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BOOK REVIEWS

# Searching For Truths in the Debate About Adoption From Care

Adoption Deception: A Personal and Professional Journey. Mackieson P. (2015). Publisher: Spinifex Press, Melbourne, ISBN: 9781742199740, 178 pages.

The Madness of Australian Child Protection. Why adoption will rescue Australia's underclass of children. Sammut J. (2015). Publisher: Connor Court Publishing, Ballarat, ISBN: 9781925138832, 342 pages.

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These two recently released, local books present passionate and highly polarised arguments on the debate on adoption (Mackieson, 2015; Sammut, 2015). They have particular relevance for children who must live out their childhood in foster care within Australian care and protection systems as a result of child abuse and neglect. Penny Mackieson opposes adoption, in any form, based on her lived experience of being relinquished for adoption as a 1960s baby under closed arrangements; and her jaded experience as a social worker coping with the demands of overseas adoptive parents preoccupied with their 'own happiness' (Mackieson, 2015, p.49) and 'increasingly demanding, unreasonable, critical and blaming of . . . staff' (Mackieson, 2015, p.45). In contrast, Jeremy Sammut presents a tightly argued, but equally personal, policy argument in favour of adoption from the welfare care system. He proposes open adoption as a response to the tragedy of Australian babies and children dying, or being further damaged following removal from family, due to being placed into a 'mad' child welfare system. Both arguments offer important contributions to the debate on adoption from care, but neither represent the whole story.

Mackieson's 'Adoption Deceptions' argues against adoption based on the overriding importance of the genetic and gestational relationships between mother and child. No doubt other adoptees share her feelings of confused identity and no one would argue that these emotions are not heartfelt and important. The pain of separation is, of course, also felt strongly by children in foster care, the latter constituting a potentially re-traumatising experience following abuse prior to entry to care. Mackieson's book is a courageous offering, but this highly personal account also has some potentially dangerous blind spots for children living in care who may never feel a permanent member of any family at all.

Mackieson does not address the diversity of individuals' experiences and does not consider the differing emotional responses to adoption by children who did not have the security and opportunities that she experienced as a result of growing up in a stable adoptive family. She dismisses the possibility that other adoptees may value their adoption on the basis that they don't want to offend their adoptive parents by speaking out. But is it possible that others may genuinely feel adoption has been a positive experience? We would suggest that this is the case for many Australian children who have told researchers that adoption brought them a sense of belonging and newfound 'safety' (Cox, Moggach, & Smith, 2007). These children describe adoption as important in righting suffering caused by rejection in multiple foster placements, as well as in recovering from the neglect and abuse inflicted by their families of birth. Furthermore, many young people over the age of 12 years, who in New South Wales are able to consent to their own adoption, are keen to do so.

Overall, Mackieson ignores the importance of the social bonds of a child with the parents who rear them and fails to acknowledge the emotional devastation involved when children are not able to attach to any adults because they are constantly moved, experience sometimes sequential failed attempts at restoration to family of birth, and consequent fractured relationships (McLean, Kettler, Delfabbro, & Riggs, 2012). Mackieson (2015) somewhat curtly dismisses the problems of children 'residing in temporary out of home care following removal from their own families . . . ' (p.69); and the reality that many babies enter care and are never returned to their parents as a result of the severity of risk assessed and determined by the Children's Court. One practical implication of ignoring the importance of the 'social parent' and belonging to a family is evident in Mackieson's superficial treatment of alternatives to open

adoption for children in care. She advocates for orders such as the Victorian Permanent Care Order to offer children permanency. However, she does not acknowledge that these Orders can be challenged by birth parents over and over again during childhood; and that this can destabilise and break placements leading to irreparable emotional damage that constitutes systems abuse. Furthermore, these Orders do not provide a sense of belonging beyond when the child reaches age 18 years. Mackieson does not acknowledge the very thing that she may have taken for granted – the security offered by social recognition of belonging to a family and the importance of the life-long relationship which she enjoyed with her own adoptive parents.

Finally, 'Adoption Deception' is disappointing in that it does not explore why identity is so significant for children who have been adopted. This could have been an important contribution as the approach to adoption currently being considered is open adoption in which there is ongoing contact between adoptees and their birth parents. It would have been useful to have more reflection about what the author found lacking in her own sense of identity and whether ongoing contact during childhood between an adoptee and her birth parents would have alleviated this problem.

In contrast, Sammut' s pro-adoption stance is based on analysis of outcomes of the Australian child protection and care system, namely that some children have no realistic chance of being able to live with their families safely and are badly damaged by delayed decisions, failed attempts at family restoration, and insecure foster care placements over time. However, his arguments do not acknowledge the issues of identity raised by Mackieson, nor the importance of attachment to birth family which can make adoption inappropriate for some children. He also dismisses reservations about adoption of Aboriginal children – effectively ignoring the very strong concerns expressed by Aboriginal communities because of loss of identity caused by the Stolen Generations. Also Sammut's suggested estimate of the numbers of Australian children who could, and should, be adopted (being up to 5000 per annum) is without apparent basis or acknowledgement of the required and necessary complexity in relation to ensuring that open adoption is the best legal alternative for a child.

Sammut begins his analyses with the deaths of children who have been repeatedly reported for child protection investigation, but have been left with their parents to subsequently die from neglect or physical abuse. He argues that this is not the result of an overworked child protection system, but rather that social workers have inappropriately championed parents' rights and that agencies have vested interests in ineffectual early intervention with families unable to safely care for their children over time. In his view, children are left too long at home and become so damaged that they are impossible to help: 'The real problem is that family preservations are too prolonged and the results too damaging' (Sammut, 2015, p.13). Sammut advocates that children should be removed from their parents at an earlier age and that more adoptions need to occur in order to save children.

'The Madness of Australian Child Protection' is right to confront us with the failures of the child protection system. Sammut appropriately questions the capacity of early intervention programs to change families affected by chronic and complex problems (Tregeagle & Voigt, 2013). In addition, there is ample evidence to justify the author's claim about the length of time that some children drift in the care system and the damage done (Cashmore & Paxman 1996; Cashmore & Paxman 2006a, 2006b; Cashmore, Paxman, & Townsend, 2007). It is also well documented that adoption provides outcomes much better than long-term foster care (Triseliotis 2002).

However, Sammut ignores practice research that shows us that some families on the brink of having their children enter care can be safely restored and supported in the community. There is local evidence that secondary prevention programs (that is, programs directed to children we know have been abused and neglected) can provide sophisticated assessment of which children need to be removed. This NSW research shows that up to 50% of children who experience a crisis leading to care can be restored home when their parents successfully receive intensive support and ongoing follow-up services (Fernandez, 2012). Whilst it is true that there are not good statistics on how many re-referrals occur, some families can be successfully supported in restoration. Furthermore, we should not be too quick to abandon kin care – with all its positives for children such as strong sense of belonging to a community and less stigmatising care (Yardley, Mason, & Watson, 2009). Sammut also ignores other less intrusive options, such as use of childcare for children under 5 years of age to monitor safety and counteract the impact of neglect.

Sammut does not explore the question of whether adoption is right for every child in the care system. Barnardos Australia, which undertakes many of the adoptions from out-of-home care in NSW, estimates that approximately half of the children who have been permanently removed from their family by the Courts are not suitable for adoption (Tregeagle, Moggach, Cox, & Voigt, 2014). This is because of existing strong attachments to family and to preserve extended family engagement. It may also be unsuitable because foster carers choose not to adopt because of inheritance issues within their family.

Like Mackieson, Sammut's argument reflects strong personal views risking polarised, ideology-based debate about child protection. For example, his description of the Australian underclass includes an explanation that 'The erosion of personal responsibility begins with the breakdown of social norms surrounding work and self-reliance' (Sammut, 2015, p.8). Such comments represent a particular political position and belie observations that he has made on the structural determinants of child abuse. This is an unfortunate feature of the book which is highly critical of welfare agencies, the 'left' and conservative politicians alike.

Ultimately, it may be best to drawn on both of these polarised accounts and take a middle path. There is a strong argument that open adoption from care is an urgently needed option for some children which should be used much more widely in Australia. However, it is important to recognise that each individual child's situation must be assessed carefully and cautiously by those with contemporary adoption expertise. Whilst Mackieson's feelings of confusion over identity are real, it is also important to acknowledge the differences between individuals and their circumstances and the extreme emotional damage of 'not belonging' in any social grouping. Given Mackieson's demands to recognise her emotional reality, we must ask what weight she gives to the problems of constant broken attachments and psychological distress for the 43,400 Australian children in out-of-home care (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2016).

Perhaps, the most crucially important lesson of past adoption experiences is that we need to listen to children's voice (Cox, et al., 2007). In recommending the books reviewed and going forward in the Australian context, it will be important to keep the needs of vulnerable children in care at the forefront of the open adoption debate.

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# Educating Children and Young People in Care: Learning Placements and Caring Schools


Cameron, Claire, Connelly, Graham and Jackson, Sonia. (2015). Publisher: Jessica Kingsley, London, ISBN 978-1-84905-365-5, 256 pages.



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Educating children and young people in care: Learning placements and caring schools is an another endeavour by the above authors, who have previously collaborated to improve the academic achievement of children in out-of-home care. All three authors are highly experienced in the subject. Claire Cameron is Professor of Social Pedagogy and Deputy Director of the Thomas Coram Research Unit at the Institute of Education, University of London. She has been involved in the social pedagogical model developments in the UK since it ran a pilot programme in 2008. Graham Connelly is a senior lecturer in the School of Social Work and Social Policy at the University of Strathclyde and leads the work to improve the educational outcomes of children in care at the Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland. He brings a Scottish perspective to the discussions, as Scotland has engaged in supporting the educational potential of children in care by introducing a multi-disciplinary perspective that complements the social pedagogical approach. Sonia Jackson is Emeritus Professor at the Thomas Coram Research Unit, University College