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Extended Essay—Group 1

Self-conception of Children in Closed and Open Adoptions.

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Contents Page

Abstract…………………………………………………………..

…………………………………..3

Definitional Introduction…………………………..…………………………………4

Self-Concept as it relates to the Individual
Relativism as it relates to the Individual
Self-Concept and Relativism as they relate to Adoption
Adoption

Closed Adoption…………………..…………………………………………………………7

Open Adoption…………………………………………………………………..…..12

About the Adoptee………………………………………………………………………..15

Conclusion…………………………………………………………………………………16

Abstract

In this paper, the definition for self-concept and its relation to identity is established and its meaning is investigated. Its significance with respect to identity formation in lifelong development is also examined. The process of adoption is then reviewed in terms of its variety of forms with a specific focus on the closed and open systems. Because considerable clinical and theoretical studies have been done to show that adoption has a substantial effect on the development of self-concept; this evidence and the conclusions drawn from it will also be reviewed. The adoptee is also examined within a context of their familial and world societies. Factors (like that of adoption) over which adoptees have no control are considered as they contribute to the formation of self-concept as well, with special consideration of the adoptee's adoptive status (open or closed) and how it further applies to an adoptee's task of establishing their self-concept. Further evidence will be reviewed in terms of lifelong developmental consequence and improvement, and conclusions are drawn concerning the open system of adoption and its possible positive effects on the psychological issues surrounding adoption. And finally, steps or approaches different members of the adoption triad can take to increase the chances of a successful self-concept formation are suggested to make for an overall, possibly healthier, and more positive adoptive experience.

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Extended Essay: Adoption

Adoption and Identity: To what extent is self-concept different between children of closed and open adoptions?

Self concept refers to the global understanding a sentient being has of his or herself—it's the composite of ideas, feelings and attitudes that a person has about his/her own worth, capabilities, limitations, and identity. Self-concept is similarly related to, but differs from identity in that it focuses more on the individual's perception of his or herself. Such factors as the values and opinions of others—especially in the formative years of early childhood play more are encompassed in the formation of self-concept, but play more of an important part in the development of identity.

Relativism is the idea that some elements or aspects of experience or culture are dependent upon (relative to) other elements or aspects. Individuals must be considered as relative to the situations to which they belong. Relativism allows variation for a number of things an individual cannot account for. Family background, genealogy gender, race, sexual orientation, and

adoptive status, would fall under this category. These factors are “assigned” components of identity that require an individual to put themselves within a greater context—that of their familial and world society. We as individuals, and who we are, encompasses more than what we perceive ourselves to be. Our self-concepts depend just as much upon ourselves as they do upon contextual elements that lay beyond our control. Once we’ve understood this—that contextual elements define our identity just as much as we do, what those contextual elements are won’t matter as much. The psychological concerns that may arise will be overcome by what instead does matter, our finding ways to accept that which we cannot control and hopefully, successfully develop a healthy self-concept.

Harold Grotevant concluded that “the essence of identity is self-in-context” (Grotevant Family 3: 381), and that three levels of interaction that shape identity: self-reflection, family relationships, and wider social interaction.

So what leads us to believe that self-concept might relevantly differ between adopted and non-adopted children, and furthermore between adoptees? Adoption significantly alters the different levels of interaction that shape identity. The contexts of self, family and society are experienced in a different ways between adopted and non-adopted adolescents. And because adoption comes in diverse forms, the contexts of those will also be experienced differently between adoptees.

There are seven existing adoptive family forms that popularized in the 1990s, they include trans-racial/racially homogenous adoption, international adoption, adoption by homosexual, single, divorced, married, and remarried individuals, and the adoption of infants and older children—with or without handicapping conditions, or from foster care. This paper focuses specifically on open and closed adoption and will generally concentrate on those adoptions by married, heterosexual couples of infants of their same race and of no particular sex. There has been limited research comparing identity in adoptees and non-adoptees. But from what has been done, the general conclusion is that a significant difference between adopted and non-adopted adolescents exists.

The significance of contextual elements is that they have the potential to greatly affect the levels of interaction that shape identity. A contextual element that children in biological families don't have to consider is that of adoption. Adoptees must consider these influences on their identity when (re)considering or (re)evaluating their self-concepts in addition to their adoption. Adoptees are classified under a nontraditional or non-normative title. This is because they, unlike non-adopted adolescents, have to integrate the factor of their adoptions (a part of their identity of which they had no control) into their developing self-concept.

The various family forms aforesaid contribute to the complexity surrounding adoption and give some insight as to why adoptees especially

must be understood within the specific context of their family systems. "For everyone, the roots of character and personality are in family relationships."(Rondell 71) Within the family system of any adoption, a framework traditionally referred to as the Adoption Triad exists. This paper focuses on how this network deals with the dynamics of individual processes – the ways a child develops and views his or herself.

Questions arise universally concerning the nature of the bond between children and their parents—adoptive or biological, and the general nature of adoption as well. The Adoption Triad consists of the child, the adoptive parents (and their extended family), and the birth parents (and their extended family). When a child has been joined in a family of birth and a family of adoption, an adoptive kinship network has been formed. (Lamb 173) Each adopted child has in essence, two families. Evaluating the relationship a child has with each family is vital to establishing a child's identity and self-concept (Grotevant Psychosocial 16:472). Adoptees will likely consider birth parents to at least some degree, whether questioning their motives in placing them up for adoption, fantasizing about various characteristics—physical or mental, or contemplating/initiating searches for them. A child's identity and development have shown to be greatly connected to the dynamics of secrecy and openness within adoptions (Lamb).

Adoption has been divided between two contemporary practices: closed and open. It is because of the major changes regarding openness in adoption

practices that this paper will consider and discuss the closed adoption system first.

CLOSED ADOPTION

Most adoptions in North America prior to the 1970s were arranged so that no contact was permitted between the biological and adoptive parents. Birthparents were excluded from the adoption process and little, if any, information about them was exchanged. Anonymity was maintained between all parties the adoption and was mediated by an agency, whose responsibility was to hold on to and protect all records of the transaction. It's been asserted that this system was meant to encourage the bond and reduce the separation between adoptive parents and their adopted child; that closed records could make it more possible for adopted children to re-establish themselves as biological offspring to their adoptive parents.

Adoption practices have been questioned, challenged and changed by professionals and members involved in adoption since the 1970s due to the belief that contact-permitting options more positively affected those involved in the adoption triad, and especially the adoptees. It has been found in studies that have been replicated all across Europe and the United States that adoptees are referred for psychological treatment between two to five times more frequently than non-adopted individuals. The institution of closed adoption has been responded to such criticism by introducing the notion that closed adoption has less to do with protecting the child but rather, with protecting the

privacy of the birth parents—even if it is at the expense of the adoptee's knowledge of a crucial part of her past and identity (Grotevant Adoptive 49: 379-380).

The practice of closed adoption also seemed to be consistent with attitudes of the era—its domination for most of the 20th century was perpetuated by a variety of motivations—most of which it seemed were influenced by the stigmas circulating at the time as well. One adoptive mother strongly put it, "In our society, if a young woman keeps an unplanned pregnancy, people will normally say, 'at least she didn't give it up for adoption. Very few, if anyone, support women who are brave enough to give a child they have born a better life" (Liptak 22). Here it's evident that one intention behind the closed adoption records was to protect adoptees from social criticism—from being associated with the stigmas of pregnancy and childbearing out of wedlock, infertility, and poverty at that time.

Clinical social workers in Los Angeles, California, along with Arthur D Sorosky, Annette Baran and Reuben Pannor, attempted to examine the complex relationships among birth parents, adoptees, and adoptive parents in the 1978 publishing of The Adoption Triangle. Based on their observations over forty years of practice as psychotherapists and researchers, Baran and Pannor pioneered a study and concluded that the negative effects of closed adoption definitely include, but are not limited to the adoptees. For the Adopted Children in particular, they said that they will suffer from the secrecy imposed in closed

adoptions— "particularly during adolescence when they often experience greater identity conflicts than members of the non-adopted population" (Baran, Pannor 231). The process of developing an individual's identity, let alone self-concept, is more complicated for adoptees. And the level of complication is greater for children adopted past the stage of infancy.

For infants, if the mother figure changes during the early months of life "the disruption is his psychological life is usually minimal, if the new mothering person meets all basic needs and remains constant." (Rondell 71) But for children adopted past that early nurturing stage, and family structure has been disrupted as have the close relationships and then not immediately replaces, "the child has difficulty in maintain constant figures with whom to identify" and consequently "his sense of self is shaken." (Rondell 71) Self-concept development is a life-long process. Psychological, cognitive and social changes that we consciously perceive and consider significant, will result in our (re)consideration and (re)evaluation of our self-concepts at every age, and at any time. It would seem best that one has a sense of permanency and constancy, during crucial times of transition—like between childhood and young adulthood—to make the development of self-concept, an already complex and vital task during that time, as smooth as possible.

Self-concept, potentially endangered by each change, could be helped by a consistent environment. Such would enable the adopted child to find ways to

not only identify with, but integrate the factors that contribute so much to their identity (Rondell 74).

But the policies of closed adoptions are inflexible to any desires adoptees may have to learn more about their biological histories (Baran, Pannor 232). Serious problems may develop as a result. In Baran and Pannor's studies, they describe these adoption-related identity conflicts as resulting in "identity lacunae [gaps]," (Baron, Pannor 232). Since the process of identification commences very early in a child's life (Rondell 70), the basis for things like self esteem, which is eventually reflected in the child's self-confidence and in his ability to achieve and formulate future goals, lies in the experiences of their early stage of development. (Rondell 70) Such gaps can lead to feelings like shame, embarrassment, and low self-esteem and damage a child's self-concept (Baran, Pannor 232).

At some point we ask ourselves, "Who am I?" To answer such a question would involve self-reflection and necessitate the considerate and evaluation of ourselves within particular contexts, with special consideration of the factors over which we had no control. To establish any level meaning, it wouldn't be enough to identify what they are—rather, we would have to consider and evaluate what they mean. While some of the aforesaid "assigned" qualities are relatively fixed, self-concept works on synthesizing them to one's identity. An adoptive child's adoption is a factor of their identity. With that individual's formation of commitments, values, and beliefs; they must come to terms with it

as an external contextual element that contributes to who they are, like that of family and society. Self-concept then becomes about integration; weaving the individual identity elements together to form an integrated whole identity.

The next step would then be to establish the extent to which each element comprises one's whole identity. An adopted child specifically has to consider the prominence of their adoption as it pertains to their whole. They have to decide the extent to which their adoptive identity contributes to it, and whether they find this factor of higher, lesser or equal significance to the others.

A survey study of 881 adolescents adopted as infants was done in 1994 that documented the connection between adoption and identity. Benson, Sharma and Roehlkepartain found that 27% of adopted adolescents endorsed the statement that adoption is a big part of how I think about myself, and 41% said they thought about adoption at least 2 to 3 times per month or as frequently as daily (Lamb 180). Their research also showed that girls were more likely than boys to report that adoption is connected to their identity; they also reported thinking about adoption more frequently than boys did. "On average, the adopted adolescents in the study demonstrated levels of self-esteem comparable to that of non-adopted age-mates, and the results did not support clinically based assertions that adopted children in general are poorly adjusted" (Lamb 180). Grotevant observed that females appear to be more

adept with relational domains that regard social decisions like that of integrating adoptive identity, than males are. (Grotevant Adoptive 49: 382-3)

H. David Kirk, a sociologist and adoptive father, was one of the first to develop one of the few social science theories specifically addressing the dynamics of adoptive families in the 1950s and early 1960s. According to his theory, the parent-child relationship and its grounding in mutual trust relies on honest acknowledgement that adoptive parenthood has its respective differences from biological parenthood. One of Kirk's aims has been to remove any sense of shame from adoptive parenthood and to help professionals and the public view adoption as merely a different route to parenting—not a deviant one (Lamb 177).

Although Brodzinksy acknowledges that there a relation between acknowledgement of difference and healthy functioning exists, he suggested in 1987, that acknowledgment can be taken too far, and that too much acknowledgment -insistence of difference, can be harmful to the family. He referenced parents who always introduce their child as an 'adopted daughter'. By doing so, these parents indirectly create distance in the parent-child relationship by always indicating that their kinship is due to adoption rather than to birth (Lamb 177).

OPEN ADOPTION

Because open adoption is relatively new, and its impact on the adoption triad has only been recently addressed, the movement toward open adoption

will continue to be a controversial one. But from the few conducted studies with reasonably sized samples, and despite the methodical problems of them being small representative samples, many have become convinced that secrecy and anonymity are undesirable within the adoption system.

As societal views of adoption have moved away from secrecy toward openness, not only adoptees, but both sets of parents of the adoption triangle have been challenged to reconsider what it means to be involved in adoption. One birthmother who gave her child up for adoption in 1967 said, “In the sixties, the catchword was, ‘we’ll protect you, we’ll give you anonymity.’ That was the sales pitch. The sales pitch of the eighties is openness. Promise the birthmother openness and you’ll get her baby” (Liptak 22).

Open adoption unlike closed adoption, involves contact and communication between the adoptive and biological parents. But the levels of contact can take a variety of forms. It could very well consist of no more than letters and phone calls, or a yearly photo—perhaps with the adoption agency to act as liaison, to the birthparent becoming part of the child’s extended family, whether for the first couple of years or throughout the adoptees life (Baran, Pannor 30). Regardless, the system sets up a way for the birthparent and adoptive parents to know how to get in touch with each other should the need arise.

The major objections to the system of open adoption are generally the result of the common misconceptions that circulate it. A few of them include

the notion that couples will not adopt children unless they can be guaranteed anonymity and secrecy. Or, birthmothers want and need anonymity to move forward in their lives and put the experience of pregnancy and relinquishment behind them. Or, adoptees will be confused by contact with their birthparents and may become emotionally disturbed as a result of being aware of and dealing with two mothers during their developmental years (Baran, Pannor 233-4).

Because research on this topic has been inadequate to answer the basic questions about the dynamics of adoptive families involving contact between the families of birth, Grotevant and McRoy (1997, 1998) designed a research project that focused on the consequences of variations in openness in adoption for birth mothers, adoptive parents, and adopted children, and for the relationships within these family systems. Three levels of openness were investigated: confidential adoption, in which no identifying information was shared between birth parent(s) and the adoptive family and no contact occurred after six months post-placement; mediated adoption, in which a third party (typically the adoption agency) serves to relay non-identifying communications between the birth parent(s) and adoptive family; and fully disclosed adoption, in which identifying information has been shared among the parties and ongoing contact (usually in the form of face-to-face meetings) occurs. (Lamb 175) Details of the results may be found in several reports, but what the researchers

found was that the results did not support that more openness would enhance child's self esteem, or self-concept.

But in contrast, Ruth G. McRoy and her colleagues at the University of Texas conducted a pilot study of seventeen adoptive family and birthparents. Given the balance of the risks and values of openness in adoption, the results also indicated that "the greatest benefit and the least risk seem to occur in families with semi-open adoptions" (Liptak 39).

The benefits are not always easy to see, but within context, open adoption placements seem generally more promising. Below is a summary of page 235 in Baran and Pannor's The Adoption Triangle of the benefits open adoption might include:

1.) Birthparents assume more responsibility from the decision to relinquish their child, and as full participants in the placement and entrusting of the child to a known family, they are better able to ameliorate the feelings of loss, mourning, and grief.
2.) Adoptees' feelings of rejection by the birthparents can be greatly diminished.
    - They'll be able to gain a realistic understanding of the problems that led to adoptive placement and such disclosure will permit the acceptance of the situation. Also, the notion that child was abandoned and forgotten will be dispelled by continued contact with the birthparent.

- Searches and reunions are unnecessary and eliminated
- Important background information –including genetic and medical histories –is readily available—it is important to know our genetic inheritance as such knowledge to help us anticipate problems of health in the future.

3.) Adoptive parents, knowing the birthparents of their children, can prevent the fears and fantasies that might otherwise have a negative effect on their children and their relationships with them.

- Knowing the birthparent will enable adoptive parents to provide the answers to all their child's unavoidable questions and background information based on first-hand knowledge and direct contacts.

When all is said and done, an open adoption seems to be is the best approach as "It [open adoption] minimizes emotional and psychological harm." (Baran, Pannor 236) But perhaps, the challenge today is no longer to determine whether or not adoption should be open or closed but rather, to ensure that it continues to evolve in the best way possible. While the respective roles of the birth and adoptive parents within the adoptive triad deserve careful consideration, "in the final analysis, it is the adoptee whose well-being is central." (Baran, Pannor 236)

ABOUT THE ADOPTEE

Is it possible that if more recognize this one fact— that adoption is about the child's best interest, then whether an adoption is open or closed won't

matter? Perhaps, after reconsideration and evaluation of the facts, one might reprioritize that the treatment of the issue is rather what matters most. The members of the triad—of the familial and world society in which we co-exist—need to respect the situation of adoption rather than try to change it. If everyone considered each other, and was reminded that the children are the focus, maybe the ultimate goal could be reached amidst all the controversies—to use all the means available within contemporary society to create the healthiest individuals possible. After all, we consider and evaluate ourselves within the greater context of our familial and world societies. They are major contributors to the overall development of everyone's self-concept, not just children of adoption.

Ways in which to promote the development of a healthy self-concept of adoptive children is to recognize the relevance of discourse. Open adoptions are much like families of divorce in that they too are a model of cross-family communication. Good communication between the biological family and the adoptive family would only positively affect the situation. Grotevant assessed that "children thrive best when the adults are able to have a civil reasonable relationship with each other." (Grotevant Adoptive 49: 384) In this case contact is the factor of consideration to the successful formation of the adoptive child's self-concept, and Grotevant argues that collaboration will best enhance the socio-emotional experience of adoption.

Whether an adopted child is grown or infant, and within the closed or open system of adoption, he/she brings with him a background in which the adopted family has not played a part. Here lies the adoptive parent's responsibility to their child to understand his/her circumstances and learn about his/her biological origins. (Rondell 78) The child's knowledge of his background need not interfere with the bonds that have grown between him and his adoptive family." (Rondell 79)

CONCLUSION

Adoption comes in a variety of forms, but closed or open, each presents a different challenge to the overall formation of one's self-concept. Birthparents, adoptive parents, and adoptees will continue to struggle with the many issues that the option of adoption brings up. For now, it can only be suggested that the dynamics of family and a society can have substantial impact on lives, and development of self-concept of the adoptees and such should be acknowledged by everyone.

While a negative experience of adoptive identity development can cause great psychological damage, adoption itself, closed or open, does not have an intrinsically negative effect on adoptees' sense of self-concept. It can be resolved that Adoption is simply yet another dimension of personal identity that one must consider when evaluating their self-concept. And self-concept can differ substantially, or very little depending on how the parties involved (within the adoption triad) approach it. While there are some indications that open

adoptions are more conducive to a child's developmental process, the most important thing is for that child to feel comfortable with his or her status as an adoptee and find some way to positively integrate this element of his or herself into a functional personal identity.

While it can complicate the lives of adoptees, adoption may also just as well enrich them. Despite our lack of control over some of our "assigned" contextual elements, the integration of adopted identity into the individuals' whole identity is the personal choice of each adoptee—no study can measure precisely, the extent to which that adoptee is affected by it.

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