

Psychoanalytic Perspectives of Adoption

John C. Sonne

Moorestown, NJ, USA

Keywords: Adoption; identity; trauma; abortion survivors; psychological abortion; falsified birth certificates; family image

Abstract: This study describes the unusual difficulties and often subtle symptoms many adoptees have in being unable to feel authentic, real, first class and entitled. They have difficulty not only with their sense of self and identity, they also have difficulty constructing a family image. They have much in common with abortion survivors. Three major traumas experienced by most adoptees are explored. Their first trauma was experienced prenatally from living in an ambivalent intrauterine environment, their second trauma occurred from the disruption of early emotional bonds when they were given up for adoption, and their third trauma was experienced if they were given falsified birth certificates defining them as biological children of their adoptive parents. This third trauma constitutes a psychological abortion of the minds, spirits, souls, and identities of adoptees, and it can be compounded if adoptees are denied access to their original birth certificates and knowing the truth about the identities of their biological parents. Adoptees often encounter impediments and lack of understanding from society, the law, their adoptive families, and at times from their therapists, when they search for healing, resolution, meaning, and completion of their identities. Documentation is presented of the benefits coming from an increased understanding of the issues presented in this paper, benefits not only for adoptees, but for their adoptive and birth families as well, who also have had their identities skewed, and who also have suffered needlessly in many ways.

Zusammenfassung: *Psychoanalytische Perspektiven auf die Adoption.* Diese Studie beschreibt die ungewöhnlichen Schwierigkeiten und häufig verborgenen Beschwerdebilder von Adoptierten, Gefühle als glaubwürdig, wahr, wichtig und berechtigt darzustellen. Sie

This paper was presented to the Institute for Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy, Heidelberg-Mannheim e.V. in Heidelberg, on June 20, 1997. (An earlier paper dealing with similar material, but with a strong legal focus, entitled, "Privacy, Abortion, and Adoptees' Access to Their Original Birth Certificates," was presented on April 26 at the 18th Annual International Conference of the American Adoption Congress, held in Baltimore, Maryland, April 25–28, 1996. It was subsequently published as "The Psychological Consequences of Ignorance: Adoptees' Right to Know Who Their Biological Parents Are," in the *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society*, 1997, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 105–114.)

Correspondence to: John C. Sonne, M.D., 443 Shady Lane, Moorestown, NJ 08057, USA, Telephone and Fax 001 (609) 235-3558

haben nicht nur Schwierigkeiten mit ihrem Selbstwertgefühl sondern auch damit, für sich das Begriffsbild der Familie herzustellen. Damit haben sie viel gemein mit Abtreibungsüberlebenden. Drei wichtige schmerzhaft Erfahrungen von Adoptierten werden untersucht. Die erste Erfahrung ist vorgeburtlich das Leben in einer zweideutigen intrauterinen Umgebung, das zweite Trauma war der Abbruch früher emotionaler Bindungen bei der Freigabe zur Adoption und das dritte Trauma wurde erlebt durch die falsche Geburtsurkunde, welche sie als leibliche Kinder ihrer Adoptiveltern ausgab. Diese dritte Art Trauma entspricht einer „psychologischen Abtreibung“ auf Verstandes-, Geistes- und Seelenebene sowie Verlust der Identität eines Adoptierten. Es kann dadurch vermindert werden, daß den Adoptierten die Kenntnis ihrer originalen Geburtsurkunde und das Wissen um ihre leiblichen Eltern versagt wird. Adoptierte müssen oft Hindernisse und einen Mangel an Verständnis von seiten der Gesellschaft, des Rechts, ihrer Adoptivfamilien und manchmal auch ihrer Therapeuten hinnehmen wenn sie auf der Suche nach Heilung, Problemlösung, Lebenssinn und Herkunft sind. Der Nutzen, der aus einem besseren Verständnis der in diesem Aufsatz gemachten Vorschläge resultiert, wird beschrieben; Nutzen nicht nur für die Adoptierten selbst, auch für ihre Adoptiv- und Herkunftsfamilien mit ihren verqueren Verhältnissen und in vielen Dingen vermeidbarem Leidensdruck.

*

Introduction

In recent years there has been an increasing awareness of and interest in adoptees, the special problems they have, and the internal and external impediments standing in the way of their resolution. The fact that adoptees comprise a significant percentage of the population, and beyond this the fact that they are disproportionately highly represented in psychiatric treatment, makes an understanding of adoptees' special problems essential for all of society, not just for the psychoanalyst or other psychotherapists. The therapist in particular cannot assume that adoptees have problems no different than those encountered with non-adoptees. To work effectively with adoptees, and to understand the reenactments of adoption dynamics in the transference, it is necessary to not only have a sensitivity to the unique internal struggle the adoptees are having, and the trauma they have experienced, but also to be aware of the family, social, and legal structures with which the adoptees interact, the dynamics of which all too often reinforce the adoptees' problems or impede their resolution.

The Problems of Adoptees

Although adoptees do not necessarily have gross psychological or physical symptoms, many have less manifest, subtle, but nevertheless major impairments in their identity and sense of self. They have particular difficulty with separation and individuation. Adoptees have a vague sense of not feeling real, authentic, present, first-class, entitled, and connected, and feel vaguely resentful, ungrateful, ashamed, and guilty, despite reassurance they may have received from their adoptive parents that they are special and chosen. They often feel different, out of place, and not belonging. Many see for themselves that they are physically different, and even ethnically different, from other members of their adoptive families,

whether or not they have been told that they were adopted. They feel unrooted, in the dark, wondering who they are and where they came from, feelings which in some adoptees reach the level of an urgent need to know the truth about their origins. The adoptees of our times who are struggling with confusion about their identity can take heart in the story of the adoptee, Moses, who, after years of mental struggle, decisively declared that he would live out his original identity as a Jew. He took this stand against the opposition of both his birth family, and his adopted family, the royal family of the Pharaoh of Egypt. After making this decision, he led his people out of bondage to the Promised Land, and there received the Ten Commandments from God, which have served as the basis for many of the moral and legal positions of certain sectors of society since that time.

To return to our current adoptees, there are major differences between the problems experienced by them and by non-adoptees, although at first glance they may seem similar. An analogy has been made that their problems resemble those of immigrants (Colberg 1997, *Gay and Lesbian Families: A Cross Cultural Perspective*), but the analogy is incomplete. The problems of adoptees differ markedly from those of non-adoptees and immigrants not only in terms of origin but also in terms of resolution. In terms of origin, adoptees must deal in therapy with feelings about their prenatal experience and the fact that they were given away by their biological parents. They will also have to deal with the usually unprocessed trauma of the rupture of the bond with their biological parents which occurred upon relinquishment. Adoptees usually assume that the reason for their abandonment was that there was and is something wrong with them, and that they are therefore not entitled to feel hurt and angry at their biological parents. Being told by others that their relinquishment was done with the best intentions usually can have the undesired effect of reinforcing these very feelings, rather than helping.

Many adoptees must also deal with the fact that they do not know the identities of their biological parents. With no physical reality of biological parents as a grounding against which to weigh their negative assumptions about themselves, adoptees have more difficulty developing an accurate self assessment than do non-adoptees. If they find themselves opposed by others when they want to search for the truth, their state of ignorance can be compounded by a sense of betrayal and lack of trust.

Adoptees also have a more difficult task in developing a family image than do non-adoptees, since they have to do this with their adoptive families, not their biological ones. To compound matters further, adoptees approach this task with the handicap of a personhood already traumatized. Full of shame and guilt, they see themselves as unlovable rejects and failures. They are adoptee Hans Christian Anderson's "Ugly Ducklings." They share many traits in common with abortion survivors, thinking that perhaps they should have been aborted, or still should be, and that they do not deserve to live and to be loved. These feelings often come out very early in therapy relative to the therapist. The first thing one adoptee said to me after I had taken his initial history was, "Are you sure you want to accept me as a patient?" Over time, this attitude became a major barrier to the patient accepting me, and letting me in. This is in contrast to what some other non-adoptee patients have occasionally said to me in a somewhat playful manner somewhere along in the therapy, such as, "Do you think you could adopt me, or do you think

you could be my Daddy?" Despite the fact that these non-adoptees presented the inevitable resistances which usually occur in therapy, they wanted to be accepted, and gradually welcomed me in with my interest, my love and my ideas.

In the larger social milieu, adoptees have to deal with a problem not encountered by non-adoptees, a not uncommon social sentimental idealization of adoption, which makes them think that they should feel accepted and happy, further suppresses their hostility and discourages them from being critical. Of the current crop of movies on adoption, (*A Family Thing, Secrets and Lies, My Son the Matchmaker, and Natural Enemy*), only *Natural Enemy* (1996) portrays the rage many adoptees have that is usually covered over by layers of suppression and repression. In this disturbing movie an adoptee systematically destroys most members of his adoptive and biological families, including his birth mother's unborn baby. He fails to kill his mother only because he himself is killed at the last moment by his mother's stepson.

Adoptees' Experience of Trauma

Adoptees have suffered unusual trauma. Their *first trauma* most likely was a *pre-natal trauma*. The fact that the birth parents of future adoptees did not keep their children, no matter what the reason, suggests that many adoptees, as unwelcome unborns, experienced prenatal trauma as a result of an ambivalent parental environment during their life in the womb. The likelihood that adoptees probably felt a *dread of being aborted* would explain why many adoptees have dynamics similar to those commonly found in abortion survivors (Sonne 1996b, *Interpreting the Dread of Being Aborted in Therapy*). The deleterious consequences of being an unwelcome child were emphasized years ago by Ferenczi (Ferenczi 1929, *The Unwelcome Child and His Death Instinct*), who, though not focusing on abortion and adoption dynamics as I am in this current paper, found a history of having been unwelcome children a common theme in many adult patients who exhibited a variety of psychosomatic illnesses, self-destructive behavior, and suicidal impulses.

In addition to probable prenatal trauma, all adoptees have definitely experienced a *second trauma*, by virtue of the *postnatal disruption* of the emotional bond between them and their birth parents when they were given up for adoption. This is true no matter how welcoming, loving and caring the adoptive families were. As mentioned earlier, although adoptees may or may not have grossly manifest symptoms of psychological dysfunction, most have subtle and vague feelings of not being fully present. They feel disconnected and lacking in feeling a solid sense of continuity. They sense that things are not quite right in their world, and that something is missing. These are feelings with which people who have always felt welcome, or even if they haven't, still have had continuity in their parental relationships, and have taken their heritage for granted, may find it difficult to identify. It is important for the therapist to identify with these feelings if he is to help adoptees, many of whom may not have necessarily consciously connected these feelings with their source, to do so in therapy.

The *third trauma* is a *psychological abortion*. During adolescence, when adoptees are maturing sexually and going through the stage of identity vs. role confusion,

or at a time when they plan to marry, plan to have children, or when they plan to travel abroad – which involves getting a passport identifying them, and also symbolizes freedom to travel and still to be welcomed back home – many adoptees experience an escalating and almost imperative need to search for their roots. The search is by no means an easy one under the best of circumstances, but if adoptees find their path blocked either because of discouragement by their adoptive family or friends, or because of the denial of access to their original birth certificates by law, they become acutely and painfully conscious of experiencing a *third trauma*, a powerful *psychological abortion* of mind and spirit that has been latent but not obvious heretofore. To consolidate this psychological abortion forecloses the opportunity for the adoptee to address and resolve all three traumas. Without knowing the truth about their origins, many adoptees are unable to use their minds to heal themselves. It is of the utmost importance for therapists to realize this and to validate the adoptees need to search, or they run the risk of unwittingly colluding in reinforcing the very problems the adoptees need help with.

Adoptees' Difficulty Constructing a Family Image

As mentioned earlier, adoptees, already traumatized, have the difficult task of conceptually constructing an internalized family image with adoptive parents, a task markedly different from that required of non-adoptees. Ideally this task is facilitated by the presence in their new families of a loving environment containing what I have called a psychological family (Sonne 1980a, *The Psychological Family and Family Image Construction in Unrooted Children*, and Sonne 1980b, *A Family System Perspective on Custody and Adoption*). Sometimes the adoptive families are grossly deficient in meeting the adoptees needs, however, and in some instances are even abusive. Yet, even with the presence of a loving adoptive family, the fact that this task is particularly difficult for adoptees can be seen in data showing that adoptees comprise a disproportionately high percentage of patients seen in both child and adult therapy (Brodzinsky, Schechter and Henig 1992, *Being Adopted: The Lifelong Search for Self*).

It is not uncommon for non-adopted children to have momentary fantasies of insecurity thinking that they were adopted. They might also, in the grip of this fantasy, fear that they will be abandoned again. Some imagine that they were abducted by their “bad” adoptive parents from a fantasized royal family of idealized parents with whom they dream of being reunited. These fantasies are usually transitory, however, and in a trusting family atmosphere can be dispelled relatively easily. This is not so for adoptees. For them adoption is a reality (Wieder 1977, *The Family Romance Fantasies of Adopted Children*). In their minds, as well as in fact, adoptees have been abandoned and disconnected from their original bonding. They are bewildered, and they sense that something is amiss in the whole process of conception, pre-natal life, birth and adoption, no matter how consciously well intentioned their biological parents or their adoptive parents may be or may have been.

Loyalty

One of the major barriers impeding adoptees claiming their heritage is a sense of loyalty to the adoptive parents. This probably has several roots. One is fear of rejection, but that is not the only component. Despite their resentment at being expected to be overly grateful and indebted, adoptees themselves do in fact have their own sense of gratitude, and are concerned out of love for their adoptive parents that they not hurt them. How can adoptees express their hurt, anger, and grief about their biological parents, or their unhappiness with themselves, without their adopted parents feeling rejected? Being told by their adoptive parents that they were chosen as special, often makes adoptees feel worse – rejects who are beholden rather than entitled. Even though they may wonder whether their adopted parents' concern for them is out of true love or out of sufferance, they feel that they are expected to be and act happy even if they are not, and to feel great gratitude and obligation to their adoptive parents for admitting them into the family. They therefore feel unentitled to protest when they encounter the effects of unresolved conflicts of their adoptive parents, often around the issue of infertility, that are contained in the adoptive parents' motivation to adopt. This is partly why they hold themselves back from searching for the identity of their birth parents, wishing to connect with them, or claiming and enjoying any trait that might be attributable to their genetic inheritance. One adoptee gave up his interest in instrumental music when his adoptive mother frowned when it was speculated by another family member that perhaps he had inherited his musical talent from his birth parents. A five year old adoptee girl who was pretending to type a letter to her imagined birth mother, whom she knew was "out there somewhere," stopped abruptly when her adoptive mother questioned her about what she was doing. She had detected in her mother's inflection an unspoken unhappiness with her curiosity about her birth mother.

Adoptees also have a genuine wish to identify with their adoptive parents. When one well meaning adoptive mother complimented her three year old daughter on her beautiful curly hair and added that she must have gotten this from her birth mother, the little girl responded angrily, "I don't want to have curly hair. I want to have straight hair like yours, Mommie!" Another adoptee, who was a black child adopted by a Jewish, white family, and whose adopted mother decided not to have children of her own because of fear that she was a carrier of a gene that had caused blindness in her brother, wove a complex fantasy, which he told to his friends, that his adopted mother was his birth mother. He said that she had gone to another country with his birth father, then left him because he was not a good provider, moved to America and married his adoptive father. This adoptee was a wanderer in later life, seemingly searching for someone, but he refused to accept any assistance from his adoptive parents to help him learn the identity of his birth parents. As an interesting aside, his adoptive mother late in therapy, commenting on an experience she had had holding a blind child in the course of her work with handicapped people, tearfully said that this child could have been hers.

Infertility and Sexuality

Another barrier that adoptees often encounter has to do with the adoptive parents' infertility, particularly the mother's. To adoptive mothers who have not resolved their feelings about their infertility, their adoptees can represent a constant reminder to them, with all the accompanying feelings of resentment, jealousy, and self-hatred, that they themselves have not given birth, and the adoptees can receive the blame for this. One adoptive mother who had had both ovaries removed during adolescence and had adopted two daughters, became so upset witnessing the blossoming pregnancy of a neighbor woman that she threw her younger daughter against the wall. The dynamics of the mother who discouraged her son's musical interest were similar.

The issue of infertility blends with the issue of sexuality. Hulbert (1994, *Severed Braid: The Split Feminine as Represented in Relatedness between Birth Mothers and Adoptive Mothers*) has written on the identity problems of adoptive mothers and birth mothers. She applies the "Whore/Saint" split to each of them, with the birth mother being seen by both mothers, and often society as well, as the sexual, illegitimate, bad, yet envied woman, and the adoptive mother being seen as the legitimate, good, virginal, yet sadly infertile woman. Each mother has conflicts about sexuality and fertility. Although this is not stressed in her article, an important aspect of this split is that unfortunately these conflicts, as those about fertility, can spill over onto the adoptees. They are impacted upon by these conflicts, both in terms of both mothers' behaviors, and in terms of stories the adoptees may have been told. One adoptee was told initially by a social agency that his mother had told them that she was raped. He felt that he had the seeds of a rapist in him. Further pursuit by the adoptee and the agency resulted in the mother telling the agency the truth, that she had had an extramarital affair with a married man. Learning this truth left the adoptee still with an image of sex as sordid. Only late in therapy was he able to spontaneously mention that his birth parents' sexual encounter might have been a brief, positive, life-affirming experience in their lives. Being able thus to see his conception in a positive light was a very important step in modifying his negative self-image, and his guilt and repugnance about his own sexuality. It was also part of his diminishing the discouraging impact on him of his adoptive mother's conflicts about sexuality and fertility.

The Law

A major impediment to adoptees' resolution of their problems in the United States is that current law – in contrast to that in England, Germany, and many other nations – does a serious disservice to adoptees, and therapists should be aware of the magnitude of the legal barrier that adoptees are up against. Upon adoption in all states in America except Alaska and Kansas, and most recently Tennessee, a new birth certificate is issued which lists the adoptive parents as the adoptee's birth parents. Adoptees' original birth certificates are then sealed, and access to them by adoptees who are searching for the identity of their birth parents is proscribed by law.

There is a growing movement to revoke these laws, which many consider to be unconscionable, and to replace them with new ones which would authorize

adoptees eighteen years of age and older to have access to their original birth certificates. These bills usually include a provision that birth parents who do not want their identity known would have one year after the bills are signed by the Governor within which to block access by having their names deleted from their child's birth certificate. Only the adoptees would have this power, not the birth families or the adoptive families. Despite strong efforts in New Jersey by the New Jersey Coalition for Openness in Adoption to influence legislators to change current adoption law, many legislators have continued to be opposed to change.

Hearings on New Jersey Assembly Bill A-742 were held by the Assembly Community Services Committee on March 4th, 1996, and hearings on New Jersey Senate Bill S-287 were held by the Senate Committee on Women's Issues, Children and Family Services on March 14th, 1996. Testimony from others and myself was presented which documented the special problems adoptees have with their identity, their need to know their roots, and the benefit accruing to them from knowing the truth about their origins, particularly through access to their original birth certificates (Sonne 1996c, *The Ethical and Psychological Importance of Adoptees Knowing the Truth about the Identity of their Birth Parents*, and Sonne 1996d, *The Ethical and Psychological Importance of Adoptees Having Access to their Original Birth Certificates and Knowing the Truth about the Identity of their Birth Parents*). The committee members acknowledged that the evidence presented in support of these bill was convincing. Despite this acknowledgment, however, some legislators were inclined to override this evidence and oppose any change because of two expressed concerns: that these laws would improperly breach the privacy of birth parents and adoptive parents, and that without the guarantee of privacy future birth parents who do not want to raise, or feel they cannot raise their children, might choose to abort them as unborns rather than relinquish them for adoption.

For adoptees to consolidate their identity it is vitally important for them to connect with the truth of their birth parents and to establish a continuity to their existence that can help them to feel more real. To not be supported in their search compounds their feeling that there is something wrong with them, that they themselves are a shameful scandal, that they are bad and guilty people, or potential law breakers who wish to harm others. Adoptees should not be sacrificed to support a family secret by making their search illegitimate. Current adoption law in most states of America legislates blatant dishonesty, deception, restriction of freedom, distortion of reality, and causes immeasurable harm to adoptees, birth families, and adoptive families (Sonne 1997, *The Psychological Consequences of Ignorance: Adoptees' Right to Know Who Their Biological Parents Are*).

Not Whose Rights, but What Is Right

In adoptees' need to know the truth about their origins, there is an issue not only of the rights of the birth parents, or the rights of adoptive parents, or the rights of adoptees, or even the question of a causal factor in abortion or adoption, but of what is right, not who is right. The basic issue is one of truth, and the meaning of words, what Hayek (1944) in *The Road to Serfdom*, called the basis of all morals. Since adoptees' birth certificates are in fact falsified upon adoption, the original identities of adoptees are taken away from them; they have been declared

by legal decree to be magically reborn and have been given new identities. It is not only the adoptees who have their identities changed. Adoptive parents do as well. Since the adoptees' new birth certificates list the adoptive parents as the adoptees' birth parents, the adoptive parents, not uncommonly unable to be birth parents themselves, have also been given new identities by virtue of having been legally declared to be magically procreative and to have given birth. As for the birth parents, their existence and identity have in effect been erased, regardless of whether they want this or not.

Adoptees are not the magical children of their adoptive parents, even though these parents are their psychological family. They, as much as anyone else in this world, have a *right to know* akin to the movement in general in society of the citizenry's *right to know*. Adoptees should not be placed by others, and by the law, in the position of being unwilling colluders in a family secret, their lives compromised by an imposed sacrificial solution that presumes to protect or prevent them, as well as others, from dealing with reality, and from grieving.

Those concerned that adoptees may be harmed if they come upon unpleasant realities in their search would do well to consider that encountering unpleasant realities, even though they be painful and distressing, can give adoptees a grounding in reality that years of analysis may not be able to give them. Such painful realities can replace unhelpful fantasies, and may help others as well.

Are Children Objects or Persons?

Implicit in society's view of adoptees, whether it be that of birth parents, adoptive parents, therapists, legislators, or members of the general society, is a basic question of whether we relate to children in their early stages of development – prenatally, neonatally and in early childhood – as human beings possessing thoughts and feelings, or whether we dehumanize and depersonalize them, contributing to the very feelings many adoptees not so unrealistically do indeed have. Recent research has shown that there is a great deal more mentation and communication in the unborn that had previously thought (Sonne 1995a, *The Relevance of the Dread of Being Aborted to Models of Therapy and Models of the Mind. Part II: Mentation and Communication in the Unborn*). The unborn, newborns and young children are human beings who have rights and feelings that need to be respected. They cannot be regarded as non-persons who can be moved about like property or pets at the will of adults and legislators in our society without being hurt. We know this, but particularly when it comes to adoption law, we forget it. There is no hue and cry from the non-adopted sector of society to lament this. The efforts to consider the problems of adoptees, and attempts to change adoption laws and to educate the general public about adoption have come mainly from adoptees or their families, not from the general society. The ultimate in children being treated as commodities can be seen in instances in which adoptees have been bought and sold. Robert Andersen, a psychiatrist (Andersen 1993, *Second Choice: Growing up Adopted*), tells of how he was purchased for \$250, and a recent newspaper article by Parker (Parker 1997, *Baby-Dealer's Legacy: Children Sold by Ga. Doctor in 1950s–60s now Search for Roots*) documents the sale of numerous adoptees to willing adoptive purchasers for sums ranging from \$250 to \$1,000. When one

considers these reports, the fantasy of an adoptee who told me that as a child of three years of age, he had thought when his parents brought his younger adopted brother home, that children were bought at the supermarket, and that they could be returned if found defective, does not sound so fanciful.

It is odd that more non-adoptee adults, most of whom have experienced pain when an intimate relationship has been disrupted through abandonment, death, misunderstanding, or betrayal, and who have experienced dishonesty or injustice in their lives, do not identify more with adoptees. With all the adult resources of maturity, friends, and the capacity for comprehension at their disposal at these times of heartbreak or bewilderment, adults are still traumatized by these events, and a compassionate society validates their experience. Knowing this, how can we possibly non-empathically assume that immature, dependent children who have experienced ambivalence, disruption, and dishonesty in intimate relationships, as adoptees have, would be less affected by such experiences than adults? The fact that future adoptees were traumatized at such early stages in their development, when they were vulnerable and at risk, makes it likely that they would be more injured than adults, not less.

The Flaw in Over-Identifying with Birth Parents

Not only legislators, but also therapists, and even some advocates of adoptees' access to their birth certificates themselves, have been caught up in over-identifying with the birth mothers, as well as fathers. Because of this resistance, the injustice, inappropriateness, and lack of moral solidity inherent in the base upon which the great concern for birth parents privacy rests has not been sufficiently examined. I shall focus mainly on mothers hereafter, not only for simplicity, with the understanding that many others are involved, particularly the fathers, but also because the mother is the main custodian of the child both prenatally and postnatally. I shall also focus on mothers because protecting them has usually been the main focus in court testimony given by opponents of open access. It is obvious that protection of the identity and privacy of birth mothers would implicitly also shield the identity and privacy of birth fathers, but strangely enough little was said about directly protecting birth fathers. Protection of their privacy was hidden in the focus on the birth mothers. One cannot help wondering about the dynamics of this phenomenon, and what it says about the biological fathers of adoptees.

There seems to be a common tendency in society for both men and women to regard mothers as sacrosanct, no matter what their faults or shortcomings. Most people have been raised by mothers, and have an image of what they consider to be a mother's love, caring and nurturing. This image is probably universal and strongly held. But what of mothers who conceive children, threaten to abort them, or if they give birth to them do not raise them? Does the positive imagery of mothers apply to them? Are they beyond criticism? Are the fathers afraid to oppose them, or do they also not want their child, and therefore rather than acting as protectors of life and opposing the mothers, they support them in their decision to either abort their children or place them for adoption. All of the three traumas I have listed above which damaged adoptees were experienced because their mothers, for the most part – not to exclude fathers as well – did not want to have their

lives disrupted by their child's presence or existence, even though they started the child's life.

If one were to attribute relative innocence or guilt to adoptees or to biological parents, an issue adoptees struggle with in therapy, would the child not be considered the more innocent, and the parents the more guilty? Even if we view the birth parents compassionately, should we have compassion with no limit. If we were to know the full stories of the conception of many adoptees they would probably run the gamut of a wide range of imaginable scenarios. Even though the circumstances of conception may have been infelicitous, unpropitious, potentially scandalous, or tinged with violence, the baby conceived should not be seen as a scandal, someone shameful and guilty, or someone who brings others bad luck, but rather as a precious yet unappreciated gift to the parents and to the world. It is important in therapy for adoptees to realize this about themselves, and to not see themselves as bad luck for their parents.

Protection Implies Wrongdoing

There is a double message contained in the need to protect the anonymity of birth parents. An excessive need to protect could be viewed as a reaction formation masking hostility and rebuke on the part of the protector and self-reproach on the part of the protected. Even though this may be done by the parents, or by others with the intention of protecting the parents, the need to do so implies and sends the message to all that the parents have done something terribly wrong, and that their act of conceiving, if known, would be viewed as a shameful act, and hence must be kept hidden and denied. Otherwise, why try to hide it, and the child as well? If anyone's lives are inauthentic, it is the parents', not the adoptees'. Jocasta, Oedipus' wife and mother, attempted to dissuade Oedipus from knowing the truth about his identity. Was she trying to protect Oedipus, or herself? She hanged herself when the truth came out, and Oedipus, unfortunately, although innocently involved, shared the guilt by stabbing his eyes out with Jocasta's brooch.

The Threat to Abort if Not Guaranteed Privacy

As discussed earlier, many birth parents who give up their children for adoption were quite likely ambivalent in their respect and love for their children during their children's prenatal life. Testimony given in court hearings in New Jersey that some birth parents threatened to abort their children unless confidentiality could be guaranteed by those arranging adoption, was illustrative of such an ambivalence. Paradoxically, this testimony, although presented to strengthen the legitimacy of the position of birth parents who wish to deny access, actually weakens it. Such birth parents are revealing themselves to be untrustworthy guardians of their unborn children, whom they are holding hostage, and as such they do not merit protection, legal or otherwise, of their position.

Likewise, birth parents who give up their children after they are born, also have a dubious credibility. They have broken the implied promise and commitment of trust to care for their children to whom they have given birth, by rupturing the parent-child bond and turning over their responsibility to love and care for their

children to others. Birth parents who wish to protect their anonymity might do well to consider that the price of keeping their identity secret is being paid by their children, whose lives, even after the age of emancipation, are still being compromised by *ex parte* contracts made long ago by others to which the children gave no consent. The provision in proposed new laws granting birth parents one year within which to oppose giving adoptees the freedom of access is in itself a questionable concession that brings to mind the Emancipation Proclamation that freed the slaves. Did anyone in “the land of the free and the brave” consider at that time granting slave owners who did not wish to free their slaves a year within which to refuse them freedom?

The Fallacy of a Presumptive Increase in Abortion upon Access

It has been the prediction by many pro-life groups that without legal protection of anonymity, many birth parents considering adoption would abort their children rather than give them up for adoption. Abortions would then increase and adoptions would decrease. John Willke, then president of National Right to Life, in his testimony in 1990 to the Ohio legislature (Willke 1990, *Testimony, State Senate Hearing, HB 256*) strongly and successfully opposed passage of an open access bill on the basis of this prediction. This presumption is not supported by the evidence available from countries that have open access, which in fact supports the opposite conclusion. As for abortion, countries that have open access to birth records have a lower rate of abortions than those that have closed records, and a change in the direction of open access is followed by a decrease in abortions, not an increase. The longer in time access to birth records had been legalized, the lower the abortion rate (Forest 1996, *Chart of Abortion Rates in Countries with Open Access to Original Birth Certificates*; Ridgeway 1995, *Letter on England’s Adoption Act of 1977*). As for adoption, the rate of adoption in general, and of abortion as well, has been gradually decreasing, according to statistics from Canada (Daly and Sobol 1993, *Adoption in Canada: Final Report*), apparently because more unwed mothers are increasingly inclined to keep their children. They neither abort them nor do they relinquish them for adoption. The authors speculate that the reason these decisions are being made is because of the lessening of stigma against out of wedlock pregnancies, and perhaps because of other unclear reasons in the social milieu. As mentioned earlier, some opponents of open access stated at the legislative hearings in Trenton, New Jersey, in the spring of 1996, that some birth mothers had actually threatened to abort their unborn unless they were guaranteed that their birth records would be sealed. No specific examples, even with the names disguised, were presented to document this statement, and whether or not such threats actually do occur, and how often, is open to question. Evidence to the contrary was collected by Feinstone (Feinstone 1996, *Survey of Seven Adoption Agencies in New Jersey*) who found in a survey of seven adoption agencies in New Jersey that not one of them had ever had a birth mother who had expressed such a threat.

It has been my clinical experience that a more common reason some women choose abortion over adoption, in addition to other reasons, privacy upon adoption being an unlikely one, is because they fear going through the pain of relin-

quishing their new-born child. N.M. (N.M. 1996, *Letter*) writing in the Adoption Triad Forum, speaks to this, describing her adoption relinquishment as “by far the single most painful event in my life. I’ve always felt strongly that abortion was wrong, and in an ultimate sense I still do. Yet after going through one unplanned pregnancy that ‘ended’ with my son being adopted, I *knew* I could not survive that kind of pain one more time when I became pregnant just 2 months short of my wedding.” (Italics by N.M.) She chose to abort her child. Closed records actually increase the fear of relinquishment, encourage abortion and discourage adoption because they confirm to birth mothers that once they have seen their children and have given them up, they will never see them again.

Pro-life Sanction of Psychological Abortion of Adoptees

There is a contradiction and inconsistency in the position of some pro-life, anti-abortion advocates who oppose adoptees’ access to their original birth certificates. Their concern for the sanctity and protection of prenatal life, and their efforts to help future adoptees to emerge from the womb physically alive is not enough, if they simultaneously limit their chances for a full spiritual life by sanctioning a psychological and spiritual abortion of them after they are born. Supporting current adoption law disconnects adoptees from their roots and deprives them of their birthright. A life of material existence and physical survival is incomplete if one’s heart, mind, and soul are damaged. If one already feels inauthentic, as many adoptees do, what better reinforcement of this is there than to know that one’s birth certificate, marking the beginning of one’s life outside the womb, and the uniqueness of one’s life, is inauthentic, yet legally validated? The force of current law reinforces the very psychological and spiritual problems many adoptees have, further damages their already troubled minds and souls, denigrates their dignity, and casts doubt on the meaning of their lives.

The Benefit for Birth Families from Adoptees’ Access

The presumption that harm will result if the privacy of the birth parents is not protected ignores the possibility that benefit from access could accrue to birth parents. In fact, benefit is what usually occurs, for contact is often healing for the birth parents as well as for the adoptees. Many birth parents have been wondering for years who their children are, how they are, or where they are. These birth parents may wish to be reconnected, to be found, to find, to be forgiven, to forgive themselves, and to come to grips with their own sense of reality. Just as adoptees vigilantly scan the passing scene hoping to catch a glimpse of their birth parents, the parents also often have an eye out for their relinquished children while shopping at the supermarket. Many birth parents actively do search, and do not want their search to be impeded by restrictive laws. They miss their children, and would welcome contact. Reconnecting helps them grieve, and relieves them of years of wondering and worrying. Gerald Gioglio (Gioglio 1996, *Report to the New Jersey Assembly Community Services Committee*) certainly found this to be true for adoptive parents, and for adoptees’ siblings as well, in his work with the New Jersey Division of Youth and Family Services. Out of 366 birth family members

(predominantly birth parents and siblings) contacted from October, 1992 through July, 1996, there were 321 personal contact reunions, and 11 reunions by mail, for a total of 332. Only 18, or 5.1%, refused contact. 16 were deceased.

The Benefit for Adoptive Families from of Adoptees' Access

A common argument advanced by those opposed to any connection whatsoever by adoptees with their birth parents, is the presumption that such contact would weaken the parent-child bonds in the adoptive family. I have not found this to be the case in my clinical work of psychoanalysis and family therapy with numerous adoptees, adoptive families, and birth families. In fact, despite some initial anxiety and working through, the opposite usually occurs, and the result of adoptees' contacting their birth parents is healing for the adoptive families, including siblings, as well as for the adoptees. For adoptive families to anxiously oppose access in the hope that this opposition will solidify adoptive family-adoptee bonding does nothing but reveal and reinforce an insecure authoritarian alliance. This makes the adoptee feel less loving, less loved, and less loyal, not more, just as citizens would feel if a totalitarian government forbid them to visit other countries. Supporting adoptees in their search not only can help the adoptee, but it also can return dividends to the adoptive family in the form of an increased appreciation of them by their adoptees. One daughter who had had difficulties not only with herself, but who had also caused difficulties for her adoptive family for years, returned after a search and said to her adoptive mother, "Now you can be my mother."

Promoting Adoption Can Undermine Responsible Parenting

Those who oppose adoptees' access to their birth certificates because they are fearful that this would lead to a decrease in available adoptees, and who embrace and promote adoption in general, or promote adoption over abortion as a preferred solution to unwanted pregnancies, should reconsider their position. Adoption facilitators may be wittingly or unwittingly functioning as enablers of irresponsible parenthood, encouraging and easing the way for birth mothers to damage themselves and to traumatize their children by becoming baby makers or birth factories, birth mothers who conceive children not for themselves or because they want a baby to love, but for others who are eagerly waiting for them to give their babies to them for adoption. Is society sending potential parents the message that adoption is an easy solution to an unwelcome pregnancy, and protecting and relieving birth parents from parental responsibility by so willingly agreeing to take over their childrens' care by adopting them? Why not devote our efforts to sending potential parents a message that emphasizes both responsible procreation and also loving care during pregnancy and thereafter of the children they conceive?

Psychodynamic Preventative Psychiatry and Adoption

Implicit in all the foregoing analysis of the problems of adoptees and the harm done to them by either denying them access to their original birth certificates and in other ways impeding their struggle for identity, are basic principles of psychodynamic psychiatry that are generally considered to be important in terms of optimal child development, the facilitation and maintenance of individual and family mental health, and the fostering of positive interpersonal interaction both in intimate relationships and in larger social groups. Psychodynamic psychiatrists deal daily with issues involving distortions of self and with often unconscious conflicts of desire. They see the consequences of tyranny, witting and unwitting, and lack of personal affirmation in the area of self, and the consequences that can result in a variety of contexts from seduction, seducibility, over stimulation, ignorance, or condemnation in the area of sexuality. Unfortunately, social mores and governmental policy often run contrary to the principles fostering healthy individual development and healthy marital, family, and social relationships that have been discovered by serious students of psychology over the years, and this can create or exacerbate individual and social psychopathology (Sonne 1995b, *The Family Image and Ethnic Conflict*; Sonne 1996a, *Social Regression and the Global Prevalence of Abortion*). The principles of dynamic psychiatry which emphasize the importance of autonomy, freedom, truth, love, morality, and healthy family functioning, even if presumed to be understood by society and applied by governmental bodies, are often misunderstood, discredited, misapplied, or expropriated for means and ends that are at variance with the true significance of principles as originally presented by the psychological researchers most respected by their peers. The findings of researchers in the area of mental health deserve as careful and thoughtful consideration in terms of their relevance to the enactment of laws affecting the public welfare as do the findings of researchers in general medicine and physical disease. The psychiatric community of scholars could do more to ensure the transmittal of their findings to the general public, and to point out their relevance to the social mores and legislative issues of our times, and how much benefit to mankind can come from examining these issues from a psychoanalytic and family system perspective.

Adoption laws as they now stand in America increase the incidence of both individual and socially shared psychopathology. It is paradoxical that the law is destructively vocal and regulatory in adoption, where it would be better if it were silent, and it is destructively silent in addressing the proactive and derivative implications for a healthy social order that are embodied in the current proliferation of, for the most part legally unregulated, unusual ways of creating and managing new life, where it would be better if it were constructively vocal and regulatory. That these two equally inappropriate legal positions are simultaneously operative is demonstrative of a commercial or mechanical preoccupation in our current society that spills over into seeing children as manufactured commodities.

Conclusion

In this paper I have focused primarily on the psychological and psychosocial aspects of adoption, including the problems adoptees have, the trauma they have

experienced, their resemblance to abortion survivors, the difficulties they have constructing a family image, and the internal and external impediments they encounter when struggling to complete their identities by learning the truth about their origins by searching out who their biological parents are. Their search is unfortunately blocked by the laws of most states in America which seal the adoptees birth records to protect the anonymity of the birth parents. Opposition by pro-life groups to changing adoption law has been discussed, and the point made that these groups unwittingly sanction a psychological abortion of adoptees. I have documented that abortions do not increase when original birth records are available to adoptees. The wisdom of easy availability of adoption as a solution to unwelcome pregnancies was questioned, and it was suggested that more effort might well be made to encourage and support responsible procreation and child rearing. Also discussed was the benefit to both birth and adoptive families from adoptees having contact with their birth parents.

In closing, although the main focus of this paper has been psychological and psychosocial, some final points about biology relative to adoption deserve mentioning. There are potential deleterious biological consequences relative to genetic diatheses, compatibility, and consanguinity that can fall upon adoptees and their families if adoptees do not know the identity of their biological parents. They are more likely to occur, or to not be dealt with effectively, in the absence of information about the adoptee's ancestry. For example, there are potential medical problems in terms of the possible inheritance of diatheses toward certain diseases. In this age of expanding knowledge about genes, concern about the passage of genetic flaws to future generations, interest in the early treatment of genetic defects, and concern about the compatibility between organ donors and donees, the importance of adoptees knowing their genetic inheritance has become increasingly important. There is also the question for adoptees of consanguinity relative to marriage and procreation should adoptees who are birth siblings, or even birth parents and their children, unwittingly fall in love with one another, or plan to have children together. If the current vogue of surrogate parenting and of impregnation involving sperm or ovum donors continues, not only will society have to deal with the already occurring psychological consequences of this, but the likelihood of genetic or consanguinity mishaps occurring as well will in all likelihood increase unless the identities of the surrogate parents or donors, who may even be adoptees themselves, are made known to themselves and to their offspring.

References

- Andersen R (1993) *Second Choice: Growing up Adopted*. Badger Hill Press, Chesterfield, Missouri
- Brodzinsky DM, Schechter MD, Henig RM (1992) *Being Adopted: The Lifelong Search for Self*. Doubleday, New York
- Colberg M (1997) Gay and lesbian families: A transcultural perspective. Paper presented at the American Adoption Congress, The Trail to Open Records. Irving, Texas, April 3-5
- Daly KJ, Sobol MP (1993) *Adoption in Canada: Final Report*. National Adoption Study, University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario N1G 2W1

- Feinstone L (1996) Survey of seven adoption agencies in New Jersey. No instances of threat by pregnant women to abort unless guaranteed privacy upon adoption. Personal communication, July 2
- Ferenczi S (1929) The unwelcome child and his death instinct. *Int J of Psychoanalysis* 10: 125–129. Republished In: Balint M (ed) Mosbacher E and others (trans.) *Final Contributions to the Problems & Methods of Psycho-Analysis*. Basic Books, (1955), Chapter IX, pp. 102–107
- Filmline International Production (1996) *Natural Enemy*. Montreal, Canada. Made for T.V. movie shown on Home Box Office, various times, Spring, 1997
- Forest B (1996) Chart of Abortion Rates in Countries with Open Access to Original Birth Certificates. Presented to the New Jersey Assembly Community Services Committee, March 4th
- Gioglio G (1996) Report of the New Jersey Division of Youth and Family Services to the New Jersey Assembly Community Services Committee, March 4th, 1996. Updated July 31, 1996
- Hayek FA (1944) *The Road to Serfdom*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago
- Hulbert MW (1994) Severed braid: The split feminine as represented in relatedness between birth mothers and adoptive mothers. *Adoption Therapist*, 8–12, Spring
- N.M. (1996) Letter. *Adoption Triad Forum* 5(3): 5
- Parker L (1997) Baby-dealer's legacy: Children sold by Ga. Doctor in 1950s–60s now search for roots. USA, European Edition, June 18, pp. 1A–2A
- Ridgeway J (1995) Letter on England's Adoption Act of 1976 to Pamela Hasegawa. New Jersey Coalition for Openness in Adoption, November 29
- Sonne JC (1980a) The psychological family and family image construction in unrooted children. *Family Therapy* 7: 255–284
- Sonne JC (1980b) A family system perspective on custody and adoption. *Int J of Family Therapy* 2: 176–192
- Sonne JC (1995a) The relevance of the dread of being aborted to models of therapy and models of the mind. Part II: Mentation and communication in the unborn. *Pre- and Perinatal Psychology Journal* 9(4): 257–294
- Sonne JC (1995b) The family image and ethnic conflict. *Mind and Human Interaction* 6(1): 2–8
- Sonne JC (1996a) Social regression and the global prevalence of abortion. *Int J of Prenatal and Perinatal Psychology and Medicine* 8(1): 27–46
- Sonne JC (1996b) Interpreting the dread of being aborted in therapy. *Int J of Prenatal and Perinatal Psychology and Medicine* 8(3): 317–339
- Sonne JC (1996c) The ethical and psychological importance of adoptees knowing the truth about the identity of their birth parents. Testimony to the New Jersey Assembly Community Services Committee, in support of Assembly bill A-742, March 4
- Sonne JC (1996d) The ethical and psychological importance of adoptees having access to their original birth certificates and knowing the truth about the identity of their birth parents. Testimony to the New Jersey Senate Committee on Women's Issues, Children, and Family Services, in support of Senate Bill S-287
- Sonne JC (1997) The psychological consequences of ignorance: Adoptees' right to know who their biological parents are. *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society* 2(1): 105–114
- Wieder H (1977) The family romance fantasies of adopted children. *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 46: 185–200
- Willke JC (1990) Testimony, State Senate Hearing, HB 256, Columbus, Ohio, August 22. National Right to Life Committee, Inc., Washington, D.C.