



The experience of choice in voluntary relinquishment

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In Australia, adoption requires the voluntary relinquishment of the child. The free will or choice of the mother is evidenced in the very deliberate act of signing a binding consent form, witnessed in a court of law. Notwithstanding the voluntary nature of adoption, on 21 March 2013, the then Australian Prime Minister publicly apologised to those people affected by adoption practices dating from before the 1980s that are now recognised as “forced”. The use of this term refers to the findings of the 2012 Senate Inquiry into the Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices. The inquiry heard over 400 submissions, including cases where babies were taken from their mother without consent (some mothers were affected by medical drugs at the time) and instances where the mother felt compelled to give consent against her will or wishes. The Senate inquiry also heard from social workers representing the “many thousands of adoptions undertaken in good faith by women who did so in the best interests of their children” (Browne, 2012, p. 64). The Senate inquiry was aware of the sensitivity

around language when discussing adoption and this paper will reflect the Senate decision to, wherever possible, use the term “mother” to refer to the person who gave birth to the child.

Historically, illegitimacy was the defining parameter of the “choice” to relinquish. Mid-20th-century researchers represented the mother as a young, unwed woman who was trying to give her child a “better” life; that is, the love, care and security of two parents in a “normal” home situation (Smith, 1963). Her decision was a safeguard against the unrelenting social condemnation and denial of support directed at unwed mothers and their “bastard” children.

When interviewing mental health professionals, Baran, Pannor, and Sorosky (1977) were told unmarried pregnant women had “sinned, suffered and deserve to be left alone” (p. 58). “In one residence attached to a maternity hospital the sister in charge actually spelt out to them her belief that they were to do penance for their sins and to make up for the shame they had brought to their families” (Marshall

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& McDonald, 2001, p. 51). The impossibility of keeping her baby went beyond the dearth of financial and social support; a single mother was actively rejected and shamed. The practice of closed adoption—that is, where there is an absence of any knowledge about or contact between the mother and child—purportedly protected the mother and her “illegitimate” child from ongoing shame (Curtis, 1986; Jones, 1993; Silverstein & Demick, 1994; Winkler & van Keppel, 1984). In a national study of past adoption practices that included 505 mothers, Kenny, Higgins, Soloff, and Sweid (2012) found “very few birth mothers in the study ... felt that the adoption was their choice. The most commonly identified contributing factors to their child’s ultimate adoption were family pressure and/or lack of family support ... many feeling they were the victims of a systematic approach to recruiting ‘undeserving mothers’ for the service of deserving married couples” (p. xiii). Higgins (2011) was explicit; choices were limited by “coercive social forces” (p. 60).

The civil rights and second-wave feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s created an irrevocable shift in the rights of women, the rights of children and the right to information. The introduction of the no-fault divorce law in 1975 increased the divorce rate, and contributed to the change in community attitudes to single parenthood. In addition, single parents became eligible for government income support. Medical advances produced unprecedented reproductive choices through accessibility to cheap, simple, effective birth control and increased availability of abortion procedures.

The effects of these changes on adoption are demonstrated in the figures. The peak number of adoptions in Australia was in 1971, at 9,798. Of those, 2,057 were in the state of Victoria. In the 19 years between 1987 and 2006 the total number of local Victorian adoptions was 665. There were 18 local adoptions in Victoria in 2010–11 (Victorian Department of Human Services, 2011).

The number of adoptions has significantly reduced because contemporary Australian society provides more choices; reliable, cheap, contraception is available; we accept single parenthood; and, in Victoria, ongoing contact between the mother and child is mandated. The dominant mid–20th century pressures of illegitimacy are seemingly mitigated; however, the contemporary social milieu produces inverse pressures on a woman who chooses to relinquish:

A woman considering adoption in the current climate is doing so under strong emotional pressure not to

surrender her child ... No matter how well considered and responsible may be a decision taken in her own interests and those of her child, she is likely to find that she must bear, in addition to her inevitable grief and doubts, the burden of gratuitous criticism and lack of understanding. (Marshall & McDonald, 2001, p. 74)

Regardless of the social mores operating at any given time, relinquishment of a baby provokes judgement and its concomitant pressures.

Adoption is a choice that a very small minority of women still make. In order to explore the sense of choice that accompanies such a profound decision, the current study interviewed 15 mothers who had relinquished a child since the introduction of open adoption in Victoria with the *Adoption Act (Vic.) 1984*.

Method

In order to investigate the experience of choice that underpins voluntary relinquishment, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 mothers between July 2007 and April 2008. The Victoria-wide Catholic welfare service, Centacare, sent 71 letters to mothers, asking for their participation in the study. Four women responded and were interviewed and another five were recruited via direct request from the Centacare Program Manager. A further four participants were recruited through the Connections Unitingcare Adoption and Permanent Care Service, which has the government tender to manage all adoptions in the southern metropolitan region of Melbourne. One participant was recruited through an advertisement in a country newspaper, and this participant also recruited an acquaintance of hers.

The information collected from the interviews underwent a thematic content analysis, using grounded theory methodology. Conditional relationship and reflective coding matrices were constructed (Scott, 2004). All participant names have been changed in this article.

Results

Demographic characteristics

Relinquishment dates ranged from 1985 to 2006. The age of participants at the time of the relinquishment ranged from 16 to 30 years of age; mean age 22.4 years. The age of participants at the time of the interview ranged from 21 to 50 years of age; mean age 35.5 years. At the time of the interview, five of the relinquished children were five years old and under, and eight of the relinquished children were over 16 years old.



No participant was married at the time of the relinquishment and only two remained in a relationship with the father of the child; one of these relationships was violent and managed by intervention orders. None of the pregnancies were planned. Accessing an abortion had not been possible because the mother had denied or avoided recognising the pregnancy, so it was too advanced or abortion was against her values or religion. Two of the mothers had been adopted themselves. Four of the mothers already had children and cited their existing children as one of the reasons for the relinquishment. Only six of the participants had gone on to have more children and a further two participants were pregnant at the time of the interview.

Choice

When asked directly whether the decision to relinquish was theirs, all the mothers reported that the choice to relinquish was their own. Eleven of the mothers were unequivocal in their response. Answers were short, sharp and unambiguous: “yes”, “definitely”, “it was my choice, nobody else’s but mine”. The question generated a high level of personal ownership of the decision. No one reported active coercion.

However, when considering their experience of “choice”, attached to a statement of ultimate ownership of their decision, five mothers explicitly stated that the relinquishment did not feel like a choice at all; the circumstances produced a non-choice or forced choice:

It was all my decision, but I felt like ... no one said anything, but in my head it’s just like I had no choice, for whatever reason. (Betty)

It was a forced choice ... it was the only thing to do. (Karen)

For some, the choice felt uninformed:

[It was not a choice] in the true sense of: here are all your options, here’s a well-informed choice. (Jacqui)

For some, the experience of choice was elusive:

I think back and think “why?” I can’t understand, I really can’t and I get so angry ... I can’t say that he was taken from me because he wasn’t. It wasn’t forced upon me because it wasn’t. (Betty)

Cultural assumptions played a part in the experience of choice:

Initially it was, “Oh yeah, that makes sense, I’m only 16, 17. I can’t have a baby. I’ve still got an education I want to finish and I want to go to university and want to travel, you know”. I had all these big dreams and basically what was reinforced was, “If you have this child, it’s all out the window. You can forget about having a life basically ... There’s no way you can be successful if you had a child at 17”. And I believed that because no-one challenged it ... The crap that goes with single mothers at a young age, stuff that people want to believe which can be challenged. Now I know that. Back then I certainly wasn’t mature or I didn’t have the life experience to know that that could be challenged ... Without my parents being involved in it, I think it was almost useless because I needed them to be there for me. I needed them to say, “Well this is how we can support you”. But they just weren’t part of that whole process ... They were never involved in any of the counselling sessions ... they were never given any opportunity to explore other options or look at why they felt the way they did ... That wasn’t challenged. I think it was just accepted ... [but] it’s not an individual issue, it’s a systemic issue ... If someone had said to me, “Have you thought about keeping your child and telling

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'em all to get stuffed?', I would have gone, "Well, hell yeah, why not!" (Jacqui)

The power of cultural assumptions is illustrated by the inability of the system, the family or the individual to challenge them.

Reasons for relinquishment

Choosing relinquishment is a profound parenting decision. Like their mid-20th century counterparts, the mothers from the current Victorian context of open adoptions spoke about the child being "better off":

What I did was the best for him ... I just felt that that would be extremely selfish to keep him with me and not give him the life he deserves, you know. (Trudy)

Again, like their mid-20th century counterparts, illegitimacy, and its concomitant issues of youth, single parenthood and minimal family support, were the determinants. Financial hardship was cited directly by six mothers and youth was implicated in various ways:

Well I'm 16. I can't have this baby. (Jacqui)

A lack of self-confidence and life experience was nominated:

I didn't know about the everyday things, like finding a crèche and how to work out working hours with having a baby in crèche, and just your everyday challenges. (Gill)

Being a single parent of an illegitimate child had currency for some:

It wasn't so much that I didn't want the baby. I didn't want the stigma was probably more the issue. (Susan)

Another avenue of support that affects the breadth of relinquishment choice is the extended family, which traditionally has seen the mother's mother become the primary carer. Chippendale-Bakker, and Foster (1996)

found that one of the strongest predictors of relinquishment was the preference of the mother's mother.

Within this study, only four maternal grandmothers offered kinship care to their grandchild, and the offers contained the push and pull of ambivalence:

My mum would say that yes, [adoption is] probably the best thing to do, but her and dad would support me if I didn't want to. (Wanda)

All four of the mothers who received such an offer were uncomfortable with it to the point of rejecting it. The family of origin did not embody the "better off" family the mother wished for:

I certainly did not want a baby brought up in an extended family where I would be with my parents. It wasn't an environment that I had particularly liked growing up in. (Wanda)

The mother's family was formative in determining her view of her own parenting potential:

My mother was 19 when she had me ... She wasn't emotionally available and I was scared that I was going to be like that with my child ... If I manifested a parenting style that my mother had, this child was going to be isolated, hurt, disconnected ... I was afraid of that ... that I would damage her. (Arabella)

Yeah, my mum put me down, and I thought maybe I would do the same; history repeating itself. (Sarah)

For 11 mothers there was no offer of kinship care. Regardless, a number of these women were also clear that they would not have wanted their child in their mother's care, echoing the reasons voiced above. The absence of kinship care or a partner created a context of practical and social deficits that drastically restricted choice. That one is alone with the consequences of the pregnancy is a defining parameter of the decision.

Four mothers were already single parents when they realised they were pregnant. The experience of single parenthood was a determining consideration for three of them:

I had Jack, who was two. I was just 22 and I just looked at the big picture and thought, "Here I am, 22, two children, no partner. What's the prospect going to be...I don't want to struggle bringing up two children. I want to give them both the best life that I could give them" ... I just weighed it all up and thought, "How am I going to do this on my own?" It was a lot of reasons, but Jack was a really big one. (Jane)

Three of the mothers became pregnant under extreme circumstances. Drug addiction, domestic violence and mental illness imposed compelling reasons for the relinquishment. The child's safety became a critical factor



and the extreme circumstances overrode any ambivalence about the decision to relinquish.

Issues of child protection exist on a long continuum. The motivation that adoption offers a life where the child will be “better off” was in evidence not only in the women who keenly perceived their parenting limitations but also in the women who perceived that adoption offered their child the safety and protection they could not provide themselves.

Discussion

All choices are bound by the context in which they are made, and the findings from this study continue the perennial adoption theme that pressures (implicit and explicit) generated by the social context have a direct bearing on the decision to relinquish a baby. The reasons for the relinquishment shaped the choice to relinquish for all participants. The consequences of ignoring or denying the pregnancy limited some women’s access to a termination; an anti-abortion position limited others. Attitudes to youth and single parenthood were decisive and a dearth of family support and/or extreme circumstances restricted the sense of choice for others. While the contemporary context provides an increased set of solutions to some of these factors, the findings suggest there are still a small number of women for whom the mid-20th century issues and pressures surrounding an unwanted pregnancy and single parenthood lead to a decision to relinquish.

The choice to not parent the child was determined by a spectrum of contextualising forces, which usually originated beyond them but had been internalised by these women. The mother was situated within a culturally shaped, personal context. The mothers were acutely aware of what they were unable to offer their child. They perceived they could not give the child what they “deserve”; they were too young, single, poor, unsupported, ashamed—an unacceptable maternity. The issues accompanying illegitimacy still had currency and, for some, there was a perception that they were not capable of shielding the child from dangerous others or their own history.

The findings intersect the complicated nexus of liberalism, with its beliefs about individual freedom and equality, and the constraints of the context. The contemporary context inadvertently shifts the onus from external forces beyond one’s control to taking personal responsibility; where relinquishment is seemingly a choice in the truer sense of the word and the mother “owns” it. Yet for the

women in the study, boundless choice is simply not a reality; the constricting forces are still at work, in that youth, single parenthood, finances, lack of family support and illegitimacy still dominated the decision to relinquish. However, the objective of making a “good” choice—opting for a perceived “better life” for the child—is less likely to be accepted as “good”, given contemporary cultural structures and perceptions that explicate “you don’t have to”. While the consequence of this is untold, it appears the perennial adoption theme of shame may be differently shaped but still present.

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