

Chapter 2

Attitudes towards adoption

2.1 The previous chapter showed that the numbers of adoptions in post-war Australia was far higher than it is today. In fact, widespread adoption was a phenomenon confined to the mid-twentieth century.

2.2 This chapter examines societal views about adoption from the early twentieth century to the 1950s and 60s. In the early twentieth century, adoption was considered primarily as an alternative to institutional care. In the post-war period, adoption became much more widely accepted and supported as a social policy, and the number of people wishing to adopt increased dramatically. Strong societal support for adoption in the 1950s and 1960s was one factor in the fostering of an environment in which unmarried women were separated from their children.

2.3 The committee rejects the claim that forced adoptions took place as an inevitable result of the conservative societal attitudes of the 1950s to 1970s. It will discuss this issue further in Chapters 7, 8 and 9. This chapter provides a background to social attitudes towards adoption during the early part of the twentieth century in order to understand why adoption became so prominent during the 1960s.

Early twentieth century: adoption as an alternative to institutionalisation

2.4 In response to juvenile poverty, child abandonment and the petty crime necessitated by such poverty, nineteenth century policy makers suggested that destitute children should be institutionalised. The argument held that if such children were housed, fed and educated for employment, they would have no need to commit crimes.¹

2.5 Orphanages and children's homes were opened across Australia as part of a wider trend also evident in the United Kingdom (UK), United States of America (USA) and Canada. However, conditions in institutions were poor. As the public became increasingly aware of the plight of these children, calls were made for the better regulation. In New South Wales for example, the public became outraged at the rates of abuse, and, following a Royal Commission in 1874, many institutions were closed. Child protection laws were introduced and initiatives were sought to better ensure the welfare of institutionalised children. However, this opposition to institutional care was relatively short-lived, and by the early twentieth century institutions once again regained their former popularity. Child adoptions were not common because it was generally believed that institutionalised and abandoned

1 John F. Fogarty, 'Some aspects of the early history of child protection in Australia', *Family Matters*, vol. 78 (2008), p. 54.

children came from 'inferior' backgrounds. Under the laws of the time they were also ineligible to inherit property.²

2.6 In Australia, harsh attitudes towards destitute children began to change during the early twentieth century. These changes appear to have been consistent with the introduction of child protection laws, first legislated in the USA during the first half of the nineteenth century, and followed soon after by the UK. The legislative and attitudinal changes in the USA and UK established a new international discourse, which helped pave the way for similar changes in Australia:

The story of change over time is a slow, uneven and frustrating one. It starts with the assertion of absolute authority by the father and a denial of the right of the state to interfere. It ends with a wide range of powers—legislative, judicial and administrative—to protect children and advance their welfare, aligned with social, economic and educational services designed to advance the safety and wellbeing of families and children.³

2.7 In the USA and UK, the early twentieth century witnessed a move away from the institutionalisation of children, to the more permanent option of adoption.

2.8 In Australia, deinstitutionalisation was not so straightforward. Australia was slower in adopting child protection legislation, and severe economic downturns towards the end of the nineteenth century greatly increased rates of poverty and the numbers of destitute families. Consequently, increasing numbers of children whose parents were poor were placed into orphanages:

The increasing tendency was to place children in orphanages, industrial schools and other largely private and religious institutions. But this proved disastrous, as the level of care was shocking even by the standards of those times—described in a NSW royal commission in 1874 as 'a legalised gateway to hell'. Increasing public agitation led to the gradual demise of these institutions...

It is a typical irony of child protection that resort to institutions on a large scale re-emerged in the 1920s and again in the 1950s with the same cycle of abuse.⁴

2.9 In the early twentieth century, adoption practice was influenced by eugenics theory, which was prominent at the time.⁵ Adoptive families went to extraordinary

2 John F. Fogarty, 'Some aspects of the early history of child protection in Australia', *Family Matters*, vol. 78, 2008, p. 54; John Ramsland, *Children of the Back Lanes: destitute and neglected children in colonial New South Wales*, University of New South Wales Press, Kensington, 1986.

3 John F. Fogarty, 'Some aspects of the early history of child protection in Australia', *Family Matters*, vol. 78, 2008, p. 54.

4 John F. Fogarty, 'Some aspects of the early history of child protection in Australia', *Family Matters*, vol. 78, 2008, p. 57.

lengths to ensure that their newly adopted baby was of a good 'genetic background', while specialists warned prospective parents to do proper genetic checks before adopting children.⁶

2.10 Due to prevailing attitudes, many children from what were regarded as 'genetically poor' families were taken from their parents and placed into institutional care, where they were taught and trained according to 'proper' eugenic practices. Children born to poor families and single mothers were particularly vulnerable. Henry Goddard expressed views typical of professionals at the time:

[T]his results in such families refusing to take these children, then we must provide for them in colonies. Charitable organizations, even the state, can well afford to do that rather than run the risk of contaminating the race by the perpetuation of mental and moral deficiency...

It is neither right nor wise for us to let our humanity, our pity and sympathy for the poor, homeless, and neglected child, drive us to do injustice to and commit a crime against those yet unborn.⁷

2.11 During this period, babies were only reluctantly adopted by families. In a 1957 article, Dr R.J. Reid wrote that:

Twenty or thirty years ago, agencies had to go out and recruit adoptive parents for white infants; they had to try to 'sell' the country on adoption. Attitudes toward illegitimacy, toward bringing children of different 'blood' into the family set up strong barriers to adoption.⁸

2.12 As a result of genetic concerns, many organisations would not allow adoptive parents to take custody of a child before the child was one year of age. Hospitals and charity organisations argued that this was the only way adopting parents could be assured of the genetic quality of their adopted children. Indeed, it appears that acceptance of adoption 'would not have been possible without the 'guaranteed product' which the scientific nursing of new babies' homes was able to provide.'⁹

2.13 Dr Reid wrote that:

Agencies were convinced and attempted to convince the public that they could guarantee them a perfect child; that by coming to an agency adoptive parents could be sure that the child was without physical, emotional, or

5 S. Swain and R. Howe, *Single Mothers and their Children*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, pp 138, 140, 188.

6 Ida R. Parker, *Fit and Proper?: A Study of Legal Adoption in Massachusetts*, Church Home Society, Boston, 1927, pp 19–20, 69.

7 Henry H. Goddard, 'Wanted: A Child to Adopt', *Survey* 27, 1911, p. 1006.

8 R.J. Reid, 'Principles, values and assumptions underlying adoption practice,' *Social Work*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1957, p. 24.

9 S. Swain and R. Howe, *Single Mothers and their Children*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, p. 132.

mental defect; that his heredity was sound and adopting a child was a far less risky procedure than having one normally.¹⁰

2.14 However, despite 'quality assurances' there still remained some resistance to the idea of adopting children born to single mothers. A. H. Stoneman wrote in 1926:

By far the greatest problems and dangers connected with adoptions centre around illegitimacy. The large proportion of adopted children always has been and still is of illegitimate birth. Ignorance of essential facts is the great peril in most adoptions of illegitimate children. The children are born in mystery and disposed of permanently while still too young to show signs of future capacity.¹¹

2.15 Following World War II, society changed substantially. There were many more widows and single mothers and infertility rates dramatically increased. This new social landscape significantly influenced societal attitudes towards the poor and destitute. Children from impoverished backgrounds were no longer regarded as possessing a 'poor genetic background' and adoption was favoured over institutionalisation. Adoption numbers spiked during the post-war years, particularly during the 1950s and 1960s.

Post-war period: clean break theory

2.16 Following the atrocities of World War II, eugenics fell out of favour. The preoccupation with genetics was abandoned, and a greater focus was placed on the environmental and behavioural aspects of family life and the raising of children. This shift in focus was developed in part from the scholarship of Sigmund and Anna Freud. Freudian developmental theory encouraged adoptions and argued for the early separation of mothers from their babies. This philosophy has come to be known as the 'clean break' or 'blank slate theory', and represents a significant departure from earlier eugenic practices of 'scientifically' nursing babies for at least the first year of their lives.¹²

2.17 Developmental psychologists premised their beliefs on the long-held notion that a child is a 'blank slate' as a newborn. They argued that the personality and intelligence of an individual is determined by environment, not genetics. The prevailing theories advocated that the psychological and financial qualifications of a

10 R.J. Reid, 'Principles, values and assumptions underlying adoption practice,' *Social Work*, vol. 2, no. 1 (1957), p. 25.

11 A. H. Stoneman, 'Adoption of Illegitimate Children: The Peril of Ignorance,' *Child Welfare League of America Bulletin*, vol. 5 (February 1926), p. 8.

12 However, the influence of eugenics prevailed to some extent into the 1950s. This was seen most strongly in the resistance to adopting 'mixed-race' children and the brutality experienced by the Stolen Generation.

married couple were superior to those of single mothers and impoverished families.¹³ Therefore, placing the child in an adoptive home within the earliest possible timeframe was the primary way of safe-guarding the welfare of the child.¹⁴

2.18 In the post-war era, white married couples with secure incomes represented the ideal family unit and were regarded as more or less the only ones capable of providing appropriate levels of care for children.¹⁵ Should a family not conform to the ideal, institutionalisation was believed to have been the most beneficial solution:

The post war period was an era in which the institutionalisation of children in orphanages, foster care and adopted families was believed to benefit both the children and the community in which they lived...Should a mother fall outside of the norm because of poverty, skin colour or single parenthood, then society saw her as unfit and her children as neglected. She was not helped to keep them [her children] nor indeed was it believed that the members of her extended family were appropriate carers.¹⁶

2.19 Developmental and behavioural ideas after World War II had an immense impact on the institutionalisation and adoption practices of the time. Families and single mothers became particularly vulnerable to the 'well-meaning' philosophies of psychologists, almoners and social workers:

Children's requirements were categorised as an all-round mix of physical, mental, social and emotional needs, and despite contemporary maternal deprivation theories, the desire for a neglected child to be with her mother was overridden should her environment be perceived as inadequate. So keen were welfare officers to use their model of the two-parented white suburban home that they removed children because they were half-caste or illegitimate, because there was little food in the cupboard or because not all the children in the family had the same father-first to an institution in the early post-war years and later to another family home. If a child's living conditions were less than perfect, it was believed that she or he was better

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- 13 There were numerous articles discussing the increased incidents of babies being surrendered by families who could not afford to buy a house, cf. 'Housing crisis "Forces Adoptions"', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 August 1951, p. 3; "'No houses, so they sell their babies," she says', *The Argus*, 27 August 1951, p. 1. These theories have collectively become known as 'family romances'.
- 14 Ironically, the same theories held that infertility signalled, among other characteristics, neurosis. 'Sigmund Freud (1856–1939)', *The Adoption History Project*, University of Oregon, available online at: <http://pages.uoregon.edu/adoption/people/SigmundFreud.htm> (accessed 10 September 2011).
- 15 K. Inglis, *Living Mistakes: Mothers Who Consented to Adoption*, Allen & Unwin, North Sydney, 1984, pp 6–9.
- 16 C. Jones, 'Adoption—a study of post-war child removal in New South Wales', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, vol. 86, no. 1 (2000), p. 51. For more information on statistics cf. *A Report Prepared for the Board of Directors by the Department of Social Work, the University of Sydney*, Sydney 1961, Burnside Presbyterian Homes for Children Archives, Report no. 2, BRC1/145, Appendix I, p. 2.

off with adopted or foster parents, for at least then they could be socialised into the proper ways of morality and hygiene.¹⁷

2.20 According to Inglis, single mothers were the most affected:

During the 1960s most children made available for adoption were the children of unmarried mothers. A harshly punitive atmosphere surrounded her, in contrast to the social approval adoptive parents were more likely to gain. They were generally seen to be acting in an altruistic or charitable way in taking on a child often seen as flawed in some intrinsic way by the 'irregular' nature of its conception and birth.¹⁸

2.21 Collectively, attitudes during the 1950s and 1960s towards adoptions, young single mothers and impoverished families indicate a general intolerance of individuals and families who did not fit the idealised family unit.¹⁹ This intolerance appears to have coalesced with a general entitlement mentality advocating the 'right' of all legitimate couples to have children. This powerful mix of intolerance and sense of entitlement appears to have partly manifested itself in the adoption practices of the era, encapsulated by the belief that if children were born to people of 'low moral standard' or poverty, they should be adopted by infertile couples of better social standing so as to ensure the best interests of the child were being looked after.²⁰

2.22 Attitudes towards the children of unmarried mothers changed significantly following the decline of eugenics thinking. The child was no longer the subject of disdain; indeed, surrendered babies from all backgrounds, with the exception of mix-race children and children with a disability,²¹ were in demand across Australia. According to newspaper and magazine articles of the day, demand for babies far outstripped the number being surrendered. Scorn and disdain were re-directed towards the unmarried mother.²² This appears to have prominent in some areas of the medical

17 C. Jones, 'Adoption—a study of post-war child removal in New South Wales', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, vol. 86, no. 1, 2000, p. 51.

18 K. Inglis, *Living Mistakes: Mothers Who Consented to Adoption*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1984, p. 4.

19 For a definition of this idealised family, cf. R.L. Harris, 'Medical Aspects of Adoption', *Proceedings of a Seminar held on Friday, 3rd February, 1967*, Department of Child Welfare and Social Welfare, Sydney, p. 15. For tensions between the ideal family unit and the actual structure of family, cf. C.V. Baldock, *Australia and Social Change Theory*, Novack Publishing, Sydney, 1978, pp 108–110.

20 'Should unwed mother give up her child' in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 July 1953, p. 9; 'Vote on Baby Adoption' in *The Sun Herald*, 29 November 1953, p. 9. On the importance of a good environment, see also D.F. Lawson, 'The Anxieties of Pregnancy', *The Medical Journal of Australia*, vol. 2, no. 5, 1960, p. 166.

21 'Babies for the Brave', *Western Mail*, 25 November 1954, pp 4–5. See also various articles on this topic in *Australian Journal of Social Work*, vol. 20, no. 1: Aspects of Adoption, 1967, pp 16–24.

22 S. Swain and R. Howe, *Single Mothers and their Children*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, p. 140.

profession. In summarising general attitudes towards unmarried mothers, a 1973 journal article written by Dr. Ferry Grunseit, from the Children's Department at the Prince of Wales Hospital in Sydney, wrote:

In New South Wales most unmarried mothers... are more likely to be poor, undernourished and of low intelligence, if not actually retarded.²³

2.23 This kind of attitude was exhibited by other medical professionals, such as Dr Donald Lawson of the Royal Women's Hospital, Melbourne. Dr Lawson remarked during an address in 1959 that:

The prospect of the unmarried girl or of her family adequately caring for a child and giving it a normal environment and upbringing is so small that I believe for practical purposes it can be ignored. I believe that in all such cases the obstetrician should urge that the child be adopted...The last thing that the obstetrician might concern himself with is the law in regard to adoption.²⁴

2.24 However, there appears to have been a mismatch between the disdain felt towards single mothers and the high demand for their relinquished babies. In a rare show of support, a reader wrote to *The Australian Women's Weekly* stating her admiration for unmarried mothers whose babies are surrendered for adoption, because adopted children brought happiness to the lives of childless couples.²⁵

2.25 With these considerations in mind the purpose of adoptions appeared to have shifted. According to Jones and Swain:

Adoption was devised as a solution to the growing number of ex-nuptial children in institutional care and...it was gradually accepted as an answer to the problem of protecting the child and punishing the unfit mother.²⁶

Post-war period: adoption practices

2.26 Adoption practices in the USA, UK and Australia were fundamentally premised upon the work of the eminent British psychologist, psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, John Bowlby, who himself was deeply influenced by the work of

23 F. Grunseit, 'The adoption of infants and the role of an adoption advisory clinic in New South Wales', *The Medical Journal of Australia*, vol. 1 (1973), p. 854.

24 Dr Lawson gave the 1959 R.D. Fetherston Memorial Lecture entitled, 'Why be morbid? Paths of progress in the control of obstetric infection, 1931 to 1960'. *Medical Journal of Australia*, vol. II, No. 5 (1960), pp 165–166.

25 'Letters from our readers: Unmarried mothers', *The Australian Women's Weekly*, October 1955, p. 10.

26 C. Jones, 'Adoption—a study of post-war child removal in New South Wales', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, vol. 86, no. 1, 2000, p. 51 and S. Swain, 'Adoption: Was it Ever Thus?' in Phillip and Shurlee Swain (eds), *To Search for Self: the experience of access to adoption information*, Federation Press, Sydney, 1992, p. 2.

Freud.²⁷ Bowlby's pioneering work on 'attachment theory' (with the help of Mary Ainsworth) paved the way for policies and attitudes that permitted the enforced early separation of mothers from their newborns.

2.27 The World Health Organization (WHO) commissioned Bowlby to prepare a report, entitled *Maternal Care and Mental Health*, which WHO then used in the formulation of its key adoption and mental health policies.²⁸ The report was translated into 14 different languages, with the English paperback edition selling 400 000 copies.²⁹ In his report, Bowlby wrote that:

Nothing is more tragic than good adoptive parents who accept for adoption a child whose early experiences have led to disturbed personality development which nothing they can now do will rectify. Very early adoption is thus clearly in the interests also of the adoptive parents. Moreover, the nearer to birth that they have had him the more will they feel the baby to be their own and the easier will it be for them to identify themselves with his personality. Favourable relationships will then have the best chance to develop.³⁰

2.28 The beliefs advocated by Bowlby and his predecessors in relation to character and personality development resulted in the clean break approach of many adoption agencies in Australia. In a 1947 article, a correspondent for the Cairns Post reassured its readers that '[s]tate controlled adoption in Queensland is a clean break,'³¹ while an article in the *Australian Women's Weekly* considered it reassuring that if a mother was in an institution that mandated breast-feeding, she would only see her baby for a little while; and if a mother was in an institution which had bottle feeding, she never saw her baby at all.³²

2.29 Evidence suggests that by 1954, community pressure on single mothers to surrender their babies was intense. An article in *The Argus* newspaper highlighted this pressure, stating that in many cases, the young mother may have been subjected to

27 For more information on John Bowlby and his influence on adoption practices, cf. R. Bowlby and P. King, *Fifty Years of Attachment Theory: Recollections of Donald Winnicott and John Bowlby*, Karnac Books, London, 2004; I. Bretherton, 'The Origins of Attachment Theory: John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth', *Developmental Psychology*, vol. 28, no. 5 (1992), pp 759–775.

28 J. Bowlby, *Maternal Care and Mental Health: a report prepared on behalf of the World Health Organization as a contribution to the United Nations programme for the welfare of homeless children*, World Health Organization, Geneva, 1952.

29 I. Bretherton, 'The Origins of Attachment Theory: John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth', *Developmental Psychology*, vol. 28, no. 5 (1992), p 761.

30 J. Bowlby, *Maternal Care and Mental Health: a report prepared on behalf of the World Health Organization as a contribution to the United Nations programme for the welfare of homeless children*, World Health Organization, Geneva, 1952, p. 69.

31 'Brisbane Notes', *Cairns Post*, 2 October 1947, p. 7.

32 'Our legitimisation laws need drastic revision: innocent babies deserve a better chance in life', *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 8 March 1947, pp 19–21.

threats and bribes to surrender her baby and left with no opportunity to discuss her feelings with an objective and disinterested professional.³³

2.30 In a paper presented in 1965 to the Ninth National Conference of the Australian Association of Social Workers, Mary Lewis, a social worker, outlined best practice in the relinquishment of babies.³⁴ Ms Lewis' comments indicate that the official 'best practice' approach enshrined in legislation appeared to have been in direct conflict with common practices in many agencies:

[M]any agencies...have punitive, illegal and harmful rules regarding the unmarried mother's inalienable right to physical contact with her child...
[S]ome agencies refuse to allow the unmarried mother to see her child, nor do they tell her the child's sex.³⁵

2.31 The committee examines potentially unethical or illegal actions towards unmarried women in Chapter 9.

2.32 The social attitudes in favour of adoption meant that by the 1950s, there were more couples wishing to adopt a child than mothers wishing to relinquish their child. During the early 1950s, prospective adoptive parents waited for up to six months to adopt a baby girl and a couple of months for a baby boy.³⁶ By the early 1960s, however, 'waiting times' had grown significantly. Waiting times varied amongst the states, and many had separate 'waiting lists' for Catholic and Protestant parents. During the uniform law process of the early 1960s (discussed in Chapter 6), data was collected from the states on the status of waiting lists and waiting times. The NSW data is presented below for illustrative purposes.

33 'Hundreds of parents are asking... "Is our baby safe?"', *The Argus*, 15 May 1964, p. 11.

34 "'People are different' (Social Work and Social Norms)' *Australian Association of Social Workers Ninth National Conference Proceedings*, Adelaide, August 1965, p. 112. Best practice was again highlighted by Sister Mary Borromeo in 'The Natural Parents', *Australian Journal of Social Work*, vol. 20, no. 1: Aspects of Adoption, 1967, p. 13.

35 "'People are different' (Social Work and Social Norms)' *Australian Association of Social Workers Ninth National Conference Proceedings*, Adelaide, August 1965, p. 112.

36 S. Gowrie-Smith, 'Guidelines for a happy adoption', *National Times*, 12–17 April 1971.

Figure 2.1—NSW Waiting Times for Adoption at June 1961³⁷

Approximate waiting times	Boys	Girls
Protestant	3 years	4.5 years
Roman Catholic	6–9 months	14–20 months
Approved applicants to the Department	for Boys	for Girls
Protestant	367	392
Roman Catholic	58	76
Applicants awaiting approval	for Boys	for Girls
Protestant	647	813
Roman Catholic	127	144

2.33 It is clear from the NSW example above that adoption was relatively widespread in the early 1960s. Although adoption was regarded as acceptable, there were many discontented groups lobbying the government for fairer legislation. The committee will examine the social attitudes expressed during the uniform law process of the 1960s in Chapter 7. In Chapter 8, the committee will address the shifting attitudes towards single mothers and in support of open adoptions.

2.34 In this inquiry, the committee received compelling and distressing evidence from parents who bore the brunt of the practices and prejudices of the post-war period. They experienced the punitive attitudes directed toward unmarried mothers, and the result for many was the loss of a baby whom they had wished to keep. Their experiences, and those of other families members affected by the experience (particularly the children who were adopted), are the subject of the next two chapters.

37 NAA, A432 1961/2241 Part 1, *Uniform Adoption Legislation—Material prepared by States*, letter from NSW Social Welfare Under Secretary Thomas to AGD Secretary Yuill, 9 June 1961, folio pp 42–43, digital pp 27–28.