Reviews

To Search for Self

The Experience of Access to Adoption Information

Edited by Phillip Swain and Shurlee Swain; The Federation Press, 1992; 129 pp.; $27.

The need to know one's origins is deeply ingrained in the human psyche. Even a glance at human history shows the enormous amount of management and effort that went into organising the community so that an individual knew who he or she was compared to others in the community. To trace identity, as maternal lineage was the only certainty, it took precedence.

Complex but ordered rules as to which groups were available as spouses to which other groups were taught from childhood. There is compelling argument that it was women who sought a marriage system where they were not available to a whole group of men. With women's freedom to be chaste or, at least, monogamous, the certainty of fatherhood also came about. Men have clung tenaciously to this state of affairs ever since, with incentive provided by the capitalist system of ownership they also developed.

The ostracising of anyone who did not fit into the well-defined confines of 'the family' during the turbulent days of the industrial revolution while communities adapted to new ways of living has been documented. For example, fictional characters created by Jane Austen and Charles Dickens chronicled and institutionalised notions of 'the family'. These values were brought to Australia with white settlement.

But what has this history got to do with adoption? Adoption was embraced as a legal mechanism which also supported the certainties of monogamous, paternal dominant nuclear family units – then the only acceptable family structure in society.

In the early 20th century, with the fine-tuning of administrative government, adoption was formalised and legalised. However, less than 100 years later and after some 50 000 people were adopted in Victoria, parts of the adoption laws have been challenged and changed.

The change to adoption laws mirrors changes in Australian society. 'Open' adoption mirrors the more open family arrangements accepted today. In the sweep towards relaxation of traditional morality, we may congratulate ourselves on recognising the importance of the individual over the certainty of one form of family organisation.

However, it is important to recognise the difficulties this change may cause people who genuinely embraced the values of 'the family' – relinquishing mothers, adoptive parents who did not tell their adopted child, and services supporting the adoption laws. They are now caught in the cross-over, and in the cross-fire.

The various people affected by the experience of access to adoption information that a generation ago was secret, will gain much insight and comfort from the Swains' book.

To start with, Shurlee Swain sets out the history of adoption in Victoria, including the centrality of secrecy in adoption legislation. Deborah Lee provides a courageous example of relinquishing mothers empowered through self-help groups such as the 'Council for the Single Mother and Her Children'. People who used the adoption information service in the months after the adoption laws changed were surveyed, and Phillip Swain reports on the myths and realities about the people involved in adoption. Gerard McPhee follows by examining the experience of the Adoption Information Service conducted by Community Services Victoria in the first two years of *The Adoption of Children Act* 1984 (Vic.). In that time, 1091 enquirers were assisted, 75% of them being adult adoptees.

Chapter 6, contributed by Rosemary Nicholls and Mina Levy, looks at the role of relinquishing birth fathers – a relatively recent addition to adoption practices. In Chapter 8, adoption counsellors Farley O'Dea, Suzanne Midford and Mercurio Cicchini argue for 'careful stepping' when searching for information about an adoption, and for use of mediators trained in the area to deal with the varying needs and hopes of the people in the search.

More personal insights are given into the dilemma of the relinquishing mother by Marie Meggitt who writes about the 'loss of normalcy', and, from the other end of the spectrum, by Josephine Hall who writes about the adoptive parents, often the overlooked group. Hale draws out the sensitive issue of 'feelings centred around loss of control, loss of own image, return of grief over infertility and loneliness because no-one understands'.

Ironically, at the same time as Victoria leads Australia in 'open' adoption practices and information, it also leads in development of technologies for human reproduction leading to children who will not have access to their identity!

There is no end to the conflicting interests concerning children, it would seem. The legal principle in favour of giving all children, regardless of their birth circumstances, access to information about who they are, does not stop with open adoption legislation. The last two chapters of *In Search of Self* warn that either we learn from past experiences or we are doomed to repeat them. Patricia Ley's chapter confronts the question in the title of her chapter 'Reproductive Technologies – What Can We Learn From Adoption Experience?' The last chapter 'The Social Cons-truction of Adoption and Surrogacy: A Comparison' by Heather Dietrich, points out that the damage caused by secrecy of physical reality could be extended if we add the secrecy of genetic inheritance.

This is not a heavy text book to read. It is clearly intended to reach a broad audience. It should succeed in its aim as it is very satisfying in both its coverage and style.

Phillip Swain and Shurlee Swain hope that what emerges from the contributions to *In Search of Self* is 'the need to see children, not as possessions or commodities to be made and traded, but as individuals to be loved and cared for'. For me, the book showed a positive way forward for discussion and decision-making, emphasising the need to include all the people who are involved and affected, and who must be listened to and taken into account, when looking at a social construction of such importance as people's identity.

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