

LOVE IS NOT ENOUGH: BREAKDOWN IN INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTION

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Intercountry adoption (ICA) is a relatively new phenomenon in Australia and it is only since the plight of abandoned children was brought to world awareness at the end of the Vietnam War that it has become an accepted means of eradicating or extending a family. However, the major impetus for this situation has been the rapid decrease in the availability of local infants for adoption and this appears to be an outcome of the greater social acceptability of single parenting and the introduction of the supporting parent benefit which has provided single women with the financial means to keep their babies rather than give them up for adoption.

While the numbers of children available for adoption have decreased the demand for them has not and so one is faced with a problem of supply and demand which has led many persons who would otherwise have not done to consider ICA. It is of course recognised that not all adoptive parents of overseas children come into this category, although increasingly this is becoming the case. If one is honest then it is suggested that ICA is rarely a first choice as a way of creating a family, indeed, one might say that it is a third choice for those whose age precludes them from adopting an infant. Objectively then, the risk of adoption failure leading to breakdown is a real possibility and one that needs to be thought about and prepared for before the number of ICA accelerate and the probability of breakdown increases.

ADOPTIONS THAT FAIL

Adoptions like marriages are not all happy-ever-after stories. Just as some marriages inevitably end in divorce, so some adoptive placements end in relinquishment. Indeed, adoption of the older child approximates a marriage in many ways, as Bell (1959, p. 329) stated, "It is a process whereby individuals, already equipped with consciousness, memories, patterns of thought and reaction, and large stores of life experience link their lives together". Given this as a metaphor for older child adoption then it becomes reasonable to anticipate a failure rate higher than that which one would reasonably expect for infant placements and this is exactly what has been found in research studies.

While research data on adoption breakdown are limited there is a large body of information on the relationship between adoption and emotional disturbance and the disproportionate numbers of adoptees admitted to clinics or referred for psychological consultation (Harper & Williams, 1976; Humphrey & Ounsted, 1963; Rickaby et al 1981). Despite the fact that such a

focus is not the aim of this paper it is a relevant issue since it points up some of the stresses and vulnerabilities associated with the adoptive process which may lead to familiar distress and subsequent separation or relinquishment. In addition, for the older aged adoption the child's early experiences may have been associated with deprivation, neglect, abuse, rejection and inappropriate mothering, all of which have a profound affect on personality development and interpersonal relationships, leading to disturbances in trusting and bonding and consequent difficulties in emotional adjustment.

ICA of older aged children constitutes a very special aspect of adoption and one which to date lacks a cohesive body of research data. Such information as is available is largely descriptive and has been undertaken with small samples, therefore, although it is hazardous to generalize from incountry to intercountry adoptions many of the problems associated with older age adoptions are common ones and so a summary of adoption breakdown studies will be reviewed.

Follow-up research on adoption is difficult to undertake because, it relies on the cooperation of the adoptive parents who frequently see any type of follow-up as an intrusion or a criticism of their parenting so that those who do feel free to participate are a non-representative sample. Another problem is that most studies are undertaken within one to two years of the adoption and although this is the most critical period in terms of the child's adjustment, breakdowns also occur later. What is not able to be estimated are the numbers of adoptions which do not legally breakdown and end in relinquishment, but separation occurs usually at adolescence. Again one may use the metaphor of a marriage; the failure of marriage is generally assessed in terms of divorce are malfunctioning and fail. The dichotomy of "intact" home and "broken" home is an arbitrary one which we use while recognising that many so called "intact" families are in an emotional and psychological sense broken ones.

Kadushin & Seidl (1971) summarized studies relating to failed adoption placements and in eight studies covering the U.S., Canada and England reported failure rates that varied between 6.3% and 1% the mean being 1.7%. Of the total of 34,125 children placed in adoptive homes 573 were subsequently returned to the agency. Their own study was concerned with adoption success and failure during the year immediately following placement, and failure was defined as "the return of the child to the agency at any time, for any reason following placement and before legal adoption" (p. 32). The study showed

an overall failure rate of 2.8%. The relationship of the child's age at placement to adoptive outcome was investigated, with age data available for 2,732 of the 2,945 children, and a statistically significant association was found — the older the child at placement the greater the possibility of failure. Children were divided into three age groups, less than 2 years, 2-6 years and 6 years or older and failure rates were 0.6%, 7% and 9.5% respectively. Boys were over represented being 62% of the failures and a further significant factor was that multiple placements were associated with failure. As many of the older children also had siblings this was an additional hazard for them since the behavior of any one child in a sibling group increases the risk of removal of all the children. Thus a child who is completely acceptable to the adoptive parents may fail because he or she is placed with a less acceptable sibling.

Kadushin (1970) in his book "Adopting Older Children" studied 91 children between 5-11 years at the time of adoption and 12-17 years at follow-up, mean age being 13 years 9 months. He found that percentage of successful placements was high, only two children had been removed from the home after adoption, but there were a further 12 who had failed to adjust initially and had left the adoptive home prior to completion of the adoption and so were not included in the study.

PHANTASY AND REALITY IN INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTION

All the myths associated with adoption are intensified in the adoption of older children from other cultures and it is often these myths and fantasies which create problems. This is because they are related to powerful unconscious and unspoken feelings and emotions and this is further accentuated because in reality little may be known about the child's previous experiences and the life, language, customs and beliefs of the birth country. These fantasies are generated by both the child and the adoptive parents independently, where there is good bonding and establishment of trust then they will be largely replaced by real mutually shared experiences which build up a joint memory store for the future and in particular for the adolescent years during which many unresolved issues of early childhood re-emerge in a more potent form. It is in situations in which there is so called pseudo-bonding or bonding that is tenuous or where there appears to be a temperamental mismatch between parent and child that these fantasies assume an overriding importance and become a conscious obstacle to the building up of mutual trust and respect.

THE ADOPTIVE PARENT

In any circumstance involving care, transfer, therapy, placement or indeed any type of intervention with displaced or distressed children, something must be recognized and dealt with is the presence at either a conscious or unconscious level of strong salvation or so called rescue phantasies in those who act to ameliorate the child's condition. These salvation phantasies are often enmeshed with the motive for adopting and in the case of some overseas adoptions rescue "from a fate worse than death" is a real one, and one the child may soon become aware of, a point also made by Kim (1978) in looking at issues in transracial adoption. Such awareness in the child may be associated with negative feelings towards the birth country, and in the parents demand for reciprocity – the child should be grateful and meet the expectations of the rescuer. This can lead to a situation in which the child may feel that his gratitude can never equal what has been done for him and the debt becomes impossible to repay (Moss & Moss, 1975). Associated with this is the fact that in seeking to parent an older child of different race who has suffered abandonment and deprivation in his birth country and whose future by Western standards may seem bleak, there may be the tendency to view the child in terms of his condition rather than for himself as an individual.

The older child comes into the new family with a real past, which is apart from a few factual details, unknowable to the adoptive parent. Phantasies about the child's experiences are a normal part of the adoptive process, but because of the lack of knowledge about the child's culture and because he arrives with an already established personality these phantasies are much stronger and are fed by the ways in which he behaves and responds. Where the child is able to relate and makes a good adjustment and meets the expectations of the adoptive family then these phantasies lose their importance. However, where there are problems, and aspects of the child's behavior are difficult for the parent to cope with, such as passive-aggressive compliance, sexually provocative behavior, hostile withdrawal, aggressive acting out or regression, then phantasies of the child's past experiences and background become a potent issue.

In most ICA it is obvious to all that the child is not a biological one so secrecy surrounding this aspect of the adoptive process is absent, nevertheless phantasies of the biological parents and secrets of the child's past remain. The adoptive mother's tie with the child may be seen as a triad including the biological mother and in this situation each person is an intermediary between the other two. Thus what takes place between the adoptive mother and child is influenced by their perceptions and phantasies of the biological mother (Moss & Moss, 1975).

In older age adoption the burden of secrecy is reversed, it is the child who has

secrets and the unknowableness of these may intrude upon the establishment of a relationship. Pretending that the past does not exist and the beginning of a new life in a new country may appear the simplest and most realistic approach, but it is one that denies the child a past identity and asserts the supremacy of the adoptive parent. Children are past masters at responding to the unspoken and in picking up on adults unconscious feelings and it is often what the adult represses or does not say rather than what is actually said that influences the direction of bonding.

THE ADOPTIVE CHILD

In his turn he/she faces what are two of the most dreaded fears of childhood, the fears of loss and abandonment, the third may also be present, that of physical hurt. These are the most important variables affecting new attachments and for older aged children from another country and culture these losses are compounded by the loss of language as well as cultural and personal identity. The identity of a child is threatened when shifted from one parent to another and one of his/her first questions is, "Will I be accepted as I am or will I need to change myself?" (Moss & Moss, 1975). From whatever angle one looks at it, in an ICA of an older child the answer to the question has to be "Yes". The child's past identity is almost totally lost – loss of the mother tongue and all the experiences, memories and phantasies associated with it means that the child begins again and if he/she is to be accepted by the new family needs to be what they want him/her to be and to 'forget' the past, even reject it, in favour of the present. For some children there are a series of losses, loss of the biological family, followed by loss of friends and caretakers in institutions that provided them with some protection and then losses associated with placement in a foreign culture. In a sense it could be said that the child pays for the promise of a more secure future with the surrendering of his/her past and all its associations.

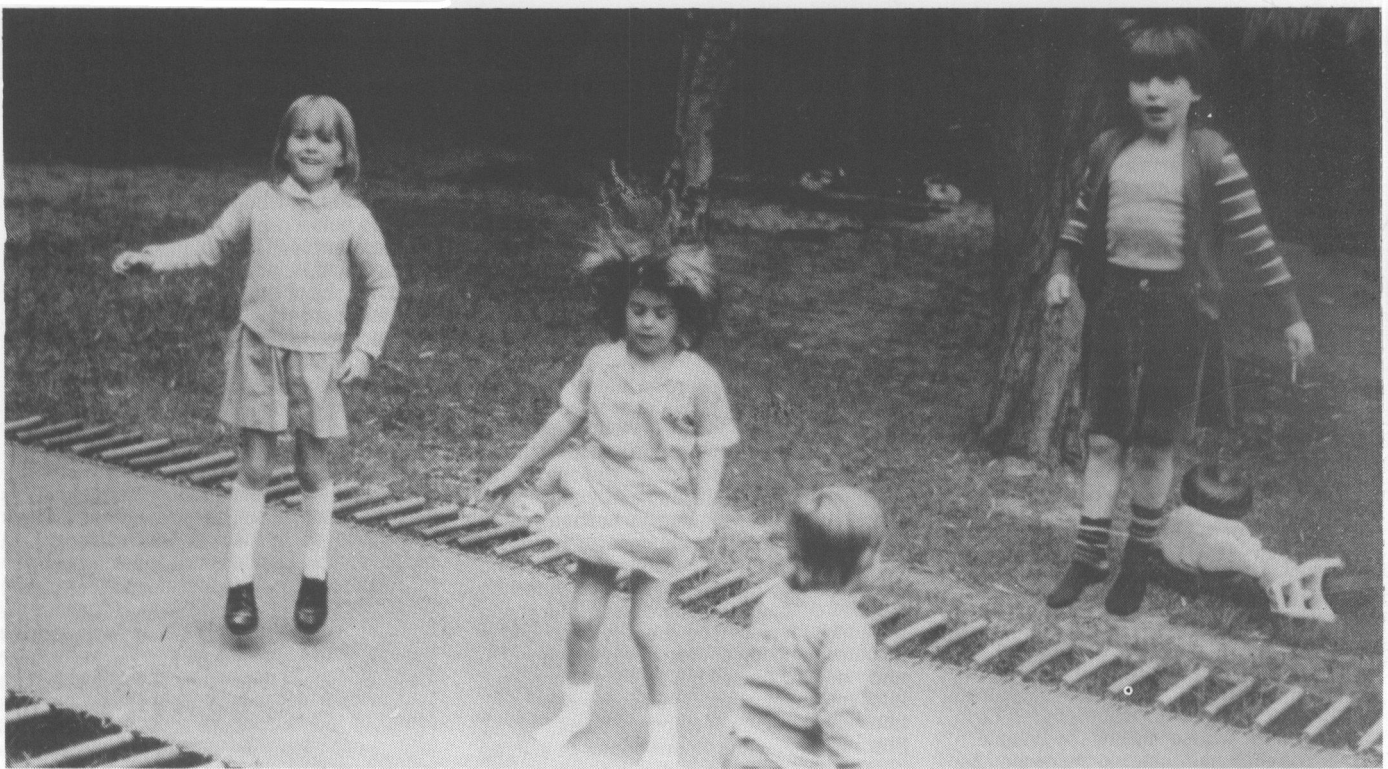
For the older child learning the language of the new family as quickly as possible and adapting to their way of life is a necessity – there is no other real choice available. Is it any wonder then that he/she adapts, but this adaptation may be at a price, that of his past identity. Loss of the mother tongue carries with it a loss of past memories associated with it which are unable to be shared in the new language because they conflict with the new identity. Thus repression and denial of the past are a frequent phenomenon and "I don't remember" a recurring theme, and as Chema et al (1970) state the absence of any reactions to discussion of the past does not mean acceptance but more often unwillingness to hear.

The child to has phantasies which affect his/her new relationships but sometimes these apparent phantasies may be close to reality or a mis-interpretation of events and remain an unresolvable issue. Two such phantasies are those associated with being kidnapped and being sold and

bought by the new white family. The notion of kidnap is not an uncommon one even among incountry adoptions (Barnes, 1953; Fraiberg, 1962) and in ICA may have some basis in reality (Sood, 1985) and the transfer of person may not be seen as different from the transfer of material goods for which money is paid, so that the idea of being "bought" by the new parent too has some reality about it. Under these circumstances it is not unusual to find that there may be a deep fear that having been "sold" once, if they are not good they will be sold again. Alternatively, if there appears to be a mismatch with the family there is the prospect that another family will be there to buy them. Adopting another child and especially a younger one carries with it the fear that they are not good enough and they are being replaced.

Memories and phantasies of the biological mother are often confused, the child wishes to deny that he was abandoned because this implies that his mother did not want or love him, therefore there must be something wrong with him. Separation, to a child invariably carries with it the feeling that it is their fault (Chema et al, 1970), they are unlovable, they have been bad and driven the mother away so the phantasy of kidnap is also a defensive one. Loss by abandonment is a very painful experience to come to terms with and integrate into ones psyche, explanations based on economic factors, disaster or circumstance provide a vehicle for the adult, but for the child the devastating reality is that they were not wanted, they were forsaken. For the older child there may also be real memories associated with privation, abuse and hardship. In addition, there is also the realization in most cases they can never find their biological parents and a return to their birth country would find them a stranger there. Reactions to such recognition are at one extreme total denial of the past and embracement of the present ("adapted at once, was so easy and anxious to please") and at the other withdrawal into the deep loneliness of being a marginal person ("he's very self contained, not really part of the family").

For the ICA child the wish fulfillment phantasies of exalted parents and a glorious past, often a feature of incountry adoptions, are not tenable and only indulge in on rare occasions often associated with kidnap phantasies. Since most ICR are from poor, struggling, over populated, war or disaster torn countries the child must at some stage face the facts of his/her background and the possible circumstances of his abandonment. How this is presented to the child is important but what mediates the process is the degree to which the child feels he belongs to the adoptive family and is truly their child. Children these days are quickly acquainted through the mass media with conditions in other countries and the stereotype images of them that are presented. So for the Indian child for example, the stereotype is of a poverty stricken, disease ridden country of teaming millions living in abject conditions and worshipping strange idols.



It is from this the child has been rescued and so there is an unspoken obligation to be grateful and try to repay this gift by conforming to the parents expectations and adapting quickly to the new culture and assuming its identity. There is the fear, however, that they will not be able to "shape up" to what the parents want or to be accepted as a full member of the new culture and so remain in limbo neither identified with the birth country or the adopted one, truly a marginal person.

BREAKDOWN AND AFTER

The most controversial and public ICA have been those associated with the Vietnam War. In a study of the 111 children from the "Airlift" placed in 101 families in N.S.W. Harvey (1983) undertook a follow up and received responses from 93 families with a total of 102 children. The failure rate in the first two years was 2.9%, of these 3 children 2 were subsequently satisfactorily placed in a second family, the third has remained in residential care after two adoption breakdowns. Since the initial study there has been at least one further breakdown and readoption, all were older children.

In a follow up report of a small group of Vietnamese children in the U.K., Jacobus (1984) refers to an adoption breakdown of a 9 year old boy and another also 9 years who refused to be adopted claiming that he was not an orphan and that his mother was still alive and wanted him.

Kin (1978) in a follow up of Korean adoptees in the U.S. found a failure rate of 0.74%, that is 3 out of the 406 in his sample. This he felt compared very favourably with the incountry rate of 1.9%. In a Dutch study by Hoksbergen (1979) the

breakdown rate was reported as less than 2% and again older children were most at risk especially those coming into families who already had natural children. Thus available data suggests a failure rate of between 1-3%.

Discussion with some overseas social service agencies indicates that information on adoption failures amongst the children they have placed does filter back, although the percentages are very small. The Holy Cross Centre in Delhi (Sister Herman Joseph, 1985) has records of 4 breakdowns all of children over 4 years at placement being approximately 1.5% of the older aged adoptions with no breakdowns so far recorded for the 0-4 years group. Of these 4 breakdowns, 2 were returned to India and subsequently readopted overseas the other two were readopted in the country of placement.

So far officially recorded cases of ICA breakdown in N.S.W. are a rarity, though there is no doubt that there are some which have been less than successful and some in which breakdown has occurred but informal arrangements have been made so that failure has not become an official statistic. Is this in the best interests of the child? Adoption failure is a devastating experience for a child who already has a long history of loss and the notion that all he needs to heal the wound is love is just adult wishful thinking - Love is not enough.

Bettelheim (1950) in reference to emotionally disturbed children makes the point that for distressed children love is just not enough. Immediate loving or mothering of a child implies the obligation to return such love, a response which is

initially beyond the child's emotional capacity and leads only to feelings of guilt and worthlessness. This is particularly relevant in adoption failure where previous affective relationships have not been successful. What the child requires is acceptance as an individual in his own right, respect for his grief and need for privacy and non intrusive understanding of his fears of making a trusting attachment. Too often the need for immediate affectionate responses from the child on the part of many adults leads them to see adults as a source of convenience so that interaction is on the basis of material gain rather than as a slowly developing and mutually satisfying personal relationship, which is how most successful marriages and family relationships proceed.

ICA failure differs from incountry failure in a number of ways the most obvious being in terms of its visibility and this fact gives rise to two important points. First, parents are very reluctant to admit that the adoption is not working out and so get locked into a failing relationship until such time as some major crisis occurs and relinquishment becomes possible or until the child becomes adolescent and takes responsibility for the failure by moving out.

Second, there is tremendous guilt associated with admission of breakdown, much more with ICA because of the circumstances of the adoption and the fact that little sympathy may be extended towards those who adopt an abandoned child from another culture and in turn abandon it themselves because it does not meet their needs or live up to their expectations.

Sometimes the sequel to relinquishment is psychiatric breakdown of one parent (Sister Margaret Mary, 1985) or marriage breakup (Sister Herman Joseph, 1985) which raises the issues of suitability and motivation to adopt in the first instance. Another way of coping with the guilt of relinquishment may be to transfer responsibility to the child, i.e.: "She's not happy with us... she says she has a family in India and wants to go back to them". In one such instance because the adoption had not been legally completed the child was sent back and the couple subsequently separated (Sister Herman Joseph, 1985). Whatever, the reason or the rationalization for relinquishment it is always the child who in his own mind takes the blame for the failure... "I was not good enough, I was not what they wanted".

Whatever the circumstances of the breakdown once relinquishment is decided upon it is essential that the child be given the necessary time and support to come to terms with the separation and loss. In short the child needs to be able to mourn and work through anger and grief and come to some resolution of his feelings before being expected to make another relationship. Returning to the metaphor of a marriage, going from one adoptive placement straight to another without any grief work is like marriage on the rebound. Adults do not consider this to be appropriate behaviour for themselves yet when it comes to a child there is often an incident haste to get the child placed and what Krugman (1971) refers to as "a resistance to separation work". Chema et al (1970) also emphasize the fact that the child needs time to grieve about the losses he faces before he can be expected to face the new family and begin again.

At the risk of being repetitive, to really understand the child's feelings it is necessary to look at the major losses he/she has suffered. For the older adopted child there is the initial loss of the biological family and all its associations, and if this was followed by residential placement loss of significant caring or protecting adults, playmates and a familiar environment. Coming to another culture results in most cases in loss of the mothering tongue and all the uncommunicable memories associated with it together with loss of the original sense of self identity. If breakdown then occurs the child is again adrift, having lost his/her adoptive family and the experiences shared with them, as a result there is likely to be a reactivation of all the feelings attached to the earlier losses so the sense of worthlessness and isolation is compounded and the fragile sense of identity further eroded.

How children cope depends not only on the quality of care that they have received in the past and in consequence what positive strengths they have internalized but also on their temperamental characteristics and whether these are compatible with the adopted culture and understood and accepted by adults who have become involved in their life circumstances. Some children have particular characteristics or

aptitudes which call out positive responses in others and so they obtain enough gratification to develop despite negative circumstances, but others are not so fortunate.

How do adults cope with loss of a significant personal relationship? The responses are many and varied but underlying them all is a feeling of emotional vulnerability and disillusionment. How much worse it must be for a child, particularly one with minority racial characteristics who has it seems attempted to adapt to another culture and failed. It is no consolation to say that the first family was not able to meet his needs and that another better one will be found, the truth is that he/she was not wanted thus there must be something wrong with him/her, he has after all been abandoned twice.

Anger and depression although different in their expression are often very closely related (Bowlby, 1960) and reactions to loss include both emotions so that the child needs not only to work through his/her despair and feelings of hopelessness at his/her loss but also anger at being relinquished. This requires recognition and understanding, but the tendency is to place the child in another family as soon as possible to try and compensate for the original catastrophe as our salvation phantasies are set into motion.

In adoption breakdown the child no matter what the circumstances has usually not given up hope of returning to the original adoptive parents and while preparing for a new family still cherishes phantasies of being reclaimed and reunited. It is particularly important then that the child be given the opportunity to come to terms with his anger and depression before being expected to transfer his affections to yet another family. To this end a short period of residential care in a safe and therapeutic environment appears the most appropriate strategy. In such a situation grief work and preparation for the future can be undertaken and the child given time to integrate his/her past, present and hopes for the future.

To conclude, the adoptive child like any other needs love - but love is not enough. Even greater is the need for recognition, acceptance and understanding since love carries with it the unspoken obligation to return the love and this is often perceived as very threatening. The idea of love being persecutory is not easily accepted by those who have been loved and cherished and are in turn able to love, but to an individual whose life has been filled with losses and who is striving for an identity, love can be a threat. Such a child is isolated and yet wanting to be accepted, afraid to approach for fear that a relationship may at once take away everything, the very little that he has, and threaten his whole existence and yet fulfil his/her dreams and fill the emptiness of the soul. For these children, Bettelheim (1950) is right - love is not enough.

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