

Adoption and its aftermath: Attachment, belongingness, and identity issues for adopted persons

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This Presentation can be downloaded at:

<http://jupitercenter.com/articles>

My Current Therapy Practice

- Private practice in Eagan, includes therapy with adopted persons and their families
 - Jupiter Center for Growth and Healing at Aslan
 - Aslan Institute is a group of providers with a common vision about mind-body-spirit connections and health
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Adoption and Mental Health

- “University of Minnesota researchers found that common DSM-IV childhood disorders are more prevalent in adoptees than nonadoptees. They also found that adoptees are more likely to have contact with mental health professionals.”
 - Example: “The odds of having ADHD or ODD were about twice as high in all adopted adolescents. 7 to 8 out of 100 nonadopted adolescents had ADHD compared with 14 to 15 out of 100 of the adoptees.”
 - Cautionary note: this may be a reflection of adopted parents’ stronger tendency to find mental health resources for their adopted children.
 - <http://www.psychiatrictimes.com/display/article/10168/1367897>, posted January 9, 2009, based on: Keyes MA, Sharma A, Elkins IJ, et al., *The mental health of US adolescents adopted in infancy*, Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med. 2008; 162: 419-425.

Adoption and Mental Health

- In 2000, roughly 2.5% of Americans (7.5 million) were adopted
- Recent research noted the following psychological issues for adoptees: “(a) difficulty with abandonment and rejection, (b) cultural and racial identity for transracial adoptees, (c) birth family romance-fantasy concerns, (d) “genealogical bewilderment,” (e) incomplete sense of self, (f) body-image issues, (g) sexual and romantic relationships, and (h) dichotomous identity issues.”
- Baden and Wiley, *Counseling Adopted Persons in Adulthood: Integrating Practice and Research*, *The Counseling Psychologist*, 2007; 35: 868-901, 869 and 873.



A little personal history...

...on the issue of adoption

Personal History: Adoption or not?

- At the age of 12, My great aunt offered me a way out of a terrible situation
- She was doing the “right” thing—trying to save me
- I did not understand what “adoption” meant
- I said “no” even though I was risking my life
- I did not understand why I said no
- I think even then, though, I knew it had something to do with my identity, with my sense of who I was

Personal History: Adoption and Belongingness



- I am the kid on the left, the other guys are my bio brothers, Kevin and Tom
- This was taken during my first year in foster care—age 13
- I was in trouble, but at least I knew where I belonged

Personal History: Adoption and Identity

- At age 13, I now lived in a foster home
- Foster mother was kind, loving, provided for me like never before
- A year after moving in, she asked me to let her adopt me
- Seems like a no-brainer now, given where I had come from

Personal History: Adoption and identity (2)

- I said “no”
- She was very hurt
- She kicked me out
- I didn’t understand any of it
- What went wrong here?
- Why did I say “no,” when “yes” would have helped me escape from the chaos and abuse of my family?
- Why did she take it so personally she kicked me out?

Personal History:

My partner

- My interest in adoption issues is also fueled by the fact that my partner is a transnational/transracial adoptee who creates art, literature, dialogue and social change around adoption and other issues.

Child Protection: kids running from foster care back to “bad” homes

- My first job as an MFT—working with families involved in Child Protection cases
 - I Saw kids, like me, running from “good” foster or adoptive homes to “bad” biological homes
 - Social workers I have spoken to recently report that adoptive kids frequently return to their biological families
 - This seemed to apply to kids adopted at all ages
 - Why do they reject their adoptive homes?

Adoption, Foster Care and Blended Families

- Much of what will be covered today applies to foster care and blended families as well as adoption
 - Caveat: Adoption usually carries an expectation (by most, but not necessarily all, stakeholders) of permanence and a deeper attachment and identity with the new family
 - Example: Adoptive parent says, “as soon as I saw a picture of the [boy or girl], I knew we were supposed to be a family....”
 - This feeling may be powerful, but leaves open how the child or its birth family might feel

What role does age play

- Are children adopted at a younger age less likely to struggle with issues of:
 - Belongingness?
 - Attachment?
 - Identity?
- Perhaps, but not necessarily so—children adopted as infants might exhibit fewer adjustment problems, but often have problems later, including identity issues
 - <http://www.psychiatrictimes.com/display/article/10168/1367897>

Adoption “Stakeholders” (invested parties)

- Adoptee
- Biological Family
- Biological Community
- Adoptive Family
- Adoptive Community
- Facilitating Agencies
- Others? (who have I left out)?

My Focus Today: Three Primary Issues for Adoptees

- Attachment
- Belongingness
- Identity



Credit: "healingdream" at freedigitalphoto.net

Defining Terms: What is “attachment?”

- I am not referring to “Reactive Attachment” Issues
 - Although this is worth considering
- I feel attached to you
- I “need” you
- I miss you
 - I think you miss me
- You feel attached to me
- ***More relational***
- Other ideas?



Credit: Arvind Balaraman at freedigitalphoto.com

Defining Terms: What is “belongingness?”

- I “fit in” here somewhere
 - I fill an important role
- There is a “place” for me here
 - I am unique and not replaceable
- I want to be here and you want me to be here
- ***More structural, but also existential***
- Other ideas about “belongingness?”

Defining Terms: What is “identity?”

- Identity: A permanent sense of self (from wikipedia)
 - A sense of continuity through transition (e.g. from one family to another)
- “Identity affiliation:” (new term) an internalized sense of self related to something or someone else
 - “Who I am” is defined in part by my relationship to you
- ***More personal and individual, fully existential***
- Other ideas about “identity”?

Relationship between Attachment, Belongingness, and Identity

- A person can feel attachment, without feeling they belong or having an “identity affiliation”
- A person can feel attachment and belongingness without having an identity affiliation
- Yet, a person might have an identity affiliation to their birth family, even if they did not make an attachment or have time to build belongingness with anyone from their birth family

Primary Adoption Issues:

(1) Transition and Belongingness

- Changes in rules, roles, and family hierarchy
 - Sibling “birth” order changes in bio and new family
 - Adoptive family has different rules based on age, development, gender
- Connections and communications
 - What are the rules for communications between old and new family
- Legal considerations:
 - TPR, is it realistic?
 - Open Adoption, if not, why not?

Primary Adoption Issues:

(2) Attachment

- Loyalty questions
 - Can I be loyal to my bio parents if I make an attachment to my adoptive parents
 - Can I be loyal to my adoptive parents if I am curious about or want to make a connection with my bio family
- Abandonment issues
 - Why did my bio family abandon me?
 - Does that make them (or me) bad?

Primary Adoption Issues:

(3) Identity

- Who am I now that:
 - I am no longer with my biological family
 - I am with this new family
- Who do they expect me to be
 - Does their race, age, gender, economic class require me to be something different than I was with my old family?

Therapy Strategies: Adjustment outcomes

- Differences between the biological family and the new family:
 - greatly influence a child’s ability to adjust to their new surroundings and
 - Affect how they resolve differences between where they come from and where they are (belongingness, attachment and identity)
- “To avoid overpathologizing or minimizing the adoptive experience... [researchers and practitioners should] maintain the sensitive balance between ‘denial of differences’ and ‘insistence on differences.’”
 - Baden and Wiley (2007), at 870.

Therapy Strategies: Permission

- Create space
 - For the family and child to explore questions about belongingness, attachment and identity
 - To verbalize misunderstandings from the past about expectations by everyone
 - To investigate whether other stakeholders (e.g. biological family members) should be included in the therapy process

Therapy Strategies: Permission

- My adopted clients often struggle with asking questions about who they are without reference to who others (including me) want them to be
- I try to give them space and permission to ask themselves questions about their identity
 - Without being bound by the requirements of loyalty
 - While also offering parents (if involved) a chance to voice their concerns and feelings
 - The parents also have identity affiliations with the child that need to be respected, wherever possible

Therapy Strategies: Suggested Questions (1)

- “Where do I come from (place, culture, biology, other family, community, history of my people)?”
- “What does this mean about why I am not still there (why they abandoned me, or was it the right thing to do, to take me from them)?”
- “What does leaving that place mean about how I am still connected to that place (should I go back and find out or leave it alone, am I still one of “them” even though I was raised here)?”
- “Where is my home?”

Therapy Strategies: Suggested Questions (2)

- “What does it mean about my sense of loyalty and belongingness to my new family that I still care about these other questions, these other people?” “Does it make me ungrateful to want to explore these ideas?”
- “Is it my adoptive parents’ fault that I was subjected to racism at school, by other kids, by their extended family?”
- “Should I resent my adopted mom and dad for discouraging these questions when it is clear now that I have been damaged by such discouragement?”

Therapy Strategies: Suggested Questions (3)

- “If I do not feel as attached to my (adoptive) family as others who are not adopted, does this mean that I am not attached to anyone?”
- “Does it mean I am not really attached to my adoptive family if I yearn to be connected with and know more about my biological family and their history?”
- Revisiting my history
 - Found acceptance in foster home
 - For single identity
 - With dual attachments



Selected Resources: Books and Articles

- Baden, A. and O'Leary Wiley, M., *Counseling Adopted Persons in Adulthood: Integrating Practice and Research*, *The Counseling Psychologist* 2007; 35: 868-901
- Lifton, B.J., *Journey of the Adopted Self, A Quest for Wholeness*, Basic Books 1994
- Oparah, J.C., Shin, S.Y., and Trenka, J.J., *Outsiders Within, Writing on Transracial Adoption*, South End Press 2006
- Shin, SY, *Skirt Full of Black*, Coffeehouse Press 2007
- Trenka, J.J., *The Language of Blood*, Graywolf Press 2005
- Trenka, J.J., *Fugitive Visions*, Graywolf Press 2009
- Verrier, N., *The Primal Wound, Understanding the Adopted Child*, Gateway Press 1993

Selected Resources: Internet

- <http://www.psychiatrictimes.com/display/article/10168/1367897>
- <http://www.adoption.org/adopt/mental-illness-and-adoption.php>
- <http://international.adoption.com>
- <http://encyclopedia.adoption.com/entry/psychiatric-problems-of-adopted-persons/294/1.html>