

Information Package

The Development of “Birth Terms” to Refer to the Natural Mothers of Adoptees (1955 to 1979)

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Table of Contents

1	Introduction
2	“Must We Have Orphanages?” by Pearl S. Buck. (<i>Readers Digest</i> , November 1955)
6	“We Can Free the Children” by Pearl S. Buck. (<i>Women’s Home Companion</i> , June 1956)
12	“I Am the Better Woman For Having My Two Black Children” by Pearl S. Buck. (<i>Today's Health</i> , January 1972)
15	“The Reunion of Adoptees and Birth Relatives” by A. Sorosky, A. Baran, and R. Pannor (<i>Journal of Youth and Adolescence</i> , September 1974). [Received for publication April 1974]
27	“Opening the Sealed Records in Adoption: The Human Need for Continuity” by R. Pannor, A. Sorosky, and A. Baran (<i>Journal of Jewish Communal Service</i> , December 1974). [Presented at the annual meeting of the National Conference of Jewish Communal Services, June 4, 1974]
36	“Identity Conflicts in Adoptees” by A. Sorosky, A. Baran, and R. Pannor (<i>American Journal of Orthopsychiatry</i> , January 1975). [Submitted for publication in March 1974]
46	“Open Adoption” by A. Baran, R. Pannor, and A. Sorosky (<i>Social Work</i> , March 1976). [adapted from a paper presented on March 23, 1975]
50	“The Terminology of Adoption” by Marietta Spencer (<i>Child Welfare</i> , 1979)
58	Quotes From the Literature
61	Bibliography

Introduction

Abstract

This information package is an examination of the development of terms such as “birth mother” and “birth parent” to refer to parents who have been separated from a child or children by adoption. This package consists of a collection of articles in both the popular press and in academic peer-reviewed journals in which these terms were used.

Summary of Findings

The earliest recorded use that has been found so far of terms such as “birth mother” and “birth parents” is in an article written by adoptive parent Pearl S. Buck in 1955. Buck also used these terms in articles published in 1956 and 1972. “Birth terms” were further used in articles published between 1974 and 1976 co-authored by adoption agency employees Annette Baran and Reuben Pannor and social work professor Arthur Sorosky. Most of these articles also use the term “natural mother” and “natural parents,” which was the standard terminology prior to the introduction of “birth terms.”

The semantics of birth terms were not firmly established until the 1970s, when they formally became part of the “Positive Adoption Language” or “Respectful Adoption Language” terminology set developed by social worker and adoptive parent Marietta Spencer as part of a campaign to change public attitudes towards adoption. In 1979, Spencer published this terminology set in the journal *Child Welfare* as a proposal for use by social work and adoption professionals (See Spencer, 1979). The “Positive/Respectful Adoption Language” terminology set defines “birth parents” as being “non-parents,” ceasing to be parents/mothers/fathers after performing the reproductive act, with the adoptive parents becoming the sole parents:

“Those who raise and nurture a child are his *parents: his mother, father...*” (Johnston, 2004)

Conclusion

The articles that are compiled in this package show that the terms “birth mother” and “birth parent” were not invented by natural mothers themselves, but were used prior to 1976 by adoption workers and adoptive parents.

Suggestions for Further Research

Research is ongoing to learn more about the early history of these terms. Academic journals have been examined as well as Pearl S. Buck’s writings; but many other sources of written material have yet to be explored, e.g. social work convention proceedings, newsletters, personal correspondence, and adoption agency promotional materials. Readers of this information package are invited to help in its further development and review. Contact research@origincanada.org for more information.

Children without families and families without children need each other. A distinguished author's eloquent plea for a true understanding of a great human problem

Must We Have Orphanages?

WHILE WE Americans concern ourselves with orphans of war and famine in other countries, we are neglecting our own orphans. Thousands of children are destitute of the most profound needs of the human being—a place to belong in society, a family, love. We accept their position as inevitable, yet we ourselves force these children to remain orphans through legal red tape, complicated adoption procedures, prejudice and religious division.

There are plenty of people who want to adopt our orphans. Rare is the day when I do not receive a letter from some couple saying, "Can you tell us where to find a child to adopt? We have tried everywhere through adoption agencies." But the children without parents and the parents without children cannot reach each other.

Social agencies continually tell us

*Condensed from
Woman's Home Companion*

Pearl S. Buck

that there are not enough children to satisfy the many couples who want to adopt them. I used to think this was true. Then one Christmas Eve a television newscaster showed an orphanage

crowded with children of all ages, receiving toys from kindly, well-meaning visitors. That picture spoiled Christmas for me.

If there are not enough children to satisfy would-be parents, then why are all these children in orphanages?

I set out to discover the reasons. I found, first, that nobody knows truthfully how many children are in our orphanages. Agencies are divided by geographic and legal boundaries and are submissive to the antagonisms of religious groups. They accept the status quo. True, there are individuals who quietly try to work around obstacles. But they are all too few.

Some orphanages are old and long

established in their routines, existing on large sums of money left by generations of legacies and gifts. What would the trustees do with all that money if they closed the orphanages? What would the caretakers, the cooks, superintendents do? A job, even a small one, can be a vested interest.

Some ten years ago an aged southern woman with a sweet withered face came to me. "I come hopin' you would see fit to right a great wrong where I come from," she said. In her state many children were kept orphaned by a law. The law was simple: 20 children in boarding homes constituted a salaried job for a social worker. The effect was devastating. Adoption of even one child from a boarding home was a threat to a job. He had to be quickly replaced.

There are many kinds of orphanages, but the largest number belong to religious groups. Church members get a warm feeling of doing good when they think of the orphans fed and clothed by their donations. They seldom see these children except perhaps at Christmas or Easter. They do not observe the look in their eyes, the orphan look.

Religion is actually the strongest force keeping children orphaned. Many states continue to require that, whenever practicable, children be placed for adoption only in families of the same religion as their natural parents. Recently the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court refused to allow the adoption of illegitimate twin children by a couple of a differ-

ent faith from the natural mother. This even though the natural mother wanted the adoption to take place, and though all agreed it would promote the children's best interests.

As I write these words, I remember Johnny. He was born out of wedlock and his mother later married a man whose religion was different from her own. Soon after, the mother died and the stepfather, even though he had adopted Johnny, abandoned him to a welfare agency. A wonderful family then wanted him. The agency told them they were not eligible because Johnny "belonged" to a *stepfather* of another faith.

So Johnny has no family, no home. He is now eight years old. At 16—or at most, 18—he will be put out to work. Had he been given to the parents who wanted him, he would have had a college education, for Johnny is bright. Instead he remains an orphan, and the taxpayer must provide for what care he gets.

Similarity in race and religion is of course desirable in adoptions. But a child should not be deprived thereby of his natural right to a normal home and life. To those religious leaders who declare that there are enough adoptive families within their own faith, I can only reply with a simple question: Why are there so many orphanages?

I visited orphanages to hear their side, to ask why the children were not set free for adoption. Again and again I was told that the children are not "released" by their legal

guardians. This is true. Many cannot be placed in families because somebody will not let them go. It may be a relative or a judge or a social agency. It may even be the parents who abandoned them.

There are many parents who have no real wish to make a home for their children but who simply keep a dead hand on their lives. Such parents cry out with false righteous indignation, "I'll never give up my child!" And yet they do give up their children. The orphanages are stuffed with the children of unwilling parents.

How sadly I remember our own little Sheila! She came to us from an agency when she was three years old, a child neglected and five times deserted by her mother. Sheila was an intelligent child, but she was ill and undernourished. We saw her change in six months to a gay, plump little girl. When we wanted to adopt her, however, the birth mother took her back again. Sheila cried when she saw her mother. She sobbed that she wanted to "go home." Home was our house. But the mother jerked her away by one arm and we never saw her again.

The social worker kept in touch with her a while, and we learned that within two months Sheila was deserted again. Still the mother would not "give up her own flesh and blood." At last the city courts put the child into an institution. There she has grown up, an orphan except for a mother who appears once a year or so. Sheila is only one

of many thousands "not open for adoption."

Children are not property, but they are considered so under our laws. True, if there is flagrant ill-treatment, a judge can order a child put into an institution until the parents reform. The reform of a wayward parent is doubtful at best and seldom permanent, so the child is doomed to a life between an unsatisfactory family and an institution. If this goes on too long he becomes "unadoptable," psychologically damaged so that he cannot adjust to another family.

Another group who cling mistakenly to their children are the unwed mothers. Too many keep their children. Again the child bears the burden. The mother has the first right over his life, he is her property by law, regardless of the fact that she almost certainly did not want him before he was born.

The unwed mother thinks she can "manage somehow." Perhaps her own parents keep the child for her. Yet seldom indeed does the child escape the stigma. The stern fact is that the unwed mother should, in fairness to her child, give him up for adoption, for otherwise the child's life will inevitably be damaged by social cruelty.

The goal is a free child, freed for parents, love and home. What can we do to achieve this? First, we need new, unified laws—laws which, crossing state and county limits, will make it possible for adoption agencies to search the nation for the right

child for the right home. No limitations of religion, race or geography should exist to deny a child a home.

Second, the red tape of adoption procedures should be eliminated and only essentials kept. We ought to have complete statistics on the number of children in all orphanages. There ought to be a national pool of children and another of adoptive parents, and information about them flowing freely through all professional centers of adoption.

Third, we need better-trained social workers. Too many today practice by rule and by rote. Such persons function well in routine jobs, but nothing to do with adoption can be routine, because human beings are concerned. Adoption workers need more courses in human nature and less in technical procedure. And I should like to see more adoption workers chosen from among older

people, women whose children are grown and who still find themselves young enough to learn.

Fourth, the boards of trustees of adoption agencies should face their real responsibility. Too often the citizens on these boards are concerned chiefly with petty finances and procedures. The duty of a board is constantly to measure the achievement of the agency against the goal, which is the placing of every orphaned child in a good and loving family.

An orphanage is an orphanage, however humane, and while it may be a temporary necessity in poor and war-torn countries, I refuse to believe it is a necessity here, where parents are waiting. I venture to say, were sensible reforms effected, that we could close most of these orphanages and find homes for our homeless children.

PEARL S. BUCK *says:*

WE CAN FREE THE CHILDREN

This famous author continues here to probe the shocking scandal of adoption in America today.

She shows how we can find the facts about adoption in our own communities

and help to free uncounted thousands of children so that they may find loving families

THE pile of letters grows ever higher on my desk, letters from every state in the union. They are from all kinds of Americans. Choose at random and you will find the letters show the same concern.

We are agreed, it seems, that all children need the love of permanent parents and family, for when children grow up in institutions and transient boarding homes they grow up stunted in heart, if not in body. We are agreed that many lonely children not now adopted should be freed for adoption. We ask what can we do to bring this about.

There are uncounted children today in our orphanages. There are also uncounted numbers of couples who want to adopt children. Yet children and parents cannot come together in mutual happiness. There are barriers between. There are vested interests, for example, which keep the children in orphanages. Such interests may be the large legacies left only for the care and education of orphans, and for the use of the legacies orphans must be found. Or the vested interests may be only jobs in an orphanage.

Again, the barrier may be a relative, unwilling or unable to undertake the care of the child and yet unwilling, either, to free him for adoption.

Or most likely of all, sad to say, the barrier may be an organized religious or other group which will not allow a child to be adopted by any except one of its own members, and if there is no member willing to adopt, the child is kept an orphan rather than freed to find adoption elsewhere.

Restrictive laws are barriers too between states and even counties, limiting a child's chances for adoption.

Yet all these barriers could be broken down by wise and courageous professional leadership. This leadership does not exist. In the face of this lack citizens must themselves inquire into the reasons for the many children still waiting in orphanages and, having heard the reasons usually given, they must investigate their validity.

LET us remember that the child is and must be the first consideration—not the parents either by birth or adoption, not the fear of their becoming a charge of a state or county, not the property sense of an organization. The welfare and happiness of the orphaned child, above and apart from all other considerations, must be our standard of achievement.

What is an orphan? An official in our U. S. Children's Bureau reported to me the other day that there are only about 10,000 true orphans in the whole of the United States. Ten thousand is a large number in terms of the children concerned but statistically

it is not large. A true orphan, it was explained, is a child whose parents are both dead and who is alone in the world. He may have relatives but they cannot be forced to take responsibility for him. Public charity or private charity therefore takes the place of family support.

There are far more orphanages in our country, however, than are needed to shelter 10,000 children. True, these orphanages often have difficulty in keeping their beds filled. Their boards of trustees search diligently for children, nevertheless, for the aura of "good works" still lingers about an orphanage.

IN the old days adoption was rare, almost nonexistent, and helpless children were of necessity put into orphanages or bound out as servants and apprentices. In those days it was perhaps a good deed to give shelter and food to an orphan. Rich men, dying, sometimes left fortunes to establish orphanages, usually only for boys, and such fortunes, now accumulated through the years, have become vast burdens on the administrators. The terms of old wills must still be observed and there are actually orphanages in our country which are monstrously rich in everything except orphans. So that money can be spent as ordered by a dead hand, lonely boys wander about in great buildings, separated from life and from friends. I think of two such institutions now in just one state.

When is a child really an orphan? I believe that the criteria must not be in terms of relatives, living or dead, but in terms of parental love and a real family life founded upon love. Any child who is not loved is orphaned. The child with one parent, even two, who has nevertheless been deserted by them or is visited by them only at rare intervals, who has perhaps no memory of life with them, is as true an orphan as the child whose parents are dead. In a sense his lot is the more bitter because his parents live and do not care for him. He is spiritually and emotionally the more deprived, therefore, because of hope denied rather than forever ended by death.

A study by citizens in California, completed in 1953, provides information on 3,394 children in that state, all under the age of seventeen, in foster homes and in institutions under the auspices of private or public agencies. Only 105 of the 3,394 children were full orphans in the conventional sense, although 64 percent were dependent on public funds. Of the 3,394 children, only 14 percent had parents living together, 25 percent had almost no contact with their parents, 32 percent of the fathers and 11 percent of the mothers were classified as "whereabouts unknown." Most shocking of all is that in spite of these facts only about 2.5 percent were legally free for adoption. In other words, *continued on page 62*

Pearl Buck used two of her own six adopted children as models when she made the sculptured heads at right

We Can Free the Children

from page 38

thousands of children in a single locality were kept orphans by persons who either could not or would not provide family love and care for them.

Why should this situation exist in the United States of America? Nobody knows. In a nation where statistics abound, nobody has full and accurate and up-to-date statistics on how many American children are in institutions, or why they are there, or how many could be adopted now, or could be adopted if the barriers were removed.

When, therefore, I am asked what citizens can do about the plight of children in orphanages, I must reply that first of all citizens must have information and since there is very little accurate information, citizens will have to get it themselves.

I recommend, then, that citizens in each state form a citizens committee, for the sole purpose of discovering why so many children are held in institutions, how many could be placed in permanent adoptive homes if there were no barriers, what those barriers are and how they can be removed.

The committee should then move to perform upon the basis of its findings, aided and advised by competent professionals in any field needful. But, steadfastly keeping their purpose in mind, the committee members must appraise freshly, with their own lay minds, the retorts and excuses of professionals. They must refuse to be delayed or stopped by red tape.

The citizens of California provide a model to some extent for such a committee. Their work, however, does not extend beyond discovering and stating the basic facts and problems surrounding adoption. After their research was made, presumably the committee disbanded, leaving a report and seven excellent recommendations and, in addition, a significant "Special Recommendation" which requests the formation by the state of a permanent citizens' committee on adoption.

Policies, not statistics, are the final importance. The atmosphere of a homeless life can scarcely be contained in figures. A child is an orphan when he is living under the conditions of orphanhood, whether or not his parents are dead. A child is orphaned when a relative comes to see him only once or twice a year. Certainly he is an orphan if the whereabouts of his parents is unknown. As an orphan he should then be given the opportunity for a family

by adoption. He should not be made to suffer for the dereliction of his parents. However favorable or even luxurious an orphanage is, and a few are luxurious, no orphanage can give the child the individual family love and opportunity that he needs. Most children in orphanages are denied the opportunity of higher education. Yet I know an orphanage where accumulated funds are so plentiful that not only college is amply provided for but postgraduate study is now being considered. The orphans there are nevertheless, still stunted emotionally and mentally.

Let me quote from just one letter among the heap on my desk:

"You are telling the story of human tragedy—the worst, because it happens to defenseless children. It is the very tragedy I witnessed in my childhood. Yet I was fortunate. During the years of my stay at the orphanage I was regarded by the other children as little less than a princess for I had a most devoted mother to whom we meant everything. . . . It is easy to see why to the children who had no one in the world to care for them, as individuals, my sisters and I were considered so fortunate in spite of our own very unhappy circumstances. I was there when little girls woke up at night crying until a dormitory full of little ones was roused to weep for the mother they had never known or hardly remembered. I was still there as one after the other, with few exceptions, girls of 14 or 15, on 'going out into the world' became branded as 'social outcasts.' They had mistaken 'love' offered by a boy or man for that parental love for which they had hungered throughout childhood.

"So new babies were added to the number of orphan children, doomed to a life similar to their mothers' because they were already branded with the mark of illegitimacy. I was still there when the head of that orphanage, a fine woman of unbelievable devotion who had in vain tried to be 'Mother' to 50 and more children, died brokenhearted because one of the most promising of 'her girls' met with the same fate as did so many . . . I know indeed, that but for the grace of God, there go I. I have also learned that the great tragedy I witnessed there was not confined to that time or that country, that it is still happening today—and what is being done about it?"

The task for a citizens' committee, then after due discovery of facts, is to determine when a child should for his own interest be made eligible for adoption. For how long can a child endure neglectful parents abandonment, the lack of individual attention and love without permanent personality damage? What chance has the child born out of wedlock to find a wholesome family and community life if his mother keeps him? The California citizens noted

from page 62

shrewdly that, while persons are eager to adopt children, though born out of wedlock, yet society as a whole condemns the unwed mother. If it is better for the child born out of wedlock to stay with his birth mother, what can be done to change social attitudes toward her and her child?

THE second task is to determine whose property the child is, after it is established that he is an orphan. As an American, I believe that children are born free. I cannot believe that a child is born the property of a family that rejects him and leaves him in public care nor that he is the helpless property of a racial or religious group. Deprived of his natural family, it is his right to find a good adoptive family to take its place. *All things being equal*, it is undoubtedly best for him to be adopted by people who are like him racially. But if parents cannot be found of such similarity, he should not be kept an orphan because of his race. The family who wants him and is best able to make him happy should be his family. There are American couples of loving heart who do not care what a child's race is.

I know this from my own experience as Chairman of the Board of Welcome House, Inc., an adoption agency which exists specifically to place the American child of Asian ancestry. We have a long waiting list of parents who have grown beyond the limitations of race and religion. To them a child is a child. And our continuing observation of children placed with them, on the principle of suitability of persons rather than of race or religion, shows happy results for all concerned. The ability to love and to be loved is the first necessity. Those who truly love are ready to accept a child for what he is and they encourage him to value his own race, as well as theirs.

Therefore I protest the policy of any agency or group which compels a child to live in an institution or a boarding home where those who care for him may not be of his race—and cannot possibly love him as well as adoptive parents could—and yet

refuses him adoption on the grounds that the adoptive parents do not “match” him. I know that some adoptive agencies are beginning quietly to reject the matching theory. Why not all? Why quietly?

Yes, a child is born free, and surely so, if he be an American child. Surely this means too that he is not born the property of religion. A few have, since my article, *The Children Waiting*, taken violent exception to this statement. I do not know why they feel that the statement applies to their denomination in particular. As I said, there are many groups guilty of possessiveness. In fact, a certain amount of possessiveness is to be found in most religious groups. Alas, all men are not yet brothers.

Religions and sects have of course the right to teach, to persuade and even to proselytize. My point is simply that in our country where we do not have castes, either religious or social, our children are born free. They are not born the property of a church. They are not born with a theology. When children have parents by birth or adoption, it is entirely right that in their families they should be taught whatever religion belongs to the family. But, unborn or newly born or orphans in search of a family, they are free. I do not understand the virulence of the opposition of some individuals to this very simple and democratic principle. By and large, church membership would probably not be affected by its practice for a child might be placed in a Catholic or Protestant or Jewish home.

I know of course the self-defensive answer which is usually made by persons of various exclusive religions and other groups. It is always the same: “We have adoptive homes enough for all our children.” My reply to this declaration is also always the same. Then why, I ask, do you still have orphanages? If the children in them are not free for adoption, why are they not free?

Yet another question we, as citizens, should ask and answer: Who is to be responsible for an adoption as quickly and wisely as is humanly possible?

Ideally of course adoptions should be carried out by recognized and approved social agencies. But we have to face the fact that many children—no one knows how many—are growing up as orphans because there are not enough recognized and approved social agencies to perform the task and certainly not enough social workers, good and less good, to staff the additional agencies to meet the need. I am not thinking of the need of couples for children. I am thinking of the need of children who could and should be adopted. Whether, if such children were freed for adoption, all couples who want to adopt would have children is quite beside my point.

The fact is, there are not enough adoption agencies to care for the children presently open for adoption. In one eastern city, for example, it was estimated recently by foundation research that approximately 300 children are adopted each year. Of these only about half are placed through adoption agencies.

Yet these agencies have been conducting a campaign to have a law enacted which would make all adoptions illegal unless performed by themselves. When asked whether they could carry the extra load of twice as many adoptions as they are now completing in a year, they confessed they could not. When asked what plans they had for enlarging their services they said the increasing shortage of social workers made such plans impossible. If the law for which they are pressing were passed, half of the children now adopted in that city would continue orphaned. We who are lay citizens must be realistic. We must not allow agencies to insist, for professional reasons, upon what they cannot perform. If the black market in children is to be done away with, we will have to recognize for the present, and hopefully only for the present, the gray market of lawyers and physicians and seek their co-operation, not their suppression.

Citizens must then, in common sense and for the sake of the child, realize that many adoptions will continue to take place out-

side the professional social agency. If this is not realized, if further laws are enacted to make social agencies the only ones who can carry out adoptions, then we must be prepared for the increase of black markets.

HOW can lay citizens help social agencies to increase their numbers and efficiency? It is a discouraging fact that far too few persons today are entering the field of social work. The reasons for this are not entirely economic. Indeed salaries for social workers, when correlated to education and experience, are not below those for other white-collar workers and working conditions are rather better than average. In most agencies, for example, social workers get a month's vacation, whereas in business offices the average vacation is two weeks. There is also considerable leniency for social workers in regard to sick leave and regularity of hours. Moreover, social work is certainly more challenging and interesting, in human terms, than many other white-collar jobs. Yet too few young people seem interested in social work.

Upon questioning, sporadic and incomplete, of course, I find various reasons given for this. Sensitive young people dread the responsibility of deciding human lives. One young social worker in an adoptive agency told me that she was often sleepless at night, fearing she had not made a good placement. She said, "When I think that perhaps a child will be unhappy for life because I have put him in the wrong home, I worry."

"If you didn't worry, I'd be worried about you as a social worker," I replied.

Sensitive youth shrinks, and rightfully, from such responsibility. I myself do not believe, as I have said, that very young people should be social workers. They are either overcome by conditions with which they must cope or they become hardened and therefore unfit to be social workers.

I have watched a group of young people in training in a school of social work grow hard within a few months. They became un-

continued on page 64

from page 63

duly pessimistic, and too soon, about the very people they were supposed to serve. They had not had enough experience with people to accumulate the reserves of mercy and understanding love which are so necessary when dealing with broken human beings, especially the lonely, the sick, the depressed. In self-defense, they ridiculed and judged where they should have sought only to understand and love.

It is only life that teaches the necessity of love, both in giving and receiving, and, contrary to usual belief, the mature person is less rigid in heart and mind than the

young person. An older person may have small fixed habits of living, which seem rigid, but heart and mind generally speaking are mellowed and common sense rules over theory.

I suggest therefore that citizens urge and indeed demand that schools for training social workers accept as their best investment men and women of maturity, and especially women who, married young and their children grown, have leisure and strength to give another ten or 20 years to human welfare. A college degree is not so important for a social worker as experience

of life and consequent maturity. Two years or even one year of training for the mature person will be better than two years and a college degree for the immature. It goes without saying that many mature persons would also have the college degree.

Professional people, again speaking generally, are necessarily narrow. This is their advantage and their disadvantage. They are experts and specialists. They must therefore be constantly supervised and criticized and controlled by the lay mind. We lay folk call in the expert to get his opinion, but before we make decisions we must relate that opinion to all that life has taught us. The expert is often right but he is not always right; the world cannot be administered from his one point of view. The social worker must not, because he has learned in school good techniques for adoptive procedure, arrogate to himself all knowledge.

Social workers need every help, therefore, from lay citizens. As professionals, it is obvious that they feel insecurity and inadequacy. I have been deeply touched by the way in which they resent criticism and suggestion. They fly to defend themselves as only the insecure feel it necessary to do. It has been a revelation to me. It shows me how much they need help, how they are still struggling for firm footing as a profession.

I realize the benefit of my own different experiences as a writer. Writers learn early to accept criticism and to benefit by it or ignore it when it is not beneficial. We send our manuscripts, the result of long labor sometimes of years, to a publisher. The publisher and his staff criticize every manuscript ruthlessly. The writer has the hard choice of accepting the criticism or of not getting his book published.

So far he has of course earned nothing. When the book is published, professional newspaper and magazine critics tear it to pieces again. The writer, if he has common sense, benefits as much as he can from this criticism also, for future use in the next book.

The writer runs a third and final gamut of criticism. It is from the public. The public likes his book or does not. The writer can earn a living only if the public buys his book. He loses everything, his time, his energy, if the public does not like his book. The writer emerges from this continuing experience a very realistic person. His goal is doing as good a job as he can. He accepts criticism as inevitable and valuable. He has become, in short, a good professional. He

learns to be a good professional because he has to be, if he is to continue as a writer.

This is true of all good professionals. To fly to one's own defense with bitter and personal feelings marks the amateur.

We must as lay citizens help the social worker to attain true professionalism in the full sense of a noble word. The best expert is the one who is able to realize that while he is indispensable and he takes pride in being indispensable, he is only part of the whole, and he must measure his achievement not by how much progress he makes in comparison with the past, but how much he makes in comparison with the goal.

It is not only the professional worker in the field of adoption whom the citizen must observe critically. Almost without exception agencies and institutions have boards of trustees or directors. Members of boards are equally responsible. Again almost without exception these boards meet for superficial or inconsequential discussion. Few members take seriously and personally the responsibility they have assumed.

Yet it is the duty of the board members to scrutinize not only the activity of an agency or institution within itself, but constantly to measure its achievement against the whole need. It is not enough for an agency to place well 100 children per year if statistics in one state alone reveal 60,000 dependent children in institutions, for one reason or another. A board is delinquent if it is content to ignore the total situation. Social workers should be encouraged by continuing support, they should be applauded for good work. At the same time they should be honored by severe and constant criticism. One tempers criticism to the inferior but tempered criticism is an insult among equals.

THE goal in the field of adoption, I take it, is to free every institutionalized child to enter a good home and thus to benefit by his natural right to a family. The good social worker, the good board member, should refuse to recognize as permanent any barrier which prevents the child now living as an orphan from being adopted.

It should be the duty of a citizens' committee, such as I plead for here, to remain permanently in office.

When we have citizens' committees in each state, these committees should at once begin to work in unison to break down the present laws between states which keep children orphans. According to the most recent

from page 64

statistics I have been able to find (1948), almost three fourths of our states have laws relating to the importation of children. The barriers are almost like those between nations. Indeed it is actually easier sometimes for a couple to adopt a child from a foreign country than from a neighboring state.

Agencies are urging that state legislatures continue to pass laws making it difficult for children from other states to be accepted for adoption. Such a law is being pressed now upon the legislature of the State of Washington, one of the letters upon my desk informs me this very day as I write. Thus another barrier is being raised.

Nearly all states require agencies to post a bond of at least \$1,000—perhaps more—before a child can enter. Many states require that adoptive parents be residents, either permanently or for a year. This is very limiting for adoptions.

There are other legal limitations. In both Texas and Louisiana among others, for example, the law requires that child and adopting parents be of the same race. Texas specifically forbids negro-white adoptions. When local prejudices are traditional and strong, we must of course allow for a period of transition but in that period the influence of education should be put to work.

As it is now in most states, investigating agencies must still proclaim the race and religion of the child's origin. Even where there is no specific law governing a case, judges are too often arbitrary and allow their own prejudices to forbid an adoption.

Many states require by law that a child can only be adopted by a family of the same religion as the birth parents professed. It is the shame of agencies that they have accepted such laws instead of protesting.

IN RECENT years it has actually become increasingly difficult to receive approval for adoptions involving different religions, though there may be in some states a permissive law allowing for exceptions. The excuse that social workers usually give is that they do not dare, or do not wish, "to make trouble." This is understandable in their present insecurity as a professional group. It provides another reason, however, for a strong citizens' committee to uphold them in helping to change laws and customs.

It should be the duty of the citizens' committees, therefore, to study the codified laws of each state most critically, with the purpose of determining what laws hinder rather than help orphaned children. Efforts should be made to have laws uniform, or to have a generalized federal law which could apply to the country as a whole, so that a child can be adopted anywhere and by the most suitable family to be found. It is the duty of all to see that orphaned children everywhere find family and home. A large order for citizens! Yes, but not for American citizens. A professional group of social workers criticized, aided and supported by citizens, could make far greater progress than is now being made. To have the approval of a vast body of citizens is to remove fear from the professional, and, fearless, most social workers I believe would rise beyond routine and mediocrity. I know that there are secret and subtle fears now which haunt many social workers, compelling them to silence or to secret communication. They know better than they do.

While we are opening doors, let us open all doors. Why not? We live in the United States of America. Here nothing is impossible. Here we can speak and act. Let us set the children free.

[THE END]

"I am the Better Woman for having my two Black Children"

The famous Nobel novelist, who has lived "where white is the undesirable color," tells what it is like to adopt across racial lines.

By Pearl Buck

THIS HAS BEEN a pleasant week. Two of my daughters spent unexpected time with me. While we try to cross paths as often as possible, we are professional women, each with her life to live, her own work to do.

The two who met me this week are, I think, exceptional young women. Both are married. One lives with her professor husband on a Vermont college campus not far from me. They have been married four years but have no children. The other daughter lives in Pennsylvania and has a beautiful son now nearly two years old.

These two daughters are adopted. The older one, who is 25, met me in Boston this week and joined me in a television show. I did not urge her to come. I never urge my children. I know better. My family life and my professional and business life have always been separate.

My children know what I do, where I am, where I go. They can always reach me. Since they are now grown men and women, I never ask them to call, to write, or to visit me unless they wish. Our relationship is deep but never demanding. They know I love them and I know they love me. If need comes, as sometimes it does, we get into instant communication, and help is there. Fortunately, we are all healthy and we all work, and communication is normally just for pleasure.

I was pleased, therefore, when my 25-year-old caught an early plane and appeared in my Boston hotel suite. She is a beautiful young woman, and she wore a new pants suit so striking that it might have overcome a person less handsome. Her hair, straight and dark, had red-gold glints and hung long over her shoulders, but was held back from her face. The clog-heeled high boots she wore with her modish outfit made her look taller. In she burst, in top form and high spirits as usual, gave me a hearty kiss, and joined me immediately at breakfast.

"Wonderful that you're here," I said, "but I thought you wanted to be what you always call 'private.'"

She laughed. "I thought it would be fun for once."

She is a cheerful soul, ebullient, charming, opinionated. I never argue with her, because I enjoy her opinions without agreeing or disagreeing. I had my turn when she was little and when she was growing up. Now she has a right to herself. She even advises me. I always listen with interest and then do what I like. She accepts this.

My husband and I thought our family of five adopted children was complete when she first came to us. Her birth mother was a girl in a small town in Germany. Her father was an American soldier who was killed. He was black. The German mother said his black child was despised in her town and had no future there. She begged his university president in Washington to find the father's family.

I was a trustee of the university. We tried to find the family, but they had disappeared without trace. What then should we do with the child? From experience we knew that the little black children from Germany had difficulty adjusting to black mothers.

The president looked at me. "Would you . . ."

"Of course I will," I said. "We'd love to have another child."

I lived in a white community. But I knew it would make no difference to me or to my husband that this child was black, and since it made no difference to us, it should make no difference to our white children. If it did, I wanted to know it and see to it that attitudes were changed. If there were wrong attitudes in the school or community, I would see to that, too. If the basic love was in the home, the child would be fortified enough to be a survivor.

At any rate, she would fare better in our home than she would where she was. That was the final argument.

She arrived at our house on Thanksgiving Day—five years old, bone-thin, weighing only 35 pounds, speaking only German. She had been airsick, she was unwashed, she was terrified, but she did not cry. Later, years later, she told me her German mother had simply put her on the plane without telling her where she was going. She had promised to return in a moment, but had never come back.

That plucky little thing, so alone, those enormous haunted eyes! Tears come to my eyes now when I think of her that day. I took her in my arms and held her. Her heart was beating so hard that it shook her small, emaciated frame.

I carried her upstairs and gently, slowly, gave her a bath. It was her first, and she was terrified all over again, scratching and clawing like a small, wild cat. I lifted her into a big soft bath towel and sat in a rocking chair and rocked her slowly to and fro, to and fro, until she relaxed. She did not cry. She was too frightened.

After an hour or so she fell asleep from exhaustion. I stayed with her

all night. For days she never left my side and for nights I stayed with her until she could be left. The door between our rooms was always open until, months later, she could let it be closed and not mind.

She was our child. When my husband died, she was my child. I am glad he lived long enough to share in her adoption. The ceremony was a double one. I asked the judge to ask her, too, to adopt us. She was then old enough to understand. It was a beautiful and sacred little ceremony, just the four of us in his private chambers. It sealed our love.

The years passed. She went to public school, developed a strong personality, fearless, independent, sometimes difficult. She had to be rid of all fear before she gave up lying as a protection. The result today is a strong, outspoken, fearless woman with a mind of her own. And yet love, our love, has helped her to try to understand other people. She understands both black people and white. She is in the deepest, truest sense a bridge between two peoples, to both of whom she belongs by birth.

Of course there were problems. We met them head on. She was my child and I would not brook the slightest nonsense from ignorant, prejudiced, small-minded people.

When she encountered nasty remarks from white people or black, we talked about it frankly. I explained that when I was a little girl in China, the Chinese made strange remarks about me. In China, I was the wrong color, for my skin was white instead of brown, my eyes were blue instead of black, and my hair was light instead of dark. I taught my children to feel sorry for people who made rude or nasty remarks about such differences.

My daughter and I knew we understood each other. I was happy when, though she had not finished college,

she married a fine young Jewish man and brought into my family yet another element. That he was able to marry two prejudices, so to speak, assured me of his own maturity and common sense. I am very proud of him as my son-in-law and, best of all, we are good friends. I do not doubt the marriage has its stormy moments, for he is an only and much-loved son, grandson and nephew in his own Jewish family, and my daughter has a strong, independent personality of her own. But there is understanding and love, and whatever their differences, they do not bring them to me nor would I hear them if they did.

Adopting a black child into my white family has taught me much I could not otherwise have known. Although I have many black friends and read many books by black writers, I rejoice that I have had the deep experience of being mother to a black child. I have seen her grow to womanhood in my house and go from it to her own home, a happy bride and wife. It has been a rich experience and it continues to be. It has brought me into the whole world. I loved to hear the great singer, Marian Anderson, sing that song, *He's Got the Whole World in His Hands*. Now I know what it means.

"Mommy, please find me a little sister." It was a natural request at a time when the older children were growing up and off to college.

Being always in touch with the children of American servicemen and Asian women in Asia—those piteous lonely children whom no country claims—I found in a Japanese orphanage a little seven-year-old girl and brought her home with me. She, too, was of a black father. She, too, I adopted. At first she spoke only Japanese, but her lively mind soon discovered English.

How my two brown children enlivened our household! They loved

each other and at the same time quarreled loudly. Born sisters could not have loved each other with more fervor and storm. Their temperaments were so alike that they disagreed constantly and made up with loud devotion. I was torn between laughter and distress.

As far as I knew—and I knew everything sooner or later from this articulate pair—there was no difficulty in the neighborhood because of race or color. They had friends in abundance, both black and white. They never belonged to a "black only" or "white only" group. Both girls were full of fun and inventiveness and carried laughter with them. Such rebuffs as they met, if any, they handled with spirit.

We have few blacks in our conservative neighborhood, although our household was—and is—an interracial and international one with color taken as a matter of course. We had Negro friends who came to our house and brought their children. We had Chinese friends, and Indian friends, but there was never an emphasis on color.

Of course I taught my daughters to stand up for themselves and to be proud of what they were—my daughters. As they blossomed into their teens, they had friends who were white or black. Both were equally welcome in our home. Good behavior and not color was the criterion.

Let me say here that the attitude of adoptive parents is most important. If the parents are doubtful, if they are fearful, if they are not strong enough, secure enough in themselves, to accept children of a race different from their own, they should not adopt such children. My black children knew and know that color means nothing to me. Whatever they might meet outside they could cope with because at home there was only love and acceptance.

Discipline, yes, but administered with reason and full explanation.

As they grew into young womanhood, they had suitors of both races. They chose finally to marry white men and they married young, though not too young. Both young men are of good family. The families accepted the marriages. I am sure—or I feel sure—that they would have preferred white girls, but they have accepted warmly enough my daughters. I do not know how much the fact that they were my daughters influenced them. If it does, they do not show it.

Both my black daughters are quite beautiful, and as they were growing up, they became used to comments about how pretty they were. Never at any time did they say they would rather be white. Nor did either ever express a desire to see her natural parents or to live with black families.

The younger daughter has a little son, now about two years old. He is a winsome, merry, highly intelligent human being. He is one-quarter Negro, one-quarter Japanese, and half white. With his charm and beauty he will dance his way through life.

His mother, now a competent, successful young designer of fashions, manages her own life surprisingly well. Yes, both she and her older sister experience occasional slights, but their childhood lives have been secure enough so they know how to handle such situations.

Recently I invited my elder black daughter to accompany me on a business trip to West Virginia. She accepted without thought and then reconsidered.

"You don't understand that not everyone is like you," she explained. "You have no feelings about race whatsoever, and you take it for granted that no one else does. I know better and I will not put myself into

(Continued on page 64)

Pearl Buck

(Continued from page 23)

the position of being in an atmosphere where there is prejudice against my race."

I accepted this decision without comment or distress. She had faced her own self and made her decision wisely. She was secure in herself, she had her own pride, she would simply live her life among people who accept her as a person. I understood that from my own experience. I have lived in parts of the world where white is the undesirable color. I prefer not to live in those places. There are other places where white is acceptable.

In sum, should white people adopt homeless black children? My answer is yes, if they feel the same love for a black child as for a white one. It all depends on their own capacity for love. The community? Never mind the community if the parents accept the child wholeheartedly. There will be situations that need to be handled, but if the parents are free of prejudice the child will be secure enough to handle them without damage. He would face them anyway, and he can do so better if he has the experience of love at home.

In short, his chances are better with love than without. Love is color blind.

And love works both ways. Reared in a home where white people love him, a black child will not hate white people simply because they happen to be white. Love will not discriminate.

I would not have missed the interesting experience of adopting children of races different from my own. They have taught me much. They have stretched my mind and heart. They have brought me, through love, into kinship with peoples different from my own conservative, proud, white ancestry. I am the better woman, the wiser human being, for having my two black children. And I hope and believe they are the better, too, and the more understanding of me and my people because of their white adoptive parents.

At least I know that there is no hate in them. No, there is no hate in them at all.

TH

The Reunion of Adoptees and Birth Relatives

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An increasing number of adult adoptees are insisting that they have a constitutionally based civil right to have access to their "sealed" birth records which would reveal the true identity of their natural parents. This study investigated the outcome of 11 cases of reunion between adoptees and birth mothers. The majority felt that they had personally benefitted from the reunion even though in some of the cases the adoptees were disillusioned and disappointed in their birth relatives. There are many reasons why an adoptee feels a need to search for more information on his birth parents or to seek out a reunion; in many cases, the true purpose remains unconscious. It would appear that very few adoptees are provided with enough background information to be incorporated into their developing ego and sense of identity. Feelings of genealogical bewilderment cannot be discounted as occurring only in maladjusted or emotionally disturbed individuals.

INTRODUCTION

In both psychiatric settings and adoption agencies, we have been encountering a number of adopted adolescents and young adults struggling with iden-

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tity problems and an urgent need to find out more about their genealogical background. In some cases they are requesting information that had been denied to them by their adoptive parents, whereas others are already in the process of searching out clues and facts that might eventually lead to a reunion with their birth parents. Some have been adamant in their requests to the adoption agencies about their rights to specific identifying data. The majority of the adoptees have a primary interest in their birth mother, a lesser number in their birth siblings, and an even smaller number in their birth fathers. There has also been an increasing number of birth parents returning to the agencies requesting information about their relinquished children.

In the case of the adoptees who are already in psychotherapy, it is often difficult to dissociate their adoption-related conflicts from their basic emotional problems. There is a consistent pattern that emerges in many of these adoptees, however, which cannot be overlooked. Furthermore, after many of the underlying neurotic conflicts or behavior problems have been worked through, the curiosity about their hereditary background remains unchanged in many of the cases, although perhaps somewhat less intense.

The unanswerable questions these young people ponder over include "What kind of person is my birth mother?" "Why didn't she keep me?" "Does she ever think about me?" "Did she have any other children?" "Do I look like her?" "Are there any hereditary illnesses that run in the family?" A number of adoptees describe how they look about in crowds and social gatherings for anyone resembling themselves, hoping to find a lost blood relative. Others have expressed a fear of an incestual union with an unknown relative.

An increasing number of adult adoptees are insisting that they have a constitutionally based civil right to have access to their "sealed" birth records which would reveal the true identity of their natural parents. The flames of interest are being fanned by the increasing publicity being given to the subject by the media and the imminent possibility of court cases to test the legality of the present policies.

The adoptee activist movement was pioneered over 20 years ago by Jean M. Paton, an adopted social worker who searched and found her original mother when she was 47 and her mother 69. Since then, she has written and lectured regularly on the subject (Paton, 1954, 1960, 1968, 1971) and heads an organization called "Orphan Voyage" with its main office in Cedaredge, Colorado. She feels that "In the soul of every orphan is an eternal flame of hope for reunion and reconciliation with those he has lost through private or public disaster."

Paton feels that adoptees are always seen as "adopted children" and never attain a true adult status in the eyes of society. Her organization is prepared to assist adult adoptees seek information and in certain cases to locate their natural parents. She has suggested the concept of a "reunion file" whereby information

could be kept recorded on adopted children and their natural parents. The natural mother would have regular access to unidentifiable information as the child was growing up. When he reached adulthood, a reunion could be arranged if either party initiated a contact and both sides were mutually agreeable.

Probably the most publicized and active worker in the adoptee activist movement is Florence Ladden Fisher, a New York housewife, who recently founded a group called the "Adoptees' Liberty Movement Association" (ALMA) which is opening branches across the country. The organization is devoted to repealing the present laws, helping adoptees find their natural parents, and providing information to natural parents who have previously given their children up for adoption. Fisher sees the sealed records as an affront to human dignity and views the adoptees's need to know his hereditary background as a necessary part of identity formation. She describes the sense of loss and grief of the "anonymous person." She does not see why the search for the natural parents should be construed as a rejection by the adoptive parents and alleges that the outcome can actually result in a closer relationship within the adoptive family. She also points out that the adoptee is not necessarily seeking to develop a relationship with the natural mother and in no way is trying to disrupt the life she has subsequently built for herself (Fisher, 1972).

Fisher is also an adoptee who spent over 20 years searching for her natural parents after the death of her adoptive parents. In her recent book (Fisher, 1973), she describes in vivid detail her own emotional turmoil and identity crisis, which she feels resolved itself with the reunion she accomplished with both her natural mother and natural father. In the subsequent years, she has developed a very close relationship with her father but a more tenuous relationship with her mother.

There is great concern today among adoption workers and agencies that there will be a greater number of adoptees returning for identifying information as a result of the support and reinforcement provided by ALMA. If Paton and Fisher are correct in their assumptions, most adoptees have an innate curiosity about their genealogical past, and in some, irrespective of their adoptive relationship, this surfaces into a burning drive or obsessive need for some kind of contact or reunion with the natural parent, usually the mother. According to them, the only restraining force in the past has been the fear of hurting the adoptive parents or the reluctance to intrude on the lives of the natural parents.

The publicity generated by Florence Fisher and ALMA has also generated a great deal of anxiety in adoptive parents. They have been concerned that this activist organization might encourage their children to run off and search for their birth parents in a state of adolescent rebellion. We have found that the adoptive parents are usually reassured to learn that ALMA is primarily concerned with the rights of emancipated adult adoptees.

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH STUDY

It became clear after consulting with various adoption agencies that there was a need for a study which would clarify many of these controversial issues and provide guidelines for the establishment of future adoption policy, at both the agency and court levels. This collaborative effort between a psychiatrist in private practice and two experienced adoption social workers is an outgrowth of this community concern.

The only previous research project to study the psychological factors involved in the adoptee's determination to search for his natural parents was done by Triseliotis (1973). He studied 70 adult adoptees who wrote or called the Register House in Edinburgh, Scotland, for their original birth certificate over a 2-year period. In Scotland, the adoption records are not kept "sealed" as they are in most countries in the world. The information the adoptees were able to obtain included when and where they were born, the natural parents, names and addresses, and the natural parents' occupations at the time of his birth. A large percentage of the adoptees initiating their search were in their middle to late 20s.

In this group, Triseliotis found that 60% desired a reunion with one or both of the natural parents (usually the mother), 37% desired further background information (on both parents), and the remaining 3% had practical goals in mind (civil service application, marriage license, etc.). He found that the majority of the group learned about their adoption in late adolescence and many reported a poor adoptive relationship with strained communication in all areas. As might be expected, Triseliotis found that the greater the dissatisfaction with the family relationship and with themselves the greater the possibility that they would now be seeking a reunion, whereas the better the image of themselves and of their parents the greater likelihood that they were merely seeking background information.

In this entire group, there were only 11 who made contact with their natural relatives. Two adoptees met their natural mothers, and the remaining seven adoptees met siblings. In two cases, the adoptees transferred their negative attitudes toward their adoptive parents onto the natural parents. In one case, the natural parents could not match up to the qualities of the deceased adoptive parents and created a sense of disillusionment in the adoptee. In the other case, the natural parents had married after giving the child up for adoption. Although they were both receptive to the adoptee, she felt guilty and disloyal toward her adoptive parents. None of these cases resulted in a meaningful new relationship with the birth parents (Triseliotis, 1973).

Triseliotis did not study the long-range outcomes of these reunions as they had occurred within a few years of his research investigation. We were particularly interested in this aspect of the phenomenon but were also limited by having access to only a few cases of consummated reunion. Our research efforts were

enhanced, however, by an article in the *Los Angeles Times* (Lilliston, 1973) which brought the controversy over the "sealed records" to the attention of a large population center and requested that interested readers write in with their own personal experiences and reactions. As a result of this article, we gained access to a number of adoptees and birth parents who had undergone a reunion in the past and were willing to share their experiences with us.

We do not view our project as completed in any sense. It is only in the pilot stage and, at best, can provide some preliminary observations and impressions. Unfortunately, this is not the type of research that lends itself to careful design with questionnaires, interviews, and adequate controls done on a random basis. The study is obviously hampered by the dependence on persons showing enough concern and interest to volunteer to participate in the study. We feel that these obstacles should not act as an impediment, however, to our efforts at clarifying issues of great concern to millions of people.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The overall number of reunion cases interviewed and studied was 23. Eleven of these cases involved adoptees who were adopted in early childhood and accomplished reunions with their birth mothers. The other cases are also of interest but include other variables which complicate the analysis: late childhood adoption, adoption to relatives, reunions in childhood, etc.

The 11 cases consisted of eight female and three male adoptees. They were all reunited with their birth mothers and some had additional encounters with birth fathers (2), birth fathers who denied parentage (2), and other birth relatives (8).

A statistical breakdown of the group is as follows:

1. Age at interview: range of 31-59 (mean 49.5).
2. Religion: Protestant (6); Catholic (2); Mormon (1); Christian Science (1); Jewish (1).
3. Age at time of adoption: newborn (3); 4-6 weeks (2); 3-5 months (2); 9-12 months (3); 27 months (1).
4. Adoption proceedings: private (4); agency (7).
5. Birth parents' marital status: unwed (8); extramarital illegitimacy (1); marital conflict with father denying parentage (1); married but death of father shortly after child's birth (1).
6. Age at revelation of adoption: before 5 (2); 5-10 (5); 14-18 (2); 29-30 (2). Four out of 11 (36%) learned about the adoption after the age of 10.
7. Manner of revelation and reaction:
 - a. Learned from parents (7).
 - i. Five were told directly: upset and rejected (2) and no reaction (3).

- ii. One learned from a "slip of the tongue" at age 18: "an upsetting experience."
 - iii. One learned at age 30 after incessant questioning: upset and relieved at the same time, always had the "feeling" she was adopted.
- b. Learned from others (4).
 - i. One was told by a friend (age 7) and one was told by an aunt (age 10): both were "puzzled" and "confused."
 - ii. One learned from an outsider (age 14): denied any adverse effects.
 - iii. One learned from his fiancé (age 29): very upsetting at first, leading to a brief period of intense drug involvement and emotional disturbance, although he had always suspected he was adopted.

(Seven out of 11, 64%, found the revelation to be a traumatic experience.)
- 8. Age of adoptive parents at time of adoption:
 - a. Fathers: range of 25-65 (mean 37.4).
 - b. Mothers: range of 28-42 (mean 33.9).

(There appeared to be no direct correlation between the parental ages and the adoptees' relationship with the adoptive parents. Some of the older couples had warmer relationships with their children than the younger couples.)
- 9. Sibling status in adoptive home: only child (7); quasi-only child with only sibling 14 years older (1); one sibling, adoptive or birth (3).
- 10. Relationship with adoptive parents: good relationship (4); poor relationship with a controlling, rigid mother (6); poor relationship with an over-protective mother (1).

(Most of the group describing a poor relationship with their mothers had a better relationship with their fathers.)
- 11. Background information provided in childhood about birth parents: none or almost no information (8); information about basic ancestry (3).
- 12. Dreams and fantasies about birth parents in childhood:
 - a. Dreams: reported by none.
 - b. Fantasies: two of the women imagined the "good mother" who would solve all their problems; one man wondered about inherited physical characteristics, especially strengths; one woman fantasized about a mother who was an entertainer and would share her interest in dancing; one wondered why she had been adopted; three pondered over various thoughts such as physical characteristics, family wealth, and talents; and three denied any particular fantasies.
- 13. Marital status of adoptee group: married (4); divorced (1); divorced and remarried (2). All have children.
- 14. Factors precipitating search: marriage (4); death of an adoptive parent or parents (2); birth of own child (1); adopting own child (1); genealogical curiosity (1); accidental happenings, e.g., being in the locality of the

- adoption, being given identifying information voluntarily by clerk in record department (2).
15. Length of search:
 - a. Age at onset: range of 19-38 (mean 26).
 - b. Length of search: less than 6 months (5); 2 years (3); 8-10 years (2); 29 years (1).
 - c. Years elapsed since reunion: 29-39 years (3); 16-24 years (3); 7-13 years (3); 4 years (1); less than 1 year (1).
 - d. Age at reunion: range of 19-59 (mean 31.7).
 16. Means of searching: tricky methods of obtaining documents (5); advertisement in *Genealogical Helper* newspaper (1); finding identifying information from various sources and tracking down birth relatives by phone book, etc. (4); reunion arranged by others (1).
 17. Expectations prior to reunion: All except one were generally enthusiastic and curious. The indifferent adoptee was a woman who had passively experienced a reunion arranged by a third party who initiated the idea.
 18. Response from birth mothers at reunion: warm and accepting (5); uncomfortable reaction (3); hostile and rejecting (3).
 19. Reaction of adoptive parents to reunion: reunion not known by them (5); no negative reaction (2); mildly upset and hurt (3); very upset and hurt (1).
 20. Similarities in birth relatives' and adoptee's personality and temperament as observed by adoptee: similarities noted (4); no similarities observed (7).
 21. Follow-up outcome of reunion: meaningful relationship established (4); occasional contacts (4); strained relationship (2); no relationship or further contacts (1).
 22. Personal benefits from reunion: positive benefits (9); negative benefits with regrets (2).
 23. Assessment of adoptee's personality: positive self-esteem and identity (8); moderate problems with self-esteem and identity (2); negative self-esteem and identity (1).
 24. Brief summaries of reunions and subsequent periods:
 - a. Female.
 - i. K. R. — The reunion was "total confusion." She was treated as a "curiosity" by the family. The reunion seemed disappointing to both parties, but especially to K. R. because she had invested so much in it. She had periodic visits with her birth mother afterward, but they were not particularly close. Her half-sister became angry with K. R. for not visiting the mother while she was dying. They haven't spoken together since.
 - ii. A. C. — The reunion was a positive, loving experience for both adoptee and birth mother. The mother cried and exclaimed "my

baby." The reunion created some tension between the birth mother and her husband which worked itself out. A. C. developed a close relationship with other birth relatives and was asked to drive in the family car at her mother's funeral.

- iii. V. G. — The birth mother at first denied parenting her. Their encounter lasted for only half an hour and was disappointing to V. G. Later the mother wrote to her and asked her to mail her a picture, acknowledging that she might be her mother. There has been no response since. V. G. has continued to correspond with her half-sister.
- iv. F. L. — The birth mother was very warm and happy to meet her. She has tried to maintain a relationship, but F. L. found herself to be disappointed in her birth mother from the outset. She saw her as an unattractive, "scatterbrained" person and could feel no love or affection for her. F. L. tries to be respectful to her and sends her greeting cards on all the holidays except Mother's Day, which she refuses to acknowledge.
- v. O. G. — She found her mother extremely cold and distant. She had a brief encounter with her natural father as well. Subsequently, there was an ongoing close relationship that developed with her paternal grandfather which lasted until his death.
- vi. P. M. — She found her birth mother very uncomfortable and afraid that others would find out. P. M. was persistent, however, and they have been writing to each other regularly since the reunion. P. M. hopes they will become even closer in the future.
- vii. R. L. — The reunion was warm and loving on all sides. She was immediately accepted into a large extended Mexican-American family. She felt more comfortable in this family than with her own adoptive family, who came from a higher socioeconomic, intellectual class. There has been a continuing warm relationship.
- viii. D. A. — She found her birth mother very cold and self-centered. D. A. had never really sought out a reunion and had gone along with this at the suggestion of a clerk in the city office who had read her request for a birth certificate and realized that she was engaged to the brother of D. A.'s mother. After the initial indifferent reunion, there were two other visits of a similar nature.

b. Male

- ix. B. M. — The reunion was awkward. The birth mother appeared nervous and guilt-ridden. B. M. was conspicuously aware of the difference in their socioeconomic levels. He met other birth relatives, whom he found to be pleasant. B. M. is trying to hold down the relationship with his mother as he feels no honest affection for her. He is trying not to hurt her, as she desires to be closer to him.

- x. T. V. — The reunion was a very warm and positive experience for both. After his adoptive parents died, T. V. changed his name back to that of his birth parents, who had married after his adoption, and became an integral part of their family. His birth father had died but he sees his mother regularly.
- xi. H. W. — The reunion was very emotional. The birth mother was overjoyed and he felt a deep love for her. There has been a continuous relationship, but his birth sister has shown a great deal of envy of H. W.'s better life through adoption.

DISCUSSION

In our initial sampling of 11 adoptee reunion cases, we found that the mean age at the time of the reunion was almost 32. Eight out of the 11 were women, and the majority of the entire group expressed a primary concern in finding the birth mother with a lesser interest in siblings and the father. There was a trend in this group for a late and disruptive relation of adoption. Four out of the 11 (36%) did not find out about the adoption until after they were 10, and two of them didn't find out until they were 29 and 30. Seven out of the 11 (64%) were very upset at the time they learned about their adoption. Seven out of the 11 (64%) reported a poor relationship with their adoptive mothers, and the majority of the group were given very little to no background information about their birth parents. It is also interesting that seven of the adoptees were only children.

In spite of the rather negative picture of their adoptive families, most of the group seem to have made an overall healthy adult adjustment. Eight out of the 11 (73%) were seen as having a positive self-esteem after being interviewed. They were very sensitive to their adoptive parents' feelings, and in only three cases were the adoptive parents upset and hurt by the encounter. In four of the cases, the reunion led to a meaningful lasting relationship with the birth mother.

In some cases, the adoptees were disillusioned and disappointed in their birth relatives. In a few cases, they found themselves in the uncomfortable position of having to detach themselves from a birth mother who desired a closer relationship than they were interested in getting involved in. Nine of the group (82%) felt that they had personally benefitted from the reunion, no matter what the outcome was. Their curiosity was satisfied and unknown mysteries were resolved which allowed them to feel more "whole" and integrated as individuals.

It would appear that very few adoptees are provided with enough background information to be incorporated into their developing ego and sense of identity. Frequently this is due to a reluctance on the part of the adoptive parents to impart known information, especially of a negative nature, which might hurt the child. The adoptees are often reticent to ask genealogical ques-

tions because they sense their parents' insecurities in this area. Information given adoptive couples at the time they adopt is scanty and usually descriptive of an immature, confused adolescent unwed mother and father. They are not provided with a follow-up as to what kind of people they became 18 or 20 years later.

The desire for background information is ubiquitous to all adoptees but can become a burning issue for some, simply because they have bright, curious minds and approach all of life's mysteries in the same manner. This may have nothing to do with the quality of the adoptive relationship, as many of the searching adoptees are preoccupied with existential concerns and a feeling of isolation and alienation due to the break in the continuity of life through the generations that their adoption represents. For some, the existing block to the past may create a feeling that there is a block to the future as well. The adoptee's identity formation must be viewed within the context of the "life cycle" in which birth and death are closely linked unconsciously. This becomes evident when we observe how frequently marriage, the birth of the adoptee's first child, or the death of his adoptive parent triggers off an even greater sense of genealogical bewilderment.

This is not to say that there aren't adoptees who have an obsessive need to search for their birth parents because of neurotic problems or secondary to an emotionally barren relationship with their adoptive parents. Some of these persons are perpetual searchers, always stopping short of a reunion. It is the search itself, and the associated fantasies, which is the significant process that serves to hold these persons together. It would appear that these individuals would almost prefer to live with their fantasies, a prolongation of the classic family romance theme, rather than face reality with a possible disillusioning reunion with the birth parent. The obsessive preoccupation serves to repress from consciousness feelings of profound loneliness and depression.

It is also important to distinguish from these other situations a special form of quasi-searching. We are referring to the adolescent adoptee who goes through a period of threatening his parents with the idea of going off and searching for his birth parents. This is actually a typical example of adolescent acting-out which is no different than the nonadoptive's threatening to run away or move into his own apartment. The adoptive parents are especially vulnerable to such threats and often overreact with intense fear or anger, which only serves to reinforce their youngster's manipulative powers.

There are many reasons why an adoptee feels a need to search for more information on his birth parents or to seek out a reunion; in many cases, the true purpose remains unconscious. We have classified the reasons for searching into the following categories: (1) medical necessity or other practical considerations; (2) genealogical curiosity; (3) a fantasy of being reunited with the idealized "good parent," often as a result of a poor relationship with the adoptive parent; (4) the late revelation of adoption with resulting bewilderment and confusion; (5) a need for a love object to counter feelings of loneliness and depression; and the desire to replace an object lost through illness or death.

We can anticipate that there will be an increase in the number of reunions in the future. The publicity on the subject in the media will undoubtedly enable those individuals who previously felt unique in having these interests in their birth parents to mobilize their suppressed efforts and begin searching. The assistance of the developing network of adoptee activist groups will also lead to more efficient means of searching and accomplishing reunions. There is also an increasing tendency for adoption agencies to "bend the rules" and act as mediator or negotiator when both parties are agreeable to a reunion.

The sealed record can be expected to be tested repeatedly by the courts as a civil rights issue. Adoptive parents, birth parents, and adoptees were queried as to their attitudes regarding any possible change in adoption policy. The adoptees and birth parents were inclined to a liberalization of the existing policies, but the adoptive parents were more resistant to change. All three groups seemed to like the idea of mediating boards being established to investigate and evaluate the feasibility of proposed reunions. This was not without controversy, however, as some of the adoptees and birth parents viewed the mediating boards as still another opportunity for outside parties to control their destinies, which they feel has been the problem all along.

CONCLUSIONS

It would appear that adoptees feel a greater lack of biological connection and continuity than has been heretofore accepted. These feelings of genealogical bewilderment cannot be discounted as occurring only in maladjusted or emotionally disturbed individuals. The degree to which an adoptee is able to resolve questions about his identity, without having more complete information about his birth parents and without the opportunity of a reunion, must be thoroughly reconsidered.

The reunion between adoptee and birth parent is a very emotional and potentially traumatic experience for all members of the adoption triangle: the adoptee, the birth parents, and the adoptive parents. For the adoptee, it may be the only means of satisfying preoccupying questions and concerns. The reunion may result in a closure of existing gaps in the adoptee's identity structure. Less frequently does it result in a meaningful relationship and rarely in a typical parent-child association. For the birth parent, it may provide an opportunity for working through unresolved guilt feelings and satisfying curiosity about the child's outcome and current welfare.

Although we view the adoption reunion as a highly explosive experience, our findings would not indicate that it is necessarily traumatic or destructive to either adoptee or birth parent. Furthermore, the reunion does not appear to have had any serious effect on the existing relationship between the adoptee and adoptive parents in most of the cases studied.

With the possibility that such reunions are likely to increase in the future, it is necessary for adoption workers and other mental health professionals to become better acquainted with the dynamics involved. Professional experiences with such reunions must be published and shared with others so that we can enlarge on our now very limited, but hopefully growing body of knowledge, in this sensitive area which touches on the lives of millions of people.

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Opening the Sealed Record in Adoption— The Human Need for Continuity*

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DOES the possibility that adoption records may be opened to enable adult adoptees to search for their birth-parents open up a pandora's box? Adoptive parents, who have been doing the parenting, are fearful that they may lose their children to the birth-parents. Adoptees are insisting that they have a right to information about their background, a civil right, they believe, which should be granted to all adoptive persons when they reach the age of 18. Birth-parents who relinquished their rights when their children were placed for adoption may see this as an invasion of their privacy. They are the most vulnerable and the least prepared for the consequences that may result should the sealed records be opened. The issues confronting us are complex and extremely sensitive ones, that touch deeply upon the lives of many millions of people. We must, therefore, examine our current policies so that we can develop appropriate services that respond to these emerging needs.

The following letter, appearing in *The Family Tree*, a publication of the Vista Del Mar Adoption Guild, presents the feelings of an adoptive mother about the possibilities that her adopted child may wish to search for his birth parents:

* Presented at the Annual meeting of the National Conference of Jewish Communal Services, San Francisco, June 4, 1974.

The question of whether adoption records should be sealed or open to adults who were adopted as children has recently become a "hot" issue. Those in favor of open records cite parents who have adopted as an obstacle; those opposed to open records give parents who have adopted as a reason.

As a parent who has adopted, I take issue with both sides. It is true that our son came to us through adoption, but it is the relationship and love that have developed that makes him our son and us his parents. The relationship will continue and grow until he becomes an adult. Then it will be time for us, as for all parents, to recognize that our son is a unique, individual adult in his own right.

I cannot say whether or not he will have deeply disturbing questions about the people whose genes gave him life, his physical appearance, and possibly even his potential. I can only be prepared to give him honest answers to his questions as he grows. If he does have questions when he reaches adulthood, I hope that somehow he can find answers that will give him peace of mind. It will be a decision that he, as a unique individual, must make.

I will not feel threatened or hurt if he should decide to seek out his birth-parents. When he became our son, we wanted no guarantees that he would accept us forever with never a thought of the people who gave him life. We only wanted to love him and have the privilege of sustaining and nurturing that life. He has another "mother" somewhere, but I am his Mother. He will have no memories of her—she was not there to comfort him when he was sick, she was not there when his fingers were slammed in the door, she will not be there for his first day of school or for his graduation.

Even if our son should some day meet his birth-parents, why should we feel threatened? If he should become friends with them, or grow

to love them, it would not diminish the relationship that we share with him. Love for one individual does not diminish because we also love another individual. If knowing and loving his birth-parents would give our son more security and happiness, we would welcome the opportunity for him. We love him — his happiness will make us happy.

A letter from a 21-year-old adoptee, hoping that the doctor who delivered her would forward it to her birth-mother, highlights the problems facing some adoptees. The letter states:

Dr. Smith must have explained to you who this letter is from. I'm Jennie.

This is the most difficult letter I've ever written. If it's awkward and hard to understand please forgive me. My twenty-first birthday finally came and now after waiting all my life to find out all about you, I don't know what to say or do. I don't know how it has been for you. But for me, being adopted has meant many things.

It's fun because it gets attention, painful because of all the unanswered questions. And wonderful because I have such a beautiful family. I love my family as much as anyone can if not more, and I am always aware of how fortunate I am to have them, but in the background, I have always known you were there — somewhere. I am so curious about my heritage, who you are and who my natural father was.

I don't want to bring back memories, that may be painful for you. But if you could please write to me and tell me things, like your birthday, his birthday, where you both were from, how you met, what happened to him, what was his name; if I could only see pictures of you all. There are so many missing pieces, things I've always wanted to know. The Jones family is so proud of their heritage. I look in the family albums and see the resemblances of the faces of the mothers and daughters. Then I look at my girl friends and see the images of their mothers in their eyes. It has always intrigued me.

I wonder if I look like my natural father. There just isn't too much you could tell me. If you could even loan me some pictures, I promise to return them.

I am living in Inglewood right now. I live with my friend Joan, my dog Alice, cat Sadie, my bird Cici, my fish Ginger Rogers.

Within the next month or so I'll be moving. I want to go back to school so I'm moving home before I go back to college. I'd like to meet you before I leave.

I'm afraid, I don't know how to relate to you.

I'm grateful to you and I'm curious about you and your family, but, I don't know what to think of you. It's strange to think I have another Mother, someone to whom I owe my existence, but who really isn't a mother.

My true mother is the woman who raised me and cared for me. And I love her very much. Right now I'm so confused with who I am and what I should do with my life that I wouldn't know how to feel toward you. But I do want to hear from you. Would you please write to me? If you like I will write again and tell you anything you want to know about me. I hope I have not hurt you or intruded too far into the past. Thank you for giving me the most beautiful gift of all. LIFE.

Does an adoptee, such as the 21-year-old girl who wrote the letter above have the right to identifying information about herself that may lead to a reunion with her birth-parent(s)? If so, what are the implications of this for adoptive parents, birth-parents, adoptees and all those in the helping professions who are being called upon to provide answers to the very complex and far reaching issues involved.

This article deals with a brief historical review of the sealed record in adoptions, examines the positions of advocacy groups on behalf of the adoptee, and reports upon the results of data gathered from adoptees, adoptive parents and birth-parents, that speak to some of these issues.

Adoption legislation in the U.S. has always been enacted at a state level with a great deal of individual variation and interpretation. In general, the 50 states provide the adopted child with the same basic rights as a natural child to protection, maintenance and education from his parents. It is generally accepted that the finality of the legal termination of the birth-parents' rights and responsibilities, along with closed identification of the parties involved, is a protection to the child, the natural parents and the adoptive parents. The adoptive parents are assured of privacy and a lack of interfer-

ence from the natural mother while the natural mother is given the opportunity to make a new life for herself.

Beginning in the late 1940's, laws were passed in most of the states keeping information identifying the natural parents confidential and available to adult adoptees only through special court order. At the present time only Alabama, Arizona, Connecticut and Kansas do not keep the records completely sealed.¹ The policies are quite different in Scotland and Finland, however, where the adult adoptee has access to official records and information that could lead to the tracing of the original parents. In Scotland, for example, any person over the age of 17 can write to or visit the Register House in Edinburgh and, on production of evidence about himself, ask for a copy of his original birth certificate.

One of the original purposes of the sealed record was to protect the child from the stigma attached to his illegitimate status. This was further accomplished by providing the adoptee with a new birth certificate containing only the names of the adoptive parents. In recent years some states have added the word "amended" to these birth certificates to indicate that they have been altered.

The adult adoptee has the legal recourse to petition the original court that handled the adoption and ask for the records to be unsealed. The courts are generally conservative regarding such matters and will open the records in unusual cases where matters of health, property inheritance or other such practical issues are at stake.

The Adoptee Activist Movement

Challenging this concept are two adoptee activist organizations. One was

pioneered over 20 years ago by Jean M. Paton, an adopted social worker, who searched and found her original mother when she was 47 and her mother 69. Since then she has written and lectured on the subject,^{2,3} and heads an organization called *Orphan Voyage* with its main office in Cedaredge, Colorado. She has suggested the concept of a "reunion file" whereby information could be kept recorded on adopted children and their natural parents. The natural mother would have regular access to unidentifiable information as the child was growing up. When he reached adulthood a reunion could be arranged if either party initiated a contact and both sides were agreeable.⁴

Probably the most publicized and active worker in the adoptee activist movement is Florence Ladden Fisher, a New York housewife, who recently founded a group called the *Adoptees' Liberty Movement Association* (ALMA) which is opening branches across the country. The organization is devoted to repealing the present laws, helping adoptees find their natural parents and providing information to natural parents who have previously given their children up for adoption. Fisher sees the sealed records as an affront to human dignity and views the adoptee's need to know his hereditary background as a necessary part of identity formation. She describes the sense of loss and grief of the "anonymous person." She does not see why the search for the natural parents should be construed as a rejection by the adoptive parents and alleges that the outcome can actually result in a closer

² Jean M. Paton, *The Adopted Break Silence*, Life History Study Center, Acton, California, 1954.

³ Jean M. Paton, *Orphan Voyage*, Vantage, New York, 1968.

⁴ A bill recently introduced by Assemblyman Keene (AB3320) in the California Legislature, sets up an Adoption Exchange whereby adult adoptees and birth-parents may indicate their interest in reunions.

¹ Barbara Prager and S. Rothstein, "The Adoptee's Right to Know His Natural Heritage", *New York Law Forum*, Volume XIX, No. 1 (1973), pp. 137-156.

relationship within the adoptive family. She also points out that the adoptee is not necessarily seeking to develop a relationship with the natural mother and in no way is trying to disrupt the life she has subsequently built for herself.⁵

Fisher is also an adoptee who spent over 20 years searching for her natural parents after the death of her adoptive parents. In her recent book⁶ she describes in vivid detail her own emotional turmoil and identity crisis which she feels resolved itself with the reunion she accomplished with both her natural mother and natural father. In the subsequent years she has developed a very close relationship with her father, but a more tenuous relationship with her mother.

There is great concern today among adoption workers and agencies that there will be a greater number of adoptees returning for identifying information as a result of the support and reinforcement provided by ALMA and the news media. Some agencies have occasionally agreed to mediate in a reunion between an adoptee and his natural parent when both parties have been mutually agreeable. In some of these cases the initial request was made by the parent and not the adoptee. Most of the consummated reunions have not been arranged by a third party, however, and come about after years of emotionally draining searches that may cover one end of the country to the other. It is the aim of ALMA to assist these determined individuals to achieve their end with less frustration and trauma.

Responses to a Newspaper Article

An article that appeared in the Los Angeles Times⁷ brought our research

⁵ Florence Fisher, *The Search for Anna Fisher*, Arthur Fields, New York, 1973.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Lynn Lilliston, "Who Am I? Adoptees Seek Right to Know," *Los Angeles Times*, July 22, 1973, Part 10, pp. 1, 14-17.

interest in the "sealed records issue" to the attention of a large population center and requested that interested readers write and describe their own personal experiences and reactions. As a result of the article's appeal a large number of letters were received representing, or sampling, responses, of the three parties making up the adoption triangle, with the preponderance coming from the "hidden" birth-parent group. Questionnaires regarding the attitudes towards the sealed record were mailed to all those who provided forwarding addresses and arrangements were made for intensive interviews with those adoptees and birth-parents who had already experienced a reunion.

The Birth-Parents

The result was a beginning investigation of the feelings and attitudes of birth-parents years after they had relinquished their child. This challenged the traditional concept of adoption which had terminated definitively, through the sealed record, the ties between the adoptee and his birth-family. The birth-parent has been the mysterious "hidden" parent around whom the adoptee and the birth-parents have been able to weave fantasies of a positive or negative nature. This anonymous individual also has been the indirect cause of many intrapsychic conflicts and interpersonal tensions, particularly between adolescent adoptees and their adoptive parents.

The open and cooperative response of the birth-parents, especially mothers, to the newspaper article was very enlightening. Many of the 47 who responded seemed to want to come out of "hiding" in order to express very personal feelings and attitudes. There was an implication that the giving up of a child for adoption is an indelible, traumatic ex-

perience. Many of these birth-parents seemed to be existing at two levels: functioning well within marriage, family or parenting, but harboring deep emotional feelings and sharp memories of the bearing and relinquishing of a child.

A large number of the birth-mothers expressed a desire to share current information about themselves with their child and to receive periodic reports on his welfare. As a group, they seemed responsive to their children's needs and a majority would be responsive to a reunion if it would be helpful to the adoptee. Most of them expressed a reluctance to intrude upon or disrupt the lives of their child or the adoptive parents. They expressed gratitude and appreciation to the adoptive parents for caring for and raising their child. Very few of the birth-parents expressed any interest in pursuing a reunion, themselves, with their adopted child. This is not to say, however, that there are not a number of mature, well meaning birth-parents who would like to have a reunion with their child for mutually beneficial reasons.

The majority of birth-mothers conceived their child out-of-wedlock. In previous generations this act may have had more of a tendency to present a symbolic acting-out of inner conflicts than it does at present. The trend towards removing the stigma of the unwed mother may also make it easier for some of the older birth-mothers to come forth and share their feelings about their adoptive experience and subsequent life more openly, which would add greatly to our knowledge of adoption dynamics. These changes in societal attitude may also make it easier for birth-mothers to accept more readily the prospects of a reunion with their child, especially if the present laws which keep the adoption records sealed are repealed.

We recognize that definitive conclusions cannot be drawn from a relatively small number of letters. The very fact

that they responded indicates a sense of responsibility, maturity and concern on their part.

The Adoptive Parents

Approximately 170 adoptive parents, representing several adoptive parent groups, participated in group sessions at which the controversy over the sealed record was discussed. In addition to this, 12 adoptive parents responded to the newspaper articles. As a group, the adoptive parents seemed to bear an irreversible scar: infertility and its psychological sequelae. They also seemed to be overprotective parents. These tendencies are also reflected in their reaction to the adoptee activist groups and the prospects of change in adoption policy. Many fear that a liberalization of the sealed record laws would lead to a loss of their adopted child to the birth-parents, even though there is no evidence at present to back up this feeling. It would appear that this anxiety represents a resurgence of the old pre-adoption childless feeling of failure, deprivation, separation and loss. Many adoptive parents also view any interest by their children in their birth-parents as an indication that they have failed as parents.

Adoptive parents are extremely protective when it comes to looking at the prospects of their children encountering their birth-parents. They express concern about their children being hurt by a reunion and are opposed to birth-parents initiating a reunion with their children. On the other hand, they feel a great deal of empathy and concern for the birth-mother and feel it is wrong to disrupt her life by allowing their child to seek a reunion with her. The adoptive parents are usually reassured, somewhat, when they realize that the adoptee activist groups advocate a change in the present laws to affect only emancipated

adult adoptees, and not children or adolescents.

The Adoptees

It would appear that very few of the 22 adoptees who responded to the newspaper article were provided with enough background information to be incorporated into their developing ego and sense of identity. This is often not the fault of the adoption agency, but frequently because of a reluctance on the part of the adoptive parents to impart known information, especially of a negative nature, which might hurt the child. The adoptees are often reticent to ask genealogical questions because they sense their parents' insecurities in this area. The desire for background information is ubiquitous to all adoptees but can become a burning issue for some, simply because they have bright, curious minds and approach all of life's mysteries in the same manner. This may have nothing to do with the quality of the adoptive relationship.

Many adoptees are preoccupied with existential concerns and a feeling of isolation and alienation due to the break in the continuity of life through the generations that their adoption represents. For some, the existing block to the past may create a feeling that there is a block to the future as well. The adoptee's identity formation must be viewed within the context of the life cycle in which birth and death are closely linked unconsciously. This becomes evident when we observe how frequently marriage, the birth of the adoptee's first child or the death of his adoptive parent triggers off an even greater sense of genealogical bewilderment.

This is not to say that there aren't adoptees who have an obsessive need to search for their birth-parents because of neurotic problems stemming from an emotionally barren relationship with

their adoptive parents. Some of these persons are perpetual searchers, always stopping short of a reunion. It is the search itself, and the associated fantasies, which is the significant process that serves to hold these persons together. It would appear that these individuals would almost prefer to live with their fantasies, a prolongation of the classic family romance theme, rather than face reality with a possible disillusioning reunion with the birth-parent. The obsessive preoccupation serves to repress from consciousness feelings of profound loneliness and depression.

It is also important to distinguish from these other situations, a special form of quasi-searching. We are referring to the adolescent adoptee who goes through a period of threatening his parents with the idea of going off and searching for his birth-parents. This is actually a typical example of adolescent acting-out which is no different from the non-adoptee threatening to run away or move into his own apartment. The adoptive parents are especially vulnerable to such threats and often over-react with intense fear or anger, which only serve to reinforce their youngster's manipulative powers.

There are many reasons why an adoptee feels a need to search for more information on his birth-parents or to seek out a reunion, in many cases the true purpose remaining unconscious. We have classified the reasons for searching into the following categories: a) medical necessity or other practical considerations; b) genealogical curiosity; c) a fantasy of being reunited with the idealized "good parent," often as a result of a poor relationship with the adoptive parent; d) the late revelation of adoption with resulting bewilderment and confusion; e) a need for a love object to counter feelings of loneliness and depression; and f) the desire to replace an object lost through illness or death.

Reunion Cases

We were able to study the outcome of reunions between adult adoptees and their birth relatives in 23 cases, of which 11 were selected for intensive study because they represented cases of individuals adopted by non-relatives in early childhood. In the sampling there were also 3 cases of birth-mothers who had initiated a reunion with their previously relinquished child.

Concentrating on the 11 "pure" adoptee reunion cases we found that the mean age at the time of the reunion was almost 32. Eight out of the eleven were women and the majority of the entire group expressed a primary concern in finding the birth-mother with a lesser interest in siblings and the father. There was a trend in this group for a late and disruptive revelation of adoption. Four out of the eleven did not find out about the adoption until after they were 10 and two of them didn't find out until they were 29 and 30. Seven out of the eleven were very upset at the time they learned about their adoption. Seven out of the eleven reported a poor relationship with their adoptive mothers and the majority of the group were given very little, to no background information about their birth-parents. It is also interesting that seven of the adoptees were only children in the family.

In spite of the rather negative picture of their adoptive families, most of the group seems to have made an overall healthy adult adjustment. Eight out of the eleven were adjudged in the interview as having a positive self-esteem. They were very sensitive to their adoptive parents' feelings and in only three cases were the adoptive parents upset and hurt by the encounter. In four of the cases the reunion led to a meaningful lasting relationship with the birth-mother.

In some cases the adoptees were disillusioned and disappointed in their birth-relatives. In a few cases they found themselves in the uncomfortable position of having to detach themselves from a birth-mother who desired a closer relationship than they were interested in. Nine of the group felt that they had personally benefitted from the reunion, no matter what the outcome was. Their curiosity was satisfied and unknown mysteries were resolved which allowed them to feel more "whole" and integrated as individuals.

Judging from our few cases of birth-mothers who initiated the reunion, it would appear that such experiences are more difficult for the adoptee to handle. Perhaps this is because he hasn't had the opportunity to do the necessary psychological working-through to prepare him for such an encounter as in the case of the adoptee who has been searching for his birth-parents for a number of months or years. We also studied one case where the reunion was arranged by a third party, rather than as a result of the adoptee's own primary interest. As might be expected the adoptee reacted with a kind of indifference, as if she was meeting a total stranger she had nothing in common with.

We can anticipate that there will be an increase in the number of reunions in the future. The publicity on the subject in the media will undoubtedly enable those individuals, who previously felt unique in having these interests in their birth-parents, to mobilize their suppressed efforts and begin searching. The assistance of the developing network of adoptee activist groups will also lead to more efficient means of searching and accomplishing reunions. There is also an increasing tendency for adoption agencies to "bend the rules" and act as a mediator or negotiator when both parties are agreeable to a reunion. Changes in state laws governing the sealed rec-

ords, may also result in an increase in those searching for one another.

The sealed record is expected to be tested soon by the courts as a civil rights issue. Adoptive parents, adoptees, and birth-parents were queried as to their attitudes regarding any possible change in adoption policy. The adoptees and birth-parents were inclined to a liberalization of the existing policies but the adoptive parents were more resistant to change. All three groups seemed to like the idea of mediating boards being established to investigate and evaluate the feasibility of proposed reunions. This was not without controversy, however, as some of the adoptees and birth-parents viewed the mediating boards as still another opportunity for outside parties to control their destinies, which they feel has been the problem all along.

Significance for Jewish Families

We do not know whether these issues have special significance for Jewish families. We do know that there is historical evidence that these questions have been discussed. Norman Linzer in *The Jewish Family* draws upon the Halacha to show that Jewish law was concerned with these problems. They state:⁷

1. An adopted child may legally assume the name of the adoptive family, but retains his original status as a Kohen, Levi, or Israel.

2. The adoptive father is required to have the child circumcized, an obligation which is transferred to him from the Bet Din (Jewish Court).

3. An adopted child is required to respect and honor his new parents, though only rabbinically. Biblically, he is always bound to honor his natural parents. The laws of mourning apply only to the death of natural relatives.

⁷ Norman Linzer, *The Jewish Family*, Commission on Synagogue Relations, Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York, 1970, p. 80.

4. An adopted person may enter into a marriage with a member of his adoptive family, for no blood relations exist between them.

5. The new parents are obligated to provide for the sustenance, medical needs, religious and vocational training of the child. However, the adopted child does not automatically inherit their estate unless this was clearly stipulated.

6. An adoption constitutes a legal agreement which has the force of a solemn pledge. Accordingly, the new parents cannot renounce the child without his consent. On reaching adulthood, he cannot legally be restrained from rejoining his natural family, though this would be gross ingratitude on his part.

Implications for Future Consideration

We do not view our project as completed in any sense. It is only in the pilot stage and, at best, can provide some preliminary observations and impressions.

The study is obviously hampered by the dependence upon persons showing enough concern and interest to volunteer to participate in the study. We do not feel that we have the moral or ethical right to impose ourselves on these people for research purposes, as we have an obligation to maintain the privacy and confidentiality agreed upon at the time of the adoption. We feel that these obstacles should not act as an impediment, however, to efforts to clarify issues of great concern to millions of people.

In this respect, we believe that adoption agencies should begin to re-evaluate their position in regard to the "sealed record." The premise that has governed the philosophy and practice in the field of adoption has been that the relinquishment of the child by his birth-parents permanently severs all ties between them and the child. Although the present standards of anonymity were developed as a safeguard to all of the

people involved in adoption, they may, in fact, have been the cause of insoluble problems. In re-examining past practice and in considering emerging needs, adoption agencies should address themselves to the following:

1. A recognition that many birth-parents, particularly birth-mothers, have not resolved their feelings about relinquishing for adoption a child whom they have been told they can never see again. Many may have a life-long unfulfilled need for further information and in some cases for a contact with the relinquished child.

2. A recognition that adoptees may feel a greater lack of biological connection and continuity than has been, heretofore, accepted. These feelings of genealogical bewilderment should not be dismissed as occurring only in maladjusted or emotionally disturbed individuals. The degree to which an adoptee is able to resolve questions about his identity, without having more complete information about his birth-parents and without the opportunity of a reunion, should be studied.

3. A recognition that the aura of secrecy may have been more of a burden than a protection to adoptive parents. On the one hand, adoption agencies

have insisted that adoptees be told early and clearly about their adoption. Yet, on the other hand, little help has been provided to adoptive parents in dealing with the complicated feelings arising out of their adoptee's dual identity, nor have they been educated to understand and to disassociate themselves personally from their child's genealogical concerns and curiosity. Open access to information and the ability for the adoptee to consider contact with his birth-parents at maturity could create a more wholesome environment for parent and child.

4. A re-evaluation of the concept of confidentiality which served a purpose when the children are young, but which needs to be seen in a dynamic, changing concept as it pertains to adults with adult rights and adult needs.

5. A recognition of the need to set up procedures within adoption agencies to meet these new challenges. The role of the agency as intermediary among adoptee, birth-parent and adoptive parents is a most important one and it should be considered in a new creative way.

6. A recognition that the agencies have a responsibility to share with the legislature their own wealth of experience and to make recommendations in order to bring about changes in the present state adoption laws if they seem indicated.

IDENTITY CONFLICTS IN ADOPTEES

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A review of the literature, and interviews with a large number of adoptees who have experienced reunions with their birth parents, indicates that adoptees are more vulnerable than the population at large to the development of identity problems in late adolescence and young adulthood.

Adoption as a social phenomenon has always been a center of emotional controversy and subjected to the prejudices of vested interest groups. The theoretical framework has been repeatedly assaulted by contradictory data and research findings. The vulnerability of the adoptee to stress and the subsequent development of psychological problems has been emphasized by some authors and disputed by others. Most of the previous studies on the adoptee have concentrated on the childhood and early adolescent years. In this paper we would like to call attention to the late adolescent and young adult stages of psychosocial development which we feel is a period of special predilection for the develop-

ment of identity problems in adopted individuals.

Erikson⁹ pointed out that the problem of identity is that it must establish a continuity between society's past and future and that adolescence in all its vulnerability and power is the critical transformer of both. The American Academy of Pediatrics' Committee on Adoptions¹ concluded that determining identity is a difficult enough process for someone brought up by his natural parents; it is even more complex for the adopted individual whose ancestry is unknown to him. Both Tec⁴⁸ and Frisk¹³ described examples of specific identity conflicts developing in adolescent adoptees.

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In both psychiatric settings and adoption agencies we have been encountering a number of adopted adolescents and young adults struggling with identity problems and an urgent need to find out more about their genealogical background. An increasing number of adult adoptees have been insisting that they have a constitutionally based civil right to have access to their "sealed" birth records which would, in effect, reveal the true identity of their birth parents.³⁵ Two activist organizations, The Orphan Voyage and The Adoptees' Liberty Movement Association (ALMA), under the direction of Jean M. Paton^{29, 30, 31, 32} and Florence L. Fisher^{10, 11} respectively, have become active in arranging reunions between adoptees and their birth parents, as well as instigating test cases in the courts in the hope of bringing about a change in the present adoption laws.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

We are currently in the process of conducting a research investigation into the outcome of reunions between adoptees and their birth parents, which we hope will shed new light on our understanding of adoption dynamics. As a preliminary step we have undertaken a thorough review of the existing literature pertaining to the occurrence of genealogical concerns and the development of identity conflicts in adopted individuals. In order to facilitate matters we have organized the material into four categories of psychological difficulties: a) disturbances in early object relations; b) complications in the resolution of the oedipal complex; c) prolongation of the "family romance" fantasy; and d) "genealogical bewilderment."

Disturbances in Early Object Rela-

tions: Many researchers have been able to demonstrate that the severity of behavior and emotional problems in adopted children and adolescents can be directly correlated with the age of adoption placement and the extent of early maternal deprivation.^{17, 26, 27, 28, 36, 52} It follows that these same troubled youngsters would continue to have difficulties, including identity problems, in late adolescence and adulthood as a result of the traumatic scars remaining from their disturbed early object relationships.

In situations where the adoption occurred at a young age, without any overt deprivation, it is somewhat more difficult to detect the subtle disturbances that might have taken place in the early relationship of the infant adoptee and his adoptive mother. In light of our awareness, however, of the adoptive mother's susceptibility to feelings of unworthiness and insecurity because of infertility, it would appear that there would be a greater likelihood of problems developing than in the natural mother-child dyad.^{17, 36} Unfortunately, studies based on direct observation of the early adoptive interaction have never been done.

Goldstein, Freud and Solnit¹⁵ pointed out that the waiting period in adoption is often a period of insecurity and uncertainty for the parents. It is not, as it ought to be, a full opportunity for developing secure and stable attachments. Reeves³⁸ suggested that the absence of a prior biological tie between the mother and child during the infant's earliest maturation makes for an inherently labile primary identification which may break down and lead to an experience, for both the mother and child, of premature disillusionment.

Both Schwartz⁴⁸ and Clothier³ asserted that the probability of conflicts in identification with the adoptive parents is likely to be increased for these children, because the unknown parental figure may continue to exist as a possible identification model.

Complications in the Resolution of the Oedipal Complex: Easson⁷ postulated that the adopted adolescent has difficulty in three areas of emotional growth which can affect the development of a stable adult sexual identity: 1) the process of emancipation of the adopted adolescent from the adoptive parents, 2) the resolution of incestuous strivings in the adoption relationship, and 3) the final identification with the parent of the same sex and the establishment of a stable growth-productive relationship with the parent of the other sex.

Among other authors, Sants⁴⁰ and Tec⁴⁸ viewed the resolution of the oedipal complex to be particularly difficult for the adoptee. Furthermore, Schechter⁴¹ and Peller^{33, 34} advised postponing the revelation of the child's adoptive status until after the resolution of the oedipal conflict to avoid complicating this stage of psychosexual development.

Prolongation of the Family Romance Fantasy: Freud¹² proposed that as a part of normal child development there were episodes of doubt for the child that he was, in fact, the natural child of his parents. This fantasy represents a brief state and is abandoned once the child accepts that he can love and hate the same individual. Conklin⁵ verified this theory after interviewing a number of eight-to-twelve-year-old natural born children, many of whom imagined themselves to be adopted. Clothier^{2, 3, 4} discussed the unusual dilemma of the

adopted child, who in fact has two sets of parents. He cannot use the family romance as a "game," as the natural child can, because for him it is "real." The adopted child can accept as a reality, for example, the idea that he came from highly exalted or lowly debased parents.

Glatzer¹⁴ showed how the family romance fantasy is reinforced and prolonged in adopted children. Eiduson and Livermore⁸ viewed the family romance fantasy as being activated by a feeling of rejection from the adoptive mother, whereas Kohlsaat and Johnson²⁰ saw the fantasy as being prolonged only in those adoptive situations where the parents put the children under a great deal of pressure. In contrast, Schwartz⁴⁸ could find no indication of a fixation or prolongation of the family romance fantasy in adopted children. Furthermore, Lawton²² felt that an adopted child would have a greater tendency to enhance the image of the adoptive parents and not that of the natural parents, of whom he has had no direct experience.

Schechter⁴¹ pointed out how the adoptive child has a chance of splitting the images of his parents and attributing the good elements to one set and the bad to the other. The anxiety the child manifests often refers to the possibility of returning to his original parents or, having been given up once for undetermined reasons, that he may be given up again at some future time—also for undetermined, fantasied reasons. Simon and Senturia⁴⁶ felt that the adoptee's identification with the "bad" biological parents is quite strong.

Genealogical Bewilderment: Clothier⁴ stated that the trauma and severing of the individual from his racial anteced-

ents lie at the core of what is peculiar to the psychology of the adopted child. She felt that the ego of the adopted child, in addition to all the normal demands made upon it, is called upon to compensate for the wound left by the loss of the biological mother. Kornitzer²¹ stated that the adolescent's identity formation is impaired because he has the knowledge that an essential part of himself, as it were, has been cut off and remains on the other side of the adoption barrier.

Frisk¹³ conceptualized that the lack of family background knowledge in the adoptee prevents the development of a healthy "genetic ego," which is then replaced by a "hereditary ghost." These issues become intensified during adolescence when heightened interests in sexuality make the adoptee more aware of how man and his characteristics are transmitted from generation to generation. When this "genetic ego" is obscure, one does not know what is passed on to the next generation. Furthermore, the knowledge that his natural parents were unable to look after him is interpreted by the adoptee as proof of his natural parents' inferiority, and gives rise to a fear of being handicapped himself by hereditary psychical abnormalities.

Wellisch⁵¹ called attention to the fact that a lack of knowledge of their real parents and ancestors can be a cause of maladjustment in children. Under normal circumstances, special attention is not paid to one's genealogy; it is usually accepted as a matter of fact. Sants⁴⁰ elaborated further on these ideas and introduced the term "genealogical bewilderment." He described a state of confusion and uncertainty developing in a child who either has no knowledge of his natural parents or only

uncertain knowledge of them. Very often in adolescence the child will begin searching for clues, and in some cases will develop an obsession about his genealogical past. Sants showed how a state of genealogic bewilderment can lead to the development of poor self esteem and a confused sense of identity. The adoptee is unable to incorporate known ancestors into the self image and may develop a fear of unknowingly committing incest with blood relatives.

Schechter⁴¹ referred to a letter from P.W. Toussieng, which describes a number of cases in which adopted children in adolescence start "roaming" around almost aimlessly, though sometimes they claim to be intentionally seeking the fantasied "good, real parents." Toussieng⁴⁹ later re-interpreted the "roaming" phenomenon as an acted-out search for stable, reliable objects and introjects that were never provided by elusive adoptive parents. He stated that if the parental figures clearly show that they view the presence of the adopted child as a narcissistic injury, as evidence that they themselves are "damaged," the child in trying to identify with such parents may well acquire shaky and defective introjects.

Frisk¹³ also described a restless wandering about by some adoptees, which he interpreted to be a symbolic search for the real parents with the underlying purpose of discovering what their true character was. Some sought company in fundamentally different social groups, on a lower level than the rest of their family. This pursuit was "instinctive" and seemed to be an effort to find a group identity corresponding to the predestined group the child imagined he belonged to.

There continues to be a controversy

as to the extent of interest and curiosity that adoptees, in general, have as to their genealogical background. Some authors contend that this concern is ubiquitous to all adoptees and is not a sign of emotional disturbance or family conflict.^{19, 28, 26, 36} Schechter⁴² detected overt fantasies regarding natural parents in 45% of adoptees interviewed. Many adoption workers feel that the only reason the curiosity does not surface more readily in most adoptees is the concern about hurting the adoptive parents.

Other authors have shown that the curiosity is greatest in adoptive homes where there has been a strained relationship and difficulty in communicating openly about the adoption situation.^{8, 16, 18, 23, 47, 50} Kornitzer²¹ stated that the more mysterious the adoptive parents make things for the child the more he will resort to fantasy. Lewis²⁴ felt that the reason many adolescent adoptees become so dreamy and inaccessible is because they become preoccupied with fantasies about their forebears. Rogers³⁹ described the turmoil felt by the adopted adolescent whose natural parents have been "hidden" from him. She postulated that this may lead to an intense curiosity and preoccupation about the riddle of life—about its beginning, ending, and, in some, even about its purpose.

Others have suggested that an adoptee's preoccupation with the past may merely be a reflection of his own unique personality makeup. Some persons are basically more curious and inquisitive and their genealogical concerns may have little to do with their adoptive status.³ Senn and Solnit,⁴⁵ on the other hand, maintained that fantasies about the birth parents are usually built from

disguised impressions and wishes about the adoptive parents, and have little to do with the birth parents *per se*.

From a review of previous studies, and in our own observations, we have noted that there are certain developmental stages or events that intensify the adopted person's curiosity and interest in acquiring further information about his genealogical background. The pubescent young adolescent becomes aware of the biological link of the generations and begins to visualize himself as part of the chain that stretches from the present into the remote past.³⁷ Late adolescence and young adulthood is the period of intensified identity concerns and is a time when the feelings about adoption become more intense and questions about the past increase.

Attaining adult legal status also accelerates the genealogical concerns.^{6, 28} Pre-engagement or a pending marriage reawakens the desire for information to a surprising intensity.^{37, 50} Interests can also be heightened by involvement with such experiences as taking out life insurance,⁴⁷ requesting a birth certificate,²⁸ illness, civil service exams, and property disputes.⁵⁰

Pregnancy elicits concerns regarding unknown hereditary weaknesses.^{37, 50} Death of one or both adoptive parents creates a feeling of loss or relieves the burden of concern and guilt about hurting the adoptive parents.^{23, 50} Separation or divorce triggers off feelings of rejection and abandonment, with an increased interest in past ties.⁵⁰ The "crisis" of middle age is felt by some adoptees to be a last opportunity to do something for the birth mother, who would now be elderly and perhaps in need of some kind of support.⁵⁰ Lastly,

the approaching of old age may bring about a final yearning for knowledge denied previously.³⁷

Some adoptees develop a particularly urgent need to find out more about their birth parents, and in some cases develop an obsessive urge to search for them. Paton²⁰ reported that half of her sample of 40 adult adoptees had made some attempt to search for their natural parents at some time or another. Lemon²³ cited a few cases of adult adoptees who were reunited with their birth parents, but she did not report on the outcome. She characterized the adoptees seeking reunion as suffering from intense feelings of separation. Simon and Senturia⁴⁶ saw the fantasy of reunion with the birth parents as an effort to deal with depression that grows out of fantasies about abandonment. Hubbard¹⁸ warned that when a reunion is agreed upon by both parties, the adoptee must be warned of the possible conflict between his imaginary picture of his unknown parents and the reality.

Triseliotis⁵⁰ pointed out that, because of personality or other special factors, it is very possible that for some adoptees no amount of information or counseling will deter them from their goal of meeting the natural parent. They may see such a meeting as the only solution to their problems. Smith⁴⁷ stressed the need for the adoption agency to serve as a protective and supportive mediator, if both parties are determined to have a reunion. It is of interest that, in a recent survey in England, 65% of adoptive parents questioned felt that the adoptee should have access to his birth certificate after age eighteen. They seemed more concerned about the welfare of the birth mother than their own feelings of rejection by the child.⁴⁴

In Scotland, any adopted person over the age of seventeen can write or visit the Register House in Edinburgh and, on production of evidence about himself, ask for a copy of his original birth certificate. Triseliotis⁵⁰ studied 70 adult adoptees who made such requests over a two-year period. As might be expected, he found that the greater the dissatisfaction with the adoptive family relationship and with themselves the greater the possibility that they would now be seeking a reunion with the birth parents, whereas the better the image of themselves and of their adoptive parents the greater the likelihood that they were merely seeking background information. Eighty percent of the group found the experience personally beneficial. They now had something tangible upon which to base their general outlook and feelings about their genealogical background.

DISCUSSION

In reviewing the literature, we were surprised to find that in spite of multiple references to identity conflicts in adoptees no one had previously attempted to organize and integrate these ideas. Most of the impressions cited in the articles were theoretical formulations based on clinical observations of a handful of cases. Research in the field of adoption has quite obviously been hampered by the privacy that necessarily surrounds such a highly personal and intimate undertaking.

We have had the opportunity to interview in depth a large number of adoptees who are searching for their birth parents or have already accomplished a reunion. Our findings would tend to validate the impressions garnered from the literature review that adoptees are

more vulnerable than the population at large to the development of identity problems in late adolescence and young adulthood because of the greater likelihood of encountering difficulties in the working through of the psychosexual, psychosocial, and psychohistorical aspects of personality development. In certain of these cases the conflicts manifest themselves as a preoccupation with genealogical concerns and a desire to make contact with the birth parents. It is conceivable that, if it weren't for the fear of hurting the adoptive parents or the reluctance to intrude upon the lives of the birth parents, these searches and reunions might be even more prevalent.

Many adoptees are preoccupied with existential concerns and a feeling of isolation and alienation due to the break in the continuity of life-through-the-generations that their adoption represents. For some, the existing block to the past may create a feeling that there is a block to the future as well. The adoptee's identity formation must be viewed within the context of the "life cycle," in which birth and death are closely linked unconsciously. This becomes evident when we observe how frequently marriage, the birth of the adoptee's first child, or the death of his adoptive parent triggers off an even greater sense of genealogical bewilderment and a desire to search for the birth relatives.

This is not to say that there aren't adoptees who have an obsessive need to search for their birth parents because of neurotic problems or secondary to an emotionally barren relationship with their adoptive parents. Some of these persons are perpetual searchers, always

stopping short of a reunion. It is the search itself, and the associated fantasies, which is the significant process that serves to hold these persons together. It would appear that these individuals would almost prefer to live with their fantasies, a prolongation of the classic family romance theme, rather than face reality with a possible disillusioning reunion with the birth parent. The obsessive preoccupation serves to repress from consciousness feelings of profound loneliness and depression.

It is also important to distinguish, from these other situations, a special form of quasi-searching, in which the adolescent adoptee goes through a period of threatening his parents with the idea of going off and searching for his birth parents. This is simply a typical example of adolescent acting-out, no different than the non-adoptee threatening to run away or move into his own apartment. However, adoptive parents are especially vulnerable to such threats and often overreact with intense fear or anger, which only serves to reinforce their youngster's manipulative powers.

Adoptive parents are generally very insecure and uncomfortable when it comes to dealing with their child's conception and hereditary background. Any interest shown by the adoptee in meeting the birth relatives is viewed by the adoptive parents as an indication of their personal failure as parents or as a sign of ingratitude on the part of their children. Their fear of being abandoned by the adopted child seems to relate to old unresolved feelings of separation and loss associated with infertility and their resulting childless state. It is difficult for adoptive parents to dissociate themselves and to view their children's

genealogical concerns as stemming from personal identity conflicts associated with the unique psychological experience of adoption.

It has been generally assumed that the birth parents wish to suppress the memories of the pregnancy and make a life anew for themselves. This may not always be the case, however; many birth mothers inquire about their child's welfare, from time to time, at the agencies that handled the original adoption arrangements. We have received a large number of letters from birth mothers who learned about our research efforts and offered to share their feelings with us. In general, they expressed a desire to share current information about themselves with their child and to receive periodic reports on his welfare. As a group, they seemed responsive to their child's needs and a majority would be agreeable to a reunion if it would be beneficial to the adoptee. Most of them expressed a reluctance to intrude upon or disrupt the lives of their child or the adoptive parents.

Adoption agencies have contributed to the confusion by assuming the role of protector, in which capacity they have become watchmen and censors of the truth. The results have often been negative, largely because the information given out by adoption agencies has been recognized as shadowy, unreal, and, therefore, unsatisfying to the adoptee. Withheld data does not protect adoptees, but instead gives them the feeling that full information would reveal "awful truths."

The aura of secrecy has also been more of a burden than a protection to adoptive parents. On the one hand, adoption agencies have insisted that

adoptees be told early and clearly about their adoption. Yet, on the other hand, little help has been provided to adoptive parents in dealing with the complicated feelings arising out of their adoptee's dual identity, nor have they been educated to understand and to dissociate themselves personally from their child's genealogical concerns and identity.

The time has come for adoption agencies to establish programs and to set up procedures to meet these challenges. The agency should begin by accepting the adult adoptee as a full client, who has the right to complete information and to the cooperation of the agency. The role of the agency as intermediary among adoptee, birth parents, and adoptive parents is a most important one. It should be considered in a new, more creative way.

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Open adoption

Annette Baran,
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Adult adoptees are increasingly challenging the practice of sealing their birth records. This and a variety of cultural changes raise serious questions about the exclusive use of closed adoptions. The authors examine the historical roots of adoptive practices in this country and suggest that the time has come for open adoption to gain acceptance as an alternative.

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WHEN THE ADOPTION of a child is legally consummated, the original birth record is sealed and replaced with an amended birth certificate. Access to the original record is subsequently denied except through a court order issued for good cause. An increasing number of adult adoptees have begun to challenge this procedure, feeling they have a right to such information. Because of this situation the authors have been studying the problems associated with sealed records in adoptions for the past two years. This inquiry has led into many areas, including the reevaluation of past practices and the consideration of new approaches for the present and future.¹

In addition to a new appraisal of the concepts of anonymity and confidentiality as epitomized by the sealed record, there is also a need to develop a wider range of options for parents who can neither raise their own children nor face the finality of the traditional relinquishment and adoptive placement process. The concept of open adoption should be considered as an alternative that can meet the needs of some children. An open adoption is one in which the birth parents meet the adoptive parents, participate in the separation and placement process, relinquish all legal, moral, and nurturing rights to the child, but retain the right to continuing contact and to knowledge of the child's whereabouts and welfare.

There is nothing new about the institution of adoption. It has been practiced since people grouped together and formed the most primitive societies. Bronowski maintains that the first socialization step taken within groups, tribes, or bands was the acceptance of collective responsibility for orphaned children.² Adoption, then, began as a means of protecting young children who lacked parents to nurture them. However, adoption has also come to perform another important function. It fulfills childless couples' lives and gives them a tight family unit that conceals their infertility and denies the existence of another set of parents. What was originally seen as a great need for the

child is now viewed, perhaps, as a greater need for the parents.

As the competition for perfect babies grew among childless couples, the rewards for being perfect adoptive parents increased. These rewards took the form of increased guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality. The shift toward closed adoptions occurred in a gradual, continuing pattern without critical evaluation of the changes. There was no attempt to assess the psychological burden of secrecy imposed upon adoptive parents and adoptees, nor were the feelings of loss and mourning by the birth parents carefully considered. It is difficult to know why a process as final and irreversible as the traditional relinquishment and adoption was so little questioned by professionals in the field.

CULTURAL COMPARISON

Other societies do not seek to give adults artificial parenthood by denying a child his birthright. This is perhaps because they place greater emphasis on the meaning of one's original family membership and on the continuity of the genealogical line.

An excellent example of this, because it has been studied and documented, is the method of adoption practiced in the Hawaiian culture for centuries. *Ohana*, or family clan, is a most important concept to Hawaiians. It is certainly more important than the question of legitimacy. To lack original family membership or to lose it is more shameful than to be born out of wedlock. In the old Hawaiian culture adoption, or *hanai*, was neither uncommon nor secret. If a child could not be reared by his own parents or grandparents, another family would *hanai* the child. As Handy and Pukui point out:

Children could not be adopted without the full consent of both true parents, lest some misfortune befall the child, and when consent had been given the child was handed to the adopting parents by the true parents with the saying, *Ke haawi aku nei maua i ke keiki ia olua, kukae a na'au* ("We give the child to you, excrement, intestines and all"). This was as binding as any

law made in our modern courts. The child became the child of the adopting or "feeding parents," and only under rare circumstance did the biological parents attempt to take the child back unless the adoptive parents died.

If a disagreement did arise between the adopting and biological parents, so that the biological parents tried to recover their child, it was believed that the child would fall prey to a sickness that might result in death. Such a disagreement between the two sets of parents was called *hukihuki* ("pulling back and forth"). So it was well for adopting parents and biological parents to keep on good terms with each other for the sake of the child.

Unlike the modern way of concealing the true parentage of an adopted child, he was told who his biological parents were and all about them, so there was no shock and weeping at finding out that he was adopted and not an "own" child. If possible, the child was taken to his true parents to become well acquainted with them and with his brothers and sisters if there were any, and he was always welcomed there.³

The child, in essence, belonged to two families openly and proudly: the family that gave him his birthright, and the family that nurtured and protected him. Many well-known Hawaiians have been raised in the *hanai* system and they speak openly of their dual identity. Their loyalty appears to be with their adoptive families, but they also take pride in the connection with their birth families.

American-style adoptions are now becoming predominant in Hawaii, and as Pukui, Haertig, and Lee indicate, this is causing conflict among old Hawaiian families:

Hawaiian grandparents and other relatives feel strongly that even the child of unwed parents should know his family background, and object to legal adoption because it blots out the past. The Hawaiian couple who want to adopt a child feel much the same. They are not at all concerned if the child is illegitimate. What they are worried about is taking a child whose parentage is concealed.⁴

In the Eskimo culture a type of open adoption is also practiced; Chance describes it as follows:

... the child's origin never is concealed and in many instances he is considered as belonging to both families. He may call the two sets of parents by the same names and maintain strong bonds with his real parents and siblings. In undertaking genealogical studies, anthropologists often have become confused about the biological parents of an adopted child since both sets claim him. It is evident that, whatever the reasons for adoption, the parents usually treat an adoptive child with as much warmth and affection as they do their own.⁵

In the United States, indications are that past adoption practices were more open. There has been a tendency to deny the value of these practices and to consider them as irregular and unprofessional, but they worked well and deserve reconsideration. It was not unusual before World War II for a couple to take in a pregnant unwed woman, care for her through the pregnancy and delivery, and then adopt her child. A close connection developed between the couple and the unwed mother, which permitted the mother to relinquish her baby confidently, knowing she was providing the child with a home she approved of and felt a part of.

There is no evidence that this practice caused any later problems for either the birth or adoptive parents. Neither is there evidence that birth parents came back to harass the adoptive families. The adoptive parents could tell the child of its birth heritage convincingly and with first-hand knowledge and understanding. There was an openness in such situations, and a good feeling was transmitted to the adoptee. This approach expressed the principle that a mother had the right to choose the substitute parents for her child, and that their caring for her was an indication of how they would care for her child. Such a principle is still recognized in the many states that have laws distinguishing between agency and independent adoptions. Independent adoptions are predicated on the belief that birth parents have the right to choose those who will raise their children.

There are a number of possible reasons why a closed and secretive ap-

proach to adoptions has developed in the United States. To the Puritan settlers, illegitimacy was considered a sin of overwhelming proportions, to be hidden at any cost. Subsequent immigration created a melting-pot nation in which genealogical lines became indistinct, and mobility and change were important. Pride was not based on family name and position, but on the achievement of success and wealth. People denied their origins rather than remain within a rigid social structure. They took on new names, new positions, and new responsibilities, and their attitudes toward adoption reflected these changes.

OPEN ADOPTIONS

Today the adoption picture has totally changed, but thinking on the subject has not. The emphasis is still on keeping records sealed, protecting parents, matching babies, and resolving ambivalence for pregnant girls, when in reality that world no longer exists. Such approaches are out of phase with current needs and do not encourage creative solutions to meet those needs.

During the past five or six years thousands of unwed mothers all over the United States have chosen to keep their children rather than offer them for adoption. Although the stigma surrounding single unwed parenthood has lessened sufficiently to give those women the courage to keep their children, the problems of coping with the situation have not decreased, but have perhaps increased. The numbers of such children on the welfare rolls, in and out of foster home placement, or under protective services, is increasing continuously.

The young single mothers who have an emotional attachment—whether positive or negative—to their children desperately need a new kind of adoptive placement in which they can actively participate. They want the security of knowing they have helped provide their children with a loving, secure existence and yet have not denied themselves the possibility of knowing them in the future.

Recently one of the authors met with a group of young unwed mothers

"What is lacking in the profession is the willingness to consider adoption that allows the birth mother a continuing role in her child's life."

whose children ranged from one to five years of age. The women talked of their struggles, frustrations, and feelings of bitterness and anger. They regretted their inability to offer their children the kind of loving care they had expected to give them. Regarding adoption, the women felt that although they were failing to provide adequately, they could not face the possibility of a final and total separation from their children. They felt that any of the alternatives they faced would bring them intense feelings of guilt. It was untenable to keep their children with them under existing conditions, but it was impossible to cut themselves off completely. They equated relinquishment with amputation of a part of their bodies, or with the loss of a close relative through death. When they were asked how they would feel about an open adoption, their attitudes were totally different. They thought they could face and even welcome adoption for their children if they could meet the adoptive parents, help in the separation and the move to the new home, and then maintain some contact with the children.

Another of the authors helped initiate an open adoption. It was an experiment that seemed to be the best solution to the situation faced by an unwed mother in her early twenties. She knew she could not adequately care for her three-year-old son, who was beginning to show signs of emotional deprivation. Despite that, the mother could not bring herself to relinquish the boy to the agency. She began to search for families who would take the child and whom she could meet and know personally. However, she was unable to find an appropriate family.

At the same time, the agency was studying a family that already included one adopted child. In the course of the study, it was learned that the family had known the parent of their adopted child and felt the experience was meaningful to them. They were eager to have a second child and were even considering the role of foster parents. They were asked whether they would consider an open adoption. Without fear, but with thoughtfulness, they agreed to meet the mother and child and discuss the possibility. Given this opportunity, both the birth parent and adoptive parents showed new resources and strengths. They succeeded in understanding each other's needs with the focus on mutual care for the boy.

The adoptive placement was made in a way that gave the child as much honest comprehension of the process as possible. The postplacement period saw the complete transfer of parental responsibility to the new family, with the birth mother furnishing a meaningful emotional tie through occasional visits. Continued counseling services were produced to help maintain and enrich the child's new status without creating a threat to either birth or adoptive parents. The social worker summarized the experience in the record as follows:

Both Gar [the boy] and the Blakes [the adoptive couple] have had an ongoing relationship and contact with the natural mother. Sandy, the natural mother, will call about once a month and arrange her visit to the Blakes's home. The visits occur in the early evening and last from two to four hours. Both Sandy and the Blakes say that the visits are comfortable. Sandy usually stays after Gar goes to sleep. He greets her warmly and separates easily. Gar now calls her Sandy, and Mrs. Blake, mother.

Although the Blakes have some feelings that they would just as soon Sandy spaced her visits less frequently, they have accepted the situation. They are concerned about Gar's reaction as he grows older, but feel they can cope by explaining the actual circumstances, which are less rejecting than if he had no contact with his natural mother. . . . The Blakes say that the commu-

nity response to Sandy's visits continues to be negative and nonunderstanding. Their friends' reactions do bother them more than Sandy's visits by far. . . .

Sandy says she feels good about the placement. . . . On occasion she at first felt some anger over the Blakes' ways, in areas where their ideas deviated from her way of handling a situation. . . . She has never expressed her differences of opinion to the Blakes, as she has consciously given them the full responsibility for raising Gar. . . .

Gar's progress and adjustment speak loudly and clearly that this has been a smooth course to follow. I feel that the placement in the adoptive home has been a most natural event for Gar and he is responding beautifully. . . .

The Blakes and Sandy have been able to work out a reasonable relationship. This relationship has necessarily been somewhat monitored by my suggestions. It is in an area where too much intimacy might encourage situations of rivalry between the natural and adoptive parents, which would confuse the adoptee. . . . One of the most exciting feelings about this placement for me is to be able to see how genuinely satisfied all of the involved parties seem to be. The Blakes, Gar, and Sandy are having their individual needs met. No one is excluded, and no one has to be excluded or rejected in the future because of agency or environmental prerogatives.

CONCLUSIONS

Is this a unique case? The authors believe there are many families throughout this country who would consider such open adoptions. The type of adoption they currently know and seek is the one adoption agencies have perpetuated. Families have never been offered alternatives. Agencies have learned during the past decade that many "unthinkable" things are thinkable, and that many "unattainable" goals can be attained.

Children who used to be considered "unadoptable" were really in that category because adoption workers felt that each family needed a "perfect" child. When families were asked whether they would consider adopting physically handicapped, congenitally deformed, or mentally retarded children, it was found there were in-

deed families who were willing to accept such children. When the baby population dwindled, adoption agencies had time to take a look at the older children and sibling groups who had been considered too hard to place. Families were found who would accept children who had a knowledge of their own past and who maintained emotional ties with relatives or foster parents. For some older children, single-parent adoptions were arranged, and instead of being only an expedient, such adoptions were found to be preferable for older children who could not accept a close family unit.

Agencies even broke one of their oldest taboos. They accepted and encouraged the idea of foster parents adopting the children under their care. And here again, when older children were involved, the legalizing and making permanent of a good relationship added another dimension of security to all parties concerned. Even foster parents who knew the natural parents were willing to adopt the children.

Partially open adoptions have been accepted as appropriate for children in the latency and teenage periods. Openness has been encouraged by showing such children albums of family pictures while telling them about their relatives and foster parents. When sibling groups must be separated, arrangements are made for future meetings. The idea that these children may one day seek a reunion with one another and with their parents has been accepted.

An obvious benefit of open adoption is that children who would otherwise be deprived can have a permanent home and reliable parental care. However, there are also less obvious emotional benefits for the child and for the birth and adoptive parents. The child's tendency to feel rejected by the birth parent can be decreased considerably through continuing, even if minimal, contact with her. As the child matures, he is more likely to gain a realistic understanding of the problems that led to his adoption. The birth parent is less subject to overwhelming feelings of mourning and loss, and her feelings of guilt become less destructive. She can build

a new, more satisfying life for herself once the problems of parenthood are solved, and this can have a positive effect on her new relationship with the child. For adoptive parents, acquaintanceship with the birth parents can help them avoid fears and fantasies and make their relationship to the child more natural and honest.

Open adoption is not a panacea and should not be considered a suitable procedure for all birth or adoptive parents. It is, however, a viable approach in specific situations and can offer an acceptable solution to an otherwise insoluble problem. If open adoption is to be mutually satisfactory and beneficial, adoption agencies must be willing to expend greater efforts over longer periods of time. The professional skills available are more than equal to the task. However, what is currently lacking in the profession is the willingness to consider adoption that allows the birth mother a continuing role in her child's life. Perhaps the clear definition of this need will lead to the consideration of open adoption as an alternative.

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PRACTICE FORUM

The Terminology of Adoption

MARIETTA E. SPENCER

Editors's Note: The author's clarification of the language of adoption strikes us as, in the main, correct, sensitive and beneficial. We strongly second her comments in the concluding paragraph of the article.

The words we use are a vital part of educating people about adoption. Words do more than convey facts; they evoke feelings. A word or phrase intended to create a positive impression may have the opposite effect. We have to be aware of the emotional weight of the words used, and choose language with care.

Words used to describe persons can become labels. A word can label the person it describes as a member of a category. Such labels do not take into account the unique characteristics of an individual. Vocabulary is also affected by cultural change. The meanings and feeling tones conveyed by certain words may not be the same today as they were a generation ago. And at any given time the same word or phrase may have different connotations for different persons.

Social service professionals and adoptive parents should take responsibility for providing informed and sensitive leadership in the use of words. For adoptive parents, a positive use of vocabulary may encourage open communication within their families. For professionals, the choice of vocabulary helps shape service content and reflects, in turn, the quality of service. The words used not only mirror insights and feelings; they intimately affect ability to help clients.

Choosing emotionally “correct” words is especially important in

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adoption transactions. For example, speaking to new adopting parents about "your daughter" or "your son" validates and strengthens the cognitive process by which parenthood becomes a reality. Using the phrase "the child you are adopting" conveys a very different message. The first conveys the emotional reality of parenthood; the second merely reflects the technical procedure of adding a child to the family.

Terms Related to Children

"Child" is a general term, signifying a young human being in need of parenting, dependent on adults. The word itself does not connote family membership. The term "*my child*" indicates that the child is a particular person's responsibility and belongs to a particular family unit. It does not indicate "ownership," but rather a tie of responsibility. "*My child*" shares a place to live, a family name, and family love, presumably permanently. No genetic mother can say, "This child is all my own," since half of the genetic descent comes from the biological father's side. The mother is the vehicle through which the child's genetic endowment from a long line of ancestors has passed.

Through adoption, children can receive full family (kinship) status in families into which they were not born. Family membership by social contract has not only legal support, but social and emotional support—at least in theory. But lack of clarity in terms designating kinship causes confusion for many persons. Some of the vocabulary describing the role of a child in an adoptive family follows.

"My child" versus "my adopted child." The latter phrase evokes the question, "Is not the child you got by way of adoption your own child?" Any adoptive parent will declare emphatically that the adopted child is the family's very own child, even if not biologically.

"My own son" versus "my adopted son." Picture a family with two boys, one born to the parents, the other adopted. My son, Paul (who was adopted) told me about a family with two children who were introduced as "our own son" and "our Korean son." The word "son" may describe the same social and emotional role content for both children, but the designation "*my own son*" reflects a sense of "belonging" not felt for the other child. In the case of a Korean child or a black child with two white parents, appearance explains the genetic diversity without need for verbal clarification. It is all the more important, then, to underline the emotional and social belonging.

"Adopted child." This term stresses how a child came to be part of a family. When persistently used by parents, "adopted" emphasizes difference, the implication being "I'm not responsible for this child's biological heredity."

"Biological child" or "our child by birth." Both terms are accurate and useful ways to describe direct descent from the parents of conception.

"Illegitimate child." This term literally means that a child legally has no father. Historically, the term refers to ineligibility to claim family membership in one's kin group and inheritance rights from the father. This label attached to a child is often used derogatively. Through adoption, a child born out of wedlock can receive full family membership; thus the issue of legitimacy is not pertinent. The phrase "born out of wedlock" is clearly preferable to "illegitimate child."

"Unwanted child." This is another term that puts an unnecessary onus on a child as being somehow unsatisfactory. In reality, it was the role of parent that was "unwanted" by the biological parents when the child was born.

Terms Related to Transfer

In speaking of adoption as the transfer of a child from genetic parent(s) to a permanent functional kinship group, it is preferable to use terminology that accurately reflects that process. This must be done first in dealing with the biological parent(s) and their families, next for the sake of the adopting family, later for the child who was adopted, and ultimately for the education of the general public. The difference between ancestry and functional family membership should be understood by everyone, not just intellectually but emotionally.

Many frequently used phrases fail to describe accurately the transfer of parental rights from the biological parents to the parents of adoption. Some examples follow.

"Put up for adoption." Such phrases, common in the public languages of adoption, militate against acceptance of adoption as an orderly, positive, social and legal process. The term dates back to the 1890s, when 90,000 orphans were brought to small Midwestern communities by train and exhibited in churches and town halls so that the town folk could choose ones to take into their homes. The children were placed up high, so they could be easily seen. They were literally "put up for adoption."

"Adopted out." This expression conveys the sense of being separated from original in-group membership and shipped off into an uncertain somewhere.

"Given away." This phrase attributes a callous and uncaring motive to the biological parents.

"Abandoned," "left with the agency," "left on the doorstep." Such phrases, which indicate that biological parents had no concern for their children's safety and welfare, can be extremely upsetting to children.

"Given up," "relinquished," "surrendered." These terms, which imply that children were torn out of the arms of their mothers by an unfeeling state or social agency, may encourage adopted children to fantasy about being reunited with their biological parents.

The following phrases are better ways of describing the transfer process:

- Arranging for an adoption
- Making a placement plan for a child
- Delegating an agency to find permanent parents for a child
- Arranging for a transfer of parental rights
- Transferring parenting to others who are ready for this long-term task
- Finding a family who will adopt a child
- Selecting an appropriate family to parent the child

Adoption transfers all parental rights to others ready to assume them. When biological parents are unable to make an adequate permanent plan for their child, society (via the courts) attempts to make a plan in the child's best interest. The court first explores the capacity and willingness of the biological parents to parent the child. The birth parents have the right to delegate or transfer parental rights and obligations, the first step before a child may be legally tied into another family unit. To "give up a child" is an erroneous expression, because a person cannot be "owned." One may, however, give up parental rights. When biological parents make an adoption plan for a child, they are not only terminating parental rights, but delegating to others the parenting of their child. When the court steps in to terminate parental rights without consent of the bioparents, the chances are that the latter filled the role inadequately or not at all.

Terms Related to Contact

The efforts of some adopted adults to establish contact with their biological parents have been widely publicized. Newspapers and magazines often present such stories in very dramatic ways—almost as modern-day fairy tales. (Daughter at last finds “real” mother, and everybody lives happily every after.) Exploiting the emotional content in these situations, reporters and writers often ignore the fact that adopted adults have ineradicable ties to their adoptive families.

“Reunion.” The use of this word to describe contact with a biological parent tends to imply that the social contract of adoption had been dissolved and the adopted individual has been reinstalled in the biological family. In reality, the desire to establish contact often reflects no more than the wish of many adopted persons to take a look at their biological ancestors. If the adopted person remembers being parented by her or his biological family, a later meeting may indeed be experienced as a “reunion.” However, because of its implication that the adoption tie has been undone, this word is best avoided.

“Making contact with,” “meeting with,” “getting in touch with.” These phrases are more accurate ways of describing adopted adults’ encounters with their families of descent.

Terms Related to Ancestry

Language that clarifies relationships and precisely reflects time factors is essential to the transmission of biological background history. For the sake of everyone involved in the adoption process, kinship terminology should be employed with insight and accuracy. The language used to describe kinship is also important in suggesting appropriate role behavior.

In compiling a child’s biological and social history for the adoptive family, for example, the biological parent’s relatives should not be labelled as the child’s “grandmother,” “uncle,” or “aunt.” Rather, in describing the child’s family of descent, kinship terms should indicate relationships with the biological mother or father, not the child. This semantic strategy legitimates the fact that the child is assuming full

membership in the adopting family. When an older child is being placed, such terms as "biological aunt," "biograndmother," and "first grandfather" might be used to differentiate appropriately between "old" and "new" family members.

For biological parents, a clear semantic separation of biological realities from social realities may be helpful in grasping the important emotional fact that their child will no longer be occupying a role of family membership in the kinship group of biological origin. Appropriate language stresses the severance of both moral and legal responsibilities and emphasizes that there can be no social or emotional role expectations. Not only will the child be perceived as acquiring firm, clear family ties to the adopting family group, but it will be brought home in a positive way that the child will be gaining a functional familial association via adoption.

If kinship terminology is used accurately from the outset, a maturing adopted child will view her or his background history comfortably and in the proper perspective. Pertinent facts about genetic ancestry can be sought and learned without confusion about social identity, including family membership.

The following terms are commonly used to refer to biological parents. Some are accurate and usually appropriate; others are ambiguous, confusing, or simply incorrect.

"Prenatal mother," This term is descriptive in regard to the time continuum and factually correct, but is not in popular use.

"Birth mother," or *"mother of birth."* These terms are useful in differentiating the biological process and the childrearing process.

"The woman who gave birth to you." An expression useful in explaining birth to a young child.

"First mother (or father)." This term is accurate only if the birth-giving mother or biological father did some parenting during the postnatal period. If they never functioned as parents, their contribution was limited to the prenatal and birth-giving process. Only in the case of an older child who experienced some parenting from his birth parents is it correct to speak of a "first mother" or "first father." The parenting given by foster parents, whom the child may clearly remember, does not represent a full kinship tie.

"Natural parent." This term, used primarily in legal contexts, implies that the adoptive parent is somehow unnatural, "artificial."

"Biological parent," or *"bioparent."* These words are used widely and comfortably; they differentiate as well as designate.

"Genetic parent." This term is useful in that it describes shared heredity potential.

"Unmarried mother." This label is often affixed to biological mothers of adopted children by agencies and by the public. Besides presuming the reason (which may or may not be correct) why many birth-givers did not take on parenting of children born to them, this term confuses marital status with relationship to a child. Since many functional parents today are unmarried, for one reason or another, this term might best be consigned to the scrap heap.

"Real mother," "real father." What constitutes a "real" parent? In terms of familial relationships and social functions, the "real" parents are the adoptive parents, not the biological parents. The adoptive parents care for the child, nurture growth, transmit knowledge and values. The biological parents brought a child into the world; the adoptive parents help the child to cope with the world—a challenging task, and just as "real." To apply the term exclusively to biological parents is grossly inaccurate.

"Begetter." Sometimes used to refer to the biological father of the child, this word is stilted and archaic.

"Young man responsible for the child's birth." Adults often say to children, "Who is responsible for this mess?" or "Who is responsible for this misdeed?" The judgmental quality of this expression makes it a poor choice.

Terms Related to Siblings

Adopted children become brothers or sisters to any other children of their adopting parents even though they do not share biological descent. Adopted siblings refer to one another simply as "my brother" or "my sister." Like any siblings, as adults they will share a common set of memories. Children reared in the same environment naturally develop a sense of siblingship—a sense that includes internalization of the incest taboo. Children of the same biological parents who were not reared together may refer to one another as "biological brother (sister)," "biological sibling" or "other children born of my biological mother (father)." The sibling relationship must have a legal basis as well as an experiential basis to become a psychosocial reality.

Terms Related to Adoptive Parents

An adoptive mother becomes a child's parent via the transfer of parental rights. Socially and functionally, she does the permanent mothering of the child, becoming the successor to the biological mother. Often she is the only mother a child can recall knowing.

In the same way, the father by adoption is a child's permanent father—legally, socially and emotionally. He occupies a specific place and plays a precise role in the family unit—the microculture in which the child is reared, to which the child belongs, and in which the child plays an integral part. Even after the childrearing process is completed, the child who entered the family unit by adoption remains a member of the kinship circle.

The terms "adoptive mother" and "adoptive father" have been used throughout this paper to describe one component of the adoption triad. Whether the descriptive adjective has to be retained outside the context of adoption-related discussion seems highly questionable. Why should parents who have assumed the same legal and social responsibilities borne by all other parents in society be permanently labeled by the process by which they acquire a child?

Furthermore, the term "adoptive parent" implies a conditional parenthood, a qualification of allegiance, a suggestion that the family relationship is tentative and temporary. Although it correctly delineates postnatal parenthood and clarifies the absence of an ancestral relationship, such a label places in doubt the authenticity of the family tie. At worst, its use can hinder internalization of the concept of a permanent family relationship that fully includes a child who was adopted. An alternative term, "postnatal parent," sounds cold and clumsy.

The author recommends that such labels be dropped for everyday use (though of course it should be explained openly to an adopted child, at an appropriate time, how she or he came into the family).

Terms Related to Other Kinds of "Parents"

Two terms that have nothing to do with adoption are frequently misused to signify adoptive parenthood.

"Stepparent." This word implies that two persons do not possess shared genetic material, and it sometimes describes a social and func-

tional family relationship. However, in the case of a stepparent there is not always a transfer of parental ties, either legal or social.

"Foster parent." This term is occasionally used mistakenly, especially by the press, to describe parents by adoption. This confusion reflects a serious misunderstanding of adoption as a temporary arrangement, since foster parenthood does not involve a transfer of parental rights and obligations. Misuse of the term is a disservice to foster parents—who, although their relationships to children are usually time limited, provide important parenting to children who cannot live with their birth parents or who are awaiting adoptive placement.

A Final Note

As "enlightened" professionals become accustomed to identifying and using correct terms in talking about adoption, it is essential to avoid sitting in judgment of others who, out of different values or ignorance, use language that is repugnant. The professional's role must encompass a kind of gentle education of persons who unwittingly continue to confuse and distort adoption terminology.

It is essential to make sure that the language of adoption is understandable to the nonprofessional, and that attention to vocabulary is always in the interest of the persons involved in adoption itself. An essentially simple and orderly human transaction, one invested with deep feeling for everyone involved, should not be confused or made more complex by the use of imprecise language. After all, the language of adoption is loving communication among members of a family created by social contract, sustained by their life together, and supported by an informed society that validates the integrity of the family. ☆

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Quotes From the Literature

Buck (1955) “Must We Have Orphanages?”

“When we wanted to adopt her, however, the **birth mother** took her back again.” (p. 59)

“The stern fact is that **the unwed mother should, in fairness to her child, give him up for adoption**, for otherwise the child’s life will inevitably be damaged by social cruelty.” (p. 59)

Buck (1956) “We Can Free the Children”

“If it is better for the child born out of wedlock to stay with his **birth mother**, what can be done to change social attitudes towards her and her child?” (p. 63)

“Many states require by law that a child can only be adopted by a family of the same religion as the **birth parents** professed” (p. 65)

Buck (1972) “I Am the Better Woman For Having My Two Black Children”

“My husband and I thought our family of five adopted children was complete when she first came to us. Her **birth mother** was a girl in a small town in Germany” (p. 21)

Sorosky, Baran, and Pannor (1974) “The Reunion of Adoptees and Birth Relatives”

“The Reunion of Adoptees and **Birth Relatives**” (p. 195)

“This study investigated the outcome of 11 cases of reunion between adoptees and **birth mothers**” (p. 195)

“There are many reasons why an adoptee feels a need to search for his **birth parents**” (p. 195)

“Prior experience in adoption, working with children, **birth parents**, and adoptive parents ...” (p. 195)

“... whereas others are already in the process of searching out clues and facts that might eventually lead to a reunion with their **birth parents**” (p. 196)

“The majority of adoptees have a primary interest in their **birth mother**, a lesser number in their **birth siblings**, and an even smaller number in their **birth fathers**. There has also been an increasing number of **birth parents...**” (p. 196)

Pannor, Sorosky, and Baran (1974) “Opening the Sealed Records in Adoption: The Human Need for Continuity”

“Does the possibility that adoption records may be opened to enable adult adoptees search for their **birth-parents** ... ” (p. 188)

“**Birth-parents** who relinquished their rights ... ” (p. 188)

“The following letter ... presents the feelings of an adoptive mother about the possibilities that her adopted child may wish to search for his **birth parents**” (p. 188)

“Even if our son should one day meet his **birth-parents**... ” (p. 188)

“... hoping that the doctor who delivered her would forward it to her **birth-mother**...” (p. 189)

“A recognition that many birth-parents, particularly **birth-mothers**, have not resolved their feelings about relinquishing for adoption a child whom they have been told they can never see again... ” (p. 196)

Sorosky, Baran, and Pannor (1975) “Identity Conflicts in Adoptees”

“... and interviews with a large number of adoptees who have experienced reunions with their birth parents ...” (p. 18)

“ ... have become active in arranging reunions between adoptees and their **birth parents** ... ” (p. 19)

“... or the death of an adoptive parent triggers off an even greater sense of genealogical bewilderment and a desire to search for **birth relatives**” (p. 24).

“... many **birth mothers** inquire about their child's welfare, from time to time, at the agencies which handled the original adoption arrangements” (p. 25)

Baran, Pannor, and Sorosky (1976) “Open Adoption”

“An open adoption is one in which the **birth parents** meet the adoptive parents ... ” (p. 97)

“ ... they also take pride in the connection with their **birth families**” (p. 98)

“Neither is there evidence that **birth parents** came back to harass the adoptive families” (p. 98)

“... is the willingness to consider adoption that allows the **birth mother** a continuing role in her child's life ” (p. 100)

Spencer (1979) “The Terminology of Adoption”

“Social service professionals and adoptive parents should take responsibility for providing informed and sensitive leadership in the use of words. ... For professionals, the choice of vocabulary helps shape service content” (p. 451).

“Choosing emotionally-correct words is especially important in adoption transactions” (pp. 451-452) (Note: This is followed by examples throughout the article validating the sole parenthood of adoptive parents after the adoption of a child, implying that no emotional or familial connection remains between members of the pre-existing family)

“‘First mother (or father):’ This term is accurate only if the **birth-giving mother or biological father did some parenting during the postnatal period**. If they never functioned as parents, their contribution was limited to the pre-natal and birth-giving process. Only in the case of an older child who experienced some parenting from his birth parents is it correct to speak of a ‘first mother’ or ‘first father.’” (p. 456)

“... the biological parent's relatives should not be labelled as the child's ‘grandmother,’ ‘uncle,’ or ‘aunt.’ Rather ... kinship terms should indicate relationships with the biological mother or father, not the child. ” (pp. 455-456)

"For biological parents, a clear semantic separation ... may be helpful in grasping the important fact that **their child will no longer be occupying a role of family membership in the kinship group** ... appropriate language stresses the severance of both moral and legal obligations and **emphasizes that there can be no social or emotional role expectations**" (p. 456)

Johnston (2004) “Speaking Positively: Using Respectful Adoption Language”

“Those who raise and nurture a child are his **parents: his mother, father...**” (§5) *

** This article illustrates how in “Positive/Respectful Adoption Language,” adoptive parents are defined as being the sole parents (mother and father), thus reducing “birth parents” to being non-parents after the birth and adoption of the child, significant only for the reproductive act.*

Cooperative Adoption Consulting (2003) “Changing the Wounding Words That Often Come With Adoption”

“Positive Adoption Language (P.A.L.) is a concept pioneered thirty years ago by Marietta Spencer, a social worker at the Children's Home Society of Minnesota. It was refined in the last decade by a handful of adoption advocates.” (§3)

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