

Why wasn't I told? Making sense of the late discovery of adoption

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Introduction

What do we know about these particular late discovery adoptive families? Are they in fact radically different from those where adoption is open?

We would need to look at a comparative sample of adoptive families to be able to answer this question with any degree of accuracy. However, from our own sample of 40 people it is interesting to note that over a quarter of the participants, in fact indicated that their adoptions were unhappy prior to the late discovery disclosure.

Could it be said that the keeping of the secret created an environment where guilt and blame flourished? Is the secrecy about adoption symptomatic of unresolved issues of the adoptive parents? These are confronting and controversial questions.

Historical attitudes towards adoption

The following quote taken from a 1947 Women's Weekly advice column, written by a doctor, describes the attitudes towards adoption at the time.

"Should I tell the child of the adoption? she asked. You certainly should I told her. When old enough to understand the child should be told of how the choice was made, and then never mentioned again. Should I inquire about the child's parents? The less you know of the child's biological parents the better. For your own peace of mind, they should not know anything of you."

Loyalty to adoptive parents

Loyalty towards one's adoptive parents can override the strong feelings of anger and grief experienced by many late discovery adoptees. This loyalty may prevent the late discovery adoptee from ever feeling comfortable about disclosing their new knowledge to their adoptive parents.

It may also prevent the adoptee from searching for his/her birth family. It may ensure that the legacy of secrecy continues. When adoption is not talked about openly, it can become a source of great shame and stigma for some families.

One of the most difficult aspects for late discovery adoptees is the sense that *"everyone knew of the adoption other than themselves"*. We have given examples throughout this research of ways that the discovery was made with the majority being told by a relative, spouse or other person who had held the precious knowledge and had, out of kindness, duty, guilt or malice, finally "told".

We have also examined the experience of "things making sense now" described by many late discovery adoptees who have finally been able to understand the whispered comments of childhood friends or a throw away statement made by a relative at a family party. For some, the sense of conspiracy is tremendously difficult to cope with, and trust in other close relationships may be challenged or destroyed.

The Post Adoption Resource Centre (PARC) has been concerned for a long time about the emotional impact for adopted people who discover late in life that they are adopted. There is no reliable evidence on the proportion of NSW adoptees who are unaware of their adoptive status.

A small study, conducted by PARC in 1992, revealed a significant number of adopted adults who had been contacted by birth family members and who had not been aware of their adoption until that point. Of the 27 adoptees who were found in this way, 6 had not known of their adoptive status (22.2%). It was thought this small sample could be indicative of a much wider group of adult adoptees.

The Research Project

Between July 1995 and February 1998, 99 people had contacted PARC because of late discovery. A sample of 40 agreed to participate in our research project, which was conducted by Shirin Markham, a NSW university social work student on placement at PARC.

The 40 participants (34 females and 6 males) were interviewed by telephone or in person using a questionnaire. The questionnaire took about one hour to complete and covered aspects such as the discovery of the adoption, the initial reaction to the news, the effects on family relationships and contact with the birth family.

The sample

Status of participants

Of the 40 participants

- 33 were late discovery adoptees
- 2 were birth mothers of late discovery adoptees
- 3 were spouses of late discovery adoptees
- 1 suspected she was adopted
- 1 was adopted by her birth mother and stepfather

Age at discovering one's adoption

- Earliest age of discovery - 12 years
- Latest age of discovery - 65 years
- Average age of discovery - 38 years

Major conclusions

- 41% of the sample was told of their adoption by someone other than the adoptive family, relatives or birth family.
- 62% of the sample never suspected they were adopted, but many felt that it made sense of their family relationships or because they always felt different from everyone else.
- 62% of the sample went on to have contact with their birth family after the discovery of their adoption.

Being Told

The experiences of being told of their adoption varied greatly among the sample. Some were told by "well meaning" relatives and others were told by spouses or adoptive parents. A small number of the sample's spouses had known of their partners' adoption for years and kept it a secret until the disclosure.

Some adoptees discovered their adoption papers, or were teased at school about being adopted by other children.

The initial reactions of the sample to finding out about their adoption was overwhelmingly that of shock, and ranged from feelings of disbelief, anger and relief to devastation. Feelings of relief were experienced by those people who had difficult adoptions.

Anger towards those people who had known of the adoption was commonly expressed. Some of the sample also experienced feelings of loss that their family was not their biological family, and questions of "who am I?" overwhelmed them.

Some initial reactions

Tessa - *"Shock, but I had a great need to tell my adoptive mother it was okay, because I was worried about her. Then I just got angry. It was like feeling shock, concern, sadness, anger - it was a process of feelings."*

Fiona - *"Anger, I felt isolated and alone. I felt I didn't belong to anyone."*

Jenny - *"Happiness, I was a victim of child abuse and there was a sense of relief that I wasn't blood related."*

Informing adoptive parents of the discovery

- 24.8% informed their adoptive parents that they had discovered they were adopted
- 22.2% did not inform their adoptive parents
- 28.2% did not need to inform their adoptive parents of their adoption because the information had come from the parents.
- 24.8% adoptees' parents were dead.

The group who told their parents of their adoption had mixed feelings. Some told their parents the same day they discovered they were adopted, others took months, even years before they told them. Some found that their parents became quite defensive and would say things like *"you should be grateful"*. *"I don't want to talk about it again."*

Some of the adoptees chose not to tell because they felt their parents were too old and it would "kill them". Others were protective of their parents and did not wish to hurt them in any way.

Effect on family relationships

Half of the sample felt that the discovery of their adoption had affected family relationships and they described different experiences. Many of this group found that family relationships had become a lot closer since the disclosure. Whereas, for others trust was secretly strained, and some broke off contact altogether. Some adoptees of older parents expressed understanding that they were adopted in a different era when secrecy might have been encouraged.

Contact with birth family

More than half of the sample went on to have contact with their birth family and 45% of those initiated the contact. The majority experienced a positive

initial response from their birth family. A much smaller portion of the sample were contacted by birth family. (17%). Those who had not had birth family contact felt they were not yet ready to search but would probably search eventually.

Two of the forty people searched for their birth mothers only to find they had died.

Many of those who felt that the reunion had impacted upon them found that the reunion had a positive effect on their lives, they now had the satisfaction and confidence of knowing the 'whys' and answers to 'who am I?'

A small number of the sample felt that the reunion had destroyed their adoptive family relationships, because their adoptive family would not accept the reunion. Some partners of the adoptees who searched felt threatened by the contact and found it hard to understand the identity issues involved.

Counselling and support

75% of the participants felt that they did not require counselling to deal with issues of late discovery. What helped the majority of those to cope was the support of their partners, extended families and friends.

Only a quarter (25%) had undertaken counselling - primarily from PARC. This was seen to be helpful. Dealing with the ongoing issues surrounding late discovery was something the majority was still grappling with.

Trusting others was difficult, and this affected the ability of participants to form new relationships. Feelings were close to the surface and could be easily triggered by reading an article on adoption, or watching something on television. For those participants who had experienced rejection from birth families, frustration and anger were commonly felt.

Identity

Issues around identity confusion were more prevalent in the groups who had not made contact with their birth families. The samples acknowledged how difficult the impact of late discovery had been, not only on them but also on their partners and extended family.

The late discovery of adoption forced one to confront deep-seated identity issues and to grieve for the person whom one thought one was. Many felt that it was a journey of self-discovery in finding roots.

Conclusion

I would like to end with a quote taken from one of the participants in the study - she says:

"I am not a social historian and I cannot imagine society as it existed then. I can, however, believe that most adoptive parents felt that they were acting in the best interest of their adopted children by not revealing their status.

In a way, they probably felt that they were protecting us from ourselves. But that very issue is the one I have the most difficulty in accepting - that our existence was fundamentally flawed in some way, that somehow we were also blameworthy. We were, after all bastards, the unwanted mistakes.

I had the best of parents, however at the end of the day, I still don't know, fully, who I am, and I do not know at all where I came from. Earlier acknowledgement, explanation and acceptance of my origins could have celebrated rather than hidden and denied the reality of my existence."

References

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