

BIRTHPARENT ROMANCES AND IDENTITY FORMATION IN ADOPTED CHILDREN

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Adopted children have two sets of parents as possible identification figures. The usually meager facts about the birthparents are shifted and embellished in response to ongoing developmental needs, and constitute a major contribution to identity formation. A description of this developmental course is offered, and implications of birthparent fantasies for the treatment of adopted persons are discussed.

The literature on adopted children has long documented particular and sometimes intense struggles around identity formation, and suggests that in many ways adopted children follow a different developmental course from children who are raised by their biological parents (Anthony *et al.*, 1989; Brinich, 1980; Kirk, 1964; Nickman, 1985a, b; Schechter, 1960; Sorosky, Baran, & Panner, 1975; Stein & Hoopes, 1985). However, we have yet to develop a clear understanding, if any is to be achieved, of the commonalities characterizing these alternative courses of development.

Two topics are pertinent to understanding the paths of identity formation in the adopted child. One is the content and related functions of the child's fantasies about the original parents, which are different from what has widely and historically been known as family romance. The other is the formation of a positive cohesive identity built around the realities of the child's biological and adoptive family experience. In this essay we address the first of these topics,

focusing primarily on the forms and functions of the birthparent romance in the lives of adopted children. We shall suggest that these romances significantly affect the course of their identity formation, and that, unlike the transitory family romance of the unadopted child, the birthparent romance continues to function throughout the development of the adopted child. The form, function and fate of this romance contrasts with the enjoyable and transitory fantasies entertained by many children as an adaptive mode.

FACT AND ROMANCE

Psychoanalytic theory has generally provided the interpretive framework for understanding the developmental functions of the family romance. Freud (1909/1959) suggested that family romance is a ubiquitous phenomenon of childhood representing the individual's adaptations, through compensatory fantasy, to the sometimes harsh realities of development and conflict resolution. Since Freud, psychoanalysts have uniformly applied the concept in normative-

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developmental ways, generally with the same basic understanding (Anthony, 1980; Blum, 1983; Burlingham, 1952; Greenacre, 1958; Watters, 1956). Anna Freud (1942/1973) wrote:

Most children of early school age (6 to 10) possess a secret daydream (the "family romance") which deals with their descent from royal or lordly parents who have only entrusted them to their real more humble families. . . . On the part of the child these fantasies are attempts to deal with the whole range of conflicting emotions toward the parents. (p. 174)

Thus, psychoanalytic developmental theory holds that the emergence of the family romance is an adaptive way of dealing with the series of disappointments children inevitably experience in relation to their parents, and that the family romance functions effectively to maintain narcissistic equilibrium and identity integrity despite such disappointments.

The adopted child may also develop a family romance and divine a set of "noble" parents different from and better than either the adoptive parents or the biological parents. However pleasurable this fantasy may be, though, the adopted child knows that he or she has another set of very real "original" parents.

The term "romance" refers to ideas that are imaginary, lack basis in fact, and entail events that are remote in time and place. Thus, when a child living with biological parents fantasizes another set of parents, the groundless nature of the fantasies in relation to reality defines its character as romance. Fantasies of origin among adopted children, on the other hand, are not romances per se. Instead, based as they are on shards of factual information about the children's pasts, these fantasies are mixed with elements of both fact and fantasy. From the bits of fact that they possess, adopted children develop and elaborate explanations of their adoptions. At the same time, they begin to explain *themselves*, and they struggle to develop a cohesive and realistic sense of who they are and who they can become.

Forty years after Ann Freud's observation, Blum (1983) wrote:

In the typical family romance of natural children the biological parents are denigrated while the wished-for ("adoptive") parents are idealized. In contrast, the adoptive child denigrates both the adoptive parents and the (unknown) biological parents. (p. 144)

The content of the facts that are dispensed to adoptive children is often harsh. One cannot imagine a fact of abandonment that could be warming or sustaining, or that would inherently help a child feel good about him- or herself. Explanations common in twentieth century United States such as "your mother died in childbirth," "your parents died in a car crash," "your parents loved you so much they wanted you to have more than they could give you," and "your parents were too young, too poor, unmarried," all carry conflict-inducing information. Such information does not conjure the images of royal or lordly parents of the family romances seen as typical in the psychoanalytic literature. The painful reality to be confronted by adoptees is that their biological parents did not want, or were unable, to find a way of keeping and rearing their own child. The children feel that they were either "not meant to be" or "intolerable," and may spend a large part of a lifetime struggling with whether this means that the biological parents were bad (inadequate) parents, or that they themselves were bad children, causing their unhappiness, thereby deserving abandonment, and so on.

The adopted child may develop a family romance in order to defend against painful facts, which in itself constitutes a denial similar in function to the transitory romances of their nonadopted counterparts. But for the adopted child, adoption is an inherently complicating factor that converts the normal vicissitudes of identity formation into a substantial struggle. Added to the transitory family romance of the adoptee are fantasies related to facts of origin that will be embellished and modified to meet ongoing developmental needs throughout adolescence and adulthood. In some in-

stances the fantasies will become the driving force behind detailed and persistent searches for biological parents (*Lifton, 1984; Sorosky, Baran, & Panner, 1984*). The few known facts about origins will remain at the core of the birth parent romance and identity struggle for the adopted child.

Disclosure of adoption. Controversy surrounds the issue of how and when in the course of a child's development the topic of origins should be raised (*Peller, 1961; Wieder, 1977b, 1978*). To our knowledge, no systematic data have been collected that would allow an effective resolution. Yet the clinical literature contains enough material to indicate that some uniformity of experience and, possibly, adjustment are likely to exist. Moreover, contemporary descriptions of the cognitive steps taken by children over the course of their development, particularly in regard to kinship understanding, permit consideration of phase-specific tasks, meanings, and coping mechanisms used by children in the service of dealing with the two supraordinate issues of kinship and personal identity formation.

DEVELOPMENTAL PHASES

Brodzinsky et al. (*1984, 1985*) found that preschool-age children demonstrate virtually no understanding of adoptive kinship structures. Children seven to eight years old demonstrate knowledge of the essential distinction between adoption and biological parenthood, including its mediation by an agency or a person outside the family. Children at these ages regularly (that is, across subjects) manifest the conjecture that the biological parents may at any time reclaim the adopted child. Older children (age 8–11) more strongly appreciate the unlikelihood of their actually reappearing. Finally, young adolescents demonstrate a stable conception of adoption as a permanent, legally encased structure.

In a study of children's conceptions of family relationships that compared constructions by unadopted kindergarten, second-

grade, and fifth-grade children, Pickar (*1986*) made compatible observations. He observed stages over which the child's cognitive comprehension of family and kinship structures progressively advanced toward the eventual distinction between blood ties (that is, "real" parents) and nonblood ties, such as adoption.

These systematic data augment the conventional wisdom that children are incapable of comprehending and articulating the concept of adoption until they are six or seven years old, and that, with their animistic and preoperational cognitive functioning, younger children inevitably distort information they have been given about their origins.

Preschool Children

While there is no systematic evidence to suggest that it is a basic tendency, preschool-aged children seem vulnerable to a feeling that being adopted is not as good as not being adopted. Prompted by the comments and actions of others, they sense an incongruity but do not comprehend it. One blond boy with dark-haired adoptive parents was frequently asked where he got his fair hair. Following the agency's recommendation for an open, natural use of the word, his well-intentioned parents casually responded to such inquiries that it was because he was adopted. Frequently hearing assertions of how lucky he was, this four-year-old concluded that all blond children were adopted, and that there was something different about it. He went so far inwardly as to contradict the external praise of his status, and verbalized feelings that "being 'dopted" was probably not so good. The contradiction, we believe, grew from his perception that those commenting on his blondness were registering an incongruity, and it seemed to him that being "lucky" compensated for a perceived difference, perhaps deficiency.

Even without the ability to comprehend the concept of biological versus adoptive parents, it is common for the child to receive the news of adoptive status as reject-

ing, and to experience a loss of status (*Nickman, 1985b*), i.e., of not being "regular" or the way one is "supposed" to be. This seemed to be the case in our four-year-old subject. True, this child, like others of his age, did not fantasize about other parents. He lacked the capacity to think beyond the immediate reality of his day-to-day life with his adoptive parents—who, in the most concrete sense of the word, *were* his parents. Yet the incongruity implied by an equally concrete difference—hair coloration—was disconcerting, outside the realm of the child's ordinary experience of differences between himself and others.

School-Age Children

The inception of the adopted child's family and birthparent romances coincides with the emerging ability to comprehend and perhaps contemplate the idea of having two sets of parents, one adoptive and one biological. The school-age adoptee struggles to determine the meanings and implications of the alter figures. Since facts concerning the adoptee's origins, meager though they may be, are likely to contradict any fantasy of elevated origins, the sorting out of personal roots and identity is bound to be fraught with conflict (*Wieder, 1977a*). During the school years the child is confronted by two overlapping relationship triads, and struggles to integrate the dynamics intrinsic to actual and available object relationships with those intrinsic to phantom object relationships. For example, the disposition to identify with the parent of the same gender leads to the dilemma of *which* parent of the same gender the child will identify with. Thus, there is an enhanced opportunity for assigning qualities of "good" or "bad" to any of the real and fantasized parents.

In imagining the birthparents, the adoptee attempts to answer the question of what caused the adoption. Themes of abandonment and rejection, no matter how muted by favorable current circumstances, are inevitable. Commonly, fault is assigned to one or the other set of parents; self-blame is

also common. Meanness, selfishness, stupidity, or laziness may be attributed to the fantasized original parents, and may augment or affirm the child's own sense of weakness or badness. Struggles with the ordinary issues of sexuality, aggression, physical and mental anomalies, or illnesses can all become the child's "evidence" of his or her own endowed badness. At this age, while capable of abstract and hypothetical thought, the child is still largely absolutist in her or his characterizations. In complex matters, he or she remains largely unable to decenter reasoning from the salient, often personalized, facts or imagined features of an unremembered past.

Parents of children of this age are generally accustomed to the endearing if also sometimes tedious questions children pose concerning their births and what they were like as babies. Such questions may be prompted by a variety of situations, including, of course, spontaneous urgings from within. Baby books and family picture albums frequently prompt excursions into the past. For the unadopted child, the result is usually an affectionate retelling of the past, in which bad traits or unhappy times are relegated to inconsequential episodes in an otherwise secure and preponderantly gratifying life. For the adopted child, however, the basic fact of adoption is a reminder that does not easily relegate itself to the secure enclave of inconsequential events. The fact of adoption acquires meanings for the school-age child that both stimulate romance and complicate the ordinary, comforting function of the family romance.

The birthparent romances of adopted children not infrequently include their half or full biological siblings. Comfort may be sought in the thought that the "bad" biological mother gave all the children away. It is disconcerting to think that she might have kept one or more of the "good" ones. One school-age boy believed that he had an identical twin who had been kept by the original mother. The twin was the good child, he the bad, throwaway child. Adop-

tive parents may unwittingly contribute to the child's bad-baby theory by straining to idealize the biological parents: "They made the greatest sacrifice—they loved you so much that they gave you away to have a better home." To a child, loving and giving away are incompatible.

The adopted child's effort to undo the implied abandonment is fraught with conflict, since the child may both wish and fear that the biological parents will someday reappear to claim him or her. One intellectually precocious youngster became hysterical on his fifth birthday, being certain that the lady playing the piano at the pizza parlor was his birthmother who would kidnap him were she to realize who he was. Having bonded to his adoptive parents, he had only wanted his birthmother to *want* him, not to *take* him. Then he could feel that he was, after all, a good child.

In defense against feelings of being the cast off, unwanted, and bad child, some adopted children develop an overdetermined need to be good. These are what many frequently term "too good" children—terrified that if they misbehave they will once again be discarded.

Preadolescents and Adolescents

Beyond the fact of abandonment, preadolescent adopted children frequently begin to conjecture about the bits of information that have been imparted to them. If the biological parents have been defined as inadequate in their ability to plan and care for a child, this might suggest "bad stock" in the child. There may thus be a strong wish to identify with the adoptive parents as a means of denying or repudiating bad origins. As this can be affected by a concomitant feeling of disloyalty and disingenuousness, a process of oscillating identification and disidentification may be instigated.

Sometimes adopted children have been given physical as well as personality descriptions of their biological parents. They may then experience powerfully ambivalent feelings about the similarities or dis-

similarities, fantasized or otherwise, between themselves and the birthparents. One eight-year-old girl had been informed that her biological mother was very artistic. The adoptive father was also artistic. While the girl herself had artistic ability, her parents noted that she did not seem interested in developing it. In the course of her treatment, it appeared that for her there was a "choice" between identifying with a talented but inadequate female or with a talented and adequate male. The conflict was so strong that she resolved it by rejecting the talent entirely and thereby denying herself its pleasures.

Adoptive status may represent a developmental interference for children during adolescence. Instead of the usual struggles over separation and the establishment of a cohesive sense of self and identity, the adopted child must struggle with the competing and conflictual issues of good and bad parents, good and bad self, and separation from both adoptive parents and images of biological parents.

Ethnically mixed adoptions raise other issues relating to the obvious physical differences between adoptees and their adoptive parents. While the school-age child is subject to the social and psychological dynamics of the adoptive parents' ethnic status, the inherent and implied conflicts associated with these dynamics seem most acute during preadolescence and adolescence. Ambivalent in their identifications, these youths frequently use denial in the service of resolving aroused conflicts on that sector. One biracial child in a white adoptive family habitually displayed the palms of his hands as proof that he was as white as his adoptive parents. An Asian child, also in a white family, habitually expressed surprise when she looked into the mirror. She *felt* that she looked like her family and friends, but was dismayed by periodic confrontations with her actual reflection.

The small bits of information given to the child about the biological parents, ini-

tially comprehended during the school years, become highlighted in the preadolescent's emerging sense of self and its associated processes of identification. As children metamorphose into young men and women, they scan their world to find anchoring points for identification. Experiencing changes in their bodies, they seek information about what the changes mean and how they themselves are likely to turn out as adults. Girls want to know when their mothers reached menarche and how bad *their* cramps were. Boys look at their father's bodies for some sense of predictability. This is a time when physical differences between the child and the adoptive parents become more apparent, salient, and meaningful.

Adopted children have no biological examples to which to turn in this regard. All that they have is what they have been told. Information such as "Your mother was petite," and "Your father was athletic" is not much to go on, and is often embellished with both wishes and fears by the adolescent.

One fact of which adolescents become aware is that their biological parents were sexually active and in most instances irresponsible about birth control. These facts are frequently magnified in portrayals of the biological parents as promiscuous. One young female adolescent expressed distress as she developed much fuller breasts than her adoptive mother. For her it was an indication that she was different from and sexier than her adoptive mother. It also meant that she was a slut, like her birthmother. Both meanings were troubling to her. A 14-year-old boy's experience with his emerging sexuality convinced him that he must be a "stud" like his birthfather.

Sexual identification with biological parents is sometimes defensive. Behaving as they think the these parents must have behaved is a way of saying "my roots weren't so bad—I'm just like him or her." A disidentification with adoptive parents is re-

quired in order to maintain integrity. There can be a period of significant sexual acting out on the part of adopted adolescents, with young adopted women being at higher risk than the norm for pregnancy. The outcome of pregnancy, too, is likely to be determined on the basis of the embellishment of the family romance. The young woman may keep the child both to do what she thinks her original mother "always really wanted, or should have done," and to undo that mother's mistake. Or she may place the child for adoption in order to affirm, perhaps even forgive, her birthmother's decision. She may abort the pregnancy, and this may be an act of self sacrifice—a destruction of the child that should not have been conceived, or it may indicate genuine differentiation from the biological mother in the exercise of an alternative that is healthiest for the young woman.

Aside from sexual issues, other aspects of self-formation emerge from the ongoing family romances of adopted children. Information gathered about the biological parents' academic status, occupation, hobbies, or interests are frequent points of departure for a developing sense of self. An adolescent in a highly educated adoptive family was informed by her parents that her birthmother had never completed high school. This girl had noted that many of her peers who dropped out of school went on to beauty school. From this she imagined her birthmother as a hairdresser and that she, too, would take up that vocation. A handsome, bright, talented 14-year-old was notably unsuccessful in all areas of his life. Having been told that his biological parents were unable to take care of him, he imagined them to be totally nonfunctioning street people. He feared that if he became "too successful" or "prominent" they would figure out who he was and come to him to be salvaged. To avoid this distress, he maintained a low profile of mediocrity. These kinds of struggles with identity and separation are likely to extend well into adulthood.

Adults.

The stage of development between leaving the adoptive family and establishing one's own family is a time when issues of work and maintaining intimate relations become primary. Here again, adopted individuals are faced with many complicated struggles. To be capable of making significant decisions about love, work, and play, it is necessary to achieve a genuine integration of biological roots and the developmental experience. Somehow, information concerning origins must be reconciled with the experience of the adoptive family.

Some adoptees achieve this integration through active demystification of the original family, i.e., through a search and reunion with at least one of the biological parents. Such a course has the advantage of dealing with current realities rather than with facts frozen in time. For those who do not search, the fantasy often remains alive. The degree to which adult adoptees are able to achieve a cohesive integration of self-dynamics may depend on how well they are able to accept the facts as simply facts and to tolerate the ambiguity of their origins.

The ultimate task of adulthood is to achieve a genuine differentiation from one's family of origin. This is the state of recognizing one's self as a new and separate person who can choose which aspects of upbringing to retain and which to modify. The task for the adoptee is to accept his or her biological roots as being as real as his or her adoptive upbringing.

CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

The clinician's awareness of the connection between the family romance and identity formation in adopted children offers opportunities to explore this material in ways that enable the adopted child to work toward a sense of cohesion and adaptive differentiation vis-a-vis both biological and adoptive parents. The therapist can encourage an unfolding of the romance in as much detail as possible, which then helps unearth the paths, magical and otherwise, toward

developing a cohesive sense of self. Asking patients to draw pictures of their families and to write their stories often helps to highlight significant details that may be left unmentioned in verbalization. Making drawings (rather than graphs) of family trees—one biological, the other actual, one fantasied, the other actual—is also a way of eliciting data that may otherwise go unmentioned.

The adoptive parents have their own versions of the biological family story and it is important that they be given expression. They, too, frequently develop a family romance about the adopted child's biological origins. They often base their stories on whatever information they have been given, embellishing them with their own notions about people in general who relinquish parental rights or responsibilities. We believe that these stories are conveyed to their children, both consciously and unconsciously, and that they interact with the child's own. It is common for adoptive parents to want to protect their children from negative facts concerning their heritage, so that such information is sometimes withheld or re-framed in the telling. This practice often inadvertently contributes to adoptees' difficulties in sorting out reality and "real" feelings in relation to the prevailing "story." Adoptive parents need support from the therapist as they confront their children's fantasies and realities, and undertake the work of dealing with these realities as manageable facts in all their lives.

It is possible that clinicians, like adoptive parents, have tended to shy away from discussions of the harsh details of their patients' beginnings, preferring to focus on rescue rather than abandonment. Like many adoptive parents, they inadvertently interfere with the child's need to assimilate his or her story in developing a cohesive sense of self.

CONCLUSIONS

The formation of a cohesive identity is a complex process. In ordinary circum-

stances, the family romance functions as a stabilizing force in the child's developmental struggle to maintain a positive sense of self in the face of disappointments experienced with parents. It serves as a respite from pain and permits stable attachment and continuity in the relationships. The need for the fantasy ceases as the child moves on to the developmental tasks of adolescence.

For adopted children, the birthparent romance fantasy serves a different function and is lifelong. For them, there is an additional romance process which involves gathering facts about their biological origins. These facts, shifted and embellished over the years, constitute the foundation of identity formation and identity conflicts. Having no autobiographical data to call up from their adoptive parents, they must construct their own stories about their genetic roots, conception, prenatal life, and birth. This construction is based on the reality of their adoptive status and on the modicum of information they receive. The facts are harsh and painful. The process of explaining related fantasies is a conflict-ridden process that contrasts strikingly with the respite enjoyed by biological children. As the adoptee struggles with identification with good and bad parents, good and bad self, he or she works toward an integration of roots and experiences of upbringing. The birthparent romance fantasy can be laid to rest only if the integrity is achieved.

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