions, there are common threads. Over two thirds (12) of the abductors reported they had unsatisfactory contact with the court system or with professionals who were in a position to help them prior to the abduction. This experience was uniformly negative for these 12. One mother reported that during the time she and her husband were receiving divorce counseling through the courts, he beat her up and robbed her on the court steps. She complained, "Charges against him kept getting dropped, and the court wouldn't hold

anything against him." Concerned about the environment her son was being exposed to when with his father, and unable to get any help with limiting visitation, she abducted. Another father, after watching his son being dragged out of school to attend a custody hearing, stated, "I felt I could not have survived [if I had not abducted] so I had to take some action. Things were stacked against me, and my lawyer was in cahoots with hers and filed papers late, and I kept on losing . . . My boy was miserable, and there was no evidence that any of this would ever get worked out."

In six of those 12 situations, the abductor reported that the child was being abused, neglected, or subjected to a psychologically unhealthy home environment when the child was with the other parent. These abductors (four men and two women) argued that they had to act to save their children. One father acted because, "They would come back after visitations with her, and I would see marks on their bodies that shouldn't have been there. I think they [the marks] were coming from some of the men she was hanging out with."

In another five of the 12 cases, the abductors believed that the court decision related to custody or visitation was unfair. In the 12th case, a mother with children from different marriages wanted to raise them together in Central America but had failed to win custody through the courts.

Sometimes multiple reasons were given for abduction. In six cases, the other parent reportedly had abducted or threatened to abduct first. Two fathers kidnapped out of anger at their ex-wives. A Caucasian American-born father who had married an African said, "I was deeply resentful and angry at her that she was no longer the compliant, obedient wife . . . In Africa, if there was a divorce and the children were over five, they would stay with the father." One woman was fleeing a battering relationship. Two fathers said their children begged them to take them, and two mothers stated that they abducted because they did not want their children to enter foster care.

From the interviews, it appears that early family history is not a reliable predictor of abduction-related behavior and that psychological profiles of abductors are difficult to draw from the data. Rather, contributing factors that lead a parent to abduct include a strong bond with the child, unsatisfactory interaction with the courts or child protective agencies coupled with concerns about the well-being of the child, the belief that

the other parent may be incompetent, and a desire for revenge.

### *Current Relationship With Children*

Since the abduction, what has been the long-term outcome of the abducting parents' attempts to secure custody and increased contact with their children? Of the nine fathers, three increased their contact after abduction by going from a situation where they had visitation to where they had custody, two fathers' level of contact stayed essentially the same (i.e., visitation before the abduction and visitation after the abduction), and four fathers had reduced contact after abduction. Of the eight mothers, two had more contact with their children after the abduction, three had the same amount before and after the abduction, and three mothers had less contact after the abduction. An example of decreased contact would be an abductor who had liberal visitation before the abduction and ended with supervised visitation or with visitation being unsupported by the courts or unwanted by the children after the abduction.

The quality of the relationship between the abductor and child seemed to depend on the custody arrangements. All of the abductors who had custody after the abduction described the relationship positively, while the abductors with visitation were less satisfied. When the abductor gained custody after the abduction, it may have been because: (a) too much time had elapsed for the child to want to return to the searching parent, so the child's request was honored; (b) the abductor was always the custodial parent; or (c) the courts sided with the abductor in viewing the searching parent as being the less suitable parent. Some abductors without custody described strained relationships with the children, while others had no contact. In a few of the cases where there was no reported contact with the child, the searching parent had forbidden it or the courts had blocked it. In the others, the child reportedly did not want to see the abductor.

## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

The complex nature of these relationships suggests that parental abduction is not the result of one behavior or factor but of a confluence of factors. Because this is a sample of divorced parents, it is difficult to tease out why some

divorced parents kidnap and others do not.

Almost half of the marriages were marked by domestic violence. Although the relationship between domestic violence and other behavior can only be suggested (Gelles & Maynard, 1987), research has found that the experience of being involved in a violent couple is related to aggression in other relationships (Gwartney-Gibbs, Stockard, & Bohmer, 1987). Clearly, a high-conflict couple that has resorted to violence in the past might be apt to consider precipitous action like abduction as a way of striking back or protecting a child.

Approximately half felt that their marriage changed significantly after the birth of the child. Research has shown that children may weaken a marriage by causing fatigue and reducing time for the adult relationship (Ventura, 1987) and by causing feelings of parental inadequacy (Wallace & Gotlib, 1990). Disagreements over parenting and disappointments in one's own parenting behavior or in the development of the child can shift the balance in a marriage. Withdrawal of one parent's attention from childrearing can foster an intense parent-child bond involving the other parent. Further, the birth of a child will not enhance those relationships that were unstable prior to the pregnancy (Wallace & Gotlib, 1990).

The reasons for abduction tend to revolve around fear for the child's safety, unhappiness with the court decision concerning custody and visitation, reaction to the other parent's abduction-related threats and actions, and anger. As has been recommended elsewhere (e.g. Johnston & Campbell, 1988), these factors indicate that court mediation may be helpful in high-conflict divorces. By addressing these problems early, prevention may be possible.

After the abduction was resolved, almost half of the abducting parents retained custody, perhaps illuminating the difficulty faced by the courts when one parent has been involved with a child for a long time to the exclusion of the other. Courts have a very difficult decision to make in deciding custody when the searching parent and recovered child do not know each other well (Greif & Hegar, 1993).

The findings point the practitioner in a number of directions related to prevention and mediation. Sound prevention can help relieve some of the abductors' feelings of unfairness and anxiety that lead to abduction. As recommended elsewhere (Greif & Hegar, 1993), mediation should be required in disputed cus-

tody cases, unless there is cause to believe that domestic violence or child abuse has occurred. Given the evidence from these 17 abductors' reports that current factors, rather than historical ones, weighed heavily on their decisions to act, many high-conflict custody battles could result in abduction. If those who appear at risk for abduction are informed of the potential legal punishment to the parent and psychological damage to the child that can flow from such an action, a few abductions may be averted. We wonder whether the abducting parents' concerns about abuse were taken seriously by the courts and by child protective services when they were voiced.

Continued pressure on lawmakers to more adequately fund court services in cases of disputes may have alleviated some of the misunderstandings that led to these precipitous actions (Greif & Hegar, 1991). For example, parents seeking protection orders in domestic violence cases, as well as those seeking temporary child custody in other situations, should have prompt and simplified access to the court system. Postdivorce custody mediation and counseling also should be available (Greif & Hegar, 1993). Practitioners can also support legislation that will guarantee greater cooperation between jurisdictions to resolve abductions quickly when they do occur.

An important focus of clinical work with abductors who are in hiding, or those who have resolved their situation, is to ascertain the abductor's perspective. These parents usually fiercely defend their actions and believe them to be justified. Taking a neutral stance on their actions until they have come to grips with the impact of those actions is recommended. After a period of time, the fierce defense will turn to ambivalence, even if abductors believe the abduction was warranted. Helping them to weigh the costs, and any benefits, of the abduction and to view their actions realistically can assist them in building future relationships among family members. Without achieving some sense of objectivity about their own actions, emotions are likely to affect future opportunities for coparenting.

Abductors also often see things in all-or-nothing terms. For example, they tend to demonize the legal system without considering some of the protections that the system offers. By taking an extreme position, they may miss a chance for reconciliation so that they can again start to parent the child in cooperation with the other parent. This is an important stage of development, whether or

not the abductor retains custody after the abduction is resolved.

It is not uncommon for practitioners to become involved with all the family members, with the initial contact being with the child, the searching parent, or the abductor. If the abductor has retained custody, visitation between the child and the searching parent may be required by the courts. The practitioner should be prepared to help with such arrangements. Sometimes a therapist who strongly aligns with children in therapy may have a negative emotional reaction to the abductor. The therapist needs to be aware of such tendencies and avoid siding with the parent who was previously searching. If the therapist unwittingly sides with that parent, the abductor may reexperience an earlier feeling of not being understood that may have led to the initial abduction.

One note of caution is in order concerning work with parents who may be abductors in hiding. The practitioner needs a thorough understanding of state child abuse reporting laws, state case law or statutes concerning duty to warn in cases where clients threaten others, and other civil or criminal liability issues. Most practitioners will want to seek legal counsel if unsure of their obligations.

## CONCLUSION

Because this study is based on a self-selected sample with no control group, the findings must be viewed with caution. At the same time, the research provides an initial view of an understudied population. It appears that when enough risk factors accumulate, an abduction may occur. Among the parents interviewed, these factors included the perception that the child was being harmed, the belief that the courts were denying the abductor sufficient time with the child, and the feeling that the courts did not understand the abducting parent's position. When the other parent has also abducted, threatened to abduct, or been violent, the abductor may feel a particular sense of urgency. Future research using larger and more representative samples, as well as using comparison groups of parents from high-conflict divorces in which an abduction did not occur, can help clarify who is most at risk. The more information practitioners have about these volatile situations, the better the chances of preventing them from occurring and of treating them effectively when they do.

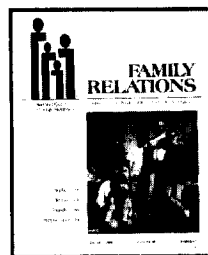
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