



A Double Trajectory of Abuse: Two Sisters Who Suffered Ill-Treatments in Foster Care to Fragment and Fragile Adult Life's

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Abstract

This article highlights the complex yet classic story of two children, two sisters, who suffered unspeakable violence in the foster family that was supposed to look after them. The aim is to highlight the shortcomings of the care provided during the placement and the strategies put in place by the children to resist suffering. Finally, the aim of this article is to show how adults who have experienced such trauma find it difficult to achieve a stable life and how the body remembers the traumatic experience.

Keywords: Unspeakable Violence; Trauma; Double Trajectory of Abuse

Introduction

The issue of children in care is at the heart of the media, politics, economy, and culture areas. Its cross-cutting impact forces different players to act in concert. Indeed, the care and well-being of children is at the heart of our society, which emphasizes its ability to care for the most vulnerable. In 2020, 170 000 children have been placed in France [1]. The book I wrote for two sisters, « Instinct de service » (Sisterviving instinct) [2], also helped to raise awareness and generated a wave of compassion among readers and television viewers after the documentaries that followed its publication in June 2021 [3]. Safiya and Lina, two French sisters, were removed from their home because their mother was deemed unable to care for them. So, they were placed in a foster home, where they were tortured. The book has been translated in English in 2023: "Sisterviving instinct".

In this sociological analysis, I look back at their respective journeys, from their placement as children - six years for the older sister and four years for the younger - to their adult lives. This long-term study provides a global, in-depth, and accurate view of the consequences of a placement that was not followed up by the child protection system and that led to dramatic abuses of these two little girls, who were mistreated in their foster family by the adults who were supposed to be looking after them. We will look at how the specific case of Safiya and Lina reflects a classic pattern of violence, isolation, and trauma in childhood. To do this, we will first take stock of the responses provided by France's child

protection system, the ASE, which takes the decision to place the child in care, and the lack of follow-up. We will then look at the relationship with adults in this case of abuse. We will then focus on the strategies used by these two children to comfort themselves when left to their own devices. Finally, we will look at how their lives continue after placement once they have returned to their foster families and into adulthood.

The failings and abuses of an inadequate state system

The story of Safiya and Lina is told in stages and involves several players. A tangle of circumstances and institutions taking turns and overreacting sealed their fate. A tragedy that, when you listen to it, could have been avoided. The first actor was the school, the institution with the authority to teach and holder of legitimate violence. Through the teacher, a report was filed, and the social services investigated. This is not to deny the salutary role played by the school in many cases of domestic violence, which have saved the lives of several children. The main point is to highlight a case of placement that could be considered abusive because of the inherent violence involved. Children are torn away from their families. In the case of Safiya and Lina, their family in the broadest sense - their mother, their grandparents, their aunts, and their cousins - played a predominant role. Once the social services had taken possession of the case, the decision to place them was taken quickly. In France, the Aide Sociale à l'Enfant (ASE) (child welfare) is responsible for the placement and welfare of children

who cannot remain with their parents. It offers children who have been abused a chance of a life in which their integrity is respected, and they can grow up in an environment conducive to their serene development.

At the age of six and four respectively, Lina and Safiya were handed over to social services because their mother, who was bringing them up alone, was deemed unfit to look after them at home. The reasons given were a lack of furniture: the mother slept with her two daughters in the same bed and had no table to eat at. Being of Algerian origin, she used to eat on a tablecloth on the floor, as is customary in her country of origin. As for the bed, she had kept this habit since her children were little and had not seen fit to change a balance that she considered beneficial for little girls. Apart from these remarks, the mother was unable to justify her absences at 4pm to collect the children from school because she was moonlighting, and the social services felt that she was neglecting her offspring. Finally, the children used vulgar and coarse language, which raised questions about their living environment. In just a few weeks, Lina and Safiya's future was sealed. They had to leave their mother to be taken in by a foster family that included a couple whose names have been changed in the book but which I will keep for ethical and legal reasons, Monique, and Philippe. This couple had two children of roughly the same age as Lina and Safiya. When they arrived, another sibling had already settled in with two children, a brother and a sister named Sonia and Salim.

The first few weeks were calm, and Safiya even remembers being impressed by the luxurious surroundings of the house and garden. She doesn't insist on missing her mother. Nor her sister. The way she talks about it, the world of the holiday camp comes first. However, a dramatic event occurred a month after their arrival and turned their initial setting upside down: an attack on an infant, the baby. From that moment on, the first acts of violence began. The first traumas were experienced. Repeated freezing showers and drowning. Locked in the cellar. Choking on funnels. Eating mold. Psychological torture. The question that emerges quite clearly is the right scale of such a placement. Is the lack of a table and a bed enough to take two children away from their mother?

Poor or non-existent follow-up

Safiya and Lina were placed with this family for three years and were subjected to the worst treatment. They had never experienced the slightest act of violence but were about to discover a real nightmare. However, one question kept nagging at me throughout the writing of the book and during the interviews I had with the two young women: how is it that no one noticed? As far as the little girls were concerned, they were in no danger of complaining because they were subjected to violent psychological and emotional blackmail, which we'll develop in the next section. What's more, the punishments and tortures were specific and aimed to leave no trace, which helped to toughen up the monitoring

work of the child welfare service. This argument in favor of the couple's Machiavellian concealment does not, however, rule out the need for in-depth and regular psychological monitoring in such a rapid placement, and for any placement whatsoever.

At the first opportunity, the little girls told a nun about their misfortune, and the nun, out of secrecy, fear, or some other motive, did not relay the children's story. However, this proves that Safiya and Lina were able to confide in each other in an atmosphere of trust and respect. Such a calm environment should have been in place from the start of their placement. There was indeed a monitoring visit, which unfortunately only served to confirm that the couple were taking good care of the children. In defense of the social worker, the wife, Monique, had perfectly orchestrated the decoration of the house and the layout of the rooms so that people would think that the two little ones were being treated properly, even very well. She dramatized her role, staging pleasant moments that certainly existed, but that only served to camouflage the general horror of everyday life. Because children at that age are quick to settle for nothing, a smile, a caress to feel the adult's assent, especially as they were uprooted and no longer had any adult reference points. I think it's a good idea, with this example, to set up a framework that encourages children to talk to each other and to introduce systematic compulsory and surprise checks.

Later, once they were adults, the two sisters tried to obtain their placement file from the ASE, but the administrative machinery held them back. They found it difficult to gather simple information about their own placement. They tried to understand the reasons for their placement, which boiled down to a lack of furniture, their mother's absence from school because she was working, and the use of foul language.

The adult, a broken authority figure

Adults play a key role in a child's life. Children identify with them, confront them, and look up to them as role models. But what role model is left when the adult is the torturer? Safiya's troubling childhood was built around two intersecting and antagonistic motivations: on the one hand, she sought Monique's satisfaction and even her love, while at the same time she was terrified of her. She was constantly afraid of being a bad little girl. She was self-flagellating. Monique played on this because it was on this tension that she maintained her authority to obtain the children's assent and submission. She would point out the "stupid things" to deprive her of her freedom or torture her. Safiya was terrified and felt guilty because if she was in this situation, she believed it was her fault. Because of her bad behaviour, she was placed in foster care. Because of her lack of compliance, Monique was forced to punish her. Especially as she couldn't admit anything to anyone. In fact, Monique had assured her that if she confessed to being badly treated by her foster family, the latter would be obliged to explain that the little girl was not well-behaved and that the placement was, firstly, amply deserved and, secondly, that it had to

be extended, as Safiya deserved to be separated from her mother and to be mistreated.

“You can do all sorts of things to a child in the first two years of its life, bending it, disposing of it, teaching it good habits, correcting it, and punishing it, without anything happening, without the child taking revenge. However, they will only be able to overcome the injustice done to them without difficulty if they are able to defend themselves, in other words, if they are able to give structured expression to their suffering and anger. If he is forbidden to react, because his parents cannot stand his reactions (shouting, sadness, anger) and forbid them [...], the child learns to remain silent. His silence certainly guarantees the effectiveness of the principles of education, but it also covers the infection sites of later development.” [4]

Silence plays a major role in children’s docility. Safiya’s fears were stifled, and her words stuck in her throat as she was force-fed like a goose. As a child, Safiya does not have the necessary distance to identify what she is experiencing as abnormal treatment [5]. On the contrary, having been placed in care because her mother’s care was deemed inadequate, she believes that what she is experiencing is normal. A “banality of evil” organized, hierarchized by adults represented as benevolent entities, better than their own mother. The most striking element was Safiya’s sadness when she left her foster family for good to join her mother. She even cried.

As for Lina, the torture was different, more subtle, more psychological. Of course, she didn’t miss drowning in the freezing shower or the lockups in the cellar, but she was subjected to unhealthy games by Monique. She would make her believe things to instill phobias in the little girl, in particular a panic fear of animals and small creatures, as in the swimming pool, where she was made to believe there were sharks or earthworms slipped into her jumper. Lina proved to be more recalcitrant than her sister. She was less docile and didn’t bend to Monique’s wishes as easily. So, Monique tried to bend her mentally. Humiliation was her tool of choice. When I worked on the story of Lina and Safiya, the thing that struck me was the distortion of the adult figure. Even outside the foster couple, mistresses, doctors, and family all missed out on their suffering. The young women told me their story, but the events happened nearly thirty years ago. Were there not signs that should have alerted the school, which was quick to point out less alarming behaviour and characteristics?

Two sisters in horror

Against this unhealthy backdrop, the two sisters found refuge in each other. They did not suffer the same abuse, but they shared their pain. Their resilience lay in their union. There were two of them. They waited together. They survived together. Several times, the two sisters told me that if they had been alone during those three years, they would have died. They said this in separate interviews, without consulting each other.

Jean Bergerette calls this kind of mistreatment “early trauma” [6], which will have the primary role of disorganizing the subject. Big sister Lina also tried to spare her little sister. She hid certain miseries from her. Even after their placement, Lina retained the feeling that she had to protect her sister.

“No one will be able to touch a hair on your head” [7], she used to tell her.

The sociologist Mélanie Mauthner highlights this protective impulse in what she calls “sistering” [8], where the eldest child takes on the role of “little mother” for her sister. In the case of this placement, the feeling of responsibility is even more blatant and fiercer because the little sister is physically threatened on a recurring basis. Monique used the sisters’ love for each other to destabilize them. It was a perverse means of pressure to keep them quiet and agree to certain degrading acts. Solidarity thus played a protective role between the two sisters, who took refuge in this duo, but it was also a lever of power for their torturers, who abused their close relationship.

A chaotic reconstruction

The two sisters only stayed with Monique and her husband for three years, but the traumas were major. Although they did not manifest themselves during their adolescence, they came back to haunt them later in violent ways. For Safiya, she was suddenly unable to eat solid food. For years, she tried to find a treatment, consulting various specialists without success. Although there are periods when she eats better than others, she still can’t swallow solid food. She mixes her meat. Social relationships are complicated because she avoids meals. She is embarrassed by her disorder and hides. As for Lina, she suffers black-outs, and her memory becomes blurred. This is dangerous, as she has been known to have to pull over to the side of the road at the wheel and see nothing. Her social relationships, and particularly her love relationships, are fragile. To take her mind off things, she kills herself at work. Both their trajectories are not out of the ordinary. According to a recent Swedish study, children who have been placed by child protection institutions are more prone to psychiatric disorders. So, what can we say about children who, once in our care, have been tortured and subjected to both psychological and physical abuse?

“Former “clients” of the child protection system should be considered as a group at high risk of suicide and serious psychiatric problems.” [9]

The ASE in France has been widely criticized. Following the publication of the book “Instinct de soeurvie” (Sisterliving Instinct), television reports revealed the dysfunctions of the system and the lack of resources, which had a direct impact on children in care.

The story of Safiya and Lina is not just that of two young girls who were abandoned and transhipped by a system that was sure

it was working, but whose operational machinery was unable to carry out its mission. Above all, it is the story of two journeys that illustrate the will to survive. Two sacrifices that shed light on the shortcomings of an institution. Two voices that warn of the dangers facing all those we do not hear.

A few days ago, a French investigation into the deteriorating health of children in care was published by Elodie Gueguen, a journalist with Radio France's investigative unit, who warned of new-born babies left alone in their rooms, teenagers in crisis receiving sedatives and children being over-medicated because the child welfare service is overburdened and under-resourced.

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