

Submission to Adoption Inquiry

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Within the adoption community the adoption triangle refers to the birth mother, her child and the child's adoptive parents. It would be the contention of most people in the community that while there is equality within the triangle, the child's best interests always come first. However, it is my contention as an adoptee that the triangle of adoption is not only unequal but also the child's best interests in many instances come last. Moreover it is my contention that the child's best interests will continue to be of little consideration while we use a defensive reasoning approach to address the social issue of adoption and childless couples. In referring to childless couples, I make no distinction between same sex couples and other couples.

In order to expand on my claim, I first need you to have some basic understanding of the theory of defensive reasoning. In doing so, I have relied on the guru, Chris Argyris who has written many books on the subject. While Chris Argyris confines his writings to organisational defences, I will be talking about it in a social context and how it influences the decision making processes on adoption including the legislators, bureaucrats, health professionals and the community.

Additionally, I will also need to discuss some of the research findings on adoption and its impact on the mental health of adopted people. In making comment on those of us who were raised outside our biological family, and the impact this can have on the person, I am not excluding our aboriginal community or those who have been adopted from overseas.

Basically, defensive reasoning is a process whereby decisions are made and actions carried out with the aim of protecting the status quo. This means that we will always meet the needs of the more influential members of society often at the expense of those less influential. This practice is done at the expense of truth, natural justice and genuine learning. According to Argyris, this is a core value that only becomes apparent when something goes wrong.

Having worked in the health sector for some thirty years and the mental health system for some 12 years if there is one thing I have learned about human nature it is this.

If we see something often enough we cease to see it. If we do something often enough we do it without thinking. If we think something often enough we think it without challenge. If we hear something often enough we will hear it without question. When dealing with people, we are only dismissive or abusive of those in a less powerful position than we are. If abuse is not happening to ourself or someone we care about we more often than not do nothing about it, or discredit those that do.

From my point of view as a result of defensive reasoning practices permeating

communities including government, bureaucracies, and the church, we look like we have undertaken a major shift in our attitudes to adoption including a change in attitude towards babies and their natural mothers. In reality however, I do not think there has been a major shift in attitudes. If there had been, overseas adoptions would not have escalated as they have, and identifying information would always have been assured for those born out of IVF programs. Instead of learning from the experience of adopted people, all we have done is take our attitudes overseas to countries where social programs are far less advanced than here in Australia. Here, we can pick up what is far less available in this county - babies. If we were genuine about the child coming first, we would be doing everything we could to ensure mothers could keep their babies. We would have ensured that from the very beginning of IVF programs that identifying information of the donors could and would be available to children born out of IVF. For those who dismiss the view of adopted people with expressions of love for the child; let me be very clear it has nothing to do with being loved or not being loved. To deny a person their biological identity is to relegate that child to a life of not knowing who they are, feelings of not really belonging to anyone and having no biological roots. To do this to any child is cruel.

Put simply, defensive reasoning largely encompasses the way we deal with issues, problems and complaints that confront us. It encompasses the way we look at things, our attitudes, the way we think, communicate and solve problems.

In practicing defensive reasoning we, fail to address the “unaddressable,” fail to discuss the “undiscussable” and rationalise our failures with defensive reasoning.

The “unaddressable” and “undiscussable” are those issues that cause emotional discomfort to others and us. They are the things that if discussed or addressed may cause us to lose popularity.

Defensive reasoning is seen as a safe way for everyone to behave. It allows us to distance ourselves from what is really going on. It saves us from being embarrassed and uncomfortable, and saves us from causing embarrassment and discomfort to others. It keeps us likeable. Little to no consideration is given to the fact that defensive reasoning impedes our personal and professional growth and that of our community. In my view, it makes no difference if we are referring to a business, government, church or special interest group such as the adoption community. Defensive reasoning is practiced everywhere.

In general terms, when defensive reasoning is practised it means that the results of problems are addressed, but not the cause. Thus, we keep “filling the cracks” that emerge from time to time in our communities, but we never examine the foundations, which more often than not are the cause of the problem in the first place. The end result is that we often solve one problem only to create another. For example, the foundation that allows for the continuance of adoption is not unwanted children, but rather the failure to recognise and correct the lack of social programs and supports to assist single mothers to keep their own children. In practical terms, what we do is solve the problem of childless

couples and create problems for many of the children and their mothers that is, unresolved and permanent grief.

Notwithstanding this, Argyris goes on to say that when carrying out our defensive reasoning practises, we engage in untruths and lies. Argyris explained that in communicating defensive reasoning arguments, the person communicating believes that what he or she is doing and saying is right, and an honest account of what is happening. This practice is regarded as communicating untruths not because they are lies, but rather because the view communicated is inaccurate. Argyris explains that when these untruths don't work, some people will then engage in telling conscious lies. Lies exist when someone knowingly and willingly communicates, or withholds information in a way that provides false information to the person being communicated with.

An example of a defensive reasoning untruth in adoption is when adoptive parents say that the child was unwanted. While I know that not all children are wanted, clearly most are. Unless the adoptive parent has met and had in-depth discussions with the natural mother around the circumstances of the "relinquishment", you are in no position to say whether a child was wanted or not wanted. Moreover, given what we have learned from natural mothers here in Australia about their circumstances which for most, did not include that they did not want their child I would suggest that we have learned little. Alternatively, we have chosen to ignore what we know because it does not necessarily fit in with what we want, that is someone else's baby to raise and love as if it were our own.

So what other defensive reasoning practices do we use in order to maintain the status quo? How is it that contrary to legislation and contrary to many people's views, the child continues to come last when addressing the needs of members of the triangle?

As indicated previously, most people in the community and many within the adoption community in particular, adoptive parents would regard adoption as a good thing. It solves each member of the triangle's problems. The childless couple (adoptive parents) get a child to love and raise, the natural mother gets rid of the burden of raising an unwanted child and the child who wasn't wanted gets to be raised by loving parents. Everyone's problems are solved. However, those of us who belong to the adoption community know that nothing is further from the truth.

For many years, research has existed on the impact of adoption on adoptees, but this research to this day has largely been ignored or undervalued. Indeed, anecdotal examples would suggest that to this day, not all natural mothers make an informed decision when they place their baby for adoption. For example, are natural mothers, in particular those from overseas informed that they may find themselves in a state of unresolved grief and regret for the rest of their life if they give their child up for adoption. I would suggest not. Are natural mothers informed of the research results about the possible impact of adoption on their baby? Anecdotal examples would suggest not. Is consideration given to the emotional state of the mother at the time of the birth of her baby and her ability to make an informed choice. Again, I would suggest not.

Why do we ignore the research? I would suggest that it is ignored because unconsciously, the need to maintain the status quo that is, that adoption is a good thing and the belief that to meet the needs of the childless couple solves everything is a concept too traumatic for many to challenge. The result being, a distorted triangle and the child's importance being secondary to all else.

For example, if you have read the research on the impact of adoption on adoptees why on earth would anyone suggest it was a good thing for most adopted persons. For example, while the research does indicate that some adoptees are unaffected by the experience of adoption, it would appear to a greater or lesser extent that most are.

For example, overseas research studies indicate that there are a higher proportion of adopted persons in the psychiatric system, prison system and forming our homeless youth than you would expect given the number of children who have been placed for adoption.

In Victoria for example in 1991 adopted persons formed 0.5% of children (0-18 years) but an audit conducted in 1993 revealed that between 1991 and 1993 the South Eastern Child and Family Care Centre's new case registrations for example, found that 1.8% were adopted. Another larger study conducted in 1994 found that 1.2% of adopted persons formed our homeless youth. Given that studies have also shown that there is a direct relationship between homelessness and psychiatric, drug and alcohol problems, the impact of adoption on the adopted person perhaps requires more attention than it has been given.

As an adopted person I spent 15 years looking for my natural mother and found her 2 years before legislation was changed allowing the release of identifying information. Eight years after meeting , I attended my first support group meeting at the Victorian Adoption Network for Information and Self Help (VANISH). This organisation provides a search service for adoptees and a support service for those who make up the adoption community (adoptees, relinquishing mothers/fathers and adoptive parents). VANISH staff told me that by the 10th anniversary of the changes in legislation to allow access to identifying information, more than 50% of adopted persons have sought information about their biological background. Adopted persons often refer to the seeking of and meeting of their biological mothers as "our journey". Why this journey is taken by most is perhaps best told by the following research results.

The impact of adoption on an adoptee is articulately explained by Heather Carlini in her book, *Adoptee Trauma - A Counselling Guide for Adoptees*. It is the most articulate book I have read, and whilst it does not cover all adoption issues, the book does cover most of them.

Carlini indicates that the baby's disconnection with his/her birth mother at birth breaks an emotional bond between the two which is now believed by the experts, to be felt by the child as a devastating, painful experience which becomes a powerful force in the lives of many adopted persons.

She goes on to say that many adopted persons feel a strong sense of abandonment resulting in much self doubt, feelings of being defective, unlovable, worthless and deficient. No amount of reassuring discussion convinces them that the adoption was not their fault.

Carlini also identifies 3 types of adoptees.

The resilient adoptee who appears calm and in control of their behaviour and emotions and is capable of being reflective. They experienced encouragement and support in discussing the feelings associated with being adopted from their adoptive parents throughout their life.

The acting-out adoptee that operates out of anger and often feels unable to live up to the adoptive family's expectations to be perfect and fit in. Behaviours include being rebellious, argumentative, having intense anger, being disruptive and socially and emotionally alienated. These adoptees frequently take mind-altering drugs to cope.

The compliant adoptee on the other hand, operates out of guilt and shame and tries to please everyone. They are usually 'high achievers' who feel the need to be 'better than others to deserve love'. They need constant approval from others to validate self worth. They put forward a desirable image in order to hide the emptiness that is felt.

The latter two types develop a facade in order to deny their feelings. There is the exterior or false self and the interior or true self. The false self allows feelings to be hidden along with the pretence that everything is fine.

Carlini's research also resulted in identifying what she refers to as 17 core issues of adoption for adopted persons. Her book does not provide the percentages for all issues, but where she has I have included them. I have not included all 17 issues.

The issues identified include:

Impaired trust (61%) along with what Carlini refers to as "control madness" that is, being on guard at all times – being fearful of rejection;

Difficulties with intimacy (78%) with an apparently high proportion never marrying or having children;

Failing to initiate relationships;

Dislike of being hugged as a child (50%) with many stating it continued into their adult life;

Feelings of anxiety all the time (63%) with 52% indicating they felt anxious as a child for no apparent reason;

A lack of self esteem (76%);

A demand to behave perfectly (71%);

Feelings of anger about being adopted (69%);

Having two different identities (79%) that is, they have a false self and a true self.

A dislike of special occasions such as birthdays and Christmas (54%),

Identity diffusion or the inability to identify with a nurturing figure that is, the difficulty many adopted persons have in identifying their adoptive mother and father as their mother and father, but rather identify them as their parents.

Feelings of guilt and shame that you must have done something wrong,

Being out of touch with feelings about being adopted and denying feelings;

Loneliness (biological identity crisis) and;

Restlessness that is, the feeling that something is missing that you do not belong.

In conclusion, according to Carlini, adoptees also talked of the need to be cautious, alert, watchful and hyper-vigilant as methods they used to avoid another abandonment. They also talked of the difficulty with giving and receiving love.

In simple terms, I would describe the feeling side of adoption from an adoptees point of view as like being separated from everyone by a picket fence. You can see everyone, talk to them, laugh with them, cry with them, but you can never join or be equal to them no matter how much you want to or how hard you try to. You will always walk on your side of the picket fence on your own. Even after you have “completed” the major part of your journey, you know that this part of your feelings will never really change. Additionally once you have met your biological mother and others, you must learn to straddle both families knowing that you will not completely belong to either, but at the same time

How much this feeling of never really belonging to anyone has to do with adoption and how much it has to do with the discrimination or the defensive reasoning statements that many of us have experienced as adoptees I do not know.

What I do know is that the discrimination and defensive reasoning arguments that I experienced as a child and adult because of my adoption is not rare. Most adoptees I have met have experienced discrimination or defensive reasoning put downs to a greater or lesser extent either from adoptive family members and or members of the community and in some instances, members of their natural family. Many of us for example, were told such things, as our mothers did not want us, we have bad blood. When we made a mistake as a child, or even as an adult, we were told it was the “bad blood” coming out in us. Even some children at school were told by their parents not to play with us because we were bad. As older adoptees when we started to take an interest in the opposite sex, some of us experienced our prospective partners parents panic who would say such things as “Good God, you can’t marry her/him, you would not know what you were getting.” Whilst many of these attitudes have now gone, pockets of it still exist so that our young adoptees can still experience similar to what we older adoptees experienced. For example, it was reported in recent years that a teacher told a child in her class that he could not participate in the development of his family tree because his adopted family was not his real family. It was only a couple of years ago there was also an article in the newspaper about an American adoptee’s adoptive parent’s suing the government for giving them a child with “bad blood.”

The dismissal of your grief when family or relatives die is also not rare. For example, when your adoptive mother dies the grief can be dismissed because she was not your real

mother. When your natural mother dies the grief is dismissed because she did not raise you.

Additionally, the use of the word “bastard” can be quite painful and confusing for a young adoptee. Some of us more chronologically mature adoptees hate the word because we know only too well what it is like to be told, “You are nothing but a dirty little bastard.” While the word is now rarely used to describe children “born out of wedlock,” it is still commonly used to describe the “rogues” of society. This simple “abuse” of a word can reinforce the view of adopted children that they are bad.

In addressing the issues of adoption, I am yet to meet an adoptee that has not found their journey a totally overwhelming, absorbing, obsessive, complex, confusing, painful and joyous experience. It is usually these emotions that lead us to attend support group meetings. It is here that we learn that adoptees can finish off each other’s sentences and be 100% accurate in their understanding of what is being said. We also learn that the feeling side of other members of the adoption community is often quite different from our own. As a result, we all learn to walk on “egg shells” because we do not want to hurt other members of the triangle and nor do we want to experience further rejection. Our real feelings are mostly confined to meetings solely for adopted persons.

Having said that, it also needs to be stated that in order for the adopted person to work through their issues of unresolved grief, they need the assistance of natural mothers (not their own) to do this. I dare say that the same need exists for many natural mothers in order to try and understand the emotional reactions of their own child especially their anger because they feel they were given away. I should stress here that it is my view that the feeling side of adoption develops when you are a child and do not have the adult maturity to challenge some of the comments made to you or work out the issues that come up in your mind.

My view regarding the journey of adoptees is that most of us experience a feeling side and a thought side to adoption; both being very different views. Fortunately, as you work through the grief and develop more understanding of yourself, adoption, natural mothers and human nature it is my view that the feelings and the thoughts come together. When they do come together, the result is a more empathetic and compassionate understanding of your natural mother and many other natural mothers you come in to contact with.

The thought side encompasses what most relinquishing mothers I have met, will say.

They were forced to give up their child;

They had no choice;

They did not have family support;

The father was not supportive, or had left them;

There was no single mothers pension and there was no way to financially rear a child;

They believed and were told we would be better off, etc.

Some relinquishing mothers have even expressed the view that we are “stolen children”.

The feeling side of adoptees on the other hand is:

We were given away;
We were not food or clothing to be given away, but their child;
My mother did not fight for me;
No one put a gun to my mother's head to sign the adoption papers – all she had to do was say no.

The feeling side regarding adoptive parents can be:

We were the r la t cho c af er trying to have the r own natura ly or via IV
We were not picke ; we wer given to you so that any baby would hav don
If my own mother can give m away, then you can to

This is the unsympathetic side of many adoptees while they work through their unresolved grief or the feeling side of adoption.

In addition, one of the defensive reasoning comments to justify adopted people taking up their journey to look for their mother is that it is only natural to be curious. I, and others like me did not start our journey and put so much effort and emotion into trying to find our natural mothers because we were curious. It is simply a nonsense.

For example, I often say to my friends in the adoption community that this “genes stuff” has got me beat. I can not understand how our biological relatives who are “strangers, but not strangers” can bring out so many emotions. My natural mother for example was a devout Catholic. I on the other hand am a very lapsed Catholic who often uses expletives to express myself. Yet, in the 14 years I knew her before she died I never even said “bum” in her presence. I never lost my fascination with her face taking in every inch of it at my every given opportunity. Staring into the faces of other people especially when they are not looking is something one unconsciously learns to do as an adopted child. I call it looking for the “rellies.” So when you finally meet your mum, I have to say there is nothing like sitting opposite someone who is really a true, blue relative. Someone that you know you are related to because you look so much like her. It is a wonderful feeling finding out that your stubbornness comes from your mother and that your frank speaking style for example comes from your grandfather. I, like many adoptees when they meet their biological mother hang on her every word. I found myself constantly looking for some sign that she cared about me but with the most blandest, indifferent look on my face so that she would never know how I really felt. I cried often about my mother, but only once in front of her and only then for a minute otherwise she might find out my true feelings and reject me once again. This is what adoptees do best, hide our true feelings until we are in a room that only contains adoptees. Then and only then is it safe. It is the strangest relationship. We share the most intimate feelings together, but know very little about the “superficial” side of each other.

In summary, being adopted can present many problems of grief, pain, anger, confusion, fear and joy. The research is very clear. It is not good for a child to be removed from its

mother, so one needs to ask, whose needs are we meeting? Clearly not that of the child's.

To summarise defensive reasoning in adoption I would firstly identify the root cause of adoption as a lack of appropriate socially supportive policies for those who live in poverty in particular women, along with a non-questioning society where it is believed children would be better off being raised by someone other than their mother, cultures where women are regarded as secondary to men, etc. As indicated previously, while many changes have occurred in Australia to correct the social imbalances outlined above, they have not in many overseas countries. As a result, overseas adoptions have escalated. Moreover, it would seem that we have learned little from the experiences of adoption in particular, the experiences of adoptees and natural mothers. For example, my generation of adoptees were brought up being told that we were not wanted. When we met our own mothers and other natural mothers, we discovered that this was far from the truth. I am not saying that all natural mothers wanted their children. Clearly, they do not form the majority of adopted people - most were wanted and most of us in the adoption community know it. Yet, the explanations that use to be provided to adoptees in Australia are now being used for children adopted from overseas. That is, that they were not wanted. I base this comment on recent statements made by Australian adoptive parents during recent television interviews. Have we not learned anything or is it that what we have learned does not suit us. Is it so impossible to look at it from the child's point of view that is, if my own mum did not want me or gave me away then what is to stop my adoptive mum and dad from doing the same. Making comments that a child was not wanted is an emotional abuse of every child's right to feel and be safe and secure in their environment.

Finally, it behoves all of us to be mindful of our defensive reasoning conditioning. When you make a decision that may impact on another person you should always see it in ethical terms. When you make a decision that may negatively impact on a person's emotional and/or mental health in particular that of a child then you should always see it as an ethical dilemma and challenge your thoughts and feelings unreservedly.

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