

Adoption: From the Adoptees' Perspective

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Abstract

Although children are being adopted every day, adoption is still a taboo in Pakistan. People leave their newborns at hospitals, at orphanages, or worst, in garbage, because they do not want to parent them. Abandoned children are usually girls, disabled or illegitimate. These children are mostly taken up by childless couples to satisfy their parental instinct. Adoption is still not accepted as a norm in Pakistani society and adopted children are looked down upon, questioned and stigmatized. A qualitative study was therefore designed to explore the experiences of these adoptees. A sample of 10 adults, who were adopted and knew about the fact too, were interviewed regarding adoption. The interview consisted of two parts; first part about the adoptee's personal experiences and then about their perceptions of being adopted. Overall it was found that a good foster experience is a key to better adjustment for adoptees regardless of when and how they received the news of adoption or the reason why they were abandoned.

Keywords: Adoption, adoptees, foster parents, parenting.

1. Introduction

Adults can form a legal relationship with a child through the act of adoption. This entitles an abandoned child to privileges expected in a biological parent-child relationship that child would have failed to receive otherwise. This phenomenon has been observed since centuries as evident in historical, religious and mythological literature (Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010). Many cultures practice adoption (Bowie, 2004) as a means of incorporating children into the family system who cannot receive the care they require from their biological parents for whatever reason. It can fall anywhere between the two categories of being 'closed' or 'open' (Gibbs, 2000). In closed adoptions information about the birth family and the adoptive family are not disclosed to either of them while in open adoptions there is full disclosure of identities.

Furthermore, there are four types of adoptions namely, domestic, international, interracial and foster care (Sanders, 2012). Domestic adoptions involve either a relative or a non-relative adopting a child within their country. In case adoptive parents cannot be found domestically, countries allow for international adoptions. Either of the already mentioned types of adoption can be interracial whenever a child from a different race is adopted. Other times a child may be placed in a group or private home under the care of a certified 'foster parent' by the government itself. Laws concerning adoptions have evolved over time. Particular to Islamic law, a once common practice of adoption was abolished once the *Sharia* law was established in Arabia (Boswell, 1988). Pakistan is one of the twenty countries where, in accordance with the Islamic Shariah law, the institution of adoption is not recognized (United Nations, 2010).

Instead, laws concerning guardianship or '*kafala*' are followed. The word '*kafala*' is an Arabic word which is literally translated as sponsorship and comes from the root word meaning 'to feed' (Ahmed, 1999). Under this law an adult voluntarily commits to care, educate and provide for a child just as biological parents would do, without forming legal ties. This ensures the child's biological lineage continues with the biological father's name and protects their right of inheritance. It can be understood as a much stable form of foster parenting as it is a permanent agreement. Preference is given to relatives of abandoned or orphaned children to claim guardianship.

Adoption research has generally taken two directions; one involves understanding the adoption related policies and practices which is helpful from social work perspective, second involves identifying the effects of the adoption process on the developmental and psychological health of adopted children (Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010). There is much controversy regarding adoption being considered a risk factor for emotional and behavioral difficulties in children. This has allegedly been viewed as a result of an overrepresentation of adoptees in psychiatric settings (Wierzbicki, 1993) and an overestimation of behavioral issues owing to reliance on clinical-based samples (Simmel, Barth & Brooks, 2007) rather than representative samples.

When reanalyzing a 1981 national survey of 3,698 adolescents, Warren (1992) found out that adopted teenagers were more likely to be referred to mental health facilities compared to non-adopted teenagers, for even minor problems. Hence an overrepresentation of adoptees in mental health facilities could be due to a number of reasons and not just an indicator of greater adjustment issues. Some researchers have found differences between adopted and non-adopted persons such as lower self-esteem, self-confidence (Borders, Penny, & Portnoy, 2000) and more vulnerability to depression (Cubito & Obremski-Brandon, 2000) and academic problems (Brodinzky, 1993). However other studies have found adoptees to be generally well-adjusted (Fletcher, 1997; Juffer and IJzendoorn, 2005) even showing no difference compared to non-adopted persons (Haan-Alvarez & Johanna, 1990).

Despite contradictory findings, research has played an important role in highlighting the various issues that adoptees face throughout their lives. According to Powel and Affifi (2005) adoptees can experience a sense of ambiguous loss when they think about their birth parents, for example, not having a chance to get in touch with a parent who is still alive. It not only leads to feelings of grief that nobody else can relate to but also feelings of uncertainty surrounding their origins and biological family. These feelings tend to resurface during important emotional milestones in their life. Previously, Nickman (1985) had summarized the three types of loss that adopted children may express throughout their lives. These include an 'overt loss' of biological relationships, a 'covert loss' of self-esteem from being renounced and a 'status loss' caused by stigmatization attached with adoption within the family and society in general. As a result of which, adopted children are more likely to report feelings of rejection and uncertainty regarding their identity and role in the adoptive family (Wahl, McBride, & Schrodt, 2005)

Another important aspect in adoptee research has been identity development. The process of identity development begins in childhood and gains much importance during adolescent years. According to Grotevant (1997) this becomes particularly difficult for adoptees because they have to go through the difficult task of "integrating their history as an adopted person into their emerging sense of identity" (p. 9). Adopted people are at a risk of identity confusion because they almost always have to face some difference with respect to culture, appearances, personalities etc. with their adoptive families (Dunbar & Grotevant, 2004). They can have a difficult time coming to terms with the meaning of adoption in their life (Lanz, Iafate, Rosnati, & Scabini, 1999).

However not all adoptions affect the adoptees in the same way. There are various factors that come into play to determine patterns of adjustment. Research has shown that an open and affectionate relationship with the adopted family can help to prevent against adjustment issues (Passmore, Fogarty, Bourke, & Baker-Evans, 2005). Adopted adolescents are less likely to have identity issues in families with an open 'acknowledgement-of-differences' style of communication as compared to families with a close 'rejection of difference' style of communication (Stein & Hoopes, 1985). Age at adoption significantly impacts adoptee adjustment. A study on a sample of over 4000 adolescent adoptees in the United States found that adjustment decreased with an increase in the age at adoption (Sharma, McGue & Benson, 1996). Up until preschool years research shows little difference between adopted and non-adopted children. However at ages where they can comprehend the meaning of adoption i.e. around 5 – 7 years, do significant differences start to appear (Brodinzky, 1987). Particular to Pakistan, there is a lack of research into issues concerning adoptees and adopted families despite an increasing need and practice of adoption. According to reports, one of the two major adoption facilities in one city of Pakistan receives around 20 abandoned infants each month and is giving away around 250 children for adoption each year (Ovais, 2014).

There are no official records pertaining to adoption statistics or adoptee experiences. This research will qualitatively analyze interviews with adoptees residing in Pakistan regarding their experiences. The purpose of this research is to explore their experiences as well the influence of it on their general and future perspectives regarding adoption.

2. Methodology

2.1 Sample

The sample includes a total of 10 adopted adults out of which there were 8 women and 2 men. Their ages range between 20 to 36 years. They were all adopted in early childhood. Out of the total sample, 8 people were adopted by relatives, whereas 2 were adopted by non-relatives. All these people were contacted through snowball purposive sampling technique.

2.2 Measures

An interview was conducted to explore the participant's personal experience as an adoptee and general opinion regarding adoption. They were asked details about their adoption including why and when it happened, how they found out and how it made them feel. They were also asked about their views regarding adoption in general, the society's perception and the role of the media.

2.3 Procedure

The participants were explained the purpose of the study and were assured of confidentiality. They were also told that their participation is completely voluntary, and they could leave anytime they want to. In-depth interviews were conducted with the participants individually. The interview began with questions regarding their personal experiences followed by their general perspective on adoption. The interviews were transcribed and summarized for content analysis.

3. Analysis and Discussion

Every adoption case is unique on its own. Adjustment and experience is dependent on a variety of interacting factors. However analysis has revealed some helpful patterns throughout the ten cases considered in this study.

In all ten cases but one, adoption took place during infancy. A 21 year old adopted at the age of 8 believed things could have been different if she was given away at birth instead. Overall the adoptees found out about the truth between the ages of 5 and 20. In one odd case, the adoptee grew up knowing she had willingly decided to stay with her maternal grandmother.

Acceptance and well-being in each case differs, depending on how and when they found out the reasons for their adoption and attitude of foster parents. More negative feelings are reported in cases where the reason indicated abandonment by the biological parents. Two of the strongest reasons are abandonment because of the child's sex or as a result of broken marriage. One was given up for adoption because she was to be the sixth daughter in a family that wanted a son. She remembers blaming herself and hating her biological parents after finding out the reason for her adoption. In her own words '*Love is not something that comes only from giving birth*'. In another case the adoptee was given away to an aunt who wanted a son to care for her in her old age. He recalled how the news shattered his confidence and developed a sense of hatred for people around him.

Better adjustment and positive experience is observed in cases where truth about adoption was told in childhood within a supportive foster environment. There are three cases where the truth was revealed in the post-puberty ages. A 27 year old adoptee who found out at the age of 20 was shocked on receiving the news. On the contrary a 25 year old female found acceptance easier when she found out at the age of 18, owing to her foster father's habit of telling her adoption themed stories since she was young. Reactions were negative for a 36 year old male who was lied to at first when he voiced his suspicions at the age of 10 but was finally told at the age of 15.

Similarly negative feelings are also reported in cases where the adoptees were made aware of the truth through people other than their foster parents. They wanted their foster parents to trust them enough to break the news themselves. This is especially true for cases where some element of lying was involved. One female adoptee was in contact with her biological mother under the false pretense of her being a cousin living abroad, before finding out the truth from random comments made by people around her. She had a very negative reaction to the truth and reported instances of aggression, physical complaints, school absence and even a suicide attempt at the age of 12.

In another case foster parents denied the truth when inquired about it only to accept it 5 years later. The adoptee strongly feels that if the truth was properly revealed to him, he would have had a chance to cry over it all at once, as he said *"It is better to cry about something all at once rather than secretly crying over it little by little"*. The 21 year old adopted at age 8 was also lied to about her reason for staying at her uncle's place making her believe she was a part of this decision to get adopted. Her apparent temporary decision to stay at her uncle's house was considered a permanent one without her knowledge, making acceptance particularly hard for her. This instilled in her a feeling of guilt associated with her adoption. On the contrary, an adoptee who was told stories regarding adoption by her foster father found it easier to accept the truth even if it came from her biological brother instead of her foster parents.

Adoptees that were in contact with their biological families had the chance to compare their current foster lives with what their life could have been with their biological parents. In one case the adoptee felt much relaxed at her biological parent's house owing to strict foster parents. While another adoptee started appreciating her life with her foster parents after spending some time with her biological parents. In one particular case where the biological mother had moved abroad to America, the adoptee felt bad for being left behind in Pakistan.

There are two cases in particular where the adoptees were in contact with their biological families and reported feelings of rejection from both the foster and biological sides. A 36 year old male adoptee was given away at an early age to an aunt who wanted a son to support her in her old age. On top of already having a bad foster experience he was lied to about his adoption. Now that his foster parents are dead, he tries to maintain contact with his biological family but this effort is not reciprocated by them. In his own words, *"Those who gave me away did not care about me and neither did the people who took me"*. In the other case a 21 year old female was permanently moved to her uncle's place after she agreed to go there temporarily at the age of 8. Neither her foster siblings nor her biological siblings consider her their sister. She felt like she was stuck in the middle and was not given the love she deserved. In both cases the adoptees said they will not consider adoption in the future and it should only happen because of genuine reasons and availability of responsible foster families.

Experiences also vary among the adoptees that are not in contact with their biological parents. An adoptee given up at birth, due to poverty, claimed to have no opinions or feelings regarding his biological family as he considered them to be strangers. If given a choice he would always choose his foster family owing to his positive adoptee experience. Another adoptee that was abandoned by her mother after a broken marriage said she blamed both her parents, specially her father, for walking away. She reported being too upset to be able to contact her mother but felt guilty for not doing so after she found out about her death. She had a positive adoptee experience that was cut short after losing both her foster parents (maternal grandparents) by the age of 16.

Some adoptees also reported how finding supportive spouses, friends and teachers eventually helped them deal with their negative emotions. Majority of the adoptees believed that the society held a negative view of adoption. They tend to sympathize rather than accept. They also believed the media could play a role in increasing acceptance by portraying adoption in a positive way. However one female adoptee believed the media could not do much as adopted children are considered different from others.

When asked about their future plans, six out of the ten adoptees reported no plans of adopting in the future. One said she would consider it only if *'God forbid'* she does not have any children of her own. Majority of the adoptees also believed that adoption should only take place in situations where it could help the adoptee and where the foster parents are willing to take complete responsibility for the child. The foster parents especially the foster mother should be the ones to break the news at an age where the child has reached a maturity level where they could understand what it means. Two adoptees believed it is better to keep adoptions a secret. All but one was completely against adoption if it is not needed, and believed the truth should be revealed by close friends instead of foster parents as one could not fully express themselves emotionally in front of their family.

Research evidence show that good foster care is helpful for children (Smyke, Zeanah, Fox, Nelson, & Guthrie, 2010) and through our study it seemed that a good foster experience is key to better adjustment for adoptees regardless of when and how they received the news or why they were given up. If a foster family makes the adoptee feel accepted and valued there is little room left for adoption related adjustment issues or psychological problems (Dozier, Albus, Fisher, & Sepulveda, 2002).

However to maintain a relationship of trust it is vital that the truth be told by the foster parents themselves before it is accidentally found out through other sources. As in one case familiarizing a child with the concept of adoption since a young age can be a good way to ensure acceptance of the truth in the future.

Also guidance and counseling to both adoptees and foster parents could help in improving relationship and care experience (Nickman, Rosenfeld, Fine, MacIntyre, Pilowsky, Howe, & Sveda, 2005)

4. Limitations and Recommendations

This is a very basic study that was designed to explore experiences of adoptees. Sample was taken from Karachi, experiences of adoptees from other parts of Pakistan might differ. Deeper understanding about the topic can be gained from considering the adopters point of view as well. Future researches can bring to light the perspective of the foster parents along with their adopted children.

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