

# Reflections on Entitlement to a Child in Australian Women's Journals

## 1947 - 1987

by Juliet Harper

### INTRODUCTION

In the Macquarie Dictionary, a family is defined as "parents and their children, whether dwelling together or not"<sup>1</sup>. To be a couple with no children puts one outside of this category when family is defined in that way. Indeed, it is only recently that the term "single parent family" has been coined and accepted as an alternative type of family structure. Prior to the seventies the reference was to the "single mother and her child" and earlier still, "unmarried mothers" and "illegitimate children" - "fillius nullis", child of nobody, until the Children's Equality of Status Act in 1977.

Society still appears to hold the nuclear family as the ideal<sup>2</sup> that is a male and a female, preferably married with one or more children. A couple remain a couple and are not considered a family until such time as they have a child. For those who wish to have a child but are unable to have one, this constitutes a painful situation, but one towards which society feels compassion and in the view of the author, supports the notion that couples are entitled to a child.

Entitlement, that is "the right or claim to something" and in this case a child, is also, in the view of the author, an entrenched social attitude associated with adoption and more recently Artificial Insemination by Donor (A.I.D.) and surrogacy, although in the latter two, biological variables complicate the issue. While it appears to be accepted that a married couple is entitled to a child, the idea that a

single woman might similarly be entitled to a child, should she wish it, does not follow and many single mothers have served the needs of infertile couples by relinquishing their babies for adoption.

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However, with the advent of the sole parent benefit and the increasing numbers of single mothers keeping their babies, the supply of infants for adoption has drastically decreased. Changing situations are frequently related to, reflect, or give rise to changing attitudes and the purpose of this paper is to look at the notion of "entitlement of adults to a child" over a 40 year period as it is reflected in widely read and influential Australian women's journals. *Woman*, later becoming *Woman's Day*, and the *Australian Women's Weekly* were targeted for this purpose. Relevant articles, stories, readers' letters and ideas were photocopied on an issue by issue basis and grouped in four temporal sequences. Each period was then analysed and this data and readers' responses to it was summarized and is presented in this manner.

The limitations of such a procedure are recognized since journals obviously promote some issues more strongly than others, and the readers

who respond to them and are chosen to have their views published comprise only a small sample of the total population. Notwithstanding, such journals provide a source of information which, because it is directed at "the person in the street", can be seen as representing a useful barometer of public opinion on many social issues.

### 1947-1959

The law pertaining to illegitimacy was taken up as a social problem which needed revision and the financial plight of the unmarried mother who wished to keep her child was raised. In 1947 she was eligible for £15 Commonwealth maternity bonus, a child welfare allowance of 10/- a week provided she was willing to name and summons the father, food relief up to 17/- a week during pregnancy and provision of a layette.<sup>3</sup>

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There were stories about unmarried mothers giving up their babies "Hazel had a baby but no husband"<sup>4</sup>, "Should she surrender her baby?"<sup>5</sup> and "The Mother in the Other Bed"<sup>6</sup>, as well as those on the joys of adoption, "We adopt a baby girl"<sup>7</sup>, "Our new Australian"<sup>8</sup>, "A baby to call my own"<sup>9</sup> and information about procedures to adopt a child.

In 1947 it was reported that there were 7,000 illegitimate births in

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Australia and most of these children were put up for adoption. In maternity hospitals where "natural feeding" was the rule, the unmarried mother breast-fed but in hospitals where babies were "artificially fed" girls were advised against seeing their babies and other "patients" were told that the baby had been still-born.<sup>10</sup>

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It was in articles dealing with abortion that attitudes to entitlement of an unmarried mother to keep her child were most plainly revealed. In 1951 it was estimated that there were at least 40,000 abortions a year in NSW alone, and while the dangers of illegal abortion were highlighted the solution to the problem of the unwanted child to a "prominent Sydney gynaecologist and obstetrician" was simple:

"I advise such women to proceed with their pregnancies, suffer the slight inconvenience to their social life during the last few months, have the child and have it adopted immediately after it is born, without even seeing it. This is financially sound because they save more than half the money they would be required to pay for an abortionist, take no risk with their health and add a fine young Australian to our population"<sup>11</sup>

Despite the concern expressed for unmarried mothers in the women's journals, readers who responded were not sympathetic, one went so far as to suggest that for children "abandoned" by their parents there should be a three month period before "adoption be legalized without their consent."<sup>12</sup> Only one stated "wouldn't it be more benevolent to assist the poor mother to keep her child ... as this gives the child the most important thing he needs - his mother"<sup>13</sup>, but this was a

minority view. The general view reported in the journals was that the unmarried mother should be well cared for during her confinement and then relieved of her baby as soon as possible thereafter, and by 1959 the adoption waiting time for approved couples was reported as 3 - 5 years.<sup>14</sup>

### 1960-1969

The 60s was the era of the Pill and of more liberal attitudes towards abortion and illegitimacy and all of these contributed towards a decrease in the number of infants available for adoption. In 1964, approximately 5,500 children were legally adopted in Australia but couples could still "see the baby before deciding to take it".<sup>15</sup>

In articles about adoption as late as 1969 the concept of "matching" a "suitable child" to the requirements of a married couple was accepted and seen as being in the baby's best interests.

"The Child Welfare goes to the greatest trouble to match the child to the family it's going to. First it's got to be perfectly healthy with no family history of things like epilepsy. Then it's got to look like the people who are adopting it.

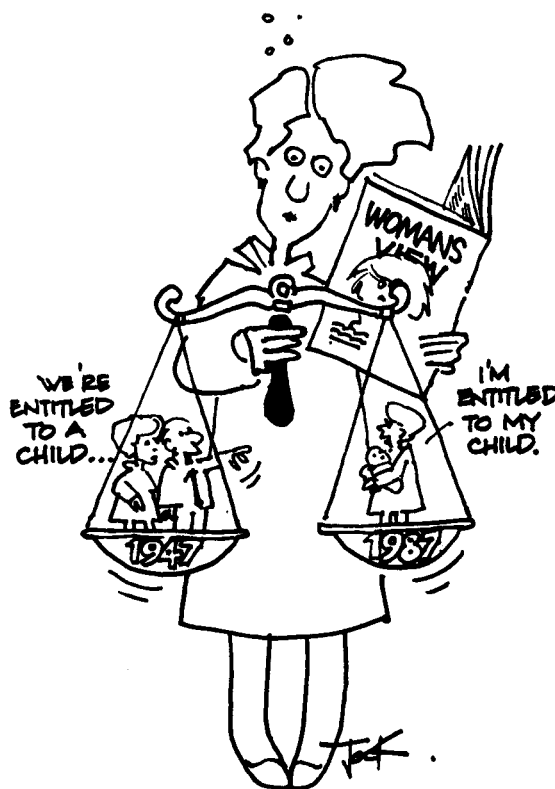
You've both got blue eyes, for instance, so you'd have to have a blue-eyed baby".<sup>16</sup>

Problems achieving a suitable match were offered as a reason for delays in placement - eg "A very tall couple of high intelligence may have to wait for some time...".<sup>17</sup>

***Letters to "agony" columns re pregnancy still received the advice, "tell your parents at once, see the almoner at your nearest public hospital and arrange to have the baby adopted"***

The story of the "chosen child" continued to be used as the way in which to tell a child of their adoptive status and despite some disagreement about how best to tell, to tell and tell early was the opinion of child specialists such as Dr. Spock<sup>18</sup> which was overwhelmingly supported by readers. However, there was still the notion that the child should feel grateful:

"If you are always frank with your adopted child, and don't pretend with him, you will have a happy and a grateful child", said the specialist".<sup>19</sup>



Reports of unmarried mothers keeping their babies became more frequent, "My advice to a girl in trouble is this: if you want your baby, don't let anyone talk you into giving it up", from a 42 year old woman who had had an illegitimate child at 16 years and kept it.<sup>20</sup> By 1966 it was stated that one third of all illegitimate babies were now reared by their mothers.<sup>21</sup> Readers' responses were varied; while some supported the right of the single mother to keep her child, most maintained "allowing a child to be adopted is the fairest solution".<sup>22</sup> Letters to "agony" columns re pregnancy still received the advice, "tell your parents at once, see the almoner at your nearest public hospital and arrange to have the baby adopted".

With fewer babies available, deferred adoptions and adoption of hard to place children – i.e., the older-aged, coloured and handicapped, was cautiously promoted. Articles on institutionalised children and the handicapped brought a flood of responses and the adoption and child welfare laws came under attack.<sup>23,24</sup> Adoption of Aboriginal children and children from overseas began to get coverage and by 1966 the plight of refugee children from the war in Indo-China was of concern and the first local adoption of Vietnamese children was reported in 1968.<sup>25</sup> Children from Korea "a land of many orphans" was promoted as an alternative source of children for couples to adopt and the whole concept of adoption of racially different children began to take root.<sup>26</sup>

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### 1970–1979

While there was an official move towards making adoption more child-

centred, the general attitude in the magazines was still that adoption was a service for couples, to find them a child in order to create a family. However, local, healthy, white infants were scarce, and as a consequence, no more was heard of phone calls stating "we have a baby girl we think might suit you, would you like to make an appointment to look at her and decide?"

*So for a couple wishing to have a family, if the first choice, their own biological child, was not possible and the waiting time for an Australian might well bring them to the age barrier and they did not feel able to adopt an older or handicapped child, then intercountry adoption of an infant became a third choice and a new possibility.*

In an article about the tragedy of unwanted babies, a girl who gave up her baby for adoption commented:

"...everyone assured me that I would be selfish to keep my child... it was unfair of me to deprive it of the two loving adoptive parents who would take it... I would marry and have more children".<sup>27</sup>

In relation to abortion, the common response remained, "I think people should first consider adoption. The waiting list of couples who desperately want a child is so big".<sup>28</sup> In both instances, the woman's right to make a choice was not given real consideration. The focus was on the product which would provide a couple with a child. Implied here surely is the notion that couples are entitled to a child.

There is no doubt that it was the issue of access to origins that was the major focus of the 1970s and this was given solid support at the First Australian Conference on Adoption held in Sydney in February 1976, where the opening of the sealed birth records of adoptees came up for discussion and the rights of the relinquishing mother received consideration. The women's journals

reflected this by publishing articles of adoptees searching for their mothers, together with reunions of brothers and sisters, twins, parents and children separated for 20–30–40 years due to adoption, disasters and war. Readers' letters flooded in – there were those from young girls who had given up babies and wanted to know how to get them back, married women who wanted to trace their mothers and relinquishing mothers and even grandmothers who wanted to locate children relinquished years ago. At first the advice was "leave well enough alone and forget the past" and it was not until 1977 that in response to a request from an adopted adolescent girl the reply given was to contact Jigsaw,<sup>29</sup> and in 1978 Adoption Triangle was also listed as a contact in tracing biological parents and relinquished children.<sup>30</sup>

Single mothers remained a source of comment even though it was reported that by 1977 one in every twelve families were sole parent ones.<sup>31</sup> In an article about them was the addenda:

"Our story on the single mother could well cause sadness amongst childless couples because the number of children in Australia for adoption is becoming less and less"<sup>32</sup>

and in 1975 the waiting list for adoption of local infants was reported as 5–7 years.<sup>33</sup>

The Vietnam airlift of war orphans was another watershed in the area of adoption in the 1970s and it was after this that intercountry adoption became an alternative way of creating or extending a family. However, at the same time adoption of Aboriginal children by white families was viewed with unease and an Aboriginal Child Placement Agency was established to secure Aboriginal homes for these children.<sup>34</sup>

So for a couple wishing to have a family, if the first choice, their own biological child, was not possible and the waiting time for an Australian might well bring them to the age barrier and they did not feel able to adopt an older or handicapped child, then intercountry adoption of an infant became a third choice and a new possibility.

## The 1980s

In 1984 a comprehensive article, "The Adoption Dilemma", commented that the new welfare credo stated "Every child is entitled to a family, but not every couple is entitled to a child" and the waiting period for a child was as long as 10 years.<sup>35</sup> While this may have been the official view, letters to the women's journals continued to support a couple's entitlement to a child. In response to an 18 year old unmarried pregnant girl who had decided to have her baby adopted and wrote "I honestly don't think I will suffer any mental strain, depression or guilt for what I am doing<sup>36</sup> there were congratulatory letters for "making the lot of an otherwise childless couple very, very happy...". "Hurrah for J.W.! For once someone is considering everyone else involved.. after all, it is the taxpayers who end up helping to keep them".<sup>37</sup>

Such responses suggest an absence of sympathy for single mothers and in 1982 one reader wrote:

"I fail to see why taxpayers should have to pay for unmarried mothers. Of course, the first pregnancy could be an accident... with so many couples waiting for adoption, I feel unmarried mothers who have a second child should be required to give it up for adoption".<sup>38</sup>

In 1985:

"I feel that benefits for supporting unmarried mothers are unnecessary. Many of these people receiving benefits don't deserve it as they use the system for their own gain... Why should the community have to pay for the selfishness of many young girls?"<sup>39</sup>

In 1986:

"I feel I must say something about supporting mothers who are unmarried mothers. I know a large number of these girls, who as soon as they child is school-age, become pregnant again simply to keep the pension... they are a drag on the community".<sup>40</sup>

There were a few single mothers who wrote back, but no support from other readers. One 16 year old who had signed the adoption paper for her

daughter and then changed her mind within the 30 day statutory period wrote:

"Unless many of the offended writers out there have been through these hardships themselves, I don't think they have the qualifications to complain. Could you give up one of your children?"<sup>41</sup>

A relinquishing mother wrote:

"There is one welfare payment that I am glad to see, that is for single mothers, that they may be able to keep their babies and look after them and not know the heartache that many women in the past, like myself, had to endure on giving up their baby for adoption".<sup>42</sup>

Searches and reunions were the biggest feature of this period and in many respects it was now the adoptive parents rather than the relinquishing mothers who felt most vulnerable, with many voicing the fear that the child they had cared for over many years would seek out their biological mother and leave them.

Interestingly, articles on surrogacy do not appear to have had the impact that might have been expected, in terms of responses from readers, perhaps because where money changes hands this makes it distasteful even though the outcome of a child for a couple may be secretly acknowledged as a good thing. In the few readers' responses to surrogacy it was the adoption triangle, adoptees, relinquishing mothers and adoptive mothers who wrote letters and made the connection between it and adoption and commented upon it.<sup>43,44</sup>

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## CONCLUSION

The author set out to explore attitudes expressed in two popular Australian women's journals towards the idea of the entitlement of adults to have and raise children.

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Over the forty years examined, it was clear that attitudes towards illegitimacy, single parenthood and family formation have changed. However, the notion that couples, especially married ones, are entitled to a child if they wish appears embedded in the thinking of the contributors published. This entrenched idea generally surfaces whenever a topic associated with reproduction is featured.

Discussions on abortion in particular always resulted in heated responses from readers. Even abortion for a pregnancy following rape was disputed by some and the raped woman was asked to bear the child for a childless couple to adopt.

" Although you have been cruelly wronged, and might not want the child, remember there are thousands of childless couples who would give anything to have that life".<sup>45</sup>

Such an attitude could be seen to reflect not only an absence of consideration for the pregnant woman, but also little recognition of the pain of relinquishment and its long-term psychological effects on the mother.<sup>46</sup> The whole area is complicated by strong emotional, social and moral issues for which there are no easy solutions.

Adoption itself raises further aspects of entitlement - i.e., those which related to the rights and obligations of the adoptee, the adopting parents and the relinquishing parents, all of which

require acknowledgment and understanding.

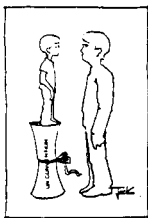
The opening up of birth records and moves to establish contact registers and access information have highlighted the hopes and anxieties of all the parties to adoption. If one can accept that women's journals reflect some of the basic attitudes of society and provide a forum for some women to express their concerns, then it would appear from the more recent published contributions to these journals that it is the adoptive parents who currently present as most vulnerable.

Entitlement to a child within the context of adoption now carries with it a much broader recognition of the rights and needs of the relinquishing parents and the adoptee for ongoing information about each other if this is desired. Support for such a move is almost universal<sup>47</sup> and must surely be seen as having important implications for the way in which our society views family formation, interpersonal relations and parenthood.

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**A Fair Go  
for Children**



The Case for the  
United Nation's  
Convention on the  
Rights of the Child

The NCBA was very pleased to note that on 18 December 1990, Australia became the 61st country to ratify the **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child**.

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