

The experience of Australian relinquishing mothers in open adoption: Contact, grief and psychological adjustment.

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Since 1984 when the State of Victoria, Australia by an Act of Parliament effectively opened all past and prospective adoptions, relinquishing parents have had the right to regular information about and “access” (in-person contact) with their children, subsequent to placement with an adoptive family. Under the Victorian Adoption Act 1984, as reviewed by Allen and Kane (1997) a person signing an adoption consent may request that the child be placed with persons who agree to provide both information about the child and access with the child either: "every three months", "every six months", "at times that the adoptive parents and I agree to by private arrangement", or "other (specify)". The requested arrangements for information and access may be included in the adoption order according to the wishes of the person signing consent. If conditions are included in the adoption order, the person signing the consent may later apply to the court to vary the conditions or to withdraw them.

Adoption social work practice in Victoria over the last twenty years has evolved to support the provisions of the 1984 Act for the involvement of birth parents in the lives of their relinquished children. The early decisions about future contact made by birthparents during relinquishment counselling and in the adoption consent, have a direct influence on the nature of the relationship that may be developed with children and their adoptive families into the future. However, there has been no systematic evaluation or review of open adoption practice in Victoria since the proclamation of the Act, and it is still quite unclear how the Victorian contact provisions have shaped the adoption experience for adoption triangle members, and in particular for relinquishing mothers.

The paper will describe the first Australian investigation of infant open adoption conducted from the point of view of relinquishing mothers. This exploratory study sought to examine birth mother experiences of open adoption in Victoria since the proclamation of the 1984 Adoption Act. The design of the study was influenced by the pioneering Australian work of Winkler & van Keppel (1984) who enquired into the relinquishment experience and psychological adjustment of 213 women whose first infant had been placed for adoption in the State of Western Australia when they were between 15 and 25 years of age.

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The framework developed by Winkler & van Keppel (1984) and also adopted here was based on two themes: the relinquishment experience as a loss and as a stressful life event. They examined adjustment for two periods post-relinquishment; namely during the year immediately following the relinquishment, and the time elapsed since the one year mark and their study. A third of participants reported below average adjustment for the first time period, and over a quarter reported below average adjustment at the time of the study. Half the participants also reported a sense of loss, which for some had extended over 30 years, and it was noted that the reported poor adjustment and presence of psychological impairment were significantly related to the relinquishing mother's sense of loss. Social support was also found to be an important factor in adjustment to relinquishment, with the finding of a direct link between support and psychological well being.

In the present study, thirty women who relinquished an infant in Victoria between 1984 and 1992 completed survey questionnaires during 2002 and 2003 asking for information about the circumstances of their relinquishment and their child's adoptive placement, the availability of social support, the type and frequency of contact (if any) with the child and adoptive family, and their satisfaction with that contact. Both quantitative and qualitative (open-ended) responses were requested. Participants also completed standardised scales relating to psychological adjustment and grief about the relinquishment, both at the time of relinquishment and at the time of the study. The Grief Experience Inventory and the Impact of Event scale were utilised to measure grief, while psychological adjustment was measured using the Satisfaction with Life scale and Quality of life scale.

Consistent with the earlier work of Winkler & van Keppel on closed adoptions and some other research (e.g. Lauderdale and Boyle, 1994) this study revealed that the greater the amount of social support and perceived freedom of choice in the relinquishment decision reported by mothers, the better their psychological adjustment and the lower their grief. The effects of these factors suggest that the psychological impact of relinquishing a child for adoption may be influenced by contextual elements independent of whether or not future contact with the child is anticipated. Furthermore, while grief did decrease over time for mothers in this study, the level of grief symptoms reported was still quite high, indicating that the passage of time and ongoing contact with the child and/or adoptive family does not necessarily assist relinquishing mothers to resolve their sense of loss.

In light of recent international research into birthmother grief, adjustment and satisfaction with openness, (Christian, McRoy, Grotevant & Bryant, 1997; Cushman, Kalmuss, & Namerow, 1997; Henney, Ayers-Lopez, McRoy & Grotevant, 2004) it was expected that opportunities for contact would ameliorate psychological distress and grieving. Yet, in contrast to most of the previous research to date, it was found that neither the type nor the frequency of contact was significantly associated with relinquishing mothers' psychological adjustment. There was however an unexpected relationship found between grief at the time of the relinquishment and frequency of contact, suggesting that mothers who retrospectively reported higher levels of

grief at relinquishment were having more contact. A negative association was also found between frequency of contact and global satisfaction with contact. Surprisingly, mothers who experienced more contact were found overall to be less satisfied with that contact. In respect of these somewhat counter-intuitive findings, an analysis of qualitative material will be presented which reveals that frequency of contact is itself complexly determined, and does not bear a simple relationship to satisfaction, psychological adjustment or grief. The implications of the findings and the limitations of the study will also be discussed.

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