

Submission to: Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices (Name Withheld)

Introduction

Many adoptions were *literally* forced, where babies were stolen, lies were told and other criminal acts took place. I have met women who went through this. I witnessed their broken hearts, the searching and the grief that doesn't go away, even after reunions.

That did not happen in my case. My Mum chose to sign the papers and was allowed to bottle feed me during the first two weeks before leaving me behind at the public hospital. But what sort of choices were available to her? Although Australia was an affluent first world country, she was coerced into giving up her child by the withholding of financial support, the threat of ostracism and the advice that others would parent me better than her. After my birth, she was treated poorly by her family. She moved overseas and has never returned.

What of her child? I wish to present to you the case that as an infant, I too was forced, against my will, to live with people who were not my kin and that it caused lasting injury to me.

While I welcome the recent West Australian apology for its acknowledgement of the terrible events of adoption, the emphasis is on the experience of the relinquishing parents. Oddly, there is little or no specific reference to the adoptee's experience. Here are a couple of examples of references to the adoptee in the transcript:

“I know many of you are thankful that your children were placed in loving and caring homes, but . . .” *Mr E.S. Ripper*

“I have also received letters from adopted children and adopting parents opposed to an apology as they believe that the apology reflects negatively on their actions.” *Dr K.D. Hames.*

The latter example highlights the invisibility of the adopted child's experience. The adoptee's interests are assumed to be the same as those of the adoptive parent. How can the apology reflect negatively on the child's actions? It can't. Dr Hames is only speaking about the adopting parents and, in fact, the statement says nothing about why the adopted children objected to the apology.

If you are fair dinkum about addressing the wrongs of past adoption practices and planning better approaches to adoption, you will need to consider the experiences of adoptees.

Me, an adoptee

I was adopted in 1957. I am now 54. The reason I was adopted was that my Mum was 19, single and her parents were dead. She had been raised by her mother's relatives and at the time of my birth, her aunty came to the bedside and lectured her on morals. Her sister offered to help her keep the baby but she was also single and not much older - what could they do?

The social services chose a family for me. The adoption criteria was two-fold: married and well-off. I have the hospital records so I know that no other criteria was considered. I note also that there was only one professional follow up after the adoption and that was by mail.

My adoptive parents had one other child, some years my senior and there was a stillborn child buried in the local cemetery but they never spoke about her. My adoptive mother had never received grief counselling and in those days, people pushed things under the carpet. So I believe that I was meant to replace the dead child.

Psychologists now know that, in the first year after birth, baby and mother are not entirely separate but function as one organism. The smell and sound of the mother is what the baby knows to be part of her/himself. The baby gazes up at the mother's face while feeding, and through this maternal-infant gaze, learns that the world is safe.

Adoption tears away this bonding. It is a psycho-neurological injury similar to an amputation. The mother is wounded forever, and so is the child. Unfortunately, the infant's pain was (and still is) dismissed because the baby is seen as an unthinking object and there is an unfounded assumption that somehow the child will forget all things that are pre-verbal. This is a simplistic notion of human infancy. Not recalling images of the event doesn't mean there was no harm.

Having lost the most important person - or more specifically, lost a crucial part of myself, I was then taken into a family that didn't look like me, didn't think like me, didn't smell like me and didn't know how to love me. The date of my adoption coincided with their annual holidays so they initially placed me in the care of a friend of the family for three weeks until they returned from their holidays. I was passed around like a puppy.

My adoptive family met my physical needs and provided me with a good education. But my emotional welfare was different. To my adoptive mother, I was a constant disappointment. Although I desperately turned myself inside out to make her love me, I never measured up. I just wasn't what she wanted. This led to a second injury - the pain of the rejecting, overly critical parent. I was compared unfavourably with my cousins, particularly another adoptee in our extended family. I was called swear word names (including bastard) and was constantly set up and tricked due to my naivety and desperate need for love. My primary years were tearful ones.

Although my adoptive father was kind, I was sexually abused by him and later by other people while I was in the care of family members. In my teens, my adoptive mother began to call me 'Slave' and later my adoptive father also called me that until, in adulthood, I told them to stop.

To their credit, I always knew I was adopted. I remember talking with some other little girls about the origins of life. One said, "I was born in [the local] hospital". The other said "Yes, I was born there too". And I said "I wasn't born. I was adopted." Such is the loss, the black void where everyone else puts the birth story. I filled the void with fantasy - where is my 'real' Mum? maybe she died and that's why she couldn't keep me? If I saw my 'real' Dad, would he know me? Do I look like my Mum? Do I have a sister or brother?

It is a faulty assumption that you can put a child with strangers and everyone will just get on because they want to. I was fundamentally different from my adoptive family and their extended family. They were tough-minded, competitive folk, excelling at sport and measuring success by money. I was tender-minded - sensitive, poetic, always writing and ungifted in sport. These differences were put down by immediate and extended family. The belittling was a daily experience - both subtle and unsubtle. It was the air I breathed and I believed it was my fault.

When I finally met my birth family, I discovered sensitive types like myself - thinkers outside the box, interested in writing, spirituality, psychology - in short, just like me. I hardly had to get to know them to feel they were my family. Its hard to describe to people who never had this experience, but it felt like we recognised each other - as though we had only briefly separated. Yet, there was the sorrow of having lived most of my life without having known such familiarity.

Similarly, I always thought I had no distinguishing physical qualities. I looked in the mirror and saw blandness, almost a nothingness. No one ever said "You take after . . ." When my birth mother sent me a photo of herself, I ran to the mirror and saw for the first time: my distinctive

eyebrows, the shape of my chin, my hairline. How amazing to have someone who looks like you! Until I met my birth family, I felt like I didn't fit in any group I joined and I constantly struggled with a sense of deep shame. In particular, I suffered at separations. I was the one who lingered too long at the party, or stumbled with how to say goodbye. When people left, I scalded myself for driving them away. The trauma kept replaying.

In early adulthood, I was depressed and anxious. I attempted suicide, sought relief from drugs and alcohol, and messed up relationships. I couldn't keep a job even though I was an excellent worker. If the boss raised their voice, I quit because I could not endure even slight rejection. It has taken many years to overcome self-doubt and rebuild my life. I have gradually found happiness with years of counselling and through support from those who love me, including my birth Mum. But even now, love never feels like a sure thing.

The importance of the search

The adoptee inherits a legacy of gratitude and obligation. People postpone the search for their birth family because they believe it betrays the adoptive family. This is wrong. Your birth family is your birth right - it is an essential part of you - and a truly loving adoptive family would not be so insecure as to deny half of what makes you up.

As soon as I was an adult, my adoptive parents made it known to me that searching would be unacceptable. I did not search for my real family until my adoptive mother had passed away and I never told my adoptive father about finding my birth Mum.

When I got my real birth certificate with my Mum's name - and my birth name! - I was excited. I searched for four years before finding her overseas. We wrote and sent photos for 15 years before I finally went overseas and met her at age 50.

The day we first met, we sat in her lounge room and spoke at length but I could make little sense of anything she said. The words were bouncing around my head. I was entranced by the movement of her face and the music of her voice and nothing else would penetrate my mind. This strange experience went on for two days before clearing so that I could converse as an adult. I later realised that this was a necessary resumption of the infant's gaze at the mother, part of the developmental bonding. 50 years later, I briefly resumed the task of being a baby.

Recommendations

In your inquiry, please do not forget the babies. For too long, the discourse has stepped around the adoptee, maybe to avoid offending adoptive parents, or maybe because the adoptees do not know how to voice what has never been given words.

Can we acknowledge the contribution of adoptive parents without discounting the horrendous experience of losing your first parent? In the UK, prospective adopters are now being educated that the child who is adopted is already injured by the primal separation and that the injury will play a role in their future. Without this information, prospective adopters are not adequately equipped to make the decision to adopt or to know what is required in parenting the adoptee. In the pretence that everything is mended through substitution, the adoptee's experience is ignored.

Here is the bottom line for me: My birth Mum believes she did the right thing because I had more opportunities than she had. But I wish I had stayed with her. I might have been poorer but

I believe I would have known more love and acceptance as a child. I would have belonged.

Do I think the Australian Governments, state and federal were guilty of hurting people? Most definitely, the injury goes on and on. To this day, I have not found my father, an Australian, and I don't know if I will ever meet him.

I accept that adoption has a place in our society as one option for the welfare of children. But we must learn from the social experiment that damaged so many lives, mothers and children alike. Here are some recommendations from the perspective of the child:

- Future adoptions should always give priority to kinship.
- With foreign adoptions, taking the child back to the country of origin is not a substitute for having contact with members of the birth family.
- People considering adoption should be informed about the primal injury caused by post-natal separation and the now well-documented associated difficulties in life.
- Ongoing support would help adoptive parents and adoptees adjust to each other. Lets drop the assumption that this will happen naturally.
- Adoptive parents should be taught not to discourage children from contact with their birth family. To parent the adoptee, accept that you are parenting another person's child. It is important to love not only what is like you but also what is not like you. Such acceptance is shown through a shared and non-defensive curiosity about the child's birth family. Above all, do not bind your adopted child with a legacy of loyalty.
- The state should not obstruct the search for birth families. The NSW Government's veto system is an insult to injury: Consider the adoptee who is persuaded on their 18th birthday to place a veto against their birth mother; or a person so desperate to find their kin that they breach the veto. These things have happened. The veto is an unnecessary further abuse by the state. In Victoria, adoptees are given the information they need to start searching, including guidelines on how to search in a way that respects privacy.
- Governments should not interfere with the ordinary business of reunion, other than to give information and make counselling available to all parties. Medicare should cover the latter since the State has contributed to the injury.
- The Federal Government should over-ride veto legislation to ensure that all persons have the right to search for, and make contact with, their true families (regardless of birthplace). Even an unhappy reunion helps people start to recover as its better than never knowing. Given our nation's history (the stolen children, adoption, British war immigrants), children's right to know their family should be a constitutional right.
- Past exclusion of the father's name and details on the birth certificate was deliberate, so that no other party could lay claim to the adoptee. For the adoptee, this is another way we are robbed of identity. The plight of children conceived by anonymous sperm donation also highlights the need for legislation to ensure that people get access to their genetic background, including photographs and opportunities for contact.

I cried while writing this submission and still feel the pain and loss caused to me and my Mum by agents of the state for the sake of adoption. What was taken away - a normal, natural order of things - can never be truly restored. I hope I have shown that adoptions of the past ignored the interests of the adoptee and cast them to their own fates, and that many adoptees suffered in ways that are now quite predictable when someone's identity is stolen. Even with the best intentions

and our modern approaches, adoption involves some inevitable injury to the adoptee and governments should ensure that (1) adopting does not obliterate the child's natural identity, (2) bonding is not assumed as a given and (3) contact with relatives is a basic right.

Name Withheld.

Reference

Feeney (2005). Attachment and perceived rejection: Findings from studies of hurt feelings and the adoption experience, *E-Journal of Applied Psychology: Social section*, 1(1), 41-49.