

Adoption: A Life-long Experience

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Each member of the triad has a unique relationship with adoption. As an adoptee, my relationship with adoption has changed with each new developmental level.

When I was in college, I came across a psychosocial model of adoption adjustment (Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, 1993). This model adds an overlay to the well-known psychosocial model created by Erik Erikson, except that the adoption adjustment model proposes that the adoptee has additional tasks to resolve.

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Finding this model put structure and meaning to what I have experienced: I have a changing relationship with adoption and the relationship looks very different at various points in my life.

INFANCY

Normative Crisis: Trust v. Mistrust (Erikson, 1968)

Adoptee's Tasks: Adjusting to the new home and developing secure attachment (Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, 1993)

I arrived at my adoptive family's home at five weeks old, healthy and pink with a bow in my hair. I have been told that I went from the hospital to foster care to my A/family's home, in those five weeks. My A/parents said that they had been starved for a child for so long that they couldn't put me down. I was held, rocked, caressed, and sung to. I learned that they were still disbelieving that they were given a baby and they would stare at me for extended periods (the power of eye contact!). It was an intense course of love, affection, and stellar attachment work, by instinct.

My adopted brother had a very different experience. He was approximately three months old when he came to our family. Where he was and how he was cared for prior to coming to our family is a mystery. My A/mother described him as thin, pale, easily startled, and quick to stiffen when touched. He would not meet anyone's gaze and his development was delayed.

Fortunately, he slowly responded to the same love and affection that I was given and began to heal. He was extremely dependent on our A/mother and required much of her. He struggled socially and emotionally.

TODDLERHOOD & PRESCHOOL AGE

Normative Crisis: Autonomy v. Shame and Doubt & Initiative v. Guilt (Erikson, 1968)

Adoptee's Tasks: Learning of birth/reproduction; adjusting to information about adoption; noticing differences in physical appearance (Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, 1993)

I have always known that I was adopted. I knew the word long before I could understand what it meant. I was told that it meant I was "chosen" and others who had birth children got what they got but I was picked. ("Like a candy bar?" I asked. I envisioned rows of babies on display and my A/parents selecting me from the line-up.)

I had a visceral sense that being adopted was a positive thing. The word "adopted" was used openly within our family and said in a loving tone. I believe that since the word and the information given by the agency was always available to me, my adoption never felt tainted with shame or secrecy.

One of my earliest memories is that of a book entitled *The Adopted Family*; it was given to my A/parents by the agency that placed me. The book was written in a Dick-and-Jane style. On the cover there was a smiling family: mother wore a natty suit with heels and dad sported a fedora, while a blond boy skipped between them. The contents explained the adopted family—in less than 20 pages. Yet, there was no mention of birth family beyond "the lady who grew you in her tummy." Essentially, the message was that I was chosen and loved, and everyone got what he or she wanted. The book was not kept with my other books and seemed to disappear shortly after my brother was adopted two years later.

When I was preschool age, my A/mother and I came across an old photograph of her in a hospital bed. I asked why she had been in the hospital. Her face grew dark and she stammered that she had been pregnant then

lost the baby. Talking about this clearly upset my mother and I got the message that this was not something we were going to discuss.

My A/mother had always been open about how she and my A/father had prayed for a baby. I knew that they had been married many years before choosing adoption. It had not occurred to me until that day that—although I had been chosen—I was not their first choice.

“Special equals different”

During early childhood was my first memory of being treated differently by others because I was not my adoptive parents’ birth child.

We had taken a trip to Michigan to see my adoptive grandparents and before we arrived, my A/mother explained to me that her mother felt a special empathy towards my brother and me because Grandma had grown up in an orphanage in Europe. (I wondered if we would’ve been sent to that orphanage in Belgium, if we hadn’t been adopted.) It was this experience, Mom said, that fueled Grandma’s feelings that my brother and I were “special.” I remember with great fondness the affection, love, and indulgence we were afforded during the visits with my Grandma. We were also “special” to Dad’s mother...but not in the same way. I had a sense that she did not count me as a grandchild. She would often dote on my many cousins, beckon them to “come to Grandma,” and delight over how they had grown. This was not the same for my brother and me. I felt invisible around her. I found out years later that she had not been supportive of adoption.

The trips to Michigan were always a whirlwind of family events. Mom had six siblings and Dad had eleven; each sibling had multiple children. I had more aunts, uncles, and cousins than I could count. The family reunion looked like Woodstock and it had to be held in a large park. I remember that this reunion was my first experience with recognizing the physical differences in how my adoptive family looked from me and how strongly they resembled their biological families.

MIDDLE CHILDHOOD/SCHOOL AGE
Normative Crisis: Industry v. Inferiority (Erikson, 1968)

Adoptee’s Tasks: Meaning/implications of being adopted; searching for answers; coping with

looking different, stigma regarding adoption, social reactions to adoption and losses of adoption (Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, 1993)

I had such a deep longing to be the biological child of my parents or at least find some feature of similarity between my adoptive parents and me. Missy, a neighborhood playmate of mine, revealed to me one day that her real name was Margaret. When I learned this, I felt betrayed and angry! I wanted that name! I sent poor, bewildered Missy back home. Margaret is my A/ mother’s name. Missy—someone not even a part of our family—was more similar to my own A/ mother than I was.

Striving towards understanding or competence is the theme of this stage. In my family, competence in sports, competition, and physical ability was valued, and I embraced this role—sometimes to the point of putting myself in physical danger. In this stage, I worked diligently to meet my family’s and society’s expectations of me; I wanted to fit.

Late in this stage, I discovered humor as a means of coping with a prominent issue of adoption: looking different than my A/parents. New acquaintances, who didn’t know I was not my A/parents biological child, would comment that I resemble my mother- which I don’t...not even slightly. My A/mom would give me look of knowing and respond, “Yeah, we get that all the time.”

ADOLESCENCE

Normative Crisis: Ego Identity v. Identity Confusion (Erikson, 1968)

Adoptee’s Tasks: Further exploration into the meaning of being adopted; connecting adoption to identity; coping with adoption related loss in sense of self, looking different, and racial differences in interracial adoption; resolving family romance fantasy; consider searching for biological family (Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, 1993)

Is it possible to reject a ghost? Or to live up to a myth? This is a time when the resolution of the normative crisis was especially difficult, in light of the absence of biological parents.

My adolescent separation and individuation was a combination resolution that was directed at both adoptive and biological parents.

During this stage, I verbalized my rejection of wanting to search for my biological mother. (“She



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didn't want me so I don't want her!") My earlier desire to meet the expectations of my A/family were replaced with a drive to do the exact opposite. I summarily refused to participate in any of the sporting activities that were integral to my adoptive family's identity.

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I am convinced that this crisis was not completely resolved until I had my reunion with biological family. Identity formation is a process that depended on

experiencing the similarities and differences between my biological family and me.

YOUNG ADULTHOOD

Normative Crisis: Intimacy v. Isolation (Erikson, 1968)

Adoptee's Tasks: Further exploration of the implications of adoption as it relates to the growth of self; issues related to searching and genetic history; the adoptee as parent (Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, 1993)

I experienced a reunion with my biological family when I was in my late twenties.

It is difficult to say what this reunion meant to me as the layers still unfold, so many years later. I can say that the reunion was crucial to my development and improved my attachment to my A/family, as well as other relationships.

I had been very anxious about telling my A/parents that I had found my biological family—I was fearful that they would feel hurt or threatened. I felt very protective of their feelings and their status.

My A/parents' response was supportive and generous. Mom said that I shouldn't worry because she knew there was room in my heart to love many people and having more family wouldn't change how I felt about my A/family. How stupid I was. I had been concerned about protecting their status and Mom clarified what really mattered: love is not divisible.

The reunion was a positive, life-changing experience and I'm so grateful for finally having the answers to where I came from. My daughter will also benefit from having that information. As will her children.

Social Feedback on Search/Reunion

All my life there has been no shortage of others who offer input (whether I asked or not) on my role as an adoptee but it was during this stage that I began to function more as a change agent.

One of the first stands I took was pursuing search and reunion. The social worker at the agency that placed me told me, "She (my biological mother) put you up for adoption because she didn't want you in her life." I searched anyway.

While in a support group, an adoptive mother angrily corrected me: her adoptive daughter's "history" started the day the baby girl was placed in the adoptive family. This particular mother was reacting to my revelation that I had experienced reunion and my reference to my own "history." I understood that mother's response came from feeling threatened. But she was wrong. Family history begins as far back as is relevant to the family member. If you don't believe it, try an Internet search for "genealogy." The number of organizations dedicated to connecting the dots of genealogical history is astounding.

More than one person's response to my revelation of reunion with biological family was, "Why would you do that when you already have such a nice family?"

While we were helping clean up after a dinner party, someone who had confided to me that she had several abortions, instead of opting to use birth control, suddenly blurted over a sink full of soapy dishes that she thought my birth mother was "very selfish" for putting me up for adoption.

The support group experience and the personal experiences were illustrations of social messages: as an adoptee, my existence sometimes triggered people's issues. My yearning to know of my origins—nature, biology, and history—was threatening or confusing or offensive. Often the message was "leave well enough alone." Be grateful—don't agitate.



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MIDDLE ADULTHOOD

Normative Crisis: Generativity v. Stagnation (Erikson, 1968)

Adoptee's Tasks: Further exploration of the implications of adoption for the aging self; coping with adoption-related loss; reconciling the creation of a psychological legacy with gaps in personal history; coping with adoption-related losses (Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, 1993)

My relationship with adoption brought me—very unexpectedly and happily—back into a venue that is all about adoption: working as a psychotherapist with adoptive children and their families.

While I was working for most of my young adulthood as an art director in advertising, I changed careers after my daughter was born. The pursuit of convincing the audience to buy or believe something didn't feel right to me anymore. I sought a face-to-face audience and the opportunity to advocate and/or work with children. I looked for a challenge and found it.

Generativity is unique for each individual. My conceptualization of generativity was hallmarked by changing careers, and I question whether I would have been ready to make this move if I had not known that both my mothers had the courage to make similar leaps.

LATE ADULTHOOD

Normative Crisis: Ego Integrity v. Despair (Erikson, 1968)

Adoptee's Tasks: Further exploration of the implications of adoption as it relates to the growth of self (Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, 1993)

The effects of adoption are intergenerational. This was clear to me on the day my daughter brought home her 2nd grade project - draw your family tree. My first inclination was openness and I suggested she draw a tree with birth family as the roots and adoptive family as the branches. My daughter has grown up with me sharing my unusual family construction without hesitation. She knows both adoptive and biological family members very well. I assumed my daughter would embrace this approach.

Wrong. She expressed concretely and emphatically that she wanted to show her "real" family (she meant my biological family). "Everybody in our family is real," I explained. "But you came from Grammy's tummy and I came out of yours," she persisted. I found out they had talked about genetic traits in class and—vigilant student that she is—she considered that feature part of her assignment.

I told my daughter she could choose how to present the family tree. Just as I wouldn't ask an adopted child to share their personal story, I allowed my daughter the same choice. For the first time I thought of her in a new way - daughter of an adoptee.

I called her teacher to talk about the family tree and suggested that there were probably adoptees in her class who struggled with this one. Her teacher was responsive and insightful; she promised that she would consider this experience when giving the assignment next year.

In this late stage of my life, I expect if and when my daughter has children, they may take on the role of grandchild of an adoptee. I will have the dual role of grandmother/adoptee. I wonder what that experience will bring; I'm counting on my learning process to continue.

So far...

In my relationship with adoption, one of the most important lessons that I have learned is that openness in adoption is a powerfully healing experience, for all members of the triad. Furthermore, it is the birthright of all adoptees to know where they came from and withholding that information is a heinous theft of their sense of self.

Judge Wade S. Weatherford, Jr., of South Carolina, said this so eloquently...

"...The law must be consonant with life. It cannot and should not ignore broad historical currents of history. Mankind is possessed of no greater urge than to try to understand the age-old questions: "Who am I?" "Why am I?" Even now the sands and ashes of continents are being sifted to find where we made our first step as man. Religions of mankind often include ancestor worship in one way or another. For



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many the future is blind without a sight of the past. Those emotions and anxieties that generate our thirst to know the past are not superficial and whimsical. They are real and they are 'good cause' under the law of man and God."

Judge Wade S. Weatherford, Jr.
Ruling on an adoptee's petition to gain access to adoption records in the case *Bradey v. Children's Bureau of South Carolina*, Seventh Judicial Circuit Court, Spartanburg County, April 9, 1979.

(Bless you, Judge Weatherford.)

As a result of my reunion with birth family, I learned something profoundly freeing from my A/mom. No matter who shares my life, no one in this world can diminish my love for my adoptive family. I share this with my clients. Love is infinite, love is an ocean. Love is not a pie cut into finite pieces that will be divided. There's more than enough love to fill everyone.

From my birth mother I learned that no matter who came after her or how much time passed, the connection between a mother and a child cannot be denied. It is a connection at a cellular level.

No matter how old I get to be, I will always be an adopted person.

References

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