

Learning about the outcomes of adoption

I am sometimes asked on what research I base my theory of adoption loss and grief. My response is to point out that, although there are particular difficulties with quantitative research into adoption outcomes, qualitative research in the adoption field can be of considerable value.

Quantitative research is based on a sample group, which is designed to be numerically representative of the population being studied. This type of research is generally conducted under strict conditions to ensure accuracy of results. Qualitative research, on the other hand, is generally based on interviews with a number of individuals and allows them to express their feelings in a more open and less structured manner. Regardless of which type of research is conducted, the manner of collecting the information should always be made clear. The difficulty with adoption-related research has always been that of obtaining a representative sample. Because those whose lives have been affected by adoption are not a readily-accessible section of the community, it is impossible to say in any study conducted into the outcomes of adoption, that the conclusions drawn will necessarily apply universally.

For example, in one study about adoption outcomes which I read, certain conclusions were reached, based on interviews with adults who had been adopted as children. These conclusions were published, quoted and repeated, without any acknowledgement that the sample group consisted of only *three* people and could not be considered to be representative. It is important, therefore, when reading about research, to access the original work, to ensure that the conclusions are supported by reliable data.

I have written two books and many articles about adoption. My work is based on my personal experience as a mother who lost a child through adoption, on my experience of being involved with post-adoption services for the last sixteen years, both as a volunteer and in employment as a counsellor, on my experience as a social worker in private practice and on my experience as a presenter and educator, having travelled to numerous locations around the world and met with a large number of professionals and members of the adoption community. My theory of adoption loss and grief has grown out of my interactions with many people whose lives have been affected by adoption, over a long period of time, combined with my study of academic literature on loss and grief theory. I have written my books, not to tell people how they feel, nor how they should feel, but to help them to understand why they feel the way that they do, about the effects of adoption separation in their lives.

Many other authors have also produced very useful and interesting work on adoption-related topics. These works represent different perspectives and positions on the outcomes of adoption separation. In some cases, authors write simply to express their opinions or describe their experiences, with no attempt to support their position by reference to research, either quantitative or qualitative. Before accepting any adoption-related material as having value, I believe that it is wise to enquire into the background of the author and to examine the basis for their work. It may be simply a collection of ideas and opinions, with no supporting data. On the other hand, it may be based on data which are unreliable. Each reader has the right, of course, to agree or disagree with the views expressed by any author.

There has been considerable discussion about whether or not useful research about the long term outcomes of adoption separation was available in the 1960s and 1970s, when so many adoptions took place in Australia, New Zealand, the USA, Canada, the UK and Ireland. My view is that it is impossible to assess accurately and usefully the outcomes of adoption separation, until many years after the event. In some studies, for example, mothers have been asked within a few years of the loss of their children, how they felt about the adoption. During the period when their children are growing up, many mothers are still numb from the loss of those children and protect themselves from facing their grief, by taking the position that the adoption was 'for the best'. It is often not until the child reaches adulthood that the mother is able to confront her loss and then her grief may begin to surface. For adopted people, also, it is often some years into adulthood before they are ready to acknowledge their losses. Their grief may begin to stir between the ages of twenty and thirty and they may then begin to

consider reuniting with their families. For many who have been separated by adoption, their grief is buried until much later in life.

For any useful research about the *long term outcomes* of adoption separation to have been available in the 1960s, therefore, there would have to have been a significantly large sample of both parents who had lost children to adoption and adults who had been adopted as children, between the 1930s and 1940s, who were willing to come forward and speak publicly about their experiences. Not only were there not a large number of adoptions taking place in those years, but public exposure of adoption experiences and of the emotions involved was, at that time, strongly discouraged. While there may well have been articles or books written in the 1960s and 1970s, expressing opinions about the long term outcomes of adoption separation, therefore, they could not have been based on reliable research, either qualitative or quantitative, because a representative sample of the relevant population was not available.

Because there were so many adoptions in the 1960s and 1970s, however and because so many of those who were separated by adoption at that time have been willing to speak out, we do now have data on which to form a view of the long term outcomes of adoption. This means that we now have the opportunity to plan confidently for the future, by learning from the experiences of the past. This long term perspective was not available thirty to forty years ago.

It was because I recognised that the adoptions which have already taken place have left a devastating legacy of pain and grief for so many people, that I wrote my books. My aim is to assist those whose lives have been affected by adoption separation to understand their experience and by understanding it to be able to manage it better. Being separated from a family member by adoption can lead to a debilitating feeling of disempowerment. Understanding both the experience and the emotions involved can assist us in building a renewed sense of self-determination.

Thanks to those who have been willing to speak out about their adoption experiences, we can now educate the community about the long term outcomes of adoption separation and argue for adequate and appropriate post-adoption services and for the creation of more child-centred alternatives for children in need of care.

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Evelyn Robinson, who is a counsellor, educator and author of

Adoption and Loss – The Hidden Grief

Adoption and Recovery – Solving the mystery of reunion

Adoption Reunion – Ecstasy or Agony?

Adoption Separation – Then and now

welcomes contact from interested readers.

Postal address: Clova Publications
PO Box 328
Christies Beach
South Australia 5165

E-mail: erobinson@clovpublications.com

For further information about Evelyn and her work, please visit her web site:

Web site: www.clovpublications.com