

An Anthropological and Historical Survey of Adoption

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“Children by pregnancy or marriage just happen, but one must think to adopt”

— A resident of Yap, Caroline Islands, to anthropologist, Sherwood G. Lingenfelter

Adoption is the institution by which children who need parents are raised by adults who are able and willing to be parents. It is not simply a human phenomenon. In the animal kingdom, for instance, emperor penguins are zealous adopters of orphaned youngsters. It is not an exaggeration to say that adoption is one of the mechanisms that species has used to survive in the bitterly cold Antarctic environment. Adoption, like the practice of medicine, for example, is a way to respond to adverse circumstances.

Adoption: Some Anthropological Considerations

No human society faces environmental conditions so harsh as the Antarctic penguins do. Nevertheless, within our species, there is also an adoption instinct at some level. The inclination among adult humans to protect and provide for children in need is probably an expression of the tendency – which is general among the higher animals – to be protective of, and affectionate toward, the juvenile members of their species. Some theorists on evolution speculate that these feelings of affection and protectiveness are stimulated by the biological fact that the eyes of juveniles in most species are disproportionately large (Richards, 1980). Whatever the basis for the general positive feelings of adult humans for the very young members of our species, they are feelings that have given rise to many useful institutions, including the institution of adoption.

Humans are among the most altricial of creatures. That is to say that they are the opposite of precocious. Unlike the young of many other species, human children take an inordinately long time to become self-sufficient. In comparison with our closest primate cousins, the chimpanzees, we seem very backward and underdeveloped during our infancy. A month and a half after birth, a baby chimp will locomote by itself and handle objects, whereas a human infant of six weeks is essentially immobile and helpless. Between 9 and 18 months, the human baby starts to acquire language and soon begins to catch up and then surpass a chimp of comparable age in its ability to understand and manipulate the physical environment.

Moreover, for humans, the social environment is much more important than the physical environment, and the social environment of humans is very complex. So the human child remains a social juvenile for a very long time. Experts on developmental psychology may disagree on particulars, but all agree that among humans, childhood lasts at least a decade and a half even in the most extreme cases. All during this time, of course, the young human needs a family to survive and thrive in the complex social environment in which he finds himself.

Lack of normal human contact and a normal human context is generally disastrous for a human child. In an infamous example of a seventeenth century attempt at social science research, King James I of England contrived to find out what was the natural language of human beings. The king, therefore, arranged to have a child brought up with no verbal contact at all with any other human being. The king expected that the child would start speaking Hebrew, Latin, or Greek. Instead, the child languished and died.

Virtually every living society across the globe has some form of adoption. The institution of human adoption has developed over many millennia. It is a more diverse institution than the instinctual adoption which is seen among animals. That is because our species, unlike any other, lives in just about every part of the planet where there is dry land.

For the purposes of this anthropological discussion, adoption could also be defined as a way in which families are created notwithstanding a blood relationship. It is quite obvious that the other major way in which humans create a family - that is, by marriage - is, at the beginning, a contract between two people who are not blood relatives (or at least not close relatives). In fact, Gallin (1958) and Wolf (1962) describe a form of family-building, which was common among poor villagers in Formosa and East China. It entails bringing an unrelated young girl into the household with the intention of raising her to marry one of the sons of the household. Though this social institution is called adoption, it is really a form of early betrothal.

What is called adoption in the anthropological literature often has features that are almost unrecognizable to a modern Westerner. For instance, in his monograph on society in rural Korea, Brandt (1971) reported that families would sometimes adopt relatives to be able to preserve ritual practices (such as ancestor worship). It is interesting that for the culturally important practice of ancestor-worship, adopted heirs are considered every bit as good as biological heirs. In the brief history of adoption which follows, we will focus on the forms of adoption in which the primary purpose is to look after the best interests of the adopted child rather than to serve the needs of the biologic family or the adopting family.

A Brief History of Adoption

It is clear that conceptions of adoption, its purposes and its benefits, have varied widely from society to society. For some societies, as we have seen, the major motivation is religious. The desire to provide descendants who can carry on ancestor worship has probably motivated millions of adoptions. This motivation, however, is not one that prevails in our own society. The ideal of adoption in our society in the present day is based on the best interest of the child being adopted.

The remainder of this paper will examine how this concept of adoption developed over the course of five millennia in Western Society. We will focus on adoption of very young children. The related concept of foster care will be discussed only briefly. Institutions like indentured apprenticeships, which centuries ago were somewhat related to adoption, will not be discussed at any length because these institutions have since become extinct and ceased to have any bearing on the modern concept of adoption.

The modern concept of adoption is the product of many centuries of development. Adoption, as we understand it today, is a relatively recent refinement of an ancient concept. The fact that adoption is a time-honored institution in Western civilization can be seen in the fact that the founders and great heroes of many cultures were adopted. In his award-winning history of adoption, *The Kindness of Strangers*, historian John Boswell discusses these “founding foundlings” such as Moses, Romulus and Remus, and King Arthur. Though the latter of these heroes are more mythic than historical, the stories of their adoptions show that, at the very least, the concept of adoption was known and approved of within their cultures. More importantly, these stories show that being adopted was certainly not considered to be an impediment to great achievement.

The concept of adoption was born under difficult circumstances. It must be recognized that the concept of familial relations that prevailed all over the globe in ancient times was that parents, particularly fathers, essentially owned their children. Among the precursors to adoption was the Greco-Roman practice of “exposing” children. Boswell goes to great lengths to prove that this practice of exposing children did not mean exposing them to the elements in the hope that they would die. It meant, rather, putting the child in the public view in the hope that the child would be adopted and live. Boswell demonstrates that adoption and survival were almost always the results. People, after all, are valuable, and in the centuries before power machinery, even young children were recognized as a source of labor. Unfortunately, some of the children who were adopted in this fashion were exploited. Prostitution was the fate of a considerable number of these children. There were, of course, some happy endings too, but the flaws of this system were too glaring for it to continue indefinitely.

Several centuries after the fall of Rome, the practice of exposing children began to change. A new institution had come into being which offered better prospects to children whose biological parents could not take care of them. This next major phase of adoption’s evolution in the West had religious underpinnings. Thus, in the early Middle Ages, children without families of their own often became oblates to the Church. Though this system had its pitfalls as well, it presented a much smaller likelihood of bad outcomes than the previous regimen. This system worked well and, ironically, the condition which brought about its decay was the unprecedented economic growth throughout Europe in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

Unfortunately, the prosperity could not go on forever. The end of the thirteenth century saw the return of hard times, and in the middle of the fourteenth century came the virulent Black Plague, which killed an estimated 30% of the population in Western Europe. Naturally, the remaining population was in a state of extreme disorder. In these bleak times, another institution arose to provide for children who could not be raised by their kin, namely the foundling hospital. These foundling hospitals were established with good intentions in response to a pressing need, but unfortunately they took on something of the nature of a mill. Some of these institutions even had a revolving door cut into the wall of the building so that biological parents could leave a baby anonymously without exposing the baby to the elements, even for a short time. These large institutional settings tended to get extremely crowded, especially during times of plague or famine, and thus became a source of epidemic disease themselves.

By the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, the proportion of children left at foundling hospitals was running from 15-30% in certain cities in France. Even in the best of times, life in these foundling hospitals was neither cheerful nor healthful. And as the years progressed toward the Industrial Revolution, conditions generally grew more bleak and Dickensian.

A strong strain of Social Darwinism pervaded the thinking of Western European intellectuals in the second half of the 1800s. This attitude made it philosophically easier for stronger elements of society to override their natural inclinations to alleviate the suffering of weaker members. Almshouses and debtors prisons were other institutions of the time that were considered beneficial to those who were homeless or otherwise bereft. These institutions were regarded as beneficial because they could rehabilitate a person, edify him, and prepare him to take his place in the world.

During this time, some foundling hospitals made the transition to what we might call orphanages. The classic orphanage generally had an element of practical and moral education (Carp, 1998). This form of orphanage existed in Europe and America until after the Second World War. A very few classic orphanages still exist in a modified form. But since adoptions from these institutions were probably the exception rather than the rule, we will leave any further discussion of them and turn exclusively to the history of adoption in America. It is in America that the modern practices of adoption developed most rapidly.

Salient Features in the American Experience of Adoption

The creed of America is that all people are born equal. In theory at least, no special legal status or privilege is conferred by blood. This philosophical position should make America especially good territory for adoption. Reality, however, has not always lived up to the theory. Indentured servitude and apprenticeship were social and economic institutions that were vital to the settlement of America from the earliest days of the Colonial period until well after the Civil War. As social institutions they seem, on the surface, related to adoption because in both instances a child may be raised apart from his biological kin. But these institutions differ from ideas of modern adoption in many ways, especially in that the main impetus for apprenticeship or indentured servitude was not the needs of the child but the desire of the parents to educate the child or to have him become financially self-sufficient. Though distinct from adoption, these institutions had an effect on the way adoption was perceived and practiced in the United States.

The first state statute that embodied the modern notion of adoption was passed by Massachusetts in 1851. (At about the same time, also in Massachusetts, the earliest states' laws about education were making their appearance.) It would be an egregious error to suppose that the lack of comprehensive adoption (or education) laws meant that adoption (or education) did not exist in America prior to this time. The writing of the statute meant only that it had become necessary, by 1851, to codify the practice.

A unique phenomenon in the history of adoption in America was the “Orphan Train.” The orphan trains carried children from urban areas in the East to rural areas of the Midwest and West that were considered to be more salubrious places for a child to grow up. In an updated rendition of the ancient practice of publicly “exposing” infants, the children from the orphan trains were literally put up on a platform at the stations so that the local folks could see which children they might want to adopt. The orphan trains brought about 150,000 children to new homes over the course of the years 1854 to 1929. As might be expected from this sort of wholesale approach to dealing with human dilemmas, mistakes were made wholesale as well. Experts disagree whether the orphan train movement, was, in the end, an advance or a reversal on the road toward a child-centered system. It is safe to say that some maladroit practices in the Orphan Train movement lead to a reaction against it, in the general public and among practitioners in the field of social work. One way or another, the Orphan Train did set the wheels in motion for adoption reform.

The 1930s and the 1940s brought the Great Depression, the Second World War, and the first years of the Baby Boom. As a consequence, adoption by 1950 was not at all as it had been at the end of the Orphan Train movement just two decades before. Adoption had become a much more private affair, and private adoption agencies rose to the fore. Adverse social circumstances, rather than physical ill-health or poverty, became the main reason that women considered adoption. Confidentiality was one of the chief factors that women considering adoption sought. Permanency of adoption was also a vital concern. About 34,000 infant adoptions took place in 1951.

It was just two decades later, in 1971, that the highest number of adoptions – almost 90,000 infant adoptions – occurred in the United States. This was a full 11 years after the Baby Boom hit its peak of slightly more than 4 million births in 1959. By 1975, the number of adoptions in the United States had fallen to less than 48,000. It is generally believed that the nationwide legalization of abortion in 1973 was the major factor in this 50% decrease in the number of adoptions.

The years between 1965 and 1980 saw tumultuous change in American society. Many institutions and attitudes that were taken for granted as a permanent part of the social landscape at the beginning of the '60s had disappeared by 1980. But the critical need of a certain number of children for permanent families continued to exist. Adoption, being an adaptive mechanism designed to meet the need of children for permanent families, had to adapt itself to challenges raised by these new social forces.

The National Council For Adoption was formed in 1980 to support in practice certain basic principles of adoption that previous experience had shown to be important, such as primacy of the interests of the adopted child, permanency, and the right to confidentiality.

Notes on the Current Situation in Adoption

In the last decade and a half of the 20th century, the annual number of adoptions of American-born children by people other than their biological relatives has remained between 50,000 and 60,000. These have been about equally divided between adoptions of infants and adoptions of older children. This plateau in the number of adoptions occurred despite the rise in the annual number of births toward record high levels, and the fact that the percentage of births to unmarried women has steadily grown. In 1999, the latest year for which statistics are available from the National Center for Health Statistics, there were slightly more than 3.9 million births, of which 33% were to unmarried women. For the same year, there were 1.37 million abortions. Of all unmarried women giving birth in 1999, only about 1.7% chose adoption for their child.

With the virtual demise of classic orphanages we have entered the age of foster care. This is probably part of the general triumph of the concept of de-institutionalization in mental health and other social services. In Classical times, children and other people in a foster relationship were called alumni. This shows the connection that foster care originally had to education. Unfortunately, current alumni of foster care generally don't have any alma mater to serve as a positive, enduring influence in their lives.

As the quote at the top of this survey indicates, it requires thought to adopt a child. Though it is based on deep-seated instincts, adoption is more than instinctual behavior. It is an institution that has undergone many centuries of growth and development. To make an adoption plan for one's child requires a great deal of thinking, even more than it takes to receive a child in adoption. That is because arranging for one's offspring to be raised by another runs against our immediate impulses. But it also corresponds to our more fundamental instinct to do what is best for our children. Adoption, then, is akin to all the best products of civilization: it is the thoughtful expression of a deep-seated instinct.

The highest aim of the counselor, as always, is to bring together the deepest feelings and the most elevated thinking.