

Chapter 4

Effects of forced adoption

I believe that every adoption begins with loss and that those who are adopted experience this loss and those who lose children to adoption experience this loss.¹

Introduction

4.1 Forced adoption did not only affect mothers who were compelled to have their children adopted, but also fathers, husbands, subsequent children, the adopted people themselves and their adoptive families. This chapter provides a summary of the long-term impacts of forced adoption as described to the committee during the course of this inquiry. It first addresses the experiences of adopted people, then mothers, and finally others who were affected including fathers and siblings.

The experience of adopted people

4.2 Some adopted people indicated in their submissions that their adoptive parents cared for them very well:

I wish to state right here and now that I categorically feel no hatred or bitterness towards my birth or first adoptive families!!!! I feel happy and content and believe that I ended up with the family I needed to care for my special needs as a child, and then raised me up to be kind, caring, loving, forgiving man that I am today!!!!²

4.3 Others stated that they have no wish to maintain a relationship with their natural parents. However, many adopted people who submitted to this inquiry recounted damaging and painful experiences of their childhoods, and/or ongoing struggles with self-identity as well as seeking to meet or build a relationship with their birth parents. The committee emphasises that it is documenting the experiences of those who have submitted to this inquiry, rather than seeking to characterise the experience of adoption more generally.

Childhood experiences

4.4 Most adopted people who submitted to this inquiry did not have positive experiences with their adoptive parents, or at school. Views were put to the committee on the nature and extent of vetting of prospective adoptive parents throughout the 1950s, 60s and 70s. These concerns are highlighted by accounts where adopted people were treated badly or abused. Some witnesses described being privately adopted by people who had hospital or legal connections:

1 Ms Evelyn Robinson, *Committee Hansard*, 26 October 2011, p. 13.

2 Mr John Rutherford, *Submission 136*, pp 1–2.

The Senior Social Worker, Mrs [...] was a close personal friend of my adoptive family. She ultimately became one of my god mothers. Mine was a private adoption, engineered by staff at Crown Street Women's Hospital. My adoptive parents were in their early 40's at the time of my adoption and probably deemed too old by authorities to adopt through those channels.³

My adoptive mother was able to access the adoption system due to her father's status and his ties with the judiciary and men of influence at that time. Had she undergone a psychological screening process, it is extremely unlikely that she would have been given a dog, let alone two motherless children in need of nurturing and understanding.⁴

4.5 Even when adoptive parents were approved by the relevant authorities, many submitters recounted painful experiences in the homes of adoptive families. An anonymous submitter described being called names by cousins and later experiencing sexual abuse:

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.⁵

4.6 Reflecting the experiences of several adopted people who made submissions, Ms Laurie Watkins explained that she did not feel as though she belonged with her adoptive family:

3 Ms Margaret Watson, *Submission 98*, p. 6.

4 Ms Josephine Yeats, *Submission 168*, p. 2.

5 Name withheld, *Submission 314*, p. 2.

I was raised in a home where my parents were present but I have no memory of them being there. I do not have happy memories growing up in this family. I never felt I belonged to my adoptive family.⁶

4.7 The committee heard several accounts of emotional, physical and sexual abuse. Abusers in some cases included adoptive parents and families, teachers and neighbours:

I am an adoptee who was abused and exploited by the adoptive parents. I was working in charcoal pits from the time I was five. I have memories of beatings with a belt, being suffocated by my adoptive father, set alight by my adoptive father and kicked with heavy work boots.⁷

My true mother was told to give me away because it was in the best interests of the child, so why was I given to monsters who treated me as a slave, tortured me as discipline and lied to me all my life? They believed I was their natural child in such a state that they gave their own medical background as my own medical history. They also allowed me to be sexually assaulted by a neighbour from the ages of two to eight.⁸

4.8 In other cases, submitters described the consequences of the death of one of their adoptive parents, or the adoptive parents' divorce. Many adopted people described the irony of being raised by a sole adoptive parent when the reason their natural mother had been forced to consent to adoption was that she was unmarried:

My adopted mother died in 1977 [when submitter was 14] and my adopted father was an alcoholic and abandoned me. Better off not being with my natural mother?⁹

I was often so lonely and confused after my adopted mum's death.

Another very bad belting was just over eight months after being in the USA. I failed for a third call to 'spring' out of bed to his calling...[o]n the third return to my bed room he literally dragged me out of bed, loudly reprimanding me for my disobedience and not giving me (as usual) a chance to explain that I felt ill and he laid into me with that dreaded belt...

I remember a time after returning to Australia at age 14. I was being belted so hard and so many times, I remember the belt wrapping around my neck once. During my adoption I still spent most of the time in boarding schools and church hostels homes.¹⁰

6 Ms Laurie Watkins, *Submission 356*, p. 1.

7 Ms Kerri Saint, White Australian Stolen Heritage, *Committee Hansard*, 27 April 2011, p. 37.

8 Ms Vikki Lewis, *Committee Hansard*, 29 April 2011, p. 59.

9 Mr Dan Lancaster, *Submission 295*, p. 1.

10 Mr Wayne Lewis, *Submission 408*, p. 3.

Did they divorce five years after my adoption? Yes....

Was I plunged into poverty again living with a single mother? Yes.¹¹

4.9 The committee heard that the societal stigma about unmarried parenthood and adoption affected adopted people as school children:

I had this best friend who, for years, I went to school with. I would pass her house on my way to school. I would pick her up. We would walk to school together, play together and come home together...I loved Cheryl's mother. I just adored her. I asked her to be my sponsor. She met my adoptive mother, who informed her that I was adopted. When I came on the Monday to pick up Cheryl for school, Cheryl's mother answered the door, said that Cheryl had gone to school and I was to never have anything to do with Cheryl again.¹²

I vividly remember getting teased at school by children saying 'your parents aren't your real parents' and how awful that was for me to bear although being feisty I did stand up for myself but inside I felt so very different and scared. Yes they love me! Surely they must— isn't that why they chose me?¹³

The teachers at school treated me exactly the same way, 'She's a ward of the state. We'll penalise her. She's a gimp. Look at her.' It continuously went on.¹⁴

I lived in a small central Victorian town where everyone [knew] everything, so when I attended the local primary school I [was] teased you're not a real (my adopted surname) your mums not your real mum, your real mum didn't want you. I would go home crying I can still remember that to this day.¹⁵

I was a quiet and shy child who did not make friends or socialise with other children. I was teased and bullied right through primary school and can remember living in a state of constant fear and confusion. I lived in a dream world, as the real life existence I had just didn't feel right. Nothing in my life seemed to make any sense and my adopters ignored my distress.¹⁶

11 Ms Leanna Brennan, *Submission 209*, p. 3.

12 Ms Isabell Collins, *Committee Hansard*, 20 April 2011, pp 104–105.

13 Angela, *Submission 50*, p. 4.

14 Mrs Pru Murphy, *Committee Hansard*, 20 April 2011, pp 124–125.

15 Name withheld, *Submission 287*, p. 1.

16 Name withheld, *Submission 237*, p. 1.

4.10 The kind of experience relayed in this evidence was shared at one hearing by one of this committee's youngest ever witnesses:

I did not really know I had a sister...It is very depressing and saddening that I did not develop bonds with my siblings. It is incredibly difficult to make friends at school and camps because of it all. I was bullied and had my lunch money stolen at school. When I got on the bus it was ten times worse.¹⁷

4.11 The committee also heard from adopted people with poor childhood experiences due to spending time in institutions.

Children in institutions

4.12 The committee received accounts from adopted people who were placed in institutions as children. Some of these people were adopted after having remained wards of the state for some time.

He put me into the Alfred Hospital, where I lived until I was 2½ years of age. From there I was put out on the street to become a ward of the state, because he would not give up parentis or whatever it is. I had to wander the streets with a little suitcase and a teddy bear until the police came to pick me up. They then put me into the Melbourne City Mission, where I lived until I was 12½...

[In] the schools I was prodded and probed, especially when the school doctors came around. 'It's okay. She's a ward of the state. We can do what we like.'¹⁸

4.13 The committee heard several accounts of horrific childhoods spent in institutions and orphanages. Some submitters described being the subject of medical experiments or drug trials whilst living in such places:

One thing I found was that living in that orphanage was like the book called *Lord of the Flies* and that is what it was like. When you lived in that place it was dog-eat-dog...

One of the things they [older girls in the orphanage] said to me was they made me promise that no matter what happened I was to stay alive. And that is because some of the boys actually suicided in that place. It was pretty hard....

There were medical experiments carried out on us as well when I was in the orphanage. That is something that I have asked quite a bit about, too, trying to get an explanation because I can remember that my brother volunteered, being the great hero that he was, because they bribed us all the time with food. I did not like food. The idea was that they wanted us for medical experiments. He would just go into hysterics any time he got a needle. This

17 Miss Gabrielle Mittermayer, *Committee Hansard*, 29 April 2011, p. 56.

18 Mrs Pru Murphy, *Committee Hansard*, 20 April 2011, pp 124–125.

was when we left there. I was volunteered in the end because it was such a big money spinner that they volunteered us all, so I was part of those experiments too. I do not know what they were. I remember the one on polio.¹⁹

Hundreds of us were treated in this way. I left the St Joseph's Foundling Hospital at the age of six weeks. There were procedures carried out on me before the adoption went through at eight months in which no consent was obtained from my mother. It was actually about growth hormone and infertility treatment.²⁰

I was given Hepatitis C when I was in the institution because of the non-sterile procedures they used, which I have been very ill with and will probably kill me within the next five to ten years.²¹

4.14 Many submitters explained that the difficulties experienced in childhood, whether experienced at an institution or with unsupportive adoptive parents, continued into adulthood, manifesting in different ways.

Ongoing effects of adoption

4.15 Many adopted people who submitted to the inquiry recounted the ongoing negative effects of their adoption, including struggles with identity, mental and physical health:

As a direct result of adoption I have found difficulties with trust of others, self-esteem, confidence, relationships and being a mother myself. I have sought counselling or therapy at six times though my adult life, roughly once in each decade. However there is no counselling available specifically for adoptees, to assist them with the issues of adoption which involves more than loss.²²

I still to this day struggle with expressing and understanding what adoption means for me. A few years ago I was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and I have recently, since doing my submission, had panic attacks and believe that I now have general anxiety disorder.²³

19 Mr Michael Bamfield, Care Leavers Australia Network, *Committee Hansard*, 20 April 2011, pp 48–54.

20 Mr Michael O'Meara, *Committee Hansard*, 27 April 2011, pp 49–52.

21 Ms Susan Bryce, *Committee Hansard*, 29 April 2011, p. 122.

22 Mrs Elizabeth Hughes, *Submission 59*, p. 2.

23 Ms Angela Barra, *Committee Hansard*, 29 April 2011, pp 59–60.

To strip a mother of her baby is a cruel, cruel act. But to leave a baby alone is another. And that's how I am, alone. Feeling as if I do not have the capacity to love, because it took me a long time to learn it.²⁴

My life has been a rollercoaster ride of emotional trauma; indescribable fear; uncertainty; anxiety; self-sabotage in so many ways; physical ill-health; alcoholism; depression; anger at a level of rage at many points in certain phases; inability to deal with many aspects of disappointment; a feeling of abandonment within friendships and work relationships (far too often); and a variety of other emotional challenges which never made sense at a conscious level.²⁵

I believe that being an adoptee has profoundly affected my life in negative ways. I believe that all choices I have made in my life have been directly influenced by my primal wound that I have carried for my life and only just begun to recognise.²⁶

4.16 One adopted person explained the long-term effects of childhood abuse:

This involved—through my childhood, through puberty and into adulthood—my being petrified and fearful of anyone in a senior position or with any perceived power over my life, my future and my general existence. It has held me back, stopped me growing and ensured that I have lived a life frozen. The memories have not faded or stopped haunting my sleep. The effects on my development still linger, proving that their torment still works. The pain, the anguish and the suffering are still companions, triggered by a simple word or look. It is all still truly 24/7 for me. My biggest fear of the many, though, is that I will never be just me.²⁷

4.17 The committee heard that the experience of adoption has extended to difficulties faced by adopted people in relation to hereditary illness:

I got sick over there because I do not have access to my family medical history. Doctors wrote it off as an undiagnosable illness. I had no way of knowing how long I am going to be sick for and no way of getting well enough to try to rebuild my life and get some semblance of financial survival.²⁸

4.18 Many adoptees explained that not knowing who their natural parents were as children, or still not knowing, made developing a sense identity very difficult. Others

24 Ms Gemma Dore, *Submission 267*, p. 2.

25 Mr Phil Evans, *Submission 277*, p. 1.

26 Name withheld, *Submission 201*, p. 1.

27 *In camera Committee Hansard*, 2011, extract published by agreement of the committee.

28 Mr Erik Spinney, *Committee Hansard*, 29 April 2011, p. 2.

recounted difficulties connecting emotionally with adoptive families or people more generally, and continue to live in fear of abandonment:

As for me, being separated from my parents and being brought up by strangers left me with identity confusion, a sense of not fitting, of being a fraud, an inability to maintain relationships and a belief that I was unlovable.²⁹

Given away at birth, I was stripped of my innate identity, my intrinsic heritage and formally given a new name and family. I grew up with a profound sense of duality—of being part of a family and yet very much separate from them.³⁰

Being removed from my mother's body after birth traumatized me. Having my identity removed—my entire story about who I was—shattered my sense of self. Having a partial and meagre false identity attributed to me kept me in a state of traumatic confusion throughout my childhood to the current day.³¹

4.19 An anonymous submitter described the difficulty of learning she was adopted well into adulthood:

I found out I was adopted when I was 46yrs old. The pain of rejection was strong and so was the pain of finding my mother only to be rejected again. This rejection was caused by the great stress and trauma she had suffered in losing me as an infant. No longer was I the baby she remembered but a fully grown woman whom to her was a complete stranger. All of the memories she had hidden in her subconscious were brought to her mind and she was in great distress. I almost lost her because of this but somehow through great determination we have managed to have a relationship. I cannot stress enough how it is to lose one's identity at such a late age and then find family most of whom rejected me. If I had not been taken from my family I would have known my siblings, my grandparents, my aunts and my uncles and my cousins.³²

4.20 This lack of connection was raised in the context of adopted people whose adoptive parents came from a different culture to their birth parents:

[She] at [that] point told me of another secret she had held and that was that my biological father was aboriginal! And that a social worker had told her that if I was born with any 'colour' to my skin I wouldn't be taken by a 'good family', so the information on my file states my biological father to be very

29 Ms Charlotte Smith, *Committee Hansard*, 20 April 2011, p. 118.

30 Mr Thomas Graham, *Submission 148*, p. 1.

31 Name withheld, *Submission 346*, p. 1.

32 Name withheld, *Submission 231*, p. 1.

fair skinned! (Wow that explained a lot of my connection to the aboriginal culture).

I have always suffered from depression and raising four children hasn't been easy. I have taken Zoloft for many years to keep me from falling in a heap. I was always scared to tell my doctor the depths of my thoughts and an inbuilt fear of social workers for fear of having my children taken from me. My research has led me to believe that I suffer a form of post traumatic stress disorder...

I am now 45 and live with anxiousness, insomnia, bi-polar and major loss of culture issues. I feel as if a part of me is missing and I'm trying to get on with life find a job and turn my life around but for me that cannot be done until recognition of my trauma, loss of identity and culture are addressed.³³

I am a Lost Bird or Split Feather. This is name given by the American Indians to persons who were removed from their people and adopted out. I am a late discovery adoptee who was unable to meet his true mother and only knew his true father for thirteen short months before his death. However, I will not regale you with stories of the emotional turmoil and near nervous breakdown that occurred whilst seeking out and meeting true family.³⁴

4.21 In some cases, adopted people feel they do not fit in with their adoptive parents' culture, but are not welcomed by people from their birth parents' culture:

I went back home to my people in Canada. When we go back home we are not welcome because we cannot name our parents and our lineage. We are still outcasts and outsiders.³⁵

At the age of 50 years I still do not belong. I live my life in constant fear of abandonment and rejection, the very first emotions that I felt as a newborn child. How can I ever overcome this and function to some degree of normality? How do I keep living this lie? I do not know who I am supposed to be. My true identity was stolen, manipulated and distorted, and I had no say in this. I was raised by people of a completely different culture than my true heritage and I still to this day do not fit in.³⁶

Another thing that Link-Up finds sometimes is that the no-contact statements that were put in place at the time of the adoption are actually not the wishes of the birth parent. They were the wishes of the authorities that were taking the child away. There was an idea that if they severed the

33 Name withheld, *Submission 338*, p. 5.

34 Mr Murray Legro, *Submission 81*, p. 1.

35 Mr Erik Spinney, *Committee Hansard*, 29 April 2011, p. 2.

36 Ms Vikki Lewis, *Committee Hansard*, 29 April 2011, p. 59.

relationship completely, the child would never know their Indigenous parentage.³⁷

There are misconceptions about what happened within my adoptive family: 'She was brought up by whitefellas. She had it all. She was rich. What does she want?' The assumptions that they put on me at times were very brutal, very cruel.³⁸

4.22 As with many policies that cause disadvantage in Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were affected by the experience severely, because of the effects of cultural loss. They were also subject to a layer of official secrecy: not only a denial of their original individual parents, but an additional official desire to suppress racial and cultural identity.

Adopted people with supportive adoptive parents

4.23 Some submitters explained that despite positive childhood experiences as children of adoptive parents, they have experienced challenging periods in their adult lives that they relate to their adoption:

She was supportive of me finding my birth mother and would have liked to have met her herself.

My mother also told me that I was a very unsettled baby, who could not be left, she strongly believed that my mother must have gone through a lot of emotional turmoil and that possibly I had suffered in the womb due to her stress...

I believe these circumstances have affected me in my life. I have been an anxious person during my life and continue to be troubled by what happens around me personally. My Story will never have closure for me if I cannot meet my birth mother or have a picture or something more than I have now. Who do I look like? What were the influences in my mother's life? What was she passionate about? What sort of person is she? What sort of family did/does she come from? Then there is my biological father what about him and his family?³⁹

4.24 Mrs Ruth Orr, who explained that her adoptive parents and family had been 'loving and caring', described feeling an urge to find her birth mother as an adult. However, when Mrs Orr did identify her birth mother, she learned that she had passed away at a young age:

37 Mrs Rosemary Rennie, Link-Up Queensland, *Committee Hansard*, 27 April 2011, p. 14.

38 Ms Heather Shearer, Stolen Generations Alliance, *Committee Hansard*, 26 October 2011, pp 14, 29.

39 Mrs Jenny Marshall, *Submission 379*, p. 1.

I understand the social and economic environment in 1967 was vastly different to what it is today...[b]ut I always thought in the back of my mind that if [my mother] really wanted me she would have kept me.

I didn't feel any great sense of urgency to find [my mother] I'd registered with agencies such as Jigsaw and [she] had never registered to find me. Upon receiving my paperwork I was also told that [my mother] had not registered to find me. This reiterated my own belief that [my mother] didn't want me in 1967 and didn't want to know me now either. My life continued and I put the envelope away in a safe place, sometimes taking it out to go over the details again that I had already committed to memory.

But it gnawed at me. I wouldn't think about it for months at a time but it was always there. I wanted to know who [my mother] was. I wanted to know where my fair skin, blonde hair and blue eyes came from. I wanted to know why she gave me up for adoption.

By mid 2010 it had started to become a bit of a problem. I would try not to think about it but it wouldn't go away. With the support of my beloved husband, I decided to try and find [my mother]. I was worried about it and said at one stage 'What if she has died and I don't get to meet her?' Even at the time of saying this I didn't really believe [she] would have passed away. She would only be in her early 60's. It took about 10 minutes on 'Google' to find [her]. [She] was listed on her husband's family tree. [She] was born in October 1948 and passed away a week after her 49th birthday in October 1997. I was devastated. I couldn't believe [she] had died 13 years ago. 49 was so young. The grief that hit me was overwhelming and took me by surprise. I felt that I had totally lost [my mother] again.⁴⁰

4.25 An anonymous submitter described the reaction she had when her own children were born given her knowledge of her own birth:

I went on to marry the man that is now my husband, and we have three children together. When my first child was born, I experienced a lot of problems settling him. I felt extremely anxious, and was always worried that something was going to happen to him or that I would lose him. I was very uncomfortable having to deal with the nurses at the hospital when he was born, and felt very defensive...there is no logical reason why any of my children would be removed from my care, so I can only conclude that my problems at the time of my firstborn child's arrival were some kind of reaction to the circumstances of my own birth and removal from my mother's care.

I have contacted my natural mother by mail several times over the years, and most of the time she has replied. I have found that my experience as a mother gives me a better perspective on her situation, and has helped me to understand her better. She told me in her last letter that she hasn't ruled out the possibility of contact, but that she couldn't bring herself to make contact with me still at that stage. That was around 2004, and my next letter did not receive a reply. She would be around 61 years old, her other children are

both in their thirties, and probably have children of their own, and I am now 42 years old. I wrote another letter to her today, simply giving her my current address and phone number. The remembrance of these things is making me feel very emotional lately, and I'm finding it difficult to hold onto hope of ever meeting the woman who gave birth to me. But now I have another reason to hope, because my children have a right to know their flesh and blood as much as I do.⁴¹

4.26 The committee heard from witnesses that the experience of being adopted, whether by an abusive or supportive adoptive family, has long-term effects on adopted people's lives. The next section will address the long-term effects of adoption on birth mothers.

Ongoing effects on mothers

4.27 The committee heard that forced adoption has long-term effects on mothers and their later relationships with partners and subsequent children. Many submitters noted that the secrecy surrounding adoption at the time had the effect of postponing the recognition and treatment of trauma.

Effects of concealment

4.28 The committee heard that the secrecy surrounding pregnancy of unmarried women continued after they had given birth. Many submitters recounted being told to 'go home and forget about it'.

Then you were not given counselling; you were simply told to go home and get on with your life: 'Forget it, you're young, you can have other children.'⁴²

I never informed my brothers or my father about what happened at Waitara [being raped in a maternity home]. Like nearly everybody here, we were told to get on with our lives and forget about it.⁴³

I had to go home and act like nothing had happened, the story for my absence from home was I had a nervous breakdown in an interview recently the interviewer laughed at the silliness to choose nervous breakdown as more acceptable [than the] birth [of] a beautiful daughter.⁴⁴

41 Name withheld, *Submission 397*, pp 5–6.

42 Mrs Lisa McDonald, Adoption Research and Counselling Service, *Committee Hansard*, 1 April 2011, p. 29.

43 Ms Therese Pearson, Origins Newcastle, *Committee Hansard*, 28 September 2011, p. 57.

44 Ms Lynette Kinghorn, *Submission 8*, p. 1.

I went back to my parent's home. They had moved to a new neighbourhood so that the new neighbours would never know what had happened to me. I was very depressed for at least 6 months. I had no motivation to do anything and I was confused and bewildered by what had happened to me and my baby. It was never allowed to be spoken about at home. It was as if none of it had ever happened yet I knew that it had because I had all of the memories which kept playing round and round in my head.⁴⁵

4.29 An anonymous submitter recounted that the adoption of her child took place without discussion, and that her mother's disappointment about her pregnancy never dissipated:

I feel the disappointment my mother showed to me for the rest of her long life and my feeling of not being worthy of her love has been a big weight to carry all my life.⁴⁶

4.30 Tens of thousands of adoptions took place in Australia in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, and many mothers consider that their children were taken by force. Nevertheless, some women recounted feeling completely alone in their experience. The wider secrecy surrounded unmarried pregnancy made the topic taboo for discussion:

I always felt different from everybody else. I thought I was the only one this had ever happened to. I could be in a roomful of people and be so alone and upset. I would leave the room, go to another room where I was in private and bawl my eyes out, and then I would walk back into the room as if nothing happened, because it was my private pain that I was not allowed to speak about. I was silenced, told to go home and forget it ever happened. By jingo, you cannot do that.⁴⁷

4.31 Ms Kathryn Rendell recounted her experience of a complete lack of community support after her child was adopted:

Back home in my community there was no opportunity to grieve, no counselling and no sympathy. The attitude was that it was all in the past. During the first year of my child's life, I seriously contemplated suicide. The reason I made the decision to live was the thought that I might one day see my daughter.⁴⁸

4.32 The committee heard of the lasting impact on mothers of having to keep the birth of their child secret:

I think it is the secrecy that went with it which is really hard to understand now. Sometimes very elderly mothers have said to me, 'Every time I go to the supermarket and I see a young mum, probably a single mum pushing the baby around the supermarket, I think how lucky you are because I had

45 Ms Cherry Blaskett, *Submission 353*, p. 4.

46 Name withheld, *Submission 265*, p. 2.

47 Ms Maureen Melville, *Committee Hansard*, 29 April 2011, p. 64.

48 Ms Kathryn Rendell, *Submission 184*, p. 2.

to keep it such a secret that I got pregnant. And look now the government even gives you money if you have had a baby.' It is that secrecy that is very profound and has lasting consequences on people.⁴⁹

When I was reunited with my mother and heard her story it was truly devastating for me to hear, particularly when I heard about how she tried to find me for years and years. She never really recovered from being made to relinquish me and it affected her whole life from then on, even though she kept it a secret from almost everyone.⁵⁰

4.33 In some cases, the secrecy around adoption led women to blame other factors for their unresolved depression. Ms Linda Eve recounted how her bouts of depression finally ceased after she reunited with her daughter:

I had bouts of depression for years which led to several suicide attempts which I didn't associate with losing my daughter to adoption until after our reunion when the bouts of depression, (which I eventually recognized as unresolved grief) finally stopped...26 years after they had started.⁵¹

4.34 In other cases, mothers described deliberately repressing painful memories:
I have blocked out a lot of things because I was so traumatised.⁵²

4.35 Another submitter described how she had sought to repress the memories of her experience of forced adoption so that she can function on an everyday level:

It is with great difficulty that I write about my experiences for a number of reasons. Firstly, due to the necessity of bringing to the surface the many memories and emotions I have tried to keep contained for all these years.

Secondly, I have limited recall surrounding that time: some memories have surfaced over past years; some very sad and hurtful memories; and some that to this day I cannot believe took place and I continually try to push back so that I can simply go on with life.⁵³

4.36 Part of the repression of memories of forced adoption may relate to the fact that many women have never seen their now adult children.

Relationships with children

4.37 Some mothers explained the sorrow of never having met their children.

49 Ms Jenny Glare, MacKillop Family Services, *Committee Hansard*, 20 April 2011, p. 84.

50 Ms Charlotte Smith, *Committee Hansard*, 20 April 2011, p. 117.

51 Ms Linda Eve, *Submission 159*, p. 4.

52 Ms Betty Mills, *Submission 366*, p. 2.

53 Ms JB (nee Williams) *Submission 373*, p. 1.

My son will be 42 years of age in January 2011, I have been totally deprived of a relationship with him, never having been able to celebrate birthdays or important holidays with him. I constantly think and imagine what his life would be like; whether he married and whether I have grandchildren.⁵⁴

That day I saw my baby for the first and last time...

I thought about going to the police but, felt so helpless and worthless. How could I be right and all the adults, including the authorities be wrong.

I have never seen my son again.⁵⁵

4.38 Some submitters recounted searching for their children to no avail:

It took 3 years just to obtain ward files for myself and my siblings. However without spending huge amounts of money I do not have it seems I will never be able to obtain information of the welfare of my daughter or leave information for her, so she knows she was not given up willingly.⁵⁶

4.39 In contrast, many mothers who have met their children recounted the difficulties of building a relationship with them, having met them for the first time when those children were now adults:

I am a very lucky person to have a wonderful family, a wonderful husband, but every day I live with guilt because I did not buck the system or fight. I made a decision a long time ago that I was not going to live with that guilt because I get one shot at this to be with my son, the two boys that I have had since, two stepchildren and the six grandchildren I have had altogether. I try all the time to build a relationship with Joshua and his family, and I am lucky: it works. I go and stay up there and he comes and stays here. But I see him hurt. As a man he said to me, 'Mum, come out and have dinner with me.' He said, 'Just tell me why again.' And this is for people who it is working for. This is where it is really good and easy.⁵⁷

I have been in contact with my son for four years now, but it is a very fragile relationship. You are constantly wary about what you do and say. I live with a little fear inside of me that if I do or say the wrong thing he will go and he will break all contact with me.⁵⁸

54 Ms Juliette Clough, *Submission 12*, p. 1.

55 Ms Judy M., *Submission 205*, p. 9.

56 Ms Deborah Snelson, *Submission 292*, p. 2.

57 Mrs Louise Greenup, *Committee Hansard*, 29 April 2011, p. 69.

58 Mrs Lisa McDonald, Adoption Research and Counselling Service, *Committee Hansard*, 1 April 2011, p. 29.

Many of our children will have nothing to do with us. Our children now have children of their own and gaze at them and wonder in anger how we could have given them away for no-one would make them give away their child. This is part of the ongoing trauma for many mothers. We have lost so much.⁵⁹

I tracked my daughter down as soon she turned 18. We met, a euphoric moment. My other children met her—a great day. We had telephone and letter contact for a while, though the APs [adoptive parents] were putting pressure on her, the emotions rising...

I discovered that my adoption was illegal as were many others. I told my daughter and the adoptive parents became very defensive and hurt. Contact was soon cut off.⁶⁰

Today my son blames me for giving him up, and I did not even give him up, because I did not even know I had him. I did not know he was born. They told me he was dead. I will never forgive those people as long as I live. I would never in my life forgive them.⁶¹

4.40 Some submitters recounted the distress of seeing their adult children suffering from the effects of their adoption and feeling helpless to assist them in their pain:

He said he always knew she was not his mother & he ran wild & had a breakdown, so at twelve years of age, they put him in a caravan in the backyard. Rather than give his mother back to him, or even asking him why he was screaming out for help...

This was, after aching and wishing and dreaming about him every day for thirty six years, so amazingly painful I felt physical pain all over my body for days. I screamed and cried for as long also.

I was now in fear of my own baby, and this was far too much for me to realise and step forward and deal with. How could I change him, you can't train a man as you would your baby?⁶²

If I had help when our reunion was set up I am sure the outcome could have been different. I believe she was given counselling, but, I was left to flounder. (She had had a difficult relationship with her adoptive mother) How does one know how to handle such a situation, I tried, I loved her so

59 June Smith, *Committee Hansard*, 20 April 2011, p. 33–34.

60 Mrs Gabrielle McGuire, *Committee Hansard*, 29 April 2011, p. 6.

61 Ms Valerie Linlow, Origins SPSA Inc., *Committee Hansard*, 29 April 2011, p. 27.

62 Ms Juanita Ellis, *Submission 259*, p. 2.

much, but that was not enough the damage had been done a long time ago. And, nothing was going to change that.⁶³

I attempted to support my son as an adult with disabilities on a financial level as he was neglected in his adoptive placement and now my son is diseased. I had the opportunity to care for him for about six months before his death.⁶⁴

4.41 The committee heard from submitters who explained the further trauma they experienced when the relationship with their adult child disintegrated. Ms Linda Graham explained how this led to attempts at suicide and an obsession with adoption:

I became hostile with family members' incapacity to empathise, particularly those family members who knew what had happened to me. I was angry that they were allowed to keep their children. I do not think that I have ever had the opportunity to tell any of them exactly what happened, one because I would become extremely agitated and emotional in the telling and thus wouldn't get very far, and two because they would inevitably try to distract me from the memories to placate me or try to see a silver lining or become annoyed and angry with me for dwelling on the past. Also there was some blame on my part attributed to my mother who had exposed me in my vulnerability to social workers and their systematic removal of babies from unwed mothers and that was not acceptable to my siblings. To support me in my pathological grief was to side with me against my mother and that was never going to happen.

I isolated myself from my family. Not being able to make them understand was excruciating for me and my anger and volatility was intolerable for them. I then began the process of mourning the loss of them in conjunction with the loss of my son for the second time.

I used to be driving in my car and imagine myself swerving off a cliff or into a tree. I tried to commit suicide on two occasions. The thing that prevented me succeeding was the concern that my son may feel responsible for my death. He was already carrying the responsibility of his adopters' fulfilment, as parents and I did not wish to add to that burden.

I became obsessed with adoption related literature, films, television programs, documentaries and I would cry for all the people [a]ffected by adoption. My social circle became even smaller as my conversation revolved around adoption and nothing much else. I threw myself into counselling and research but by the time the NSW Parliamentary Inquiry came to a close, I was exhausted and ill. When the findings of the Inquiry, that some practices of adoption were unethical and illegal were revealed I suffered a mental breakdown.⁶⁵

63 Name withheld, *Submission 352*, p. 2.

64 Name withheld, *Submission 208*, p. 2.

65 Ms Linda Graham, *Submission 258*, pp 21–22.

Lasting effects of trauma

4.42 Many mothers explained the continuing effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other mental illnesses such as depression. Other mothers described ongoing emotional damage, and feelings such as anger and disbelief that cannot be resolved.

4.43 The committee heard that the reliving of trauma can be triggered by a number of factors. Many submitters explained that they are reminded of their own children whenever they see mothers and babies in the street:

I never forgot him I was always looking and wondering if he was alive or dead. From then on every time I saw a baby, little boy and even a grown up in the street, I would look to see if I could recognise him, these memories have never faded.⁶⁶

I felt the extreme pain of forced separation then. It was very difficult being around others with babies. When I was in Queensland visiting, I was always looking around wondering if my child was near me. The grief never went away or ever will go away.⁶⁷

I suffered from nightmares, flashbacks, I had panic attacks, I felt like vomiting every time I saw a baby or heard one cry when I was out shopping or when I saw or heard one on TV.⁶⁸

4.44 The committee heard that birthdays and other anniversaries are particularly difficult times:

Nothing could take away the love I felt for my baby and still do. Birthdays, Christmas and Mothers Day were always difficult and remain so. I hoped that she was loved, well, happy, well treated and I wanted her to know that I loved her and I wouldn't have given her up had I had a choice.

I was silent and ashamed for eighteen years because it was not to be spoken of because of the stigma attached to unmarried mothers. I was not able to imagine a picture of her because I did not know her sex.⁶⁹

4.45 Many submitters lamented the lost opportunities and the feeling that their whole lives would have been different if their children had not been adopted:

The separation from my son immediately after his birth continues to have a huge impact on our lives and should not ever have happened.⁷⁰

66 Ms Carolyn Brown, *Submission 238*, p. 4.

67 Ms Margaret Collins, *Submission 269*, p. 2.

68 Name withheld, *Submission 18*, p. 2.

69 Ms Margaret Singline, *Submission 355*, p. 2.

I'm sure my life would have been a lot different, had I been informed and given a choice by the social worker. Who even had the gall to write 'not a pretty baby' about my daughter in her file!

For me it was an emotional horror story and still is.⁷¹

I have no feelings left today for anyone. It seems I have weaved my way through life since 1963 and 1964 in a trance. I am 70 years of age and I still see my girls as babies and time stopped in my mind as though I never lived a life...⁷²

4.46 The committee heard that the effects of forced adoption have had a severe and continuing effect on the lives of mothers. In many cases, the experience of trauma at a young age has affected the mothers over their whole life:

The pain never goes away, that we all gave away our babies. We were told to forget what happened, but we cannot. It will be with us all our lives.

It has affected us in so many ways, by getting married so early, married, children, divorced. We are all trying to find or avoid that [which] will never be filled.⁷³

As a consequence of the inhumane treatment I have received, I have suffered a lifetime of grief and pain, crying every day for my son, and the loss of him. I married briefly but was unable to maintain this relationship due to the psychological damage and trauma caused by this event. I was told to go away and carry on with my life but have been unable to do so, I never remarried nor had any other children.⁷⁴

I was told to go home and get on with life. I have had 20 years of psychiatric therapy for severe depression and panic attacks, I still take medication to this day.⁷⁵

This terrible experience of humankind from the Salvation Army has made a black cloud over me all my life.⁷⁶

70 Mrs Lorraine Hassett, Private Capacity, *Committee Hansard*, 26 October 2011, p. 25.

71 Teresa, *Submission 11*, p. 2.

72 Ms Teri Hay, *Submission 263*, pp 1–4.

73 Ms Kim Lawrence, *Submission 268*, pp 3–4.

74 Ms Janet McHugh, *Submission 265*, p. 3.

75 Ms Thelma Adams, *Submission 393*, p. 1.

76 Mrs Susan Evans, *Submission 270*, p. 2.

4.47 An anonymous submitter described the compounding effects of trauma, including regular panic attacks, an inability to leave the house and difficulties with finances:

I have lived with PTSD since 1969...my husband and children have been a great support to me...and every time I have contemplated ending it all, the thought of hurting them prevented it. With PTSD, when a stressful situation arises, I have a panic attack, and am bombarded with thoughts of inadequacy at my inability to take control of the situation, and my dependency on others. This brings on feelings of worthlessness and I start to think that everyone would be better off without me around...I have lived with the fear that one day I mightn't be able to talk myself out of it...I have been to the brink many times...one day I fear I'll fall over the edge...

I can't begin to tell you the negative effect it has had on my life, the life of my parents and siblings, my husband and children....and even my friends....and then the most severely affected....my first-born....

There have been financial ramifications also...my earning ability was diminished by my poor emotional health which is directly resultant on forced adoption....we have been a single income family for most of our 31 years because I have been reclusive almost to the point of Agoraphobia...for which I sought Psychological treatment....apart from the fear of leaving my 'safe place' and dealing with people, I had a fear of leaving my children and going out to work as I felt I would be abandoning them to the care of others...my husband worked so hard that at 50 his back went on him, we were forced into Bankruptcy....we couldn't afford Insurance...we are now on Newstart Allowance because the wait to see a specialist is 2–3 years...when we get a diagnosis on paper, Centrelink will then consider a disability pension and carer's allowance...in the meantime we struggle to make ends meet...

The stress of this exacerbates the effects of PTSD.⁷⁷

4.48 As well as mothers, the committee also heard from fathers and other family members who were affected by forced adoption.

Impacts on fathers

4.49 The committee received a small number of submissions from fathers whose then-girlfriends were compelled to have their children adopted. Mr John Hughes, who was threatened with police action when his then-girlfriend became pregnant, recounted how the experience of forced adoption has affected his own life:

I was going to visit her but was again warned never to go near her again by her father and a male friend who threatened assault and more should I see her, so naturally I kept my distance so as not to cause any more trouble than I had already brought on [her].

77 Name withheld, *Submission 256*, pp 9–10.

I was never at any time asked what I would like to do in regards to marriage or parenthood so with no options in any way nothing more happened, never given any documents to sign or authorise any actions which I thought was strange as I was the girl's father but felt very disappointed that maybe she would never know that.

This predicament caused me great stress and anxiety in future years and I went through a bad time with alcohol abuse and generally did not take care of myself as I now regret I should, but I'm sure this would be nothing compared to what [the mother] went through in her pain and anguish with a situation that was in no way her fault but only she and my daughter were put through these issues and pain.⁷⁸

4.50 Mr Dallas McDermott explained that he and his mother had searched for forty years for his daughter.

As a direct consequence of being completely shut out of my child's adoption and welfare, I and my mother (the child's grandmother) have suffered a lifetime of living grief. It was the South Australian government's policy to withhold all information. My mother and I searched endlessly for the whereabouts of my daughter and were thwarted at every attempt. My mother (the child's grandmother) searched till her dying day often in tears—she had an inner feeling that the child was being mistreated. After 40 years I finally had contact with my lost daughter and it was true she was mistreated by her adoptive mother and abused by their son. There was corruption involved—the woman who adopted the child was deemed unfit but the person organizing everything at Macbrides confinement hospital managed to bypass regulations. It has left my daughter with mental and emotional scars that can never be healed. I am unable to write any more as it is too emotionally painful.⁷⁹

4.51 Mr Cameron Horn noted that he provided a personal submission to the NSW Parliamentary Inquiry, and that fathers—as well as mothers—whose children were adopted against their wishes continue to experience a sense of loss and injustice:

Natural fathers of children lost to adoption, however, remain the 'silent dispossessed'...

So it is timely, in fact overdue, that there should be an examination of relevant laws, adoption industry practice and historical (contemporaneous) social attitudes to these dispossessed fathers, to see if in fact, there is any evidence of indictable behaviour by adoption workers, against fathers in the process of securing a child for adoption.⁸⁰

78 Mr John Hughes, *Submission 104*, p. 2.

79 Mr Dallas McDermott, *Submission 163*, p. 1.

80 Mr Cameron Horn, in Origins SPSA Inc, *Supplementary Submission 170 (j)*, pp 4–5.

4.52 Mr Gary Coles' submission recounted the exclusion of the fathers' name from birth certificates and cited anecdotal evidence that social workers avoided seeking the father's name so as to simplify adoption processes:

This sequence of interference may leave the lingering impression that the father did not care enough about his child to insist that his name be recorded on the original birth certificate. This perception may be picked up later by the searching adopted person, when they discover a birth certificate with but one birth parent name, that of the mother. It is no wonder then that so many adopted persons are apprehensive about finding their birth father. He is unknown, in all senses. In many circumstances, where the birth father's name is not recorded on the original birth certificate, it is the birth mother who controls both the revelation of his identity and the possibility of a reunion between father and child. Again, the birth father is disempowered. The above evidence confirms that many birth fathers have been treated harshly by past adoption practices. The legacy for these men is enduring pain and a peripheral role in post-adoption narratives. It is appropriate that the disenfranchisement of birth fathers be acknowledged in a formal apology made by the federal parliament.⁸¹

4.53 The committee also received submissions from mothers which suggested that fathers were not allowed to visit them at maternity homes, and that their names were not listed on birth certificates even at mothers' request.⁸² The hostility frequently experienced by fathers extended to the highest levels. During law reform discussions in the 1960s, outlined in detail in Chapter 7, the West Australian Department of Child Welfare observed:

The Department sees no reason why the man who has sired a child for which he cannot provide a proper family life should have any rights in its future (except to pay for its maintenance until proper family life is available to it by adoption).⁸³

Impacts on other family members

4.54 The committee heard that forced adoption also affected family members of both the natural parents and the adopted person. The committee heard from other children (now adults) of mothers who had experienced forced adoption first-hand:

I was 19 when I found out about my brother. That was only seven years ago. For 19 years, my mother kept her first-born child a secret from her subsequent children. For 19 years I thought I was her eldest...

I also suffer from the knowledge of a brother lost (I always wished for an elder brother growing up) who I will probably never meet (I have his photo

81 Mr Gary Coles, *Submission 143*, pp 1–2.

82 For example, Ms Jennie Burrows, *Committee Hansard*, 28 September 2011, pp 60–61.

83 NAA, A432 1961/2241 Part 1, *Uniform Adoption Legislation—Material prepared by States, Adoption—from the Welfare Viewpoint*, WA briefing paper, folio pp. 8–10, digital pp. 243–245.

on my desk), and of course the pain that has come from being raised by someone who has been psychologically and emotionally traumatised from having her baby removed from her and going through the mistreatment that it entailed.⁸⁴

The damage done to my mother was serious and permanent and she never recovered. It has been the main cause of much of my family's disintegration and those of us along with it.⁸⁵

4.55 Mrs Lisa McDonald described the effect that the news that one of his siblings had been adopted had on her youngest son:

I could not break the news to my other two children; my doctor did that. They were relieved because with me crying they thought I was dying of cancer, then they found out they had another brother. I did not think about the implications that they would feel behind it. They could not understand the government would do that. My youngest thought that maybe they could come and do that to him. It took a lot to get around that.⁸⁶

4.56 An anonymous submitter recounted the difficulty of growing up with a mother who had experienced forced adoption and meeting her older sister in her early twenties:

Our parents mourned the loss of their baby throughout their lives. Feeling pressured to relinquish their baby to adoption and a 'better life', our Mother felt remorseful, guilty and ashamed. She found it difficult to maintain relationships with family members including her parents, husband, siblings, friends, colleagues and most importantly her 'OWN' children, resulting from the fear of agonizing pain associated with the loss of her beloved baby. She became overprotective of us, her 'own' children for fear of losing us. She suffered an anxiety disorder and a nervous breakdown from longstanding grief related to her sense of loss....

I would begin to question my place within the family. This is not an easy feeling to describe, instead of being the third child I had suddenly become the fourth child; my place had been taken from me. For someone already suffering from a low self esteem the impact of this experience is felt at a far more devastating level. To illustrate, one example would be our family tradition that the first daughter was to inherit our mother's engagement ring whilst the second daughter was to inherit our grandmother's engagement ring, my rite of passage was now in question and I still don't know how to ask the question, where do I stand?

84 Ms Emily Wolfinger, *Submission 78*, p. 1.

85 Mr Steve Deliloucas, *Submission 384*, p. 5.

86 Mrs Lisa McDonald, Adoption Research and Counselling Service, *Committee Hansard*, 1 April 2011, p. 30.

It took me two seven year periods of being estranged with my mother to finally understand that her distrust was not personal, she was unable to trust anyone. When I was 36 years old I asked my Mother, 'So what you are saying is that you don't trust me?' After further conversations with her, I was able to conclude that she no longer trusted anybody due to the abuse she endured at the hands of those whom she most trusted to take care of her, including her Mother, Father, Doctor and Nurses (which were considered sacrosanct in those days).⁸⁷

4.57 In addition, the husband of a woman whose eldest child had been adopted explained that her search for her daughter and her anger at her daughter's adoption affected him and their sons as well:

Before I married my wife, her mother advised [me] that she had already had a child, which had been adopted...

After a number of years we moved to Sydney and we were living there when the laws were change[d] in Western Australia and my wife could express an interest to make contact with her child.

This she did and once she had made contact and found out that she had had a daughter, and more importantly what had happened to her child, life became very difficult not only for me, but also for our sons.

Her whole personality changed, not only because she built a wall around her in respect to her child, including my role but she also became very angry with the system that had deprived her of having a daughter.⁸⁸

Conclusion

4.58 Many parents have recounted the long-lasting and extreme experience of trauma that has resulted from their children being adopted against their will. The painful, sometimes disastrous effects of forced adoption hurt the mothers, but also rippled outward through families. The committee heard that some adopted people endured harsh treatment as children, and experience continued issues with identity, self-esteem and belonging. For fathers and other family members the complex consequences of forced adoption continue to be experienced.

4.59 The witness accounts given as evidence to this inquiry greatly disturbed the committee. Most significantly, they point to ongoing health and welfare problems that need to be addressed. The committee will in later chapters return to the important question of how governments and other institutions should respond to the ongoing effects of forced adoption. First, however, this report examines in more detail the first part of its terms of reference: the Commonwealth's role in this policy area. The next chapter will examine one of the reasons why unmarried women were under such

87 Name withheld, *Submission 194*, pp 2–3.

88 Name withheld, *Submission 283*, p. 2.

pressure to have their children adopted: the lack of sufficient government benefits to support them to raise their children themselves.