ADOPTION PSYCHOLOGY: TOP 25 ISSUES

John Sobraske, MA, Clinical Psychology, LMHC, LMFT
Rochester, New York
sobraske@rochester.rr.com

Core Adoption Issues

Introduction: Adoption is a beautiful and necessary practice for children whose parents cannot or decide not to parent their children. The experience of adoption has many positive aspects along with a number of potentially painful challenges. It's better to face whatever painful aspects might be present rather than pretending they are not there. The goal is to be neither morbid nor Pollyanna, but to embrace the real complexity of this life circumstance. When challenges are responded to thoroughly, they can be worked through and help one to develop new competencies.

Abandonment & attachment—Perhaps the most powerful, painful impact in adoption comes from the original loss of the birth mother. This can lead to persistent feelings of, and fear of, abandonment. It can also make one more likely to hyper- or hypo-attach (or both).

Duality & paradox—In adoption, what you see is not always what you get; what is on the surface is not the whole story. Society says adoption is great, sometimes in a Pollyanna way that doesn't match the mix of feelings that come with this experience. Adoptees often have split feelings about the birth self vs. adoptive self, birth family vs. adoptive family, about being dutiful and appreciative vs. being upset that this happened without one's permission or control. All of this can lead to feelings of dual selves or dual attitudes that coexist and yet are paradoxically opposite of each other.

Control & defiance—Some adoptees struggle with not having enough control, given the early loss of their mother and being forcibly placed into a home with strangers. Foster children too can feel like a system is managing their lives and making too many choices for them against their will. The circumstance of adoption or foster care can generate a need to have more control over one's life and the people in it, and defiance when this is not possible.

Identity & belonging—If you don't see your nose around the table at dinner, it can seem strange to look at this nose in the mirror, as if it has no moorings or reference points besides the fact that it's on your face. In many ways adoptees struggle to figure out their identity, especially in closed adoption. For foster children, they usually have some identity elements from early experiences that they can remember, though these may be complicated by both positive and negative associations. Feeling the sense of sameness helps belonging; this is more difficult when belonging must be constructed, particularly if it occurs across different races, religions and national origins.

Creativity & inventing the self—Many adoptees seem to have extraordinary creativity. Perhaps the wound of loss or the confusion of identity somehow contributes to a searching and fantasizing and

artistic articulation. There can be a sense of freedom that "I could be anything" and an inventiveness that runs through the whole personality.

Developmental diffusion—Some adoptees and foster children grow up quickly because of the suffering they encounter even as they lag behind in other areas. It's as if they are many different ages (besides their chronological age) at the same time.

Invisible & nonexistent—If there are not enough identity reinforcers, there can be a sense of invisibility. Sometimes being loud and brash and controlling is an attempt to compensate for not feeling solid and substantial. The loss of the mother, occurring at such an early age, can lead one to feel devastatingly alone, or worse, as if dead, destroyed, annihilated. There can be an existential sense that one does not even exist or have the substance to push back against gravity and air pressure.

Resilient survivor—Facing loss and other hardships can sometimes make people stronger and more determined to survive. Often this priority to be safe and capable in the face of adversity remains a priority of the whole system long after the initial challenges have passed. It's as if these hardships were imprinted into one's core so one can be ready if they reappear. But too much focus on being able to survive can make it difficult to relax and thrive.

Special, superhero & thrown away—Being different sometimes causes one to fantasize about being special or having special powers. Most children are attracted to superheroes. This is especially true of foster and adopted children, in part because most superheroes were themselves orphans, adopted or foster children. The suffering of these heroes fuels the development of special abilities that help them overcome adversity. In some ways, this fantasy can be a compensation for the feeling of being left or, as some foster children in my office have explicitly stated, "thrown away." (It doesn't help if they have to pack their belongings in a garbage bag.)

Two colors one skin—Transracial, transcultural fostering and adoption has the added challenge of observable physical differences and a cultural gap. This can be confusing to the family, but especially to the youth who must grapple with learning how to be part of the culture he or she belongs to by appearance or origin, and the culture one is fostered by or adopted into. Sometimes the family or community feels too different, as if it were a kind of "no man's land" where there's no place for the self to fit in. re is a "no man's land" where the family and community feels too different. Additionally, one can feel uncomfortable with or not fully accepted by one's same race peers.

Dependent & independent—Early loss in adoption or in maltreatment leading to fostering can make one very dependent on others, as if trying to make up for what one did not receive at an earlier age. At the same time, being dependent makes one very vulnerable, and some would rather be extremely independent: "I don't need anyone." Many manifest both poles simultaneously creating an internal push-pull.

The Great Sleep—Though adoption is a positive and necessary institution, it can come with some pain. Because society says adoption is fine and positive, doesn't generally acknowledge the potential pain, some adoptees can be confused by their own experience and unconsciously play along as if asleep to these issues. This isn't necessarily a conscious denial. Eventually some event, perhaps the birth of a child or birth family involvement, will rouse one from this slumber or an underlying tide of suppressed preverbal emotions will swell up like a rogue ocean wave.

Loyalty & disloyalty—Children can be very black and white and concrete: "This is my mom." Developmentally speaking, it is difficult to manage the complexity of having two sets of parents. There can be tension about which set I should be loyal to, and if I'm loyal to one, does that make me disloyal to the other? This is particularly the case if the adoptive parents are anxious, the foster parents want to adopt, or the birth family is suspicious.

Dissociative fantasy—Dissociation is a common coping strategy for loss, pain, neglect and abuse. Given the creative inclinations of foster and adopted youth, dissociative states can give rise to much fantasizing. When some aspects of life are too tough, they may escape and go somewhere better in their mind. It's a way to revisit the past and origins, and it can prolong the period of magical thinking.

Stealth (lying, stealing, secrets)—Much of adoption and foster care is cloaked in secrecy: Who are my parents (adopted child)? What really happened to me (foster child)? Lying may simply be a way to keep ownership of *my* reality, or what I would like my reality to be. Stealing can be an attempt to fill the emotional hole of unmet early needs. It may have been a component of one's survival strategy. It may provide a sense of compensatory control or a passive way to fight back. Theft and deception may have been modeled in the original family. System secrecy can further contribute to such behaviors.

Peter Pan & Tinkerbell—Some adoptees and foster youth struggle to be all the way grown up when it comes to dating. There can be a youthful capriciousness and a hesitation to "go all in" with a commitment, and so they may gadabout from one relationship to another. Meanwhile part of what they are really looking for may be some mothering or fathering (like the lost boys, or Peter in his fondness for Wendy).

Black hole & hoarding—The original loss, along with neglect and/or abuse, can create a black hole of need for all that should have been received, but wasn't. As a result there can be an insatiable desire to fill the self with substitutes for that original affection, though these don't satisfy and one continues to look for more.

Emotional rescue & the three-legged race—It can be seductive for those with an emotional wound to seek others with the same. Caring for another can be a less vulnerable "back door" way to care for oneself (though this usually doesn't work out too well in the long run). Adopted and foster youth who don't feel whole may seek someone similar as if together they form one whole person, thus the metaphor of a three-legged race. This may happen with an early sexual relationship—sex

somehow recalling that lost intimacy of infancy—where there is an overwhelming desire to regress and merge with the other.

Compliant Joe & Huff n' Puff—Fear of repeated loss can unconsciously make someone more compliant, "I'll be so good they'll never abandon me" (by not ruffling feathers or being a high achiever). Alternatively he or she may do the opposite, testing the family "to see if they will abandon me," like a huffing and puffing wolf, trying to "blow the house down."

Risk & security, plan B, the grass is always greener, waiting for the other shoe to drop—Feeling unhinged by loss, neglect and abuse can lead adoptive and foster youth to develop either a devil-may-care risk-taking attitude and/or to want an ultimate security free of risk. To manage both, there can be a constant searching for where the grass is greener, while keeping one foot where they are. There may be a desire to have a plan A, but also a plan B, and C, and D, along with a vigilance waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Chameleon & adaptee—Adoptees and foster children must often adapt to environments very different from where they started in life. And there may be expectations for them to "fit right in." Some youth push against this; others conform with exceptional plasticity, almost like an actor—sometimes too much so, such that they may become confused about who they really are inside.

The Mask—If the vulnerability of the adoption or foster journey feels like too much, sometimes youth may hide under a mask or persona. Perhaps they are not in touch with their underlying feelings; perhaps they don't feel safe to reveal them to others; perhaps they don't truly know who they are.

Search, suspicion, hypervigilance—In closed adoption, there can be a great emphasis on search, on figuring out who one is and where one comes from. In open adoption and in foster care, there can be questions about what happened, why the placement or adoption occurred in the first place, "Where do I fit with my birth relatives?" When secrets about past history or future placement plans are kept from youth, it generates mistrust and suspicion. Trauma, loss, and frequent moves can lead to an ongoing hypervigilance, a need to know what will happen next so that one can avoid it or brace for it.

Alien—Children of closed adoption, and in some cases, international adoption, can feel like they dropped out of the sky with nary a clue as to where they came from. Being an adopted or foster child can lead one to feel different from others, "the odd one out," particularly if the child lives among biological children—or among adoptees if the child is in foster care. This sense of being unlike others can be accentuated if one comes from another country or has racial or cultural differences or special needs.

Rage & grief—Profound loss tends to bring on profound grief. The intensity and immensity of this grief can be unexpected by those who have not faced similar experiences. And it may be too large, too early, too unwieldy to fully access it oneself. If the sadness is unexpressed, it will often find alternative expression through anger or rage. (Interestingly, the Icelandic word for grief is angr).

As Elisabeth Kübler-Ross notes, anger is one of the stages of grief. Rage can also result from abuse—both from being modeled by the abuser and from the fact of having suffered the abuse.