

The Effects of Adoption Throughout the Life Course: A Personal Reflection on Adoption, Work and Family

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Abstract: This article presents the personal narrative of the author, who discusses her experiences with adoption across her life course. The narrative relates the author's personal experiences with adoption to her decision to enter the social work profession, and her use of life course perspective to inform her teaching. The article also discusses the way in which adoption experiences relate to the author's commitment to studying, teaching and changing structures of oppression through increasing students' awareness and commitment to righting social injustices. The importance of human relationships is also discussed both within the context of personal experiences with adoption and professional experiences in social work. The author concludes that familial experiences with adoption profoundly affect both choice of profession and theoretical perspective.

Keywords: life course perspective, oppression, privilege, human relationships, social justice

I come from a family that values people. My parents—hardworking, middle class individuals—put a premium on the importance of relationships in general and the importance of relationships within the family in particular. My father is a first-generation Italian who grew up in a mid-size northeastern city in a largely, if not solely, Italian neighborhood. My mother was of German and Irish descent and lived in an adjacent neighborhood. They met in high school and married after my mother completed her nursing training.

The importance of people is an intergenerational, familial value (Bucx, van Wel, & Knijn, 2012). My mother's mother always took individuals in to live with her family: the young mother that needed a place until she could get on her feet, the gentleman from church that had fallen on a bit of rough spot. My mother, the oldest, was often cast in the caregiving role. A role that she took on without complaint, but one that had a profound effect on her own career choice, as well as her choices as a future mother. My mother always wanted to be a nurse like her grandmother. Although there is no doubt my mother wanted to emulate her grandmother, the career of nursing also fit into the values her family held regarding caring for people.

My father's house was simply just full. It was full of relatives: aunts, uncles, cousins, sisters and brothers. The more people, the better, and the more merry for all. However, my father was deeply affected by the sudden loss of his mother, Aunt J, as she was known by all, when he was 14. Aunt J was greatly loved and was deeply missed when she died in her forties

from complications related to pneumonia. My father, the youngest child of five by 10 years, was left in the care of his eldest brother and sister, who moved back home with her new husband, to help her father take care of her youngest brother. Both my aunt and my uncle looked after their baby brother to the best of their abilities. My father's father was simply too bereaved to spend much time with his youngest son. When my father discusses the death of his mother during his childhood, he is always sure to mention how his suffering lessened by the presence and love of his sister and brother.

It was with this combined history of the importance of people and of family relationships in the context of helping and caring for one another, that my parents united and formed their own family: my family of origin. In many ways my family started off as stereotypical. Two years after my parents married, they started their family with the birth of my brother, and two years after his birth, I was born. After my brother and I arrived, my parents waited a bit, but soon welcomed my sister who is four years my junior. My parents had completed their family at that point—or so they thought. They took great joy in their children and they encouraged my siblings and I to develop close relationships with one another. Even though my parents had completed their family, my mother felt compelled to help others the way her mother had helped so many. My father was accustomed to a full house, and remembered how his siblings came together to help him, so he, too, had a desire to help others. Because of who they were and are, and likely because of their families of origin, my parents took people who needed a place to stay into their home, and

welcomed them as part of our family. This was one way my parents could help others and share the love they felt for family. As mentioned, relationships and people, all people, were important to my parents. They felt there was no better way to let people know they were valued than by making them part of the family. Thus, we had a young girl, K, live with us for several years because her mother, one of my mother's patients, had died, and her father had fallen ill. K's father requested my parents' look after his youngest daughter as her older siblings were not in the area. K was reunited with her siblings after being part of our family for several years. After K, one of my mother's former nursing students lived with us, as she had nowhere to go. As we got older, my parents never said no when we asked to have our friends, who were having trouble at home or who were kicked out, stay with us. This value of the primary importance of caring for people was deeply embedded into my consciousness.

During my childhood, my mother, who had her RN, went back to school to complete her bachelor's and master's degrees in nursing. She did this while working full-time. So, she and my father worked as a team to make sure there was a parent present at dinner, at our school events, and at our sporting events. They involved my maternal grandmother, as she was charged with making dinner for my siblings, my father, and me on nights my mother was at school. Although my father could have very easily made dinner, I realized much later in life that having my grandmother cook for us, and having our family eat with her at her apartment, was one important way my parents made sure my grandmother remained a vital part of all of our lives, and we of hers. The shared meals that she truly enjoyed preparing, usually with one of us at her side to help, ensured that a close intergenerational connection was maintained.

It was during this period of full-time work in a city 45 minutes away for my father, full-time work and part-time school for my mother, and general family busyness, that crisis struck in my mother's extended family. I clearly remember the turmoil, for I was 12, and tuned into the adult world around me. My mother's youngest brother was married and had three young children. My uncle's family had always struggled. Both my uncle and his wife had trouble maintaining steady employment and adequately

caring for their three children. My grandmother, mother, and mother's sisters tried to help their brother/son, his wife and their kids. The extended family tried desperately to connect my uncle and his family to services. Services my uncle and his wife always ultimately refused or eventually dropped. The extended family also supplied material goods and money on a regular basis. These gifts, of course, were never able to remedy the myriad problems of poverty, in a permanent fashion.

I remember visiting my uncle's family's various homes. The homes were always in ill repair, they were typically unkempt and I recall them always being too cold in the winter, and too hot in the summer. But what I remember the most were my three little cousins. Their clothes were never new and were always a bit too big or too small, they always seemed to have a bit of a cold, and they loved to gain the attention of their senior cousins. The eldest of the three, S always sat on my lap and loved to cuddle. I loved to hold her, and as a young girl, wanted desperately to have more control over what happened to her and her siblings. Periodically, my uncle and his family were without essential resources such as heat and/or water. These periodic crises were typically resolved quickly due to extended family interventions. However, one cold winter's night, my mother's sister called her in a panic. My uncle and his family had come because they were without heat or running water, and were likely going to be evicted. They were all camping out on my aunt's floor. There was a strong possibility that child protective services were going to become involved with the family. My aunt was near the breaking point. She and her husband had three kids of their own and were working poor: struggling to make sure their family was able to have food, clothing and housing.

The crisis resulted in a family meeting that involved my grandmother, mother, my mother's sister and their youngest brother, my uncle. He was again without work having been fired from his latest job; his wife did not work either. The children, then ages five, four and one, were being left unattended to and unfed. My uncle and aunt admitted to being overwhelmed and feeling that they were unable to meet the demands of parenthood due to the poverty they faced, as well as some personal issues and challenges they individually struggled with. Because my aunt and uncle clearly articulated their distress and their current inability to adequately care for their children, and as a result of

having exhausted other options and resources, the family proposed that my uncle allow his sisters (and one sister-in-law) to temporarily take the children until he and his wife got back on their feet. None of the sisters was in a position to take all three children, each having three children themselves and not having a great deal of extra income. However, the family felt if they could keep the siblings in the extended family (what we now call kinship care) and prevent foster care placement, they would be able to make sure the siblings and their parents all maintained regular contact and would hopefully be reunited in a speedy fashion. It was after this conversation that my cousin, S, at age five, came to live with our family.

My five year old cousin (who eventually became my sister) coming to live with us was most certainly a traumatic disruption in her life. A trauma that only she can likely speak to and effectively about. As a five year old, she had little say in where she would go. She simply had to go where the adults in her life directed her. I am certain that her early childhood experiences combined with the assimilation into our family had profound effects on her life: some good and some bad. I can say that today my sister, S, is happily married with two young children of her own. She is college educated and works in a professional job. She lives in close proximity to both me and our other sister.

My sister's experiences are hers to talk and write about. However, I can speak for me as it marked a disruption and turning point in my family of origin's trajectory (MacMillan & Copher, 2005). This was an unplanned event. My sister's arrival to our family was an event that occurred so quickly that my parents had no time to personally reflect on, or consider the full meaning of, during a crisis that they simply responded to, 34 years ago, in hopes of having a positive effect on three of my cousin's lives.

For my part, as a 12-year-old, I was thrilled that my favorite little cousin had landed in our house. My childhood mind thought only in black and white. My family's house was certainly more safe and secure than my cousins' previous houses. Plus, I could help care for her. This temporary fix of two sisters and one sister-in-law each taking a cousin eventually became a permanent fix, as my uncle and my aunt

were unable to obtain and/or maintain a job or home, and consistently struggled with ongoing personal issues. After many long discussions and much thought and reflection, my aunt and uncle felt their children would be better off staying where they had lived during the last three years. Thus, three years after my cousin, S, came to live with us, my aunt and uncle relinquished parental rights and my parents formally adopted S. S became my sister. S's sister and brother were also adopted by my aunts' families at the same time

As our family of five expanded in an unexpected way to a family of six, we struggled and rejoiced. My younger sister, J, loved my cousin, S. However, as a 9-year-old she was not always pleased that her youngest child status was so suddenly, and as it turned out permanently, gone. My brother was pleased with the additional sister, but as a busy high school student, he was not home a great deal. My father struggled with the financial implications of raising four, rather than three, children. My mother wanted to make sure all of the members, including the newest member, of her family, were thriving. After the initial bumps associated with an addition to our family of five, we jelled into a family of six.

I was profoundly affected by the addition and eventual adoption of my sister, S. I loved her dearly and was deeply protective of her. I was moved when she chose to come to my room and sleep by me when she had nightmares. I was always glad to have her around as she watched what I was doing. I felt it was my obligation to be a good role model for her. However, it wasn't until I was pondering graduate school that I began to reflect on and understand how S's adoption influenced my decision to pursue a masters degree in social work. I wanted to enter a profession that valued relationships the way my family taught me to value them. My family's acts of compassion allowed me to see firsthand the profound implications of the "central importance of human relationships," and the essential role they play as "vehicles for change" (NASW, 2008, p. 6). I suppose in that stage of my career formation, I was aware that relationships on the micro-level could affect positive change. I wanted to learn more about how to extend my lessons from my family to client-worker relationships.

As I began to study social work, I became interested in macro level factors that could have played a role in my

family's life. I began to understand the child protective system, including the foster care system, with all of its strengths and weaknesses. I became fascinated with how my family's decision was interwoven with policy. This greatly influenced my decision upon my completion of my doctorate to work as a legislative director at my state chapter of the National Association of Social Workers. This job allowed me to directly advocate for policies that would support individuals and families, while advocating against policies that would be detrimental. However much I enjoyed working as a legislative director, I felt pulled in the direction of teaching social work at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

As I began my academic career, my teaching and scholarship focused on issues of social and economic justice, as well as issues of diversity. The experience of adopting my sister forever affected the way I viewed the world, and was one of the primary drivers of my interest in social and economic justice. As I grew, I began to step back and reflect on my sister and her parents' lives. The experience of kinship adoption was quite positive for my family of origin, despite some adjustments, and some ups and downs. My sister's biological parents, my aunt and uncle, certainly had personal agency, and made many decisions regarding their children's lives (Hilton & Elder, 2007). Likely, the hardest decision they made was to relinquish their parental lives with the hopes of affording their children a better life. The decision my aunt and uncle made caused me to wonder about larger sociopolitical and cultural forces that played into their lives. For instance, how had my uncle's inability to complete college affected his ability to obtain a job that paid a living wage that could support his family? How had the lack of affordable housing contributed to his inability to provide a safe space for his children? How had the lack of sufficient social welfare and mental health programs played into his eventual inability to even provide the basic necessities to his children? These larger social and economic justice issues are those which I challenge my students to explore in their cultural diversity and social policy classes.

My sister also influenced the theoretical frameworks that guide my professional work and my personal understanding of individuals within the life course perspective, as it views individuals as linked with

their environments. The societal contexts within which we find ourselves can work to cumulatively advantage or disadvantage us (Newman, 2008). Through my sister, I saw the profound effects poverty had on my aunt and uncle and their family's lives. I also witnessed how the cumulative advantages of a middle class life, which provided economic security, privileged me. When S joined my family, she began to benefit too. She had amazing resilience as she had thrived in less than ideal economic conditions which resulted in less than ideal home conditions. However, S's life trajectory was undoubtedly altered when she entered her adoptive family environment. The family she entered provided her with opportunities that resulted in her attending college and embarking on a professional career, and allowed her to now live in an economically secure household with her two children, to which she is able to pass the cumulative advantages. It is not surprising as a social worker that I find the life course perspective useful in understanding individuals in the context of society and society's culture and institutional structures. The life course perspective helps explain the way that individuals interact with the environment, and the way the environment acts on individual development and growth. So, I find myself drawn to the it when striving to understand the individual. However, my personal experiences with my sister, in which I witnessed the deleterious effects poverty had on all aspects of her biological family's lives, fueled my interest in institutional factors associated with oppression, power, and privilege. It also led me to both study and teach in the areas of race, class and gender.

S also had a profound influence on how my husband and I chose to create a family. S's adoption and the love I have for my sister convinced me that adoption is a positive and legitimate way to create a family. My husband is convinced too. We have four children. Two are biological and two are adopted. One of my children was adopted from South Korea and the other, from Ethiopia. Our family, a blend of adopted and biological children, is amazing. The incredible gifts my children have given me and my husband with their very being is difficult to put into words. The experience of adoption is one that we entered into with the idea that "it is better to light a candle than curse the darkness" (Roosevelt, n.d.). The number of children in the world and in the United States who are currently without families is truly astounding. Having the privilege to adopt children has provided my family

with the opportunity to experience love in many every day, surprising ways. The love that is experienced within the context of the family, and the largely positive socio-emotional and cognitive outcomes of children adopted internationally, are encouraging to adoptive parents and families (Misca, 2014). However, entering into adoption on either a national or international level causes reflection into the dynamics of privilege and oppression, and how they play into who is adopted and who adopts. My personal experiences grappling with these issues and how they are intertwined, in a very real way, to both my entire family and to me as an adoptive parent. They have caused a great amount of critical, personal reflection, and have repeatedly drawn my attention to not only the immense responsibility I have to all of my children to provide them with a sense of self, safety, and cultural belongingness, but also to the wider society, in actively working to dismantle the structures of oppression that work to disadvantage so many on both the national and global levels.

The personal is professional. My personal experiences absolutely influence my thinking as a social worker. The experiences I have had with adoption in my family of origin influenced my very decision to become a social work professional and faculty. These familial experiences taught me the importance of two of the foundational, ethical principles of the profession: “the central importance of human relationships” and the necessity of “[challenging] social injustice” (NASW, 2008, p.5). Within this professional context, I attempt to act upon these principles in a consistent and relevant fashion in the courses I teach. Courses regarding policy and policy advocacy focus on the value of social justice and the principle of challenging injustice (NASW, 2008). These courses encourage students to advocate for policy implementation and policy change that will result in moving our society (at least in an incremental fashion) toward more justice. The courses I teach on cultural diversity, privilege, and oppression, encourage students to be both self-reflective and conscious of the world around them, with a particular attention paid to how

we structure our society in micro, mezzo, and macro ways, that perpetuate social injustice. We can use this consciousness to become an ally through the development of relationships and then to making change. Most profoundly, the life course perspective is interwoven into all of my thinking and teaching on social work. The way in which our lives are connected with one another in a complex and interconnected fashion within a broader sociopolitical context is important, and adoption so clearly illustrates the complexity of our interwoven lives across a life course trajectory.

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