

Some thoughts on shame

We know from work produced by those involved and others who have an interest in the area that, in the middle of the twentieth century, in many Western countries, unmarried mothers were frequently shamed into allowing their babies to be adopted by married couples. Sometimes the mother felt this as a personal shame and sometimes her family felt shamed by her condition and pressured the mother to accept the adoption for their sake. Unmarried mothers were also advised by others that if they did not allow the adoption to take place, their children may well carry this shame and suffer because of it. At the heart of this notion of shame was the social and religious disapproval of sexual relationships outside of marriage, which was widespread at that time.

In the years after the adoption took place, some mothers reconsidered their position and felt that perhaps they could have been stronger and resisted the pressure to be parted from their children. They then assumed an added level of shame for what they perceived to have been their own weakness in complying with the demands of society at the time, especially as social expectations around pregnancy and marriage moderated considerably over the years. Shame can be a very powerful emotion and, when internalised, can have a long term impact on the way that people view themselves and the way that they interact with others. In some cases the fathers of these children were similarly affected.

Although adoption was intended to protect the children of unmarried parents, some adults who were adopted as children have reported that they grew up feeling ashamed of being adopted. They felt that joining a family through adoption meant that they were in some ways inferior to children who were raised in the families into which they were born. The consequences which they have encountered have been similar to those experienced by the parents who were prevented from raising them. Some adoptive parents have also felt a degree of shame related to their infertility.

One outcome of this sense of shame has been that many whose lives have been affected by adoption separation have suffered symptoms of depression and/or anxiety, at certain times in their lives. A significant percentage of this section of the population has either died by suicide or has attempted suicide – sometimes many years after the separation event. While others have not had such an extreme reaction, they have often experienced difficulties with interpersonal relationships, including avoidance of emotional intimacy.

For others the impact of their sense of shame has been quite different. Psychologists tell us that the inability to process shame in healthy ways can lead to symptoms of Narcissistic Personality Disorder, which can be displayed in a lack of empathy and a need to be in control. These traits have been observed in those who have experienced adoption-related shame. Those affected, because of their fragile self-esteem, often bully and blame others. Narcissistic Personality Disorder can have a negative impact on relationships with family members and work colleagues.

Members of the adoption community have chosen a range of ways in which to manage their feelings of shame. Some have sought professional assistance. While many have found post-adoption counselling to be of great value, unless professionals have a deep understanding of the long term impact of adoption separation, they may not recognise the consequences of shame in the lives of clients from the adoption community. Others have sought support from those who have shared their adoption separation experience, through membership of support and advocacy groups. While these groups can provide a safe and nurturing environment, there is also the danger of them suffering from the influence of those who have not confronted and managed their own shame and who exhibit blaming, bullying and controlling behaviour.

In spite of the challenges, many of those whose lives have been affected by adoption separation have been successful in viewing their experiences from a more balanced perspective and ensuring that shame does not have serious, long term negative consequences in their lives. Some have also been able to assist others with similar issues.

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