

Infant Adoption is Big Business in America

by Darlene Geron, CUB Communicator Editor



Adoption is perceived by society as primarily an altruistic act where a child is rescued from a dreadful fate. The child's mother is portrayed as not wanting her child and the child's father as usually being nonexistent. The adopting parents are mythically portrayed as saint-like rescuers who provide a happily ever after. In reality, birthparents anguish over the loss of their children, adoptive families are just as dysfunctional as natural families, and adoption is a huge, profit-driven industry where babies are the commodity. As it is currently practiced in America, infant adoption by non-relatives does more to meet the needs of affluent adopters than to help children.

Billion Dollar US Industry

Infant adoption is big business in America. Approximately 140,000 adoptions are finalized each year although it remains unclear how many are infant adoptions and how many are older children adopted by relatives or foster parents. According to an industry analysis by Marketdata Enterprises, Inc. of Tampa, Florida, adoption provider revenues in 2000 were \$1.44 billion with a projected industry annual growth rate of 11.5 percent to 2004.

Ken Watson, named the 1992 Child Advocate of the Year by the North American Council on Adoptable Children, explains that the outright sale of children is illegal, but adopters are routinely charged fees to legally parent a child. Watson recounts how some agencies circulate a fee schedule with children listed in categories by race and sex with prices proportionate to their desirability. Prices can range from \$25,000 to \$50,000 and upwards. According to Watson, although adoption providers insist that the fee is not payment for a child, but rather money to cover the cost of services provided, adoptive parents are not deceived. They know they are paying for a child. Adopters with the most money obtain the children considered the most desirable.

Along with the fees charged by the adoption provider, adopters routinely reimburse relinquishing parents for expenses incurred during the pregnancy. Although these expenses are paid as an act of charity and are not tax deductible, there are adoption facilitators and web site sources that coach adopters as to how much they dare pay a relinquishing mother for such things as cars, clothes, and tuition without crossing the line into baby buying.

James Gritter, open adoption practitioner with Catholic Human Services, Inc., observes,

Birthfamilies are ostensibly given money to make their experience more tolerable, but the relief they receive may soon feel like blood money, ultimately producing unspeakable guilt and misery. Gritter explains that reimbursement for expenses is coercive because when adopters invest in prospective birthparents, they expect a return on their investment. The money a young mother receives during her pregnancy is coercive because it may cause her to feel indebted to the adopters and prevent her from following her heart after birth and parenting her own baby.

Baby Selling?

Since the business of adoption has become so lucrative, it has attracted many professionals never previously interested in adoption. In the last ten years, the number of attorneys involved in adoption has doubled. Gritter contends that adoption has changed from a professional model, in which service providers hang out their shingles and aspire to suspend self-interest, to a business model that aggressively recruits consumers on a buyer-beware basis. Randolph W. Severson, director of Heart Words: An Adoptee Advocacy and Counseling Center, cautions, The trend runs perilously close to that cliff called selling babies.

One of the more outrageous examples of the excesses surfacing in the adoption industry appeared recently in **Talk** magazine in an

article by Jim DeFede. DeFede reports on a boutique adoption service in Florida and its elite baby broker, Richard Gitelman, who places ads nationally seeking pregnant women, and then auctions their babies to the highest bidder among the adopters on his list. His prices vary from \$75,000 to \$250,000 for healthy white infants. Increasingly, for-profit businesses and unlicensed facilitators promise to connect prospective adopters with the child of their dreams and charge whatever the market will bear.

Competition for Infants

There is a huge disparity in the supply-and-demand of infants, which creates desperate and intense competition among adopters. Currently, there are forty or more adopters vying for every healthy white infant that becomes available for adoption. There are fewer desirable adoptable infants because society has become more accepting of single mothers who parent their children than in the past. The stigma of bearing a child out-of-wedlock has diminished, so the vast majority of today's single mothers choose to keep their babies instead of relinquishing them to adoption. Effective birth control methods are readily available to the fertile population, and, since abortion is legal, an unplanned pregnancy can be terminated.

While the supply of desirable adoptable infants has been decreasing, infertility in America has been increasing. It is estimated that one in six couples has trouble conceiving and that there may be as many as 5.3 million infertile couples in America. Many adopters who are currently seeking babies postponed child bearing to pursue their careers, and later, when they finally wanted to conceive, found that due to age they were infertile. Unrelated to age, another cause of infertility is chlamydia. Dubbed the silent epidemic, chlamydia is the most frequently reported infectious disease in the U.S. and often results in infertility because there are few

symptoms. Many people do not realize they were ever infected with chlamydia until they later discover complications, such as infertility.

Although adoption does not cure infertility, and adopting a child is not the same as having a child by birth, many of the infertile eventually pursue adopting a baby. In **U.S. News & World Report**, Clark and Shute relate that the majority of adopters want only healthy infants because most foster children awaiting homes are at least five years old, many have physical or emotional handicaps, and most are of mixed races.

A Scarce & Dear Commodity

With such market demand, the adoption industry is striving to increase the supply of desirable adoptable babies. Historian Rickie Solinger writes in **Beggars and Choosers: How the Politics of Choice Shapes Adoption, Abortion and Welfare in the United States** that Representative Pat Schroeder of Colorado claims there are too many single women in the U.S. having babies with too few of them giving up their babies for adoption. Schroeder labeled babies a scarce and dear commodity. Representative Schroeder supports the adoption industry and does not see anything wrong with viewing babies as a resource to meet the needs of adults.

Domestically, efforts are underway to encourage women to relinquish their babies for adoption; however, it is the rare mother who actually wants to be separated from her child. According to the twenty-five year old national organization, Concerned United Birthparents, Inc., mothers surrender their babies due to a lack of financial resources, lack of extended family support, and pressure by social workers or other adoption facilitators. Mothers who have relinquished their children grieve for the remainder of their lives. Losing a child, whether to death or to adoption, is a tragedy from which a mother never completely recovers. Her relinquished child never recovers from the separation either.

Traditionally, most babies relinquished for adoption were born to single, unwed, teenage mothers, but that is no longer the case. According to long-time adoption reformist and co-author of **The Adoption Triangle**, Reuben Pannor, more than half of the babies relinquished today are born to impoverished married couples in the Bible Belt and other areas with high rates of poverty. Most

currently, relinquishing families already have two or more children who are the brothers and sisters of the relinquished baby. Pannor explains, "These birthparents come from the poverty pockets of our country and are the primary targets of attorneys who flood their communities with enticing advertisements."

Adoptive mother Ruth Reichl's recent article in **More** tells how at thirty-nine years old she had undergone extensive infertility treatments when her doctor admitted defeat and suggested that she consider adopting. Her doctor recommended an attorney who was "sleek and handsome and to whom [. . .] the adoption industry had clearly been good." The attorney explained that he would target "pregnant southern women who lacked either the means or the desire to raise their babies."

Poor women are especially vulnerable to the high-pressured tactics of the adoption industry. Without resources or support, they want to believe that their sacrifice really will be helpful to their children. Rarely are they informed about the long-term repercussions they and their children will experience as a result of separation.

Industry Promotes Relinquishment

In order to promote adoption and encourage the relinquishment of infants, the adoption industry employs full-time lobbyists in Washington, D.C. The National Council for Adoption is a private lobbying group whose members include twenty-eight adoption agencies and represents 3.5 percent of U.S. adoption agencies. The N.C.F.A. and three adoption agencies just received \$8.6 million from the federal treasury in October 2001 to promote adoption to pregnant women at health centers and clinics. In the press release from the U.S.A. Department of Health and Human Services, Tommy G. Thompson, H.H.S. Secretary, said, "These grants are an important step in making sure that every pregnant woman who is considering her alternatives understands the benefits of adoption."

Relinquishment and adoption is considered by some to be a solution for the societal problem of illegitimacy and welfare dependency. Psychologist Lynne Reyman contends that by viewing adoption as a cure for poverty, we deny the humanity of birthparents. By taking the children of poor families, we compound their problems; not only are they still poor, but additionally they have lost their children.

The Industry Tightens the Screws

Other lobbying and legislative efforts of the adoption industry include supporting states to legally reduce the length of time after which relinquishment becomes irrevocable. California recently reduced the time a relinquishing mother has to change her mind from ninety to thirty days.

Some states allow no time for reconsideration. Some states have enacted legislation that allows the mother to sign a binding relinquishment even before her baby is born. Before birth, a pregnant woman may think relinquishment is the best solution for her predicament. Following birth, once the mother actually meets her infant, her priorities often change drastically. A mother needs to experience motherhood and understand the full implications of relinquishment before she signs anything.

The adoption industry aggressively supports both anti-abortion legislation and the recent "baby dump" laws. Thirty-five states have passed safe haven laws in the last two years. These laws allow anyone to anonymously abandon a baby at a designated safe place. Ostensibly, their intent is to reduce infanticide, but inadvertently they encourage and condone the abandonment of infants. Since the surrender is anonymous, there are no safeguards against fraud and corruption. There is no way to confirm that the person dumping the baby is the parent or legal guardian or if both parents have agreed to the abandonment. The "baby dump" laws are supported by the adoption lobby, who see the foundlings as a source of infants for adoption.

The Internet has become the tool of choice for adopters seeking pregnant women who might consider relinquishing their babies. Laura Mansnerus reported in the **New York Times** that hopeful adopters typically pay \$175 to be listed in an Internet registry for three months. Their profiles in the registry include photos, family histories, and loving descriptions of their homes, pets, hobbies, and child-rearing plans. The Internet allows adopters to advertise for babies, which is illegal in other mediums in some states.

Professional Marketing

Public relations and marketing firms with very bright and likeable marketing experts have orchestrated the commercial approach to adoption, and in their effort to make relinquishment and adoption appeal to preg-

nant women, they have disguised the process to make it appear as though it prioritizes birthparents, Gritter explains. Watson describes the phenomena as having spawned a host of ancillary exploiters, including public relations and marketing firms that help prospective adoptive parents prepare biographies and photographs to increase their appeal [. . .] and insurance companies who will write a policy to reimburse [prospective] adoptive parents who have paid the expenses of a [prospective] birthparent who then decides against adoption.

The National Adoption Network was one of the first national organizations dedicated to connecting pregnant women with adopters. Severson recounts how Dian Jordan brought her skills as an advertising executive to the National Adoption Network and employed high-gloss polished creativity to solicit prospective birthparents.

Foreign Infants Help Meet Demand

Foreign procurement of desirable infants for adoption helps meet the market demand and is the fastest growing area of infant adoption. David Tuller reported in the **New York Times** that more than 18,000 children were adopted from other countries in 2000. Most came from Korea, China, Russia, other Soviet Bloc nations, India, and Guatemala.

Adam Pertman, author of **Adoption Nation**, expresses the prevailing ethnocentric justification for recruiting children from other countries, With few exceptions, the ones [children] who are adopted will live better lives than they could have in their homelands. Affluence does not make American adopters better parents, nor guarantee that the children they adopt internationally will be happier for having been removed from their families, cultures, and heritages.

One of the reasons adopters cite for adopting internationally is that relinquishing foreign mothers, especially those from Third World countries, have less recourse than their American counterparts and are unlikely to contest an adoption, or have the resources to seek contact at a later date. Although countries with white populations are especially targeted, adopters indicate that race is less of an issue with babies because all babies are cute and loveable.

Exploitation is Endemic

Exploitation of babies and their mothers by the adoption industry is endemic in adop-

tion today. Domestically, adoption professionals use coercive tactics to procure infants.

Adoptive mother and adoption reformist, L. Anne Babb in **Ethics in American Adoption** relates that research on ethics in adoption shows that adoption is rife with conflict of interest. Most adoption facilitators who claim to offer unbiased counseling to potential birthmothers depend upon the dollars collected from adopters to support their business. Free counseling for pregnant women often is indistinguishable from a sales pitch for relinquishment. Another area of conflict is that in most adoptions, an attorney hired by the adopters purports to represent everyone involved in the adoption transaction. Rarely does an impoverished relinquishing mother retain her own legal counsel.

Lynne Reyman describes the exploitation of young mothers in her recent book, **Musings of a Ghost Mother**:

Fraudulent crisis lines may act as fronts for attorneys who broker adoptions. In the marketplace for infants, merchandising techniques draw in unmarried pregnant girls and women. Looking in our local yellow pages under adoption, I see pictures of smiling adoption facilitators promising birthmothers that all the choices are yours. One adoption facilitation center promotes college scholarships for birthmothers, among other free services. The coercive nature of these services is a reminder that the system is driven by adoptive parents, the paying consumers to whom agencies and attorneys cater.

Some tactics employed by the adoption industry are more coercive than others.

Open adoption, the revolutionary practice of allowing and even encouraging full contact between adoptive families and birthfamilies, has been embraced by the adoption industry as a tool of unparalleled seduction to potential birthmothers. Adoption facilitators have found that a mother is more inclined to proceed with an adoption plan that includes ongoing contact with her child because the prospect of never seeing her child again is unbearable. Too often, openness is the carrot that entices a mother to relinquish, and only after the adoption is finalized, does she learn that the adoptive parents did not intend to maintain the open agreement, which is not enforceable by law. Once the adoption is finalized and the adopters have the baby, they are free to have their telephones unlisted,

change their addresses, change their names, move out of state, and sever contact. Birthmothers are left without legal recourse.

Allowing adopters to be present during a mother's labor and childbirth is another coercive tactic employed by the adoption industry. Babb cautions about the manipulative potential of having prospective adoptive parents participate in an expectant mother's prenatal care, childbirth, or even visit the hospital following delivery. Babb maintains that a mother who is considering relinquishment must have the opportunity to experience motherhood without [. . .] the onus of anxiety or guilt about the feelings of the prospective adoptive parents. The potential heartache of prospective adoptive parents with whom [the mother] has developed a pre-delivery relationship should not be used as a coercive means of obtaining the relinquishment of an infant. If the mother does decide to relinquish, the time immediately following birth is the only time she and her child will ever have as a family. If the mother decides to not relinquish, then her baby does not need an adoptive home. Adoption is for children who need homes. Either way, the presence of adopters in the delivery room or at the hospital is inappropriate.

Foreign adoption is also plagued with abuse. Pertman describes the exploitation occurring in foreign adoption, Unregulated, unscrupulous facilitators coerce or bribe the poor and single women around the world to part with their babies. Thousands of Americans travel to foreign countries every year to get babies with tens of thousands of dollars hidden in their clothes because, as Pertman explains, they have decided they want a child more than they want to deliberate the ethics of their actions or of their advisors. Pertman continues, Some agencies hire bounty hunters to locate babies for adoption, paying as much as \$10,000 per find, which is a huge sum in the poor areas of the world where this is a routine practice.

Baby stealing is a burgeoning problem in international adoption. Michael Riley, writing about Guatemalan infants fueling the adoption industry in the **Dallas Morning News**, reports that with such high demand for infants, adoption brokers are enticed to use tactics of intimidation and manipulation. They target poor single mothers who are often isolated from their families and support systems and scour poor neighborhoods looking for pregnant women, sometimes pretend-

ing to befriend them. Riley writes, Brothel owners sell the babies of prostitutes to help offset the downtime of the pregnant employees. Middle and upper class housewives hire expectant mothers as servants, help arrange an adoption, and then pocket the [baby broker] fee.

Mothers whose babies were taken without their understanding or consent have filed dozens of complaints with the Guatemalan attorney's office. In response to the report of baby stealing, Britain and Canada, among other countries, have instituted a mandatory DNA test for adoptions from Guatemala, but the United States tests only sporadically. Out of the twenty-nine babies tested by the U.S. last year, three tests revealed that it was not the genetic mother relinquishing the baby for adoption.

Sally Stoecker, writing for the Russian magazine, **Demokratizatsiya**, reports that corruption and fraud plague Russian adoption. Demand from infertile couples in the West provide substantial profits and entice criminal elements. According to the Main Directorate of Internal Affairs in Moscow, several cases of missing children are reported daily. Kidnapping has become a frequent crime associated primarily with foreign adoption. Underprivileged women whose babies have disappeared rarely find legal recourse.

A Perfect World

The business of infant adoption is out of control. The affluent can buy any commodity they desire, including babies, while at the same time, poverty is the leading cause of relinquishment. Describing a perfect world where no babies would ever be relinquished for adoption, Barbara Eck Manning, founder of Resolve, an organization for infertile people, explains that the fact babies are available reflects society's failure to provide education, family planning, medical services and support for at-risk families. Every adoption represents a tragic breakdown of a family where a mother and child have been separated.

A glimmer of hope for that perfect world described by Manning was offered by adoption reformer, Evelyn Burns Robinson, author of **Adoption and Loss-- the Hidden Grief**, during her presentation at the 23rd Annual American Adoption Congress Conference in Anaheim, California in April 2001. Robinson said that many people simply accept adoption as a part of our culture, but

that adoption is a social construction. She said that adoption has not always existed, and it does not exist everywhere. She said that adoption occurs mostly in affluent, Western societies and is a fairly recent historical phenomenon. Robinson pointed out that in just over a hundred years, we have seen the end of slavery and the triumph of suffrage, and that the reason these changes occurred was because someone drew attention to the injustice. Robinson's examples of the changes that occurred to slavery and suffrage make it seem possible that the institution of adoption might also change, no matter how firmly entrenched in society it is, nor how much money it generates. Perhaps, with continued diligence, the business of infant adoption can be eliminated, and we can move a little closer to that perfect world.

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Darlene Gerow is currently volunteering as editor of the CUB Communicator. Darlene reunited with her daughter, Kathryn, twenty years ago. She may be reached at CUBeditor@juno.com