Adopted women become parents
A pilot study

Jeanette Conrick and Thea Brown

Becoming a parent and mother is 'the irreversible crossing of the boundary from being someone's (daughter) to becoming someone's mother' (Schmidt Neven 1996) and what we know of this transition for adopted women is still primarily anecdotal. Many women adopted during and after the 1970s in Victoria are still in the parenting life stage, and this paper describes the experiences of three of them. The women participated in qualitative, in-depth interviews that were part of a Master of Social Work research study

This article primarily takes a life course approach in eliciting themes of normative family experiences, delay of identity consolidation until the time of childbearing, the impact of search, reunion and divided loyalties, and the negotiation of multiple family systems (adoptive, in-law and birth). The management of these complex phenomena have demanded a high level of skill and effort by these women as they cope with their own emotional reactions, continue to be responsive mothers and assist their children and partners to negotiate new, extended, family relationships.

The study draws attention to and provides insight for practitioners in this hidden area of welfare and indicates the need for further research.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I wish to thank this study's three participants who gave so generously of their time and experiences, and my supervisor, Professor Thea Brown, for her encouragement and academic excellence.

Jeanette Conrick, B.Soc.Stud (Uni Syd), MSW (Monash Uni)
Senior Clinician
Royal Children's Hospital
Melbourne, Victoria
Email: jenny.conrick@rch.org.au

Professor Thea Brown, BA, Dip Soc Study (Uni Syd), PhD (Uni Melb)
Department of Social Work
Monash University
Melbourne, Victoria

Adoption is an ancient and global phenomenon which has fulfilled a variety of political and social purposes and has taken different forms throughout history. It has been a means of strengthening political alliances, planning for succession and continuance of a family line, rescuing children from poverty and providing a solution to the stigma of single parenthood. The rules and laws surrounding adoptive relationships have varied, reflecting cultural, societal and historical contexts, but what is agreed is that adoption is a life-long 'status' built around the complex processes of relinquishment and incorporation into the adopting family, and that it impacts on everyone in the adoption triangle across the life cycle (McGinn 2007; Reitz & Watson 1992).

In Victoria, as in the other Australian states, the adopted child becomes a member of a new family, assuming the same rights and privileges as a birth child, including the right of inheritance. The birth parents' legal rights and responsibilities are relinquished and an adoption order is made by the State County Court. Over 21,256 children have been adopted in this State since 1968 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2001). Many of them are still in the child rearing phase of their lives, but little is known of their experiences as parents, the impact of their adoption status at this time of their lives, or the emotional and social supports they found to be important.

This article reports on a Master of Social Work pilot study completed in 2009 that arose from the researcher's clinical work in the adoption field. It aims to increase the understanding of adoptees' experiences of mothering within an Australian and Victorian context by acknowledging:

> ...the way individuals make meaning of their experiences, and, in turn, the ways the broader social context impinges on those meanings, while retaining focus on the material and other limits of 'reality' (Braun & Clarke 2006).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Parenting has been described as a life stage that involves moving from being someone's child to becoming someone's parent (Schmidt Neven 1996). It is a time of re-evaluation and reconstruction of the image we have of ourselves, a time to hold our own aspirations, losses and projections, so as to clearly see, interpret and meet the needs of the infant (Bion 1965). It precipitates changes in an individual's social status

and role performance (Germain & Gitterman 1980) and involves negotiations around division of labour, economic arrangements, and decision-making processes.

Being a mother is a time when one's own childhood attachment style (Newman 2008), identity formation (Erikson 1968) and the quality of social networks (Duvall 1977) impact on the adjustment to the parenting life stage and contribute to a parenting style (Passmore, Feeney & Peterson 2005). In *Chasing Away the Shadows*, Zara Phillips (2004) writes:

> What I didn't expect is how ... (motherhood) has awakened parts of me that were long dormant or perhaps not even there to begin with. Mainly it has gotten me in touch with the most terrifying emotions I, as an adoptee, could ever experience: love, intimacy and the inevitable that will one day happen in some form or another, loss ... It seems that the birthing of my children was the birthing of my whole self (p.108).

Thinking about having children may raise issues for adopted people (Yellin 1993) and it is suggested that adopted women are more likely to delay child-bearing than the general population (Collishaw, Maughan & Pickles 1998). Reitz and Watson (1992), on the other hand, state that many adopted people:

> ... feel a great desire to have children due to a profound hunger to know a birth relative.

Hampton (1997), in her study of twenty adopted women, noted the importance of having a child as a way of healing their feelings of separateness as adoptees.

A significant New South Wales study conducted by Masso and Whitfield (2003) considered the relationships between adoption, pregnancy, birth and motherhood and 'how becoming a mother impacts on adopted women's views of adoption ...' The researchers sampled 190 adopted women, ranging in age from 21 to 76 years, who were at differing stages of the parenting continuum. They reported that for 56% of their sample, adoption was a factor in their decision to have children as was the need to feel a biological connection with someone, while 64% felt that since becoming a mother, they had a stronger empathy for their birth mother. Forty per cent (40%) experienced fears of losing or being separated from their baby (Masso & Whitfield 2003).

Central to adoption discourse is the notion of identity formation (Erikson 1968), highlighting the complexity of adoptive identity, the effects of separation and secrecy (Lifton 1995; Verrier 1991) and the sense of difference often reported to be experienced by adoptees. Harold Grotevant and his colleagues at the University of Minnesota note that the development of adoptive identity can be placed on a 'continuum of *salience* of adoption' (Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler & Lash Esau 2007, p.80). It is an 'iterative and integrative process rather than a linear one' that has intrapsychic, relational, societal and historical determinants (Grotevant et al. 2007, p.80). Associated with identity is adoptee mental health. Brinich (1990) speaks about adoptees being over-represented in the samples of psychiatric patients in Britain, and this is echoed by Brodzinsky and Schechter (1998) in the United States. Feder (1974) and Goodwach (2003) suggest the likelihood of adoptees encountering emotional difficulties due to their experiences of loss and separation. There does not appear to be specific literature that considers the incidence of Post Natal Depression (PND) with mothers who are adopted, and little is written about the social support networks of adoptees, or how they operate in the life of the adoptee and impact on the formation of their families of procreation.

... it is suggested that adopted women are more likely to delay child-bearing than the general population.

THE STUDY

This study has sought to obtain rich data using a case-focused approach (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott & Davidson 2002). Following University ethics approval, research participants were recruited through a poster advertisement at the 9th Australian Conference on Adoption held in Sydney in September 2008. Prior to interview, each woman was provided with information describing the study, and asked to complete a demographic questionnaire. In-depth, individual interviews were conducted using a series of questions to prompt discussion; each interview was recorded, then manually transcribed by the researcher. Data was coded and themes (both descriptive and interpretive) were generated using inductive analysis. A copy of each transcript was provided to participants for comment or amendment, and a summary of thematic areas was provided to them at the end of the study.

Areas that were explored with participants during the interview included:

- a brief examination of each participant's early years and their adoption experiences;
- the decision, expectations, hopes and fears about becoming a mother;
- pregnancy and birth history;
- relationships with their children;
- relationships with partners, adoptive family members and significant others during this time of parenting;

- searching and reunion; and
- relationships with birth family.

STUDY FINDINGS

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

All participants were over 40 years of age at the time of this study and had been infants under eight weeks of age at the time of their non-relative, local adoption. All study participants grew up in families that had a structure of two parents, extended adopted family and adopted siblings. One participant's adoptive mother had died when she was 3 years of age, and she was subsequently parented by an adoptive step-mother. All three participants had other adopted siblings, and one participant also grew up in a household with two other biological siblings. All had maintained long-term marital relationships as well as friendships from their childhoods.

Two participants had completed Year 12 High School and all had subsequently completed vocationally-oriented training. Two participants had changed career direction in the two years prior to interview, and the third was in the process of changing her career direction. All had worked in 'caring professions' and all participants had held employment positions over long periods of time. All participants stated that they held religious or spiritual beliefs. Two participants had biological children ranging from primary school age through adolescence to early adulthood. One participant had an adopted pre-school child. The children of the participants comprised four females and two males.

All participants had been adopted within a 'closed' system with little information provided at the time of their adoption about their birth family and with no opportunity to obtain information until after 1989 with changes to the *Adoption Act 1984* (Vic). At the time of this study, each participant had obtained information about her adoption, two after marrying and having children and one prior to having children. All had searched and been involved in reunions with birth family while they were raising their children.

THEMES

The themes located in the data have been classified into four major and seven subsidiary thematic areas, as summarised in Table 1.

1. Participant perceptions of their own childhood history

1.1 Normative developmental experience

Functionally, all participants appeared to have grown up in families that were within the mainstream of society and were able to successfully complete parenting tasks for their children. No one had had contact with institutional services such as police or child protection, and each woman reported having a generally nurturing adoption experience that had allowed the development of 'secure enough' attachment relationships and had supported them in achieving life stage tasks, including that of parenting. Participant 3 commented that she '... had a very fortunate upbringing ... an amazing family'. This is what would be hoped for from the successful replacement of family structures as outlined by Duvall (1977) and Germain and Gitterman (1980). It is unclear how these adoption outcomes compare with the wider adoption population experience of 'successful' adoptions, due to the paucity of research material.

1.2 Formation of identity

Identity development was complicated for the research participants. Each knew of her adoption status throughout childhood and adolescence but had no information about her birth family. While they felt part of their adoptive family, each participant expressed feelings of difference to this family and those around them.

> There was always an undercurrent of being different ... umm ... not quite belonging ... with extended family, not with Mum and Dad, with cousins, with extended family I felt that ... (and) not just in the family, but with friendships (Participant 2).

Childhood anxiety was identified by two participants. This is a common theme that is discussed in adoption literature (Lifton 1995; Reitz & Watson 1992; Verrier 1991). Neither participant had related these experiences to their adoption until adulthood: one following a 'break down' and the other following diagnosis and treatment for a mild anxiety disorder. Both women found abandonment and loss issues associated with their adoption to be components of their emotional situations.

> I look back at my childhood and remember always feeling afraid and scared. Scared that Mum would die. I had nightmares about that .... I could never go on school trips ... I would be vomiting by the time we got there ... possibly it was because of these dreams of Mum. That Mum would die (tears) (Participant 2).

Table 1: Summary of research themes

Major themes	*Sub-themes*
Participant perceptions of their own childhood history	Normative developmental experience Formation of identity Divided loyalties
Participant perceptions of family of procreation	Marital relationships Childbirth and parenting Emotional health and self esteem
Search and reunion	Relationships with adoptive family and birth family
Contexts (latent)	

Another commented:

> I look back at some of my relationships and think that I was a little bit *needier* than some of my friends. [I] placed more emphasis on things that others didn't. I used to feel let down by people and a little bit sensitive. But I think those are rejection issues and talking to my close friend [who is also adopted] ... she said that she feels the same way. She always had to prove things (Participant 3).

All participants had questions about the circumstances of their relinquishment and their birth families, which were unable to be answered until they were legislatively able to obtain information as adults. This inability for childhood thoughts and questions to be tested against reality and resolved during their primary and adolescent years appeared to delay the ego identity process identified by Erikson (1968) until their childbearing life phase.

> Not knowing your background, that's one of the biggest things. Your history, your medical history, anything like that ... you know (voice quiver, pause) probably later on in life ... you know alcoholism, schizophrenia and stuff like that (Participant 1).

> There was always ... so many questions ... did you ever remember me on my birthday, why did you give me up for adoption, would I have had a better life if I had been your daughter rather than somebody else's? (Participant 2)

These experiences of incomplete information, unreconciled ideas, questions, emotions and reverie about what 'might have been', the researcher has termed 'adoption dissonance'.[1]

1.3. Divided loyalties

Divided loyalties were experienced by each participant at different points in their lives: as children when they were curious about their birth family (yet may not have spoken about these matters) and, most notably, at the time of searching and reunion.

Goodwach (2003, p.64) believes that this is a 'recurrent theme for adoptees whilst they are trying to understand their family and how they feel about them.'

> It was very difficult to tell them [adoptive parents] that I wanted to search. I remember they [adoptive parents] were over for the weekend and I pussy footed around ... I starting to tell them and not tell them and I couldn't tell them. When they left I wrote them a letter and posted it. They rang the next night, said don't be silly, it's great ... no they have always been very, very good (Participant 2).

2. Participant perceptions of their family of procreation

2.1 Marital relationship

Each participant has formed a strong and enduring marital partnership and all reported that their partners knew of their adoption prior to marriage.

Two participants had discussed having children with their partners prior to marriage and had considered the options of having biological children, adopted children, or life without children. They reported feeling prepared for each of these possibilities, and one participant remarked that she had always wanted to adopt a child. This is unlike the Masso and Whitfield study (2003), in which it was found that 53% of their study participants had the need to feel a biological connection with their child or to begin their genetic line. This thematic outcome might differ with a larger study.

All reported bonding well with each of their children and spoke warmly of them as individuals ...

2.2 Childbirth and parenting

Childbirth elicited a variety of responses. One participant reported inviting her adoptive mother to the birth of her first child and then reneging, another reported a sense of separation from her child shortly after delivery, and a third reported being fearful that her child might be deformed.

Each participant agreed that becoming a mother had brought change.

> Changes in the household, changes in your work and with your husband. Everything changes (Participant 2).

All reported bonding well with each of their children and spoke warmly of them as individuals, although one participant felt that she had initially been 'all over the place' with her first child and was concerned that she had passed on her anxiety to her daughter. Each of the women spoke in a normative fashion about her parental hopes and aspirations for her children, about the pleasure as well as the challenges that they experienced with them.

> We've had a few things happen ... nothing out of the norm. You speak to other parents and you know that you are not the only one who's feeling it. It's the stage they are all going through

[1] This term refers to a state of ongoing emotional discomfort or disequilibrium that is adoption related. It is associated with a sense of difference to family and peers, unanswered questions about birth parents, birth family and relinquishment circumstances and underlying 'retrospective' grief. This may impinge on an adoptee's identity formation, self esteem and life satisfaction. This concept is based on Leon Festinger's (1952) notion of cognitive dissonance and the western notion of musical dissonance, i.e. a quality of sound that seems 'unstable', and has an aural 'need' to 'resolve' to a 'stable' consonance (Wikipaedia).

> and talking to other people is the best thing, you actually know that you are not the only one. That's nice to know, we are not abnormal (Participant 1).

Each participant appeared to draw on the usual resources available during early parenting years, ranging from using her adoptive mother's parenting style as a base line for her own parenting style (although one felt that something was missing here), to drawing on the supports that adoptive and marriage networks offered.

> I did with my children as she [adoptive mother] did with me ... the learned stuff ... but there was a hole (Participant 2).

> I was quite erratic with (pause) my eldest child (pause) ... anxious. He [adoptive father] did have a very calming influence on me. Often on his way home from work he would call in, pretending to buy a newspaper or go to the butchers ... and he'd come and be with me for a while each night. That was when I had my second child. He's beautiful ... wonderful people ... exceptional. I know I could never have had that with my birth mother's family (Participant 2).

While another participant's adoptive family lives in another country, the supportive bonds appear strong. Her adoptive mother visits four times each year and they email and telephone regularly.

Participants' parenting skills appear to have developed over time and adjusted to each child, and the commitment of all participants to their children and family was very high, with parenting reported as a shared responsibility with their partners.

2.3 Emotional health and self esteem

For two participants, anxiety and 'break down' were emotional issues that were wrestled with during these mothering years and one reported having post natal depression. One participant undertook counselling prior to the arrival of her children and discovered that feelings of abandonment associated with her adoption were contributors to her emotional vulnerability at that time. Another participant reported having done a lot of 'self help' work in association with a mentor (also an adopted person) and later began taking medication prescribed by her GP.

Each participant reported feeling more whole, more at peace within herself at this time of her life. Having received answers to long-held questions, there appears to be more congruence between the childhood wonderings and their adult situation. They appear to have furthered their identity integration or, in Erikson's (1968) terms, ego integrity.

> Very comfortable, very content, I don't say yes to everyone, I don't feel I have to please them that much now. That has been a big learning (Participant 2).

3. Search and reunion

Searching and reunion undertaken by each participant were not only legally defined processes, but they were emotional journeys that had far-reaching effects on their adult lives. While two participants had done some 'searching' prior to their marriages, all participants searched while with their partners and, for two participants, following the birth of their children. All had obtained information about their birth families and felt that many questions had been answered. One participant found that her birth mother had died and she later made contact with maternal relatives.

Reunion with birth mothers or birth family meant making room for additional sets of social relationships and decisions about how their birth family fitted with the adoptees' views of what is good for themselves and their created families. Two women spoke of feeling divided loyalties around searching. Each expressed a sense of obligation to maintain a level of contact with birth family, because of the searching they had initiated. However, participants were sensitised to any perceived threat that the contacts might bring to their family of procreation.

Each participant reported feeling more whole, more at peace within herself at this time of her life.

Each participant's experience of search and reunion appears to have led to a renegotiation of existing family relationships, involving the strengthening and clarifying of the relationship between themselves and their adoptive family. Masso and Whitfield's (2003) finding that 50% of the women in their study felt closer to their adoptive mothers since becoming mothers themselves, may not be the same phenomena, depending on the timing of the search and whether the adoption was closed or open.

The narratives also touch on the adoptive parents' reactions to their daughters' search and reunion. In one situation, the adoptive parents were pleased and supportive; another did not appear to understand her daughter's need to search, while a third later apologised to her daughter for her 'jealousy' at the time of reunion. The researcher has been unable to determine how common these adoptive parent themes are at this life stage as no literature has been found that allude to them.

4. Contexts

Underpinning participants' narratives, and each of the themes discussed, are the historical and social contexts in which closed adoptions occurred. All participants in this study were adopted in the late 1960s and early 1970s when

single parents were often socially ostracised, Social Security benefits and subsidised child care did not exist, and families were encouraged to treat adopted children as if they were biologically their own. These attitudes encouraged secrecy around adoption matters – not only within the family that had adopted the child but also, at times, between the family's kith and kin networks and local community – and were enshrined within the adoption legislation of the day. Adoption legislation provided little or no information to the child or the adoptive family about the birth family and only allowed access to information from 1989 with amendments to the *Adoption Act 1984*.

CONCLUSION

The impact of former adoption practices continues to ripple through our society. While this study is small and does not claim to speak for all adopted women, it indicates themes worth pursuing in the future to enhance clinical understanding and rejuvenate professional discussion in this area of welfare practice.

The participants in this study have had normative life experiences overlayed with a variety of challenges related to their adoption status. The management of these complex phenomena has demanded a high level of emotional skill and effort on the part of these adopted women as they cope with their own emotional reactions, continue to be responsive and available mothers, and assist their children and partners to negotiate multiple, extended family relationships. These insider voices shed light on profound adoption experiences that accompany the child bearing life cycle and impact on current and future generations. ■

REFERENCES

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2001) *Adoptions in Australia 1999-00*, Child Welfare Series No. 26, p.6, Canberra: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

Bion, W.R. (1965) *Transformations*, London: Heinemann.

Braun, V. & Clarke,V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp.77-101.

Brinich, P. (1990) Adoption from the inside out: A psychoanalytic perspective', in D. Brodzinsky & M. Schechter (eds), *The psychology of adoption*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Collishaw, S.B., Maughan, B. & Pickles, A. (1998) 'Infant adoption: Psychosocial outcomes in adulthood', *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, Vol. 33, pp.57-65.

Crotty, M. (1998) *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*, Australia: Allen & Unwin.

Duvall, E. (1977) *Marriage and family development*, Philadelphia: J.B.Lippincott Company.

Erikson, E.H. (1968) *Identity: Youth and crisis*, New York: W.W. Norton.

Feder, L. (1974) 'Adoption trauma: Oedipus myth, clinical reality', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 55, pp.491-493.

Festinger, L. (1957) *A theory of cognitive dissonance*, California: Row, Peterson & Company.

Fossey, E., Harvey, C., McDermott, F. & Davidson, L. (2002) 'Understanding and evaluating qualitative research', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 36, pp.717-732.

Germain, C. & Gitterman, A. (1980) *The life model of social work practice*, NY: Columbia University Press.

Goodwach, R. (2003) 'Adoption and family therapy', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*, Vol. 24, No. 2, pp. 61-69.

Grotevant, H.D., Dunbar, N., Kohler, J.K. & Lash Esau, A.M. (2007) 'Adoptive identity: How contexts within and beyond the family shape developmental pathways', in R. Javier, A. Baden, F. Biafora & A. Camacho- Gingerich (eds.), *Handbook of adoption: Implications for researchers, practitioners and families*, London: Sage Publications.

Hampton, M.R. (1997) 'Adopted women give birth: Connection between women and matrilineal continuity', *Feminism & Psychology*, Vol. 7, pp.83-106.

Lifton, B.J. (1995) *Journey of the adopted self*, NY: Basic Books.

Masso, P. & Whitfield, V. (2003) *A child to call my own*, Sydney: The Benevolent Society.

McGinn, M. (2007) 'Developmental challenges for adoptees across the life cycle', in R. Javier, A. Baden, F. Biafora & A. Camacho-Gingerich (eds.), *Handbook of adoption: Implications for researchers, practitioners and families*, London: Sage Publications.

Newman, L. (2008) 'Attachment theory and personality disorder: Approaches to high-risk families', *Communities, Children and Families Australia*, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp.4-18.

Passmore, N.L., Feeney, J.A. & Peterson, C.C. (2005) 'Relationships between adult attachment style, adoptees' motives for searching, and reunion satisfaction with birthmothers', in T. Bowles (ed.), *The good, the bad and the ugly: Proceedings of the APS Psychology of Relationships Interest Group 5th Annual Conference*, Melbourne: Australian Psychological Society.

Phillips, Z. (2004) *Chasing away the shadows*, Baltimore: Gateway Press Inc.

Reitz, M. & Watson, K.W. (1992) *Adoption and the family system*, NY: The Guilford Press.

Schmidt Neven, R. (1996) *Emotional milestones*, Melbourne: Australian Council for Educational Research.

Verrier, N. (1991) *The primal wound*, Baltimore: Gateway Press.

Yellin, L. (1993) 'Adoptees as parents and implications for children of adoptees', *Adoption Therapist*, Vol. 4, pp.15-19.