

What is the Couple, What is the Family in Adoption? Oedipus and Adoption

Introduction

I thought I would open with a story that involves the lead up to this conference. I sent in my proposal with title, etc. as we all have. When the preliminary conference brochure came out I found that my title had been changed and that I had been paired with a presentation on children with special needs. I immediately felt as though I would be perceived as not very smart because the new title did not make sense and this was compounded by the assumption that I belonged in the special needs category. This struck me as emblematic of what happens in adoption: the child's name and identity are changed, (including putting the names of the adopting parents on their birth certificate and removing those of the biological parents), leading to a feeling of erasure. And they are assumed to have special needs, being required to face an implicit bias before having a chance to show who they are. Leora very graciously heard my thoughts on this and immediately had the title corrected and put me in a different group here with Sally that points more in the direction of alternative family-making, rather than examining the challenges of having deficits in learning.

While it is certainly the case that many adopted children have learning issues, some due to trauma, not all do. The special need that they do all have is to have the meaning of their adoption understood by those who love them and the professionals who are enlisted to help them.

In order to contextualize adoption, let me give you some basic background. In 1970—three years before *Roe v. Wade*—the number of adoptions in the United States peaked at 175,000. Since the late 1980s, approximately 125,000 children have been adopted annually in this country. Between 1990 and 2005, annual adoptions of foreign-born children tripled, to 23,000 a year, and subsequently fell to 9,000 in 2011. In 2014, the last year that total data is available, total adoptions in the US fell to a total of 110,000, largely due to the decrease in international adoptions. Five million Americans alive today are adopted (Herman, 2008). These statistics give us some background on

adoption at the present time.

Who is the Couple, Who is the Family in Adoption?

So who is the couple in adoption and who is the family in adoption? It takes more than two parents to create an adoptive family. There are birthparents and adoptive parents, or sometimes one adoptive single parent. There are gay parents and straight parents. There are closed adoptions where biological parents are unknown and open adoptions where some contact between families is negotiated in a variety of ways. Whether known or unknown, the biological family exists at the very least in everyone's imagination.

Every family formed by adoption has a complex story of how it came to be. These stories, both ecstatic and traumatic, inform relationships from the very beginning. When these histories go unacknowledged or misunderstood by others, the isolation of otherness, the absence of a third who bears witness to the experience, clouds the ability to metabolize all that needs to be held and processed for these families to feel adequately supported. The complexity of adoption is rooted in a paradox. On the one hand it has been pathologized and on the other, idealized. As Silverstein and Kaplan point out, "The losses in adoption are difficult to mourn in a society where adoption is seen as a problem-solving event filled with joy." (Silverstien and Kaplan, 1982). Integrating the losses intrinsic to adoption has the potential to create resilience, and a new narrative that fosters understanding and growth, can emerge.

In the adoptive family, mourning accompanies love. The experience of loss is fundamental to adoption. All members of the adoption constellation experience it: adopted children, adoptive parents, and birthparents. Adopted adults speak of the primal wound of losing the mother who gave birth to them (Eldridge, 1999; Lifton, 2009; Pavao, 2005). In the past, psychoanalysis has identified this loss as a cause of psychopathology in the adopted population (Sants, 1964; Schecter, 1964). Unresolved grief in adoptive parents who were unable to have a biological child—over the loss of birth children and over the fantasy of birth children—has been discussed as possibly creating a weakness in the adoptive parent-child bond (Verrier, 1993). And for birthparents, the loss of offspring from whom they were separated at birth has been

documented as the cause of ensuing issues of unresolved grief through the life cycle (Horowitz, 2013).

These multiple losses create the “ghosts in the nursery” (Fraiberg, 1975, p. 100) of adoption. Additionally, the ruptured connection that is intrinsic to all but open adoptions, in which families stay in touch with birthparents, leaves all participants with many unknowns that may operate unconsciously and put members at risk for the melancholia that is the result of incomplete mourning (Freud, 1917). If we are to help families formed by adoption, we must open ourselves to the depth of their loss and its attendant grief, the tenacity of their attachment, and the resilience of their love.

To facilitate the creation of individual narratives for adopted children, we need to help them find the middle ground between being “chosen” and “being irrevocably broken by loss.” We must acknowledge their loss, while holding clear that mourning loss is a life task that can promote growth and resilience. (Naftzger, 2017). Parents of adopted children need help finding this narrative *with* their children, and need to be encouraged to mourn their own losses and be supported in the huge tasks they face with their children. To help them it is essential to find creative understanding of the complexity of their family experience.

The Family Romance in Adoption: Parents and Birthparents Real and Imagined

Identity is a crucial issue for all concerned in the adoption process. How do we parse the longing of the adopted person to know their origins from the fantasies about those origins? And how do we distinguish such fantasies as the wish for an idealized parent in the adopted person from the usual human ambivalence between biological parents and children, the primary relationship in which we all must negotiate love and hate? It would appear to be human to imagine some perfect set of parents elsewhere, or at least to long for them (Freud, 1909). When one is adopted, one can imagine that because of the biological relationship, birthparents could, on the one hand, fill this longing or, on the other, be the object of hate for their abandonment. A risk is that “for the adopted child, where the fantasy representation of the biological parent has a possible reality, the fantasy carries, on the contrary, a more

potent danger of disloyalty, of an attack on the parents—‘You’re not my real mother’” (Hodges, 1984, p. 50), is a refrain that many adoptive mothers hear in the course of raising their children. The cast of real and imaginary characters in adoption hugely complicates the challenge to come to terms with normal human ambivalence. The oedipal situation is exponentially complicated.

In closed adoptions the adopted child has no memory with which to construct a representation of birthparents. They may have bits of information that their parents have told them. Often parents know very little. Children do have their own bodies, which are their most tangible connection (Hodges, 1984). When they look in the mirror, they may be looking at the face of a birthparent they do not know. My daughter announced to me one day that she got her sense of style from her birthmother. Looking for ways to identify often requires concrete embodiment. In another, more chilling moment, she looked me directly in the eye and said, “You don’t have any children.” I was deeply shaken. With the help of a psychoanalytic lens, I was able to wonder to whom she was speaking and what she was trying to express. First, could I survive such an attack, which, I must say, I barely did. And then, was she speaking to me, or to her birthmother through me? Does she feel she has a mother or no mother? Who has whom? Who is who?

The relief reported by adopted people who find someone who looks like them and has familiar characteristics that went otherwise unexplained through their lives is common to reunion stories with birthparents. This refers to the phenomenon of “genealogical bewilderment,” (Sants, 1964), that adopted people report feeling. This is another challenging reality for adoptive parents to understand without feeling deeply rejected. Parents are often called upon to tolerate the attacks of a child who compares them to the idealized birthparent or to receive the anger they feel toward that birthparent. While all children attack parents in the honest project of differentiation, it is particularly painful for adoptive parents to weather this storm, as much as it may be frightening for their children to test these limits and risk such disloyalty. Adoptive parents are “real parents,” but they often hear that they are not, both from their children and the culture at large. While surviving these attacks is essential to all parent/child dyads, in the case of adoption, it is

even more critica. The adopted child will often push harder to confirm that he or she will not be rejected again, and parents will be tested over and over to reassure the children of this.

Searching for Answers, Searching for Birthparents

When my husband and I adopted our children in the 1990's open adoption was not as prevalent as it is now. Our two adoptions were closed adoptions in which we did not agree to on-going contact. We did provide pictures to the birthparents and some written updates through our lawyer's office. This is what was advised and this is what we chose to do.

Currently, most adopting parents in the United States are encouraged to maintain some open contact with birth families so that adopted children no longer have to live with so many unknowns and can maintain some connection with their families of origin. This is a grand social experiment the success of which varies according to the circumstances of each adoption. (Lori Holden, 2013)

For the many children who have grown up in closed adoptions, the question of searching for birthparents raises the possibility of converting fantasy to reality for the adopted person. In their book *Being Adopted: The Lifelong Search for Self* (Brodzinsky, Schecter, & Marantz, 1992, p. 43), the authors maintain that every adoptee searches. Whether or not they ever do so formally, they search crowds for a face that looks like theirs; they search in the mirror; they run away to search. Searching takes many forms. In the 21st century, searching can and does occur on the Internet. Facebook adds a new dimension to adoption, as does DNA testing on sites such as Ancestry.com. Adopted people are now finding birthparents through social media.

When my daughter was thirteen she announced that her good friend, also adopted, had found her own birthmother on Facebook, my heart skipped several beats. I realized the game had changed completely. I decided that it would be better to join with her wish to find her birthmother rather than attempt to delay it until she was eighteen, as we were advised to do at the time of her adoption. With my heart in my mouth, I searched for and found the birth families of both of my children.

They have each encountered very different situations. My son found a family in disarray, suffering from some of the very issues with which he has struggled over the years, reminding us that unknown genetics are powerfully at play in adoption. Sadly, they did not want to be in touch, which caused more damage that we were then challenged to contain. This bears out one of the great risks that adopted people face when they undertake searching for biological family. Rejection can and is an outcome sometimes. It reinforces the feelings of rejection that most adoptees carry within them from being placed for adoption in the first place.

My daughter's story took a very different turn and required a different kind of work and containment. We quickly and easily located her birthmother through a driver's license. She is now married, has two more children and leads a stable life, which was wonderful to find. She has suffered deeply the loss of her first child, my daughter, at a very tender age, and had much anger and hurt to express to me.

What I have been challenged to process with my daughter has of course been even more enormous. Imagine a thirteen-year-old girl meeting her birthmother for the first time and how that would impact the adolescent years with her adoptive mother. The challenge to not be split and to hold out for her wholeness and my own has been like holding onto a swaying tree in a tsunami. We are just emerging from the storm as she approaches her twenty first birthday.

Adoption is so much about mothers. We talk about birthmothers. Birthfathers are often shadowy figures, sometimes unknown and unknowing of the child they helped to create. The triangle of birthmother, adoptive mother and adopted child is a central triangle in adoption. I find that gay fathers are much freer of this triangle of conflict and are able to welcome a birthmother into their child's life with less ambivalence. It is the adoptive mother who receives so much of the hurt and confusion of her child through complex mechanisms of projective identification. (Freedgood, 2013). The ability to transfer the feelings of rejection experienced in adoption to the adoptive mother in particular, leaves mothers questioning themselves and stunned by the outcome of their wish to love and parent. If we can understand that what we are feeling is often what our children are feeling, a window opens to find

connection and understanding.

I decided to propose writing this paper after reading a letter that was written to my daughter by her birthmother when she visited us to attend my daughter's high school graduation which she signed, "Love, Your Momma." I needed a way to further integrate the open adoption we have created altogether. Writing and working with other adoptive parents has been a way for me to metabolize my own adoption experience. Certainly her birth mother claiming status of "Momma" gave me my own experience of erasure and then once again the challenge to accept that there are indeed two mothers. Each one did part of the job.

The letter was, from a developmental perspective, written by the fifteen-year old-girl who lost her baby and who idealized that baby and the fantasy relationship they surely would not have had; the girl who was still too angry to acknowledge me or that she might not have been able to raise this child without great difficulty. There was no mention of the loving family that my daughter was lucky to have been raised in, or the real person my daughter is, or the struggles she had growing up that this "momma" saw her through. Who survives in this oedipal triangle? Not the faint of heart! After reading this letter in my daughter's presence, I calmly told her with tears in the corners of my eyes, "It's hard to share you." Internally I was stunned and then furious.

This moment exemplifies the triangles that exist in the adoptive family. There is always the imagined third of the life not lived and it is almost always idealized.

I will say that I believe that my daughter sharing that letter with me, the reading of it in her presence and my measured response created a turning point in my relationship with her. While many moments led up to that one, I think in that moment she felt allowed to be whole and not split between us. Both mothers could exist within her and outside her. I did not feel that the letter, in itself, offered her that.

The greatest disservice done to adoptive families by well-meaning professionals is to erase this very nuanced fantasy life that is going on all the

time in the adoptive family by insisting that they are a family like any other. And to minimize the powerful need adopted people, parents and birthparents have to communicate their experience of loss and rejection. If there is a push for that to be silenced it will be heard, sometimes in shockingly destructive ways.

The Magic Ingredient: Resilience in Adoption

While the enormity of loss intrinsic to adoption in some ways defies the imagination to find a way to make it all right, it also contains the other core attribute of adoption: resilience. The good news is that we humans are hardwired for survival. We can make more than one attachment and carry on with the human projects of bonding, thriving, separating, and developing if we have sufficient permission to metabolize our losses when we need to, and the spaciousness to express our anger safely and be heard, and not be shamed into silence.

A child who is adopted does not replace a biological child, nor should he. He needs to be his own person. Life does not go on as it would in any other family, but it does go on as its own kind of family. The container of the adoptive family is different and in many ways more complex. The biological child who does not look like her mother does not have an active fantasy of another mother that she may look like. Likewise, adoptive parents carry, however quietly, the fantasy of the child who would have been more like them. These are the ghosts of adoption, even if things look similar to other situations on the outside. Adoption, like infertility, is an invisible wound. However, if these differences and the feelings associated with them can be experienced and discussed, a sound family that is able to communicate on a very deep level develops.

Making sense of the truths of life in a family formed by adoption is an extraordinary journey. It can be filled with moments of exasperating frustration, heartbreaking loss, and sometimes frightening challenges when the well-being of the children is threatened by the warring stories inside them of love and loss, rejection and belonging, understanding and feeling misunderstood. Surviving such challenges most certainly builds resilience

and, with hard work, can produce profound intimacy.

Like all parents, as adoptive parents, my husband and I have grown as people in unique ways we never would have had we not chosen to adopt to form our family. I am a humbler person for having learned so profoundly about the limits of my control and accepted the need to put myself aside in order to understand my children's losses. Living adoption has fostered deep bonds among all of us. These positive outcomes have only occurred with the help and support of extraordinary friends and professionals. These outcomes also constitute a possible new narrative about adoption that clinicians can foster for those who struggle to make meaning of their experiences as adoptive families. It's not what we thought we were getting into, but it has taught us lessons we might never have learned otherwise. It is my hope that my children and their birthparents will be able to integrate this as part of their narrative as well.