

Secrecy within adoptive families and its impact on adult adoptees

NOLA PASSMORE, JUDY FEENEY AND ALEX FOULSTONE

For most of the twentieth century, Australian adoptions occurred within a closed system whereby adoption records were sealed and kept secret (Swain, 1992). The original birth certificate was amended so that it contained the adoptive parents' names (Brodzinsky, 2005) and there was a general belief that adoption should be just "like building a family biologically" (Hartman, 1993, p. 87). Many countries have since moved to various kinds of open adoption policies (Brodzinsky, 2005). Since legislative changes in Australia in the early 1990s, adoptees and birthmothers have been able to access identifying information once the adoptee reaches 18 years of age. For adoptions that occurred prior to these changes, information can still be accessed when the adoptee turns 18, though legislation in some states also allows either party to lodge a veto against the release of such information. As a result, some adoptees are still denied access to their own identity and background, thus continuing the legacy of secrecy from the closed era.

Brodzinsky (2005) has argued that it may not be whether the adoption took place in a closed or open system that is most important for adoptees' wellbeing, but rather the extent to which adoptive parents are open with their children regardless of how little or how much information they have available to them. A model of family adoption communication was developed by Wrobel, Kohler, Grotevant, and McRoy (2003) (the Family Adoption Communication Model: FAC) that outlines the different types of disclosure decisions that adoptive parents must make at various stages of their child's development.

While this model is useful in describing different types of decisions regarding the disclosure or withholding of information, it does not look more specifically at the actual impact that openness or secrecy can have on the adoptee. As secrecy can undermine trust and intimacy within the adoptive family (Schooler & Norris, 2002), we were interested in further exploring the ways in which openness or secrecy within the adoptive family could impact on the lives of adults who had been adopted as children.

For most of the twentieth century, Australian adoptions occurred within a closed system whereby adoption records were sealed and kept secret.

Our study

As part of a larger study, 144 adult adoptees completed a survey that included a number of background items and standardised questionnaires. Of most relevance to this article was an item that tapped the adoptive family's attitude towards discussing the topic of adoption, with responses ranging from open and honest discussion through to secrecy. Attachment and parental bonding were also assessed. All participants were born in Australia, had an Anglo-Australian background, and were adopted by non-relatives within two years of birth. At the time of the survey, they ranged in age from 18 to 66, with a mean age of 39.2 years. Most were female (76.1%), married or cohabiting (62%), and had completed some education after high school (79%). Approximately six months later, 138 of the original participants again completed the attachment measure, but also completed various interpersonal relationship measures. Fifty-seven of these participants were later interviewed in more depth regarding their interpersonal relationships and their adoption, search, and reunion experiences.

Our findings

Adoptees who had experienced greater secrecy within their adoptive families felt less emotionally close to their adoptive parents, perceived their adoptive parents as less caring and more controlling, and experienced greater loneliness within the family context. Secrecy within the adoptive family was also associated with general relationship variables such as social loneliness, risk in intimacy (i.e., the perceived risk of close relationships), and both anxious and avoidant attachment; though not associated with specific measures of romantic relationships such as romantic loneliness, trust in close relationships, relationship satisfaction or commitment.

Our interview data shed further light on some specific ways in which openness or secrecy within adoptive families affected the adoptees throughout their lives. Openness within adoptive families helped adoptees with (a) the resolution of adoption-related issues such as identity and belonging, (b) search and reunion experiences, and (c) relationships with others. For example, some participants noted that their adoptive parents' example of openness about the adoption had provided a good role model for their own interpersonal relationships. Conversely, secrecy and/or lies or misinformation on the part of the adoptive parents impacted negatively on adoptees in terms of their (a) identity, search, and reunion experiences; (b) relationship with their adoptive parents, and (c) relationships with other people. By making adoption a taboo topic, some adoptive parents denied their children information about their backgrounds. Such secrecy also led some adoptees to subsequently keep their own search and/or reunion a secret from their adoptive parents.

Adoptees who found out about their adoption later in life were especially likely to feel a sense of betrayal. For some, this lack of trust transferred to other relationships outside the family, though at least one participant noted that "the total cone of silence" surrounding her adoption had actually prompted her to be even more open in her own relationships, perhaps too open at times.

Implications for counselling

Adoptees who experienced secrecy and/or lies or misinformation in their adoptive families may need assistance in dealing with issues of trust and betrayal. In some cases, it may be possible to work with adoptees and their adoptive parents to rebuild supportive family ties. It is important for counsellors to help adoptees work through the negative impacts of the secrecy, while also remembering the issues that led to the withholding of information in the first place. In some cases, adoptive parents may have lied or maintained secrets as a means of keeping control, protecting themselves or their children, or hiding from the shame of infertility (Schooler & Norris, 2002). However, Schooler and Norris also note that "it was not unusual for agencies themselves to edit or even fabricate information that was told to the adoptive parents at the time of the adoption" (p. 5), so that they have also been betrayed.

Individual counselling may also assist adoptees in dealing with the ongoing negative impact of secrecy in their lives. Forgiveness of adoptive parents, birthparents, or "the system" may be a necessary step in helping the person move on (see forgiveness interventions described in Ferch, 1998 and Baskin & Enright, 2004). Those who find that trust issues with their adoptive parents have transferred into other adult relationships, such as romantic attachments, may also benefit from relationships counselling or couples therapy. For example, interventions based on attachment theory may be appropriate for couples experiencing trust issues (see Johnson & Whiffen, 2003).

Practitioners working with families who have younger adopted children may find Wrobel et al.'s (2003) FAC Model useful. This model provides a step-by-step process that explains the types of decisions adoptive parents make about disclosure at different stages of the child's development. At any stage, parents can share all known information while actively seeking more, share available information but without actively seeking more, share some information but not all, or withhold whatever information they know. The counsellor could help the adoptive parents clarify the implications of disclosing or withholding information at different stages.

As noted earlier, adoptees and birthmothers can now obtain identifying information once the adoptee turns 18. For those adoptions that occurred before the introduction of this legislation in the early 1990s, however, some state legislation still enables either party to place a veto on the release of such information. For those who search only to find that a veto has been lodged, the secrecy continues. Without access to the birthmother's information, the adoptee is usually cut off from information about the birthfather as well. The counsellor needs to be aware of the emotional minefield this can create. While adoptees may be devastated to find their information blocked, the birthmother's possible motives must also be understood. For example, at the time of many of these adoptions (i.e., 1940s to early 1970s), conceiving a child out of wedlock was seen as a shameful thing and unmarried mothers did not have as much support as they do today. When adoption consents were signed, birthmothers were assured that the information would never be revealed. In some cases, they have gone on to marry and have other children without telling their other family members about the relinquished child. Thus, it is understandable that some birthmothers would be reluctant or even fearful at the thought of their information being released. If adoptees are aware of such issues, it does not take away the desire to know more about their backgrounds or the hurt and anger at not being able to obtain their original birth certificates or other identifying information. However, it may help them to have a better understanding of the reasons behind such decisions.

Finally, there are a number of excellent adoption support groups and post adoption counselling services that can assist adoptees, adoptive parents, and birthparents. We have noted a few of the main ones below, but there are also many others. Please see the extra links provided on these web sites. As openness becomes more and more a part of adoption policy, hopefully we can continue to reverse the negative effects of the secrets of the past and move towards a better future for all members of the adoption triangle.

Adoption resources

Adoption Research and Counselling Service (ARCS) Inc: www.adoptionwa.org.au/default.asp
Jigsaw Queensland: <http://members.ozemail.com.au/~jigsaw>
Post Adoption Resource Centre (PARC): www.bensoc.org.au/parc

Contact details

A longer version of this article was presented at the APS Psychology of Relationships Interest Group 6th Annual Conference in Melbourne, 2006. A copy of that article can be obtained from Dr Nola Passmore, Psychology Department, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba QLD 4350 or via email on nolapass@usq.edu.au

References

- Baskin, T. W., & Enright, R. D. (2004). Intervention studies on forgiveness: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 82*, 79–90.
- Brodzinsky, D. M. (2005). Reconceptualizing openness in adoption: Implications for theory, research, and practice. In D. M. Brodzinsky & J. Palacios (Eds.), *Psychological issues in adoption: Research and practice* (pp. 145–166). Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Ferch, S. R. (1998). Intentional forgiving as a counseling intervention. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 76*, 261–270.
- Hartman, A. (1993). Secrecy in adoption. In E. Imber-Black (Ed.), *Secrets in families and family therapy* (pp. 86–105). New York: W. W. Norton.
- Johnson, S. M., & Whiffen, V. E. (Eds.). (2003). *Attachment processes in couple and family therapy*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Schooler, J. E., & Norris, B. L. (2002). Secrecy in adoption and the high cost it required. In J. E. Schooler & B. L. Norris (Eds.), *Journeys after adoption: Understanding lifelong issues* (pp. 3–15). Westport, CT: Bergin & Harvey.
- Swain, S. (1992). Adoption: Was it ever thus? In P. & S. Swain (Eds.), *To search for self: The experience of access to adoption information* (pp. 2–16). Annandale, NSW: Federation Press.
- Wrobel, G. M., Kohler, J. K., Grotevant, H. D., & McRoy, R. G. (2003). The Family Adoption Communication (FAC) Model: Identifying pathways of adoption-related communication. *Adoption Quarterly, 7*, 53–84.

Dr Nola Passmore is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Southern Queensland. **Associate Professor Judy Feeney**, formerly of the University of Queensland, is a private research consultant. **Alex Foulstone** is a doctoral student at the University of Queensland.

The Family Relationship Services Program

Provided by the Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA).

The Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA) and the Australian Government Attorney-General's Department jointly fund over 100 organisations under the Family Relationship Services Program (FRSP) to provide family relationships services through approximately 350 outlets across Australia.

The FRSP aims to:

- enable children, young people and adults in all their diversity to develop and sustain safe, supportive and nurturing family relationships; and
- minimise the emotional, social and economic costs associated with disruption to family relationships.

FaCSIA has funded the establishment of the Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse (AFRC) in response to requests from the FRSP sector in order to:

- support community organisations and other professionals assist families by providing easy access to current knowledge, the latest research, data and models of best practice;
- assist in the achievement of the FRSP's strategic priorities; and
- inform on the implementation of the Australian Government's new family law system.