

## WHOSE BABY IS IT? POST-MODERN INFLUENCE IN ADOPTION PRACTICES IN THE UNITED STATES<sup>1\*</sup>

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*This article identifies the predominant themes of the 'closed adoption' era during which remarkable measures were instituted to keep the involved parties in a state of 'not knowing'. The authors explore how meanings were construed to 'it' a proprietary, closed system. In contrast, the system of open adoption is addressed in which empowerment, open communication, and interrelating of all parties is fostered. Postmodernism is recognized as influential in the evolution of adoption practices.*

Keywords: *adoption, empowerment, open adoption, adoption policy, strengths perspective*

There has been a dramatic shift in child adoption practices in the United States over the past 40 years. Adoption as a legal and a social construction has developed in response to societal values, history, public policy and legislation. Originally, adoption in the United States met a need to care for large numbers of homeless children. Today adoption in the United States is concerned not only with the interest of children free for adoption but also with the rights of adoptive parents and birthparents (Zamostny, O'Brian, Baden, & Wiley, 2003).

These pervasive changes are evident in birthparent and adoptive family functioning, social policy and laws governing adoption, and in social perspectives on adoption. The evolution of adoption practices parallels the postmodernism movement. The belief systems that gave form to the adoption process historically are grounded in a modernist perspective. Anderson (1990) contends that the recognition of all belief systems as social construction has resulted in an ideological conflict, "not merely conflict *between* beliefs, but conflict *about* belief itself" (p. 3). The beliefs that formed the bedrock of adoption practice in the past have been scrutinized, challenged, and disavowed. The predominant stakeholders in adoption have promoted multiple belief systems as their social reality.

The marked change in adoption practice can be understood as a process that began with the empowerment of adult adoptees and birthparents. Empowerment has been described as "a construct that occurs at three levels: *individual*, which relates to psychological and behavioral variables; *organizational*, which relates to resource mobilization and participatory opportunities; and *community*, which relates to sociopolitical structure and social change" (Schulz, Israel, Zimmerman, & Checkoway, 1995).

This multilevel conceptualization suggests a reciprocal relationship among constructs in which empowerment at each level affects and is affected by the other (Shera, 1998). Today, child adoption is practiced very differently than thirty or forty years ago. The assumptions which formed the bases for adoption practices have come under formidable challenge as adult adoptees and birthparents have become increasingly empowered. Their empowerment brought organizational change in adoption agencies as social workers began to adopt new models of openness in adoption practice. Together as change agents, social workers, adoptees, adoptive parents and birthparents have worked collectively to make changes in adoption law and in society's perceptions of adoption.

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## FANTASY MYTH OF ADOPTION

For change to occur, it has been necessary to deconstruct the fantasy myth of adoption. The concept of the 'fantasy view of adoption' can easily be likened to the 'fantasy view of marriage', a well-known concept to couple therapists. When couples enter marriage with an idealized view of marriage it is often difficult to reconcile that it takes hard work to maintain a quality marital relationship. This realization conflicts with the romanticized view that marriage is a constantly blissful state (Doherty, 2001). The fantasy view of adoption promotes the concept that all parties are abundantly happy – maybe more than anyone would have been were it not for the adoption. The young, beautiful couple adopts a beautiful baby who grows up happy and well adjusted. The child is perfectly matched to the adoptive family and others often exclaim that the child looks like the adoptive parents. The birthparents go on with their lives and put the 'unfortunate' unplanned pregnancy behind them. The adopted person considers the adoptive parents to be the 'real' parents and never has a desire to seek out his or her birthparents.

The adoption experience is much different from the mythical fantasy view. For every couple overwhelmed with joy upon the arrival of a new baby, there is a birthmother, sometimes birthfather, birthgrandparents and extended family grieving over the loss of a child. For many, it is a grief experience that can only be compared to the grief associated with the death of a loved one. Children adopted as infants often grieve for the loss of their birthfamilies throughout childhood and as adults. Likewise, many adoptive parents who have endured years of infertility treatment and repeated disappointments in trying to get pregnant, grieve the loss of their dream of having a biological child.

Historically, much of adoption practice has been based on the disenfranchisement of the individuals in the adoption triad (adopted child, birthparents and adoptive parents). To mask the painful aspects of adoption and maintain the adoption myth, it was necessary to keep birthparents hidden and to keep adopted children and the birthfamilies separated. The adoption fantasy myth overlooks the realities of the birthparent's experience. Birthfamilies were expected to

'move on' with their lives and to act as if there had been no birth. They were socialized to this role by practices such as being prohibited from holding their child after birth to prevent 'bonding' between mother and child. After the birth of the child, young women were often told that they should forget about the unpleasantness of the unplanned pregnancy, forget that their birthchild exists, and move forward with their lives. Of course, the reality is that many birthmothers report that they think about their lost child every day for the rest of their lives. Many women report that they always think of their child as a 'baby' even 40 years after the adoption. Others report that they frequently wonder about their child as a toddler, teenager and adult trying to imagine what they are like (Anonymous birthmothers, personal communications, 1986-1999).

Adoptive children have also been socialized to maintain the fantasy myth. Latency age children will often "confess" to professionals that they grieve for their birthparents but do not want their adoptive parents to know because it may make them sad or upset. It is common in post-adoption work to hear of adult adoptees who are waiting until their elderly adoptive parents die before they attempt to be reunited with their birthfamilies. Even as older adults, some adoptees believe that they must deny their desire to rediscover their birthfamily. The closed adoption concept forces adoptees into a state of divided loyalties should they act on their desire to establish contact with birthfamily members (Jones, personal communication, 1992).

## KEEPERS OF THE MYTH

The motives undergirding the adoption myth were protective. The constituencies collectively 'bought into' the matrix of beliefs that essentially said, "it is best for all concerned that adoption procedures be closed now and forever." Birthparents could gain expedient closure and generate a new beginning. Adoptive children could experience family life more closely to non-adoptive family life. Adoptive parents could parent more 'naturally,' unencumbered by the involvement of birthparents, the thought of which brought fear and trepidation into the minds of adoptive parents. After all, since they adopted this 'needy

child' they should be *entitled* to parent autonomously. Furthermore, what would a birthparent who was willing to give a child up for adoption, know about parenting?

Another conceptualization inherent in the propagation of the adoption myth was that the parties involved were flawed (Rappaport, 1992). As a consequence, these flawed parties needed protection from one another. The adoptive parents were seen as flawed because of their infertility. These 'barren' people were in need of the protection of an elaborate adoption system, where they could be studied and evaluated for their worthiness to have a child while being shielded from the emotional costs of adoptions. It was as if adoptive parents who had endured fertility should not be subjected to the reality of birthparent pain. Birthparents were considered flawed due to their 'immoral behavior' of premarital sex or their incapacity to care for a child economically or emotionally. Even the children of adoption were viewed as flawed due to their being labeled 'illegitimate' or 'needy.'

#### **THE SYSTEM: LAW AND SOCIAL POLICY**

Not only did constituent parties promote the myth, professionals promulgated it. The task of the adoption system and adoption workers was first and foremost to protect the adoptive parents and the adopted child from the birthparents. (Rappaport, 1992). To do less would have been an acknowledgement that there is not only great joy in adoption but also great pain, grief, and loss.

Social Workers and attorneys played major roles as keepers of the myth. Through a system of closed adoption, social workers created and maintained policies and practices based on secrecy and denial. In closed adoptions, most decisions were made by the professionals, not by the adoptive or birthparents. Power and decision making control were retained by the professionals. All information about the adoptive triad was held private and confidential, and contact between adoptive parties was disallowed before, during, and after the adoption (Rappaport, 1992). Adoption practice developed as a way to protect the 'flawed parties' in adoption from one another.

er. Attorneys often orchestrated adoptions applying policies, procedures, and laws consistent with the myth. The social work and legal professions created an adoption system with the primary goal to protect and to retain power and control.

The fantasy view of adoption was maintained not only by adoption practice but also by laws mandating that adoption records be sealed. In this system, birthparents were expected to legally 'relinquish' their parental rights to the adoption agency. Agency professionals would then place the child with a couple deemed by the agency to be sound citizens, potentially capable parents, and a good 'match' for the child. A 'loyalty bond' was promoted between adoptive parents and the adoptive agency. The birthparents were the disenfranchised parties in this loyalty pact. The agency maintained adoptive parent anonymity from the birthparents and safeguarded records that would reveal birthparent identity. This anonymity insured that birthparents would remain unidentified, unseen, and, most importantly, uninvolved. Adoptive couples typically had great loyalty to the agency from which they had received the child, not to the anonymous and unseen birthparents.

In many states within the United States even the adopted person's birth certificate validates the fantasy. When the adoption was legally finalized, the original birth certificate was sealed by the court and a new birth certificate was issued with the adoptive parents listed as the parents. The fantasy had become, at a minimum, a *paper reality*. Subsequently, court records were sealed and agency adoption records filed away along with the identities of the child and the birthparents.

#### **DISPELLING THE MYTH**

This deficit view results in birthparents who relinquish children for adoption being viewed as dysfunctional, marginalized, immoral and damaged human beings. These views fail to recognize the tremendous positive potential influence that birthparents may bring to bear on their placed children. From a strengths perspective (Saleebey, 2006), adoptive parents are viewed not as needing protection, but as capable of de-

veloping healthy relationships with the parents of their child. Birthparents are seen as capable of sustaining a quality relationship with their child and possessing abilities to effectively participate in making thoughtful decisions regarding their child. The child, birthparents, and adoptive parents are seen as capable of healthy interrelationships with all parties benefiting.

The fantasy view of adoption supported a system of closed adoption based on secrecy and protection of each member of the adoption triad from each other. As birthparents and adult adoptees have become empowered, they both have had a marked impact on adoption policy and practice.

### Individual change

In the late 1970s and early 1980s adult adoptees began to speak out publicly regarding the impact of the adoption system on their lives. At the same time, many women and some men who had relinquished their children for adoption, began to speak out against a system they had come to see as oppressive and unjust. These constituencies would no longer remain silent and both adoptees and birthparents became more aggressive in seeking out one another. Birthparents also began to speak out and to organize themselves into advocacy groups. Adult adoptees and birthparents began to search for one another in record numbers.

The popular media has been a major influence in changing the social construct of adult adoptees and birthparents. In the early 1970s, the effort to reform sealed records laws and agency practices was spurred by two influential autobiographical accounts of the psychological effects of the sealed records policy—Florence Fisher's (1975) *The Search for Anna Fisher* and Betty Jean Lifton's (1975) *Twice Born: Memories of an Adopted Daughter*.

Search and reunion stories of adoptees and their birthrelatives are common themes often featured in books, newspapers, magazines, daytime television dramas and talk shows. Movies in popular release also have been built on an adoption search and reunion story line. The adoption theme, particularly the theme of searching for birthparents, has emerged as a compelling

human-interest story and has inspired myriad novels, plays and movies (Wegar, 1997).

The social construct of those seeking their birth information has changed over time. Seeking to find one's birthparents or offspring was often perceived symptomatic of underlying pathology (Wegar, 1997). *The Adoption Triangle* (Sorosky, Baran & Pannor, 1979), written by a psychiatrist and two social workers, concluded that "taking a child from one set of parents and placing him/her with another set, who pretend that the child is born to them, disrupts a basic natural process. The need to be connected with one's biological and historical past is an integral part of one's identity formation" (p. 67). Knowing the identities of one's birthparents and forging relationships with them are crucial parts of the 'assumptive world' of many adoptees. For many, denial of one's heritage represents loss trauma, a likely threat to the integrity of one's assumptive world, his/her sense of self and unique 'fit' in the world. Gillies and Neimeyer (2006) note that, "to the extent that losses undermine these assumptions, leading us to believe that our world is malevolent, that life is meaningless, or that we ourselves are unworthy or undeserving of good things, they cause us profound distress" (p. 34). In a recent study of the effects of open adoption, Siegel (2003) emphasized that proponents of open adoption stress that knowledge of one's genealogy, ethnic heritage, and medical background are crucial to the adoptee's well-being both emotionally and physically (Campbell, Silverman, & Patti, 1991; Curtis, 1986; Silber & Martinez Dormer, 1990). In clinical and popular literature, the desire to search is no longer perceived as unreasonable or as symptomatic of underlying pathology. Today a lack of interest in one's biological origins is often viewed as a sign of repression (Wegar, 1997).

### Organizational change in adoption practice

In challenging the closed records of the adoption process, adults who were adopted as infants began to ask social workers, "what gives you the right to keep my family heritage information from me?" It was a good question, indeed, and as social workers began to deal with this ques-

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tion, a major shift in practice began. When confronted with these questions, many social workers joined with their clients and former clients to begin to reform adoption practice and the laws governing adoption in the United States.

Deconstructing the fantasy myth that denied the pain and grief associated with adoption was a difficult process. The movement to modify adoption practice came to be known as 'open adoption'. Silber and Martinez Dornier (1990) called for 'myth-free adoption' by saying,

*Myth-free thinking acknowledges that the birthparents love (and will always love) the child they are placing for adoption, that secrecy is not conducive to healthy adoptive functioning, and that it is normal for an adoptee to be curious about his identity and roots. The latter is not rejection of the adoptive parents. By dispelling the myth, the individual will discover that his initial feelings of fear and threat disappear (p. 21).*

Today, adoption practices vary from the traditional closed or 'confidential' adoption system to those agencies where fully disclosed open adoption is practiced. Silber and Martinez Dornier (1990) define open adoption practice as "the birthparents and adoptive parents meeting one another, sharing full identifying information, and having access to ongoing contact over the years" (p. 9). In open adoption practice birthparents choose the parents of their child. They review all the couples approved for adoption and may interview as many prospective adoptive parents as they wish before making their decision. The couples and the birthfamilies negotiate their adoption agreement that includes the role the birthparents will have in the child's life. It is a system based on openness and inter-relatedness rather than anonymity and secrecy. It is a system based on belief in the strengths of all the parties involved rather than a system based on a belief in the deficits of the respective parties.

The deficits view results in birthparents who relinquish children for adoption being viewed as dysfunctional, marginalized, immoral and damaged human beings. Not only is this a highly judgmental stance, these views fail to recognize the tremendous positive potential influence that

birthparents may bring to bear on their placed children. To the contrary, traditional adoption practice supported a view that the involvement of birthfamily members with the adoptive child would unduly interfere with the bonding between adoptive parents and child, create a state of confusion and divided loyalties, provide opportunities for parental conflict, and foster instability and identity confusion in the child. Although the potential for conflict between adoptive parents and birthparents exists in open adoptions, the positive effects of open adoption are considered to weigh far more heavily. Rather than existing in a silent partnership, birthparents and adoptive parents join together in providing for the emotional well-being of the child in open adoption. The questions about parentage that may preoccupy and trouble an adoptive child are answered in open adoption, and the child may further greatly benefit from the active love and caring from birthparents. The birthparents avoid the sense of shame, guilt, and loss associated with severing all ties with the child. Although unable to provide fulltime parental involvement, the birthparents have a unique role to fulfill. The love, support, and involvement of the birthparents, albeit limited, may effectively remove the void experienced by adoptive children in closed adoption who have a burning desire to know the identity of their birthparents and yearn for a relationship with them. The adoptive child may benefit remarkably from the involvement of the birthparents in his or her life. The birthparent benefits from the active relationship with the child. Not only are birthparents aware of the child's development, they are allowed to maintain an active relationship with the child and contribute to the child's well-being.

Although there are obvious benefits to both the adoptive child and the birthparents, one may question the rewards to be derived by adoptive parents in open adoption. Perhaps the most important is the knowledge that they are "doing the right thing" for their adoptive child. Their child deserves to have an active relationship with birthparents and other birthfamily members if appropriate and desirable (eg. birthgrandparents). It may be helpful for a parent to know that the parental rights may be legally relinquished but there is no way to legislate the meaning that most adoptive children attach to

their biological parents. Most adoptive children appear to be driven to know the identity of their birthparents, and furthermore, to form a relationship with them. Open adoption allows adoptive parents to know that they are giving the gift of knowledge and human connectedness to their adoptive child when they facilitate the involvement of the birthparents in their child's life.

It should be noted that there are exceptions in which open adoption is not viable. There are birthparents who prefer to remain anonymous and uninvolved with the adoptive child. Others may seek to wield deleterious influence on the adoptive child, undermine the relationship between adoptive child and adoptive parents, or behave in a self-serving or devious manner. In these instances, the adoptive child and adoptive parents should maintain little or no contact with the birthparent.

Social Workers have had to examine their assumptions. In retrospect, adoption is one of the few areas of practice in which social workers supported a system based on secrecy. The role of the social worker is changing in adoption practice. The social worker is no longer the decision maker, the controller and the placer of children. The adoption social worker is a counselor and facilitator. As Florence Fisher asked, "Where else was this kind of secrecy condoned?" (Wegar, 1997, p 83).

Certainly not all adoption professionals embrace the practice of open adoption and may fiercely oppose it. Various concerns have been raised by opponents of open adoption including: interference in adoptive family life, confounding child identity formation, disrupt bonding between child and adoptive parents, and interference with parental role functioning (Kraft, Palombo, Woods, Mitchell, & Schmidt, 1985; Siegel, 2003). Although, not without resistance, it is undeniable that there has been a major paradigm shift in ways that adoption practice is viewed. Adult adoptees, birthparents, many adoptive parents, social workers and other adoption professionals have come together and continue to construct the new open reality for the practice of adoption.

### **Societal change**

The societal changes in adoption policy that have influenced adoption practice can be viewed in the context of Schneider and Ingram's (1997) degenerative policy-making process model. (Watson, 2004) In this model, the social construction identifies four different kinds of policy targets that are based on social constructs and the extent of the political power of each group. The authors identify these groups as: (1) advantaged (who are powerful and positively constructed); (2) contenders (powerful but negatively constructed as undeserving or greedy); (3) dependents (positively constructed as 'good' people but relatively needy or helpless, who have little or no political power; and (4) deviants who have virtually no political power and are negatively constructed as undeserving, violent, mean, and so forth (Schneider & Ingram, 1997). In looking at adoption policy and practice, it is instructive to view the stakeholders in adoption practice as the targets of the policy within this framework.

Those advocating to maintain closed adoption and sealed adoption records are, for the most part, members of the 'advantaged' class—affluent adoptive parents. As members of this group they carry a positive social construct and are thought to be deserving. They are solidly a part of the middle to upper class. Their inability to have biological children evokes empathy and their decision to adopt is viewed as commendable. Those who advocate sealed adoption records view adoption as "a perfect and complete substitute for creating families through childbirth" (Samuels, 2001, p. 20).

As adult adoptees have become empowered they have become an emergent contending group whose power lies mainly in their legal, ethical, and moral claims for equality and justice (Schneider & Ingram, 1997). Adult adoptee advocacy groups have been successful in moving the public perception of adult adoptees from a status of dependency to a status of emerging contender. Their challenge is to continue their progress toward being seen as deserving of their rights and refuting claims that this is being done at the expense of adoptive parents and birthparents.

Birthparents are often viewed, at best, as a dependent group and, at worst, a deviant group. At the time of the adoption, they relinquished their rights and therefore are most likely to be

seen as having no claim to re-assert those rights. Public perception of birthparents has shifted in a positive direction, however, largely as a consequence of such factors as popular media interest in search and reunion stories.

## CONCLUSION

Open adoption may be construed as a psychosocial element of the postmodernism movement. The beliefs surrounding closed adoptions have been challenged and called into doubt. The deleterious consequences of non-disclosure to the adoptive triad, in particular the permanent and pervasive parental disenfranchisement of birthparents and the extreme self-identity despair suffered by adoptees, have been weighed against the benefits of closed adoption practices. The sentiment of the major stakeholders along with adoption professionals is that the human benefits of open policies and procedures are superior to the benefits professed by closed adoption proponents. This evolution in adoption represents a better 'fit' in a postmodern world.

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