

THE POSTADOPTION EXPERIENCE OF SURRENDERING PARENTS

Eva Y. Deykin, Dr. P .H., Lee Campbell, M.Ed., Patricia Patti, B.S.N.

In order to ascertain the effects on subsequent life adjustment of having relinquished a child for adoption, a survey was conducted among 334 individuals, most of whom are members of Concerned United Birthparents. Findings indicate that having surrendered a child is perceived by these respondents as having a protracted negative influence on their lives in the areas of marriage, fertility, and parenting. Implications for adoption work and policy are discussed.

This investigation describes the current life adjustment of parents who surrendered a child for adoption and evaluates selected variables as determinants of present adjustment. An understanding of the extended impact of adoption on this group of parents is important since it is possible that both the number of children born to single women and the proportion of such children adopted will grow as a result of complicated access to abortion, reduced welfare benefits, and a public policy which stresses adoption as the best option for young single mothers.

During the past 20 years, increasing numbers of single mothers have chosen to raise their children. Fifteen years ago, 80% of out-of-wedlock newborn babies

were placed for adoption; last year only 4% of such children were surrendered.^{1,12} A less moralistic view of premarital sexual activity, a high divorce rate making single parenthood commonplace, and the rise of the women's rights movement may all have played a role in affording single women the opportunity to raise their children. Nonetheless, such a major societal change could not have taken place without the coexistence of adequate social services and income maintenance programs.

Recently, eligibility for and benefits of welfare programs (food stamps, Medicaid, and Aid to Families with Dependent Children) have been severely curtailed. Concurrently, several bills

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have been proposed which seek to outlaw abortion, prevent federal court interference in local antiabortion rulings, and define the beginning of life as the moment of conception.^{11,13} The Adolescent Family Life Act, enacted by the 96th Congress, requires that grantees of funds appropriated under the Act notify parents when unemancipated minors seek prescribed contraceptives, promote adoption for adolescent parents, and refuse abortion counseling or referral. The combination of current fiscal cutbacks and proposed "right to life" legislation poses the prospect of a high percentage of young single mothers relinquishing children for adoption.

The traditional view of adoption is that it simultaneously meets the needs of the mother, the child, and the prospective adoptive couple. As three distinct clients are served at the same time, the potential for conflict of interest exists. Since an irrevocable decision on the part of the mother is considered essential, there is little incentive to encourage her to verbalize grief. Conversely, the focus of work has been to help the mother reconstitute her life quickly by bolstering the defenses of denial and repression at the cost of other emotional needs. The validity of such a stance is now challenged by increasing numbers of parents seeking data on their surrendered children.

In an attempt to deal with some of these emotional conflicts, a small number of people joined together in the mid 1970s to form a discussion and support group that formed the nucleus of Concerned United Birthparents (CUB), now a nationwide organization with a membership of 1500. The availability of this group as a unique study population, coupled with projected adoption trends,

has sparked the current investigation. The results of this study may be useful in formulating adoption policy or law, in structuring family support programs, and in the design of mental health services.

Despite the recognized importance of natural parents in the adoption process, relatively little is known of the impact of adoption on their subsequent life. The results of three recent studies indicate that child surrender remains an issue of conflict and intrapersonal difficulty even years after the adoption. Pannor *et al*⁷ studied 38 natural parents and found that the majority still experienced mourning and feelings of loss. While not specifically designed to assess the impact of adoption on subsequent adjustment, this study suggested that the parents involved continue to carry a considerable emotional burden. Burnell and Norfleet³ followed up 300 women, members of the Kaiser-Permanente prepaid medical plan, who in the previous three years had placed a child for adoption. The subjects' medical and maternity status and their perceptions of child surrender were ascertained by means of a mailed questionnaire. Based on a 26% response rate, the authors reported that gynecological, medical, and psychiatric problems were each present in about 60% of the subjects. Depression, reported by 40% of the sample, was the most common emotional disorder. Rynearson,⁹ in a study of 20 women in psychotherapy who had given up children for adoption, found that fantasies of restitution were common, and that subsequent parenting behavior was characterized by intense attachment and overprotection. The lack of a control group makes it impossible to assess whether the past experience of

this group constitutes a risk factor for psychiatric difficulties.

In the study presented here, we attempt to relate various aspects of current functioning to personal and demographic characteristics and to variables related to the process of surrender. This study is not designed to assess the overall impact of adoption on the subsequent life adjustment of surrendering parents. No comparable control group was available for study. Furthermore, since the membership of CUB is a self-selected group composed of individuals who might differ from nonmembers on a number of personal characteristics (age, education, social class, personality type, etc.), the findings of this survey may not be applicable to all parents who have given up children for adoption.

METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire designed to elicit information on members' current life status and adjustment, as well as on the process which had led to the surrender of the child for adoption, was published in the August 1980 issue of the *Communicator*, the official newsletter of CUB.* The purpose of the study was explained in an accompanying article, which encouraged participation. Readers who were willing to be contacted at a later date could so indicate by signing the questionnaire and by providing their address and telephone number. Data from the questionnaires were coded, and frequency distributions were run for all variables. Associations between variables were assessed and statistically tested by chi-square analysis satisfying SPSS computer programming.

A total of 364 natural parents completed questionnaires, 339 of whom indicated that they were CUB members. Responders constituted 40% of the membership at that time. Respondents who had relinquished more than one child were excluded from the sample on the assumption that issues attending multiple surrenders might be different. The final sample consisted of 334 respondents (321 mothers and 13 fathers). Characteristics of the sample are summarized in TABLE 1. The educational attainment of the sample was surprisingly high, perhaps reflecting the self-selected nature of the respondents. To assess adjustment, we investigated four areas of life functioning: search activity, marital interaction; subsequent reproduction, and parenting behavior. We hypothesized that life functioning having to do with spousal relationships, reproduction, and parenting would be the most likely affected since these areas are at the very core of every birth experience.

FINDINGS

Characteristics of the Adoption Process

The majority of respondents (76.3%) had held, or at least seen, their child prior to surrender, although for most the adoption of the child had occurred within the first month of the child's life. External factors, including family opposition, pressure from physicians or social workers, and financial constraints, were cited by 69% of the sample as the primary reasons for surrender. Only 14% of the respondents identified personal factors such as age, uncompleted education, unpreparedness for par-

Table 1

DEMOGRAPHIC AND PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF STUDY SAMPLE			
CHARACTERISTICS	MEAN	RANGE	N (%)
Current Age	35.5 yrs	19-76	
Age at Child's Birth	19.8 yrs	13-44	
Education (yrs)	14.0 yrs	10-20	
Marital Status			
Never married			43 (13.1%)
Married			226 (68.3)
Divorced/separated			50 (15.0)
Widowed			9 (2.6)
Subsequent Children			
None			125 (37.9)
One			44 (13.3)
Two or more			161 (48.8)

enthood, or shame as the major reasons for adoption, while the remaining 17% cited other factors. For 85% of the sample, adoption had been arranged through a social service agency; for 7% by lawyers or physicians; and for the remainder it was implemented privately. Pregnancy and subsequent child surrender took place for most respondents at an early age when they were in the midst of their education. Yet, a high proportion of the study subjects continued their education through high school or beyond.

Determinants of Search Activity

To ascertain whether the surrender of a child continued to be an issue of importance, we asked respondents to indicate whether at any time they had considered searching for their surrendered child. The vast majority (96%) responded affirmatively, and 65% indicated that they had actually initiated a search. Since the desire to search for a surrendered child was almost universal among the respondents, and was thus a nondiscriminating variable, we grouped those respondents who had never

thought of searching with those who had considered it but had not actively searched. This combined group of 118 "nonsearchers" was then compared to the group of 215 respondents who had undertaken an active search.

We evaluated several personal, demographic, and historical variables relevant to the surrendering parent, the surrendered child, and the process of surrender, to determine whether any were associated with subsequent search activity. TABLE 2 lists the variables assessed, and displays their chi-square values. Only the primary reason for surrender and the elapsed time since surrender were significantly related to subsequent search activity. Those individuals who reported that adoption was the result of external pressure (family, social workers, or money) were significantly more likely to have searched than were those who invoked personal reasons such as youthful age, unpreparedness for parenthood, or a desire to complete schooling. Elapsed time since surrender was also associated with search activity. Parents who had surrendered children more than 12 years ago were

Table 2
CHARACTERISTICS OF STUDY SAMPLE BY SEARCH ACTIVITY

CHARACTERISTICS	SEARCHERS	NONSEARCHERS	CHI SQUARE
Marital Experience			
Ever married	190	97	3.685 (ctf=1)
Never married	22	21	
Education			
Less than high school	15	8	0.8111 (ctf=3)
High school graduate	131	73	
College graduate	50	30	
Beyond college	16	6	
Age at Surrender of Child			
≤17 years	65	30	0.864 (df=1)
≥18 years	150	88	
Sex of Child			
Male	106	51	1.1043 (df=1)
Female	108	67	
Contact With Child Before Surrender			
Saw child	167	87	0.6632 (df=1)
Did not see child	48	31	
Desire for Child			
Wants to repossess	82	46	3.291 (df=1)
Does not want to repossess	122	67	
Primary Reason for Surrender			
External pressure	148	64	9.623* (df=2)
Own preference	19	23	
Other	32	20	
Time Elapsed Since Surrender			
≤ 7 years	12	20	37.766** (df=3)
8-12 years	31	40	
13-17 years	89	39	
≥18 years	83	19	

*p<.01; **p<.001.

more likely to have searched than those who surrendered children recently. A direct time relationship was evident. Among parents who had surrendered a child within the past seven years, only 37% had actively searched; the corresponding percentages of searchers among those who relinquished children 8-12, 13-17, or 18 or more years ago, were 43%, 69% and 81%, respectively. Several variables were not associated to search activity. Present desire to retrieve the child, educational attainment, age at surrender, contact with infant prior to adoption, subsequent marriage,

other births, and adoption facilitator were not predictive of searches. Written comments by respondents indicated that search activity was both emotionally taxing and rewarding:

After ten long painful years, it gives me peace of mind that I am making every possible effort to locate my daughter. It's scary though, not knowing what the outcome will be.

The disappointments are so devastating. Each time a new lead fails. I am so depressed. However, it's so exciting every time I can find out something new.

For other respondents, searching had become a consuming activity, eroding

other aspects of their life. The pressing, obsessional nature of searching is seen in this comment:

It's very hard to be brief. I have had one letdown after another. I can't find out anything. It's almost as if it (the birth) never happened. I am very frustrated. I have become obsessed with finding her. I've lost a lot of sleep and have headaches all the time. I think of her every minute of the day.

Subsequent Marriage

Of the 280 subjects who had been married subsequent to the surrender of the child, and who also provided information on marital interaction, 71% stated that their earlier birth experience had colored their marital interaction. Subjects who had attained a high level of education or those who were married to the other parent (17% of all respondents) were most likely to regard their past experience as a negative influence on marriage. Examples of extreme stress among couples who had surrendered their child are evident in the following statements:

My husband was the birthfather and had made me feel guilty about the adoption. We could never talk about our daughter without feeling guilty and miserable. I felt so bad when I sent our children (subsequent births) to visit their grandparents in another state. I didn't want them to go but my husband insisted.

I am bitter against my wife and her parents for giving away the child. I was bitterly opposed from the start, but was allowed no say in the matter. My first attempt to attend college after my son's birth was a disaster. I had to drop out. It was a very difficult period. I even considered suicide.

Yet, for other couples, the shared loss became the cement of a fragmented relationship. Despite unhappy marriages, they seemed to stay together because their common bereavement was a stronger bond than the forces pulling them apart:

It's been hard to forgive him for pressuring to give up our baby. We have no other children and in a way that has brought us closer together because now he cares too. We continue to fear that our marriage would not last if we had another child.

Or:

We have clung to each other through the most terrible times. Neither one of us could bear to have us end in divorce.

While surrendering parents married to each other bear an especially high risk of marital difficulty, other subjects also attributed their marital problems to issues of allegiance, commitment, and jealousy resulting from their prior experience of childbirth and surrender.

Subsequent Fertility

Interest in the subsequent fertility of parents who have given up children for adoption was sparked by the common but unsubstantiated impression that such individuals hold complicated attitudes toward subsequent reproduction and may be at elevated risk of secondary infertility. Among the 334 survey respondents, 308 provided information on their subsequent fertility and reproductive attempts. In this subgroup, 208 (64%) had been successful in having at least one live-born child following the surrender of the index child; 45 subjects (14%) reported that they had tried but been unable to produce another child; and 55 respondents (17%) stated that they had chosen to remain childless. Eliminating from consideration the 55 subjects who had not wanted other children, the rate of secondary infertility among the study sample is thus 16.2%. This rate is statistically significantly higher ($p < .001$) than the 6% general population rate of secondary infertility among couples who have had one child

Table 3
 IMPACT OF CHILD SURRENDER ON SUBSEQUENT MARRIAGE

SUBJECT	IMPACT ON MARRIAGE				CHI SQUARE
	NONE	MIXED	POSITIVE	NEGATIVE	
Age at Time of Surrender					
≤17	25	10	9	39	5.492
≥ 18	49	47	16	81	(df=3)
No. of Years Since Surrender					
≤ 7	5	3	0	7	9.19
8-12	14	10	10	25	(df=9)
13-17	27	25	9	54	
≥18	28	19	6	34	
Education					
Less than high school	12	1	1	6	21.3*
High school graduate	45	42	14	68	(df=9)
College graduate	14	11	5	34	
Beyond college	3	2	4	10	
Primary Reason for Surrender					
External pressure	42	37	19	79	8.626
Own preference	12	5	2	13	(df=6)
Other	13	10	3	20	
Marriage to Other Biological Parent					
Yes	9	18	2	27	10.210*
No	65	39	23	93	(df=3)

*p<.02.

and desire another.⁶ This rate is also somewhat, but not significantly, higher than the 15% rate of primary infertility for the U.S. population.^{2,6} While it appears that parents in our sample may experience about a 170% increase in secondary infertility over the general population, both the stability of this estimate and its possible causes require further study.

Our survey found no significant relationships among social and personal characteristics of the respondents, adoption process variables, and subsequent fertility. The lack of association between personal and process variables and fertility status provides little information regarding the possible causes of infertility in this sample. Comments provided by the 55 respondents who had elected to remain childless cannot serve as explanations for the involuntary

childlessness of those respondents who identified themselves as infertile. Nevertheless, the following remarks shed light on the complex attitudes regarding subsequent reproductive activity and appear to reflect a devalued self-esteem, as well as an idealization of the surrendered child:

Desired not to have children: I did not want to be unfaithful to her (the child).

Always felt unfit to become a mother again (even though I loved children) after signing adoption papers. I have not been able to even hold a baby since the surrender.

I do not want children. My husband agrees and is very understanding. I want my daughter's birth fresh in my mind.

Subsequent Parenting

Nearly 80% of the 219 subjects who responded to the questions on parenting

stated that their earlier surrender of a child had exerted a powerful impact on their subsequent parenting practices. Almost all reported both positive and negative consequences. Overprotectiveness, compulsive worry about the children's health, and difficulty in accepting growing children's independence were the most frequent negative features cited by the subjects. At the same time, many of these respondents/ also stated that they felt closer to their children and were more involved in their lives and activities than are most parents. It was clear that, for many of the subjects, children constituted their most important source of emotional gratification. The words "precious," "valuable," and "irreplaceable" were frequently used to describe subsequent children. However, these valued children were rarely seen as substitutes for the adopted child, and in a few instances the advent of other children triggered renewed anguish over the surrender. One woman wrote:

I regret the joy my children give me when they do something special because I cannot share the event with the son I gave up.

A more extreme and pathologic process is seen in the two following comments:

I can't seem to get close to anyone. I fear their (the children) leaving me. I cannot believe that anyone could really accept me when I haven't yet. So I dump on them. Sometimes I think they would be better off with someone else.

I have had absolutely no patience with my children, and when frustrated with two toddlers, I've manifested an awful rage much greater than the situation called for. I feel this rage is over my birthparenthood past—a rage that has been suppressed for years!

No personal, demographic, or adoption process variables differentiated

subjects who felt their adoption experience affected their subsequent parenting behavior from subjects who did not. Respondents who were married to the other natural parent were no different in this respect from subjects who had gone on to marry others.

DISCUSSION

The results of this survey indicate that, for some individuals, the experience of relinquishing a child to adoption has a prolonged effect on subsequent life functioning. It should be noted that the applicability of our findings may be limited, since the study sample consisted of a volunteer subset of an already self-selected population. Participation in a support organization such as CUB may be more likely for those who experience continuing conflicts over the surrender of a child or who have a particular interest in searching. In addition, recollection of prior events can be colored by present attitudes; thus, the reported associations between variables may be specific to surrendering parents who are members of support groups.

While the results of the present investigation may be generalizable only to a subset of natural parents, the rapid and continuous growth of CUB suggests that membership is not limited to a small or unusually vulnerable group of parents who have surrendered their children. Rather, the appeal of the organization may reflect society's current acceptance of single parenthood, which has both made it easier for unwed parents to declare themselves and has diminished a major reason for relinquishing a child to adoption. Placing a child for adoption was once the price expected from the single mother for the shame and trouble she had caused. For many, society's

softened stance may have paradoxically served to trigger the reemergence of suppressed but unresolvable conflicts.

The data on the determinants of search activity do not support the commonly proposed idea that natural parents initiate searches in an attempt to retrieve the surrendered child. On the contrary, the evidence from this study indicates that search activity is closely related to adoption process variables and to the time elapsed since surrender. If retrieval were the primary reason for searches, subsequently childless parents would be over-represented among those who had initiated searches. In fact, the majority of searching parents had had other children.

It is possible that search activity represents an attempt to resolve a significant loss. Unlike other permanent losses, for which society has constructed supportive rituals, there is no recognizable support following the loss of the child to adoption. Psychodynamic theory has proposed, and clinical experience confirmed, that losses inadequately grieved may produce feelings of unworthiness, diminished self-esteem, and depression. Evidence of low self-esteem and severe mood disorder was clear in the comments made by searching respondents. Search activity may thus be a means of achieving restitution not of the surrendered child, but of the self.

Although marital disharmony was reported by a majority of the sample, the 15% prevalence of divorce was less than the 40% rate of divorce in the general population,^{4,5} implying either that the disharmony was not as severe in this group as in the general population, or that the respondents were more willing to withstand an unhappy marriage. The

source of disharmony appeared to be different for study subjects who married the other parent of the surrendered child than for subjects who did not. Those whose mates were not partners in the earlier childbirth indicated that their marital difficulty stemmed primarily from their search activity and its resulting drain on their time and emotional energy. Among couples who had shared the adoption experience, conflict involved many areas of interaction. Comments by such couples suggested that they were united by shared pain rather than by commonality of interest or spirit. A study by Plomin *et al** tended to support this observation. Their investigation of assertive mating among married and unmarried parents showed that both groups shared high intracouple correlations for physical attributes but only married parents displayed high intracouple correlations for behavioral attributes. This suggests that unwed parents may have less in common with one another than married parents at the time of mating and may thus be at higher risk of marital conflict should they marry after relinquishing their child.

The observed high occurrence of reproductive failure among respondents is difficult to evaluate since it is not known what proportion of secondary infertility might be due to deficiencies in the spouse rather than the subject. Furthermore this finding may simply be the result of selection bias since infertile individuals may be more likely to join a support organization such as CUB than would those without reproductive problems. Nevertheless, the estimated 170% excess of secondary infertility in the sample is sizable, and should be studied further.

The reported difficulties in parenting appear to reflect unresolved sadness over past loss and lack of self-confidence rather than active deleterious parenting. Overprotection, overindulgence and overinvolvement may well have a negative impact on a child's development but clearly are not as damaging as abuse and neglect. It is possible that those subjects who felt very unsure of their ability to parent subsequent children were the ones who opted not to bear more children. While we have no objective measures of parenting skills, there is considerable evidence suggesting generalized anxiety in interactions.

The results of this study indicate the need to consider the biological parent more fully both at the time of adoption and subsequent to the signing of adoption papers. Specifically, adoption workers should facilitate, rather than discourage, parental mourning for the surrendered child. Innovative techniques, based on a clearer understanding of the magnitude of this loss, its difficult resolution, and its possible long-range consequences, will have to be developed. Since grief over a surrendered child appears to remain undimmed with time, present knowledge of the dynamics of mourning may only partially apply to this situation.

Finally, our results suggest that adoption does not always fulfill the needs of three distinct clients. The inherent conflict of interest should be recognized and appropriate changes instituted in the administration and services of adoption agencies. This is of particular importance in light of the current trend of social policy toward hindering

access to abortion for young women, promoting adoption as the option of choice, and severely limiting social services and financial aid. Implementation of such policies is likely to increase both the numbers of children born to younger single mothers and the proportion of such children surrendered for adoption.

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