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"Real" Mothers

Adoptive Mothers Resisting Marginalization and Re-Creating Motherhood

BETSY SMITH

JANET L. SURREY

MARY WATKINS

"Are you her 'mother'?"

"Is she yours?"

"Does she call you 'Mom'?"

"She can't be your baby. Where does she come from?"

"How much did she cost?"

—*Comments directed to the authors by strangers at playgrounds, restaurants, and supermarkets*

THE paths to and through motherhood differ in significant ways for adoptive and nonadoptive mothers. Some come to adoption through the disappointments of infertility, secretly harboring a sense that adoption is "second best." Others may choose adoption for personal, political, or moral reasons, despite voices that warn them against the "bad seed," or the "dangers" of going beyond one's bloodline. Adoptive mothers-to-be, rather than fathers, are often in charge of painstakingly arranging the adoption, as though it were an analogue to carrying a child. The desire to mother must sustain itself, under intense scrutiny from strangers at social agencies, through the wait for an assigned child

and the pain of a match that falls through. There is no word like miscarriage to mark and convey the loss of a child whose image has been carried in the mother's heart.

When new biological mothers seek out resemblances between their family and the child and share stories of deliveries and nursing, adoptive mothers are often left out. Their experiences of coming to and beginning mothering are not widely known, shared, or acknowledged. Thankfully, among adoptive mothers, there is conversation, particularly about the positive experiences, the "birth stories" of adoption, of feeling called to mother a particular child, of a profound opening to what is initially "other," of the joy of seeing and holding their child for the first time, of the memory of the first moment the child feels like "one's own," and of the deep physical and psychological connection with one's child that feels fundamentally different from that with other children. We, the authors, know these joys personally because we are all adoptive mothers.

We also know of the more frightening and worrisome thoughts of adoptive mothers in mainstream North American culture. Twisted around our own and others' experiences of mothering, there is a legacy of cultural hesitation and apprehension about adoptive motherhood, based on dominant European American beliefs about the primacy of blood ties,[1] ethnocentricity, and traditional patriarchal inheritance systems. These beliefs live too in our psyches and place a burden of doubts, prescriptions, and responsibilities on us as adoptive mothers, which separate us from biological ones.

Thoughts like the following are familiar to us and to many adoptive mothers—indeed they have haunted us, but they are rarely spoken about. Although most mothers phrase their doubts in very personal terms, questions like those below can be traced back to cultural beliefs and ideologies, and the psychological models that reflect them. When traced to their roots, these thoughts can then be illumined, articulated, wrestled with, and challenged.

"Will my baby's attachment and love be as deep, strong, and resilient as a biological child's?"

"Will I be less attached to my child, and she or he to me, because we did not have the experiences of childbearing, nursing, or being together directly after birth?"

[1] This has been named "biologism" by Elizabeth Bartholet (1993, p. 93).

"Can my nurturing compensate for the often multiple losses my adoptive child has suffered: losses of birthparents, birth siblings, extended birth family, sometimes of birth country and culture?"

"Will differences in appearance make us seem less like a family?"

"Will these differences make my child feel uncomfortable and cause her to separate from me . . . and possibly from her siblings?"

"Will I, a white parent, fail to teach my child of color how to protect herself or himself in a racist culture?"

"Will my child ultimately leave me to join her or his kind?"

"Can nurture make up for being the product of a rape, being abandoned, having a biological mother or father who used drugs or alcohol or smoked?"

"Will I feel ill equipped at preparing and protecting my child as she or he navigates through what may be frightening and unfamiliar territory to me?"

"If I hold an optimistic or hopeful view, am I in serious denial regarding the wounds of adoption that will eventually hurt my child?"

We, the authors, are writing from our own experience, and we hope also to reflect the voices of many other adoptive mothers. Although some of our understanding comes from our personal stories, some also is from the stories of adoptive mothers we have witnessed in psychotherapy, in friendship, and in research (Watkins & Fisher, 1993). We are all white, relatively privileged women who have adopted internationally, and thus we are not representative of a vast number of adoptive families in this country. We are aware of the wealth of experience, strength, and cultural resources of adoptive mothers further outside the dominant culture. For example, adoption in African American culture has a profoundly different history, meaning, and value based on the ideal of collective responsibility for children. This grew out of the forced destruction of nuclear family relationships during slavery as well as from a far stronger sense of collective identity and the presence of extended family networks within African American families. Similarly, within Latino cultures, adoption of young children within and across families is a frequent occurrence, reflected in the familiar term *madre de crianza* or "childrearing mother."

Our children, adopted internationally, represent about 9%

(11,000) of the 127,000 adoptions legally recorded in the United States (Lewin, 1997). Our personal experiences do not speak directly to some of the contemporary American experiences of open domestic adoptions, to controversies surrounding African American adoptions into European American families, or to the issue of access to records to search for birth mothers.

I, Mary Watkins, came to adoption from a childhood of imagining a large family of adopted children. I began by being a stepparent to three. From that experience, I learned I could love a child who wasn't seen as "mine." From working with children clinically and being attuned to the international situation regarding children who need families, I found I could make better meaning out of adopting children than "having my own." I live in a multicultural, multiracial family with my husband and three daughters from Brazil, India, and China. It was through my study of motherhood cross-culturally and cross-historically that I first began to see clearly the use of psychological theory to promote dominant cultural ideologies, which then affect mothers' daily experience. It is my hope that mothers can collaboratively and intentionally create structures of mothering that support their children's and their own development. Despite the difficulties of adoptive family life, I am deeply moved by the reality and vision of love and nurture moving beyond the borders of blood, race, and ethnicity.

I, Betsy Smith, am an adoptive mother of two young children who were born in China. My female partner and I are jointly raising our children. I chose adoption after years of experiencing infertility and having been entrenched in the belief that a biologically related child would be the best choice, the most likely way of feeling the deepest sense of closeness with a child as well as somehow being easiest for my children. I have grown immeasurably in 6 years and have opened my heart and mind to the new ways I now envision and experience my own family. Becoming a biracial, bicultural family has been filled with challenges and surprises that my partner and I have tried to embrace fully. Both of us bring to our family the experience of living as lesbians in this culture, which I feel enables us to give our children a perspective on being outside the mainstream. Developing a positive self-image as a lesbian in a homophobic society involves a parallel "resistance" to the dominant cultural messages that pervade our world. I hope this perspective becomes a strength I can give my children over time.

I, Janet L. Surrey, am a Jewish, Buddhist, married, adoptive mother of Katie, my 6-year-old daughter born in China. My decision to adopt after a short period of infertility was partially a resistance to any further

expensive and intrusive medical treatment. The decision to adopt has allowed me to reconnect to an early childhood dream ("I want to provide a home to a child who really needs one") as well as to an adolescent political statement ("The world is too endangered and overpopulated to give birth to more children"). Since Katie's arrival at 4 months old, I have been learning about the intersections of adoption, race, class, and gender status as these construct the adoption experience in this culture. At the same time, I hold a spiritual vision of adoption as a pathway toward the creation of a "global human family" and the most powerful commitment to diversity and multiculturalism I can live. I am obsessed daily with how to help Katie decode and challenge the messages she receives about her adoptive and racial status as well as with my responsibility to help create a world that will see, hear, value, and support her in her journey.

THE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF ADOPTION

The experiences of adoptive mothers challenge some of the most basic Western assumptions about what is "right," "normal," "real," "natural," and psychologically sound in family life. These assumptions are so strong that it comes as a surprise to find that in nature itself, among animals, adoption is quite common, both within and between species (Masson & McCarthy, 1995).

Adoption is as old as recorded history. Whether or not adoption is considered "normal" varies widely within different cultures, as does whether or not a culture grants equivalent kinship, legal, and inheritance status. Adoption often has been seen as a legitimate means of building families, resolving conflicts between families, ensuring inheritance and security in old age, and providing a "better" life for children (Bartholet, 1993). Ideas about adoption, then, must always be viewed as embedded within a particular cultural and historical context.

In North America, adoption has been constructed and understood within prevailing psychological models of human development that are also reflective of underlying cultural beliefs. These models support the idea that adoption places children at risk. Most research on adoption in the United States has focused on "outcome" studies, where the success of adoption has been studied with emphasis placed on exploring psychological risk factors (Brodzinsky & Schecter, 1990). The belief is widespread that adoptees have more psychological problems than

nonadoptive peers. Only recently has it been suggested that rates of referral of adoptive children to mental health facilities may be affected by cultural beliefs. Warren (1992) suggested that the status of adoption itself significantly increases the likelihood of referral for psychiatric treatment of adolescents. Adoptees are significantly more likely to be referred even when they display fewer problems than nonadoptees. The author concluded that overrepresentation of adoptees in clinical settings is not attributable solely to the fact that they may be more troubled, but to cultural beliefs that expect them to be so. Over the past century, until quite recently, much of the writing and psychological reflection on adoption has undermined the confidence and optimism of adoptive mothers. Very little attention has been paid to the actual lived experience and the enormous care, courage, personal commitment, and growth so often involved in such parenting.

We suggest in this chapter that we need to study the sources of psychological strength and developmental pathways that lead to healthy resistance in adoptive families in general and in mothers in particular. Adoptive mothering offers unique challenges, opportunities for growth, and experiences of risk and adventure in the embracing of diversity and the creation of family relationships, typically without personal or familial models.

The impact of adoption on mothers' development is clearly very powerful. New work has begun to detail the relational practice of adoptive mothering (Watkins & Fisher, 1993), to make available the stories of adoptive mothers, adoptive daughters, and birth mothers (Wadia-Ells, 1995), and to give voice to white adoptive mothers' experience and learning about racism (Lazarre, 1996; Reddy, 1996).

We believe that one of the greatest sources of resistance and empowerment for adoptive mothers is the recognition and analysis of the power of cultural marginalization and psychological pathologizing of their experience and that of their children. To see this power one can look at how adoption is and is not represented in the arts, media, film, schools, and mental health systems. For example, we can examine the sensational highlighting of tearful "reunion" stories between children and birth mothers in the media, or the lack of representation of adoption in books for children or in elementary school curriculum on families.[2] The degree to which adoption is pathologized is still seen in

[2]One of the authors wrote a children's book on adoption, which was rejected by publishers, who said it would be of interest to only a very small percentage of the population.

issues of confidentiality around adoption in schools and the shaming of adopted children by peers.

Adoptive mothers struggle with their internalizations of cultural objections and ambivalence to the differences adoptive family life poses. They are often marginalized by nonadoptive mothers, as well as by society at large. In addition, they are caught, often unaware, in a cross-fire within the adoption community. In one camp are those who are ideologically committed to the idea that adoption as it is commonly practiced is a disservice to children, a breeding ground for almost inevitable psychopathology and identity disturbances. Phrases such as "primal wound," "genetic ego," and "genealogical bewilderment" abound in the literature. This side can be heard in the mass media and professional literature throughout the land. For example, a letter to the editor of *The Boston Globe* (Waldron, 1993) states a widely held opinion in this partial quote: "Until we truly understand that adoption is a profoundly unnatural act from which there is never full recovery, and that other choices must prevail . . . " The writer simply assumes this statement to be true, and goes on to make her next point without any hesitation.

In the other camp are those who believe that adoption can be a positive experience for children, that it is the manner in which the differences of adoption are addressed that determines the outcome. Indeed, the latter argues that recovery from the losses of adoption within the supportive intimacy of a good-enough adoptive home may well contribute to a more robust resiliency than is usually available to nonadopted peers (Drew, 1996).

We argue here that the mental health and psychological development of adoptive mothers is, in part, dependent on coming to understand how cultural ideologies about adoption influence our thoughts and actions. Once this is recognized, adoptive mothers can draw on personal and collective power to challenge prevailing beliefs and to develop and "hold" an alternative belief system. In fact this process is at the heart of many "successful" adoptive parenting experiences. We are suggesting that this process can be more consciously articulated and supported by adoption communities and agencies; extended families and friends of adoptive families; mental health professionals; and educational, legal, and governmental institutions and policy makers, and through the responsible use of media. Adoptive mothers need to have clarity about the ideologies framing their experiences in order to approach them from an empowered position of challenging and transforming these ideas of motherhood and kinship in the light of their

actual experience with their children. Without such a process, adoptive mothers remain on the margin, their experiences lost in reimagining motherhood and kinship.

DOMINANT CULTURAL IDEOLOGIES AND BELIEFS

What do families that are marginalized because of their difference from the norm have to teach about motherhood? Our belief is that penetrating the forms of motherhood that seem "other" reveals something about those forms as well as about the dominant ideologies of our culture. Our hope is that by looking more closely at adoptive motherhood we can use it as a window through which we can see more clearly the largely unconscious but dominant ideologies of the family, the child, and motherhood. As Kirk (1964) and Wegar (1997) have eloquently pointed out, these ideologies largely concern issues of "difference" and the possibilities of relating across difference. Presently these issues around difference are as central to the evolution of our national and global identities as they are to the integrity of adoptive family life. In the end we shall learn some lessons from the metabolizing of differences within adoptive families; these lessons have the potential to speak to the problems of the larger culture.

Below we discuss the dominant ideologies that enshadow adoptive motherhood.

1. *The primacy and superiority of sameness; thus the valuing of blood relations over all others and the valuing of racial and cultural sameness.*

When similarity between child and parent is highly valued, blood children are sought, often regardless of pain and price for parents with fertility difficulties. Many infertile couples who truly wish to parent remain childless in order to avoid the uncertainties of harboring in their homes "the other," the genetically dissimilar.

Similarity between parents and child appears to be thought a virtue, even in cases when it flies in the face of rationality. For instance, a couple resists adopting a child because of the unknown difference in gene pool, even though a serious genetic disorder is known to exist in their own family lines. Additionally, same genes do not necessarily result in sameness. Often biological offspring look quite different from at least one parent depending on how the genes mix together. More

subtle unexpected differences exist, too, among biologically related mothers and children, based on temperament and constitution.

Spanning both the dominant and African American cultures is a common assumption, although for different reasons, that children fare better when they are brought up in families that resemble them racially. Institutional racism is clearly evident in the enormous demand for "healthy, white infants" in preadoptive families, especially those who most closely "fit" the dominant culture's definition of the healthy "norm." The assumption that racial sameness yields better adoptive outcomes is contradicted by much research (Gill & Jackson, 1983; Figelman & Silverman, 1983); nonetheless, adoptive parents in transracial families are often marginalized by white families as well as by families of color. In addition, transracial families suffer under the prejudice within the adoption system that makes the adoption of black children by white parents particularly difficult, at times impossible. The National Association of Black Social Workers has worried, with good reason, that the adoption of black children into white families will leave these children unprepared and undefended against the massive assault of racism they will encounter in American society. Transracial adoptive mothers may well have to learn to confront and challenge both racism and "biologism" as powerful forces impacting them and their children. Recent writing suggests that white adoptive mothers may have a unique perspective to offer as they learn to negotiate for their children within biracial and multicultural contexts (Lazarre, 1996; Reddy 1996).

There are ways in which, by challenging the biological paradigm of building families, the adoptive mother's perspective on parenting yields insights into how families are constructed in our culture. Do the losses inherent for adoptive children and mothers necessitate tragedy? Or can they help to enrich the formation of a family that comes together with an initial effort that requires a belief that differences can be positive, that biological connections are not the only "real" ones that build families? Can there be a way that adoptive mothers can offer their children more opportunities to develop without the burden of expectations that sometimes weigh on biological children? Is there a way, particularly in cross-racial adoptive families, in which children may become better equipped for the increasingly multicultural world they are being raised in? Is there an opportunity for both mother and child to be more aware of, and allied with, other people who do not fit into mainstream images of family (single mothers, lesbian mothers, families with a special-needs child, etc.)?

2. *The developmental primacy of environmental nurture over genetic endowment.*

Paradoxically, another cultural ideology that has affected adoptive parents—although it is not as deep or as embedded—is exactly the opposite of this: Namely, biological inheritance is far less important in how children turn out than is the day-to-day environment in which they partake. The democracy of America is deeply influenced by the thinking of John Locke and the ideology of individualism that issued from it (Kagan, 1994). In order to break free of inherited rank, to have a culture in which, with the proper education, all citizens could inform their government and avail themselves of opportunity, it was necessary to minimize the importance of genetic endowment and emphasize the importance of environment. Wegar (1997) points out that this is a principal reason for adoption taking hold sooner in America than it did in England.

Further, after the atrocities of racism and anti-Semitism in the first half of our century, psychological research silenced study of racial differences for several decades after World War II (Kagan, 1994). During this time, which coincided with the ascendancy of adoption, nurture was further lauded in the field of psychology for its effects over nature.

History fuels these contradictory messages about adoption. The predominant belief in the 1950s and 1960s was that adoption was the "perfect solution" to illegitimacy and infertility among white women.[3] However, in the 1970s, critics of adoption claimed that adoption created a rupture of biological kinship that could be harmful for parents and children (Melosh, 1994).

Given the strength of cultural commitment to the value of sameness, the parallel, though opposite, belief in the importance of nurture placed adoption practice in an awkward position, which was

[3]There are two very different histories of single pregnancy in the post-World War II era: for black women and for white women. Both were shunned and humiliated by a variety of institutions because of their predicament, but white unmarried women who became pregnant were often "sent away" to relatives or homes to complete the pregnancy and then have the child adopted by people outside the family. This solution was possible because there was a growing pressure on white women to become mothers during the "baby boom" years after the war and the number of births among out-of-wedlock white women was rising. Black women, however, were told by social service agencies that their children were not adoptable, and relatives generally became the caretakers. Differing "value" was attached to children based on race, fueling the still present societal rage at illegitimate black children (see Solinger, 1992, for a detailed history of this issue).

reflected by some of the logical inconsistencies in adoption practice. For instance, families were reassured that nurture was the most important factor while babies were carefully matched with parents for appearance, religion, and social class. Further, adoption records were sealed, in part to prevent adoptive parents from being alarmed by the differences between themselves and the adopted child. However, purportedly this was done "in the best interests of the child," and it was proselytized that the history of the biological parents would have little bearing on the child's development, which was deemed to be affected primarily by the social bonds within the adoptive home. At worst, these contradictions complicate the adoption experience for all involved. It is remarkable, given the conflicting messages, that in fact many adoptive families live out a healthy and creative integration of these apparently opposing belief systems.

3. The purported importance of "bonding" to the mother–child relationship.

As if this contradiction weren't powerful enough, adoptive mothers since the 1970s have had to deal with the romanticization of the interaction between mother and child in the early hours after birth. Klaus and Kennell's (1976) work on mother–baby bonding, based on now-refuted ideas and research, claimed that a future of maternal child abuse and neglect would be more likely if a mother did not bond with her newborn in the first few hours of birth. They claimed that without this experience a mother was more likely to neglect or abuse her child, or fail to attach, in a way that would leave a hole in the psyche of the child (Eyer, 1992). Because most adoptive mothers adopt their children after this infamous "critical period," they are believed to be unable to inoculate their relationship with their baby from these dreadful outcomes. The theory of bonding, as Eyer (1992) beautifully educates us, is still used, despite its downfall in research and theory, because it supports underlying cultural beliefs. Mothers, he says, are not educated to differentiate between bonding and attachment, the latter describing the unfolding of a relational connection of trust and reliance over time. Giving birth, nursing, and being with the child directly after birth are not ingredients essential to the development of the mother's attachment to the child, or to the child's attachment to the mother.

The mother–infant bonding research is yet another example in which adoptive mothers basically can't be "real" mothers. "Real" relationships that will "hold" or "last" are based on biological "blood" ties and the immediate bonding supposedly made after birth. Rela-

tional connections based on love, empathy, mutuality, and commitment are not seen as strong enough, that is, they will not "hold" through time, geographic distance, conflict, or contact with biological kin.

Adoptive mothers are left struggling with the fear that they are not strong enough to provide the proper relational matrix. The relationship is somehow diminished and seen as being less sustaining, less potent, more fragile, and all in all less "real" than relationships based on "blood" and bonding at birth. There clearly is evidence that infants develop a sense of familiarity with their biological mother even prenatally, and there can be important effects of relationship disruption. However, these observations do not contradict the fact that adoptive mothers can, and usually do, learn to work with this, neither denying nor despairing about this fact.

4. The psychological health of the child is dependent solely on the relationship with the "nuclear family" mother.

This notion has become so ingrained in American psychology that it blinds us to our recent historical past and to the childcare arrangements of cultures other than in North America. Before industrialization, children were taken care of by a host of caretakers who included older siblings, apprentices living in the family, and extended family as well as parents. In white colonial America, as John Demos (1983) has shown, the outcome of a child's character was thought to be dependent on the father's influence, not the mother's.

Once fathers left home for the workplace, apprentices left also, and families became more nuclear (less extended kin living together). Childcare was then relegated to the mother. It is only at that time, a little over 100 years ago, that the relationship with the mother began to be thought of as significant, and then crucial, for the child's psychological development, especially as advanced by psychoanalytic theory (see Introduction).

Historically, in African American and Latino families there has been greater reliance on extended family for the raising of a child. Even in language, there is room made for both biological mothers and mothers who are not kin through blood, but through the daily care of the child: "blood mothers" and "othermothers" for African Americans (Hill-Collins, 1991), and *madres de sangre* (blood mothers) and *madres de crianza* (childrearing mothers) for Latinos. In many cultures, the "real," most valued mothers are not necessarily the biological ones, but rather the adult women who actually take on more of the parenting

responsibilities. The increasing number of lesbian families in North America in which there are two mothers parenting children also challenges the notion of one primary mother in the construction of a family (Benkov, 1994). In these examples, the child can be seen to profit from a collaboration among caretakers. Multiplicity of mothering figures is not seen negatively, as it is seen in contemporary Eurocentric psychological models.

The analogous situation in adoptive family life is clear: birth mothers and adoptive mothers, and sometimes foster mothers and orphanage mothers on the way to the adoptive home. This multiplicity has been seen exclusively through the lens of loss, given our monocular view of child development being reliant on the child's relation with a single caretaker. Looking cross-culturally and historically this view needs to be supplemented by a vision of the child as being cared for by a nexus of adults, which can include birth and adoptive families, fathers and mothers, siblings and extended family, and institutions, including schools and religious communities as well as orphanages and foster families.

However, in a culture that values blood relations over others, the parents considered "real" are the birth parents, despite any acts they have committed that are antithetical to "parenting." Young children, unschooled in the biology of genetics, learn this early on. It is not unusual for an adoptive child of 6 to speak about her or his birthparents as "real," and the adoptive parents as "not real." This dichotomizing—real–unreal—is an extension of our limiting in language and reality the number of caretakers of our children, clearly giving priority to blood.

Birth mothers and adoptive mothers are too often depicted as in competition, and their relationship is defined as "winning" or "losing" (Melosh, 1994). The cultural paradigm attempts to dictate that they be divided, separated, in conflict, and mutually threatening. Adoptive mothers fear that birth mothers will "claim" their children, legally or psychologically. Birth mothers feel cast out or vilified by society in general and often by adoptive mothers. The media plays on this by highlighting stories of highly emotional reunions of children and birth mothers and wrenching custody battles between adoptive and birth mothers.

The open adoption movement has attempted to address this unnecessary division and support all the relationships within the adoption triangle (child, birth parent, and adoptive parent), but often underlying fears and perceived threats may still impact the unfolding relationships. These adoptions do not yet take place in a culture that supports multiplicity of mothering and solidarity among mothers.

However, many successful experiments in open adoption today *are* challenging these assumptions of division and competition among mothers.

Revisioning the relationship between mothers as mutually enhancing, supportive, and grounded in responsibility for children, both in the adoption triangle and in the culture at large, would profoundly reshape the configuration and context of adoption. We believe this ideology of basic conflict and mutual threat is an enormous source of difficulty for both adoptive and birth mothers. Conversely, the revisioning of this relationship by adoptive mothers, birth mothers, and their children can be an enormous contribution to the task of resisting and reframing such cultural ideologies. Collaborative parenting based on empathic care for children rather than notions of ownership support the psychological development of parents as well as children.

5. An identity that is simple is superior to one that is complex.

One fallout from the cultural derogation of difference is a cultural premise that it is better for a child to have a simple identity than a complex one. When one adds the differences of race and culture to that of adoption itself, this premise argues that adopted children will have identity confusion that will weaken their sense of self. Elsewhere, Watkins and Fisher (1993) have argued that the fact that children must knit together the various pieces of a complex identity neither means that they will fail this task nor that this task handicaps them in any way. On the contrary, it can be argued that work on this very task of a heterogeneous identity prepares these children in a unique way for participation in a multicultural society and world where the negotiation of difference is an essential skill.

Similarly, for adoptive mothers, messages from the dominant culture generally warn women that the task of becoming an adoptive mother may be difficult, confusing, and complicated, particularly if it is a cross-racial adoption. Rarely is there encouragement that the process could be expansive in terms of one's identity. If circumstances permit, however, there is the potential for exploring new parts of oneself in becoming an adoptive mother. There is often a parallel growth of mother and child as a mutual relationship develops that acknowledges and respects differences. When a white mother adopts a child of another race, the way she understands herself, the world, and the experiences of people of color begins to change. No longer is she able to see the world only as a white person without having a perception of how people view her and her child as somehow different. Antennae

are up when discussions of race occur at work, when children at the playground question where the mother of her child is, when political events take place that are related to race and need to be explained to her child. There can be an internal strengthening that develops, an assertiveness that may be newly experienced as the woman rises to advocate for her child or to learn about the child's cultural heritage. Just as biracial or bicultural intimate relationships for adults can be a catalyst for change in how each person experiences her or his identity, multiracial families provide a parent with new opportunities for forging a more complex and multifaceted sense of self.

6. Adoptive mothers are defective as mothers, causing psychiatric symptoms in their adopted children.

Issuing from the work of psychoanalyst Helene Deutsch (1945) is the judgment that infertile adoptive mothers are unable to parent successfully. This purportedly has to do with the narcissistic wound to them caused by their infertility, which may have originally been an unconscious rejection of motherhood. Infertility in this model is equated with feelings of inferiority in the psyche of the mother that so preoccupy her that she cannot give enough maternal love to her child. Schecter (1960) continues in this tradition warning that the adoptive child is a constant reminder to the mother of her "barrenness." These bleak prognostications claim that such maternal issues result in increased psychiatric disorder among adoptees. They do not pause to consider that the stigmatizing itself places all members of the adoptive family at risk for psychological hardship (Kirk, 1964; Watkins & Fisher, 1993; Wegar, 1997). Clinical observations suggest that there are actually strengths as well as vulnerabilities associated with parenting after infertility (Glazer, 1990).

7. Adoption is a lifelong grieving process for all members of the adoption triangle.

Certainly there are losses and various periods of grieving related to the adoption experience that birth mothers, adoptive mothers, and adopted children face at different developmental points. Until recently the voices of many birth mothers had been silenced, with much of their grief having been endured quietly by themselves.

However, the seemingly relentless focus by clinicians on the perpetual grieving process for those directly affected by adoption is often what adoptive mothers confront when seeking support and

guidance. When challenged with the notion that she will be unable to impact this grief substantially for her child, the adoptive mother is faced with an enormous sense of helplessness. Rarely is she counseled that adoption is as much recovery from loss as it is loss itself (Bernard, 1974). Feelings of anger, disappointment, and loss can often be directed between birth mother, adoptive mother, and adopted child, which can intensify the fears that each member of the triangle may hold. If, instead, all the voices of children, birth mothers, and adoptive mothers could be heard and better understood, then the grief might not be seen as an inevitable, ongoing psychological construction.

The adoptive mother is cast in the role of forestalling or beating the terrible odds she is given by the culture around her. She feels the pressure from numerous sources to be a better than ordinary mother in order to prove her entitlement to the child and to compensate for the "damages" already done as well as those considered to be endemic to living the adoptive life. This defensive posture makes it difficult to step away and clearly evaluate the forms of attack she is negotiating and to articulate the values her family and her mothering represent.

Further, because adoption is most often pursued because of infertility, not from choice, there is no reason to believe that adoptive mothers begin their journey with a conscious sensibility regarding the cultural norms by which they are entrapped. Indeed, they often begin, sadly enough, by thinking that adoption is second best, that adoptive children grow up flawed, that the love they will receive from an adoptive child is more fragile than that from a "natural" child, and that the love they must give may go beyond their capacities and still fail to fortify their children sufficiently. Disappointment about needing to adopt is shameful to admit openly and difficult to bear alone. How much the cultural ideas and psychological representations of these beliefs contribute to this disappointment! Adoptive mothers further along in their questioning of these ideas, and further along in their own experience of not only the challenges of adoptive motherhood, but the beauty and hope of it, have a critical role to play in creating a more positive cultural outlook on adoptive family life.

SOURCES OF RESISTANCE

Cultural ideologies live and are either reproduced or challenged within our psyches and our actions. These ideas place a set of burdensome thoughts and responsibilities on the adoptive mother that haunt her

silently, that are difficult for her to articulate and still more difficult to fight and transform. And yet the metabolization of this cultural residue is critical to her own mental health, to her relationship to her children, and to her ability to give voice and power to her own experience.

There are various arenas that both impact and are impacted by the development of healthy cultural resistance (Weingarten, 1995) by adoptive mothers. Communities—both the adoptive community and other communities to which families relate—are a source of support and, at times, a place for education by adoptive mothers. There are important lessons for the mental health and research worlds to learn from adoptive mothers. Clinicians, adoption workers, teachers, and health care providers can be most helpful by moving beyond notions of emotional "support" to a model of supporting mothers' ability to resist the marginalization and pathologizing of their maternal experience and practice.

We believe that deconstructing the underlying dominant ideologies that construct adoption in mainstream American culture will liberate new energies and new visions of mothering, family, and human connectedness. We hope it will liberate the voices, strengths, and resources of adoptive mothers who are further marginalized by differences such as race, class, ethnicity, sexual identity, and disability status. This process of cultural resistance needs to be simultaneously undertaken at the personal and societal levels. We see the availability of and access to communities of resistance as essential to the liberating process.

We have found helpful a model of resistance based on Robinson and Ward's (1991) description of the process of repudiation and affirmation as an act of resistance for African American girls. We believe this may reflect a mother's developmental process as well as a cultural evolution of resistance.

The first form, *resistance for survival,* is an adaptation that lies in being as invisible as possible and calling little attention to oneself. This is often seen in an adoptive mother who may minimize differences in her adoptive family . She may rarely speak openly about being in an adoptive family, may keep the adoption secret to her child or others in her life, and may feel so uncomfortable about adoption that she evades and abbreviates such discussion. Adoptive mothers were prescribed this strategy by many adoption "experts" until recently.

The second form of resistance, *resistance for equality,* seeks equality under the law, with equal rights and representation in all areas. For example, adoptive mothers might encourage teachers and administra-

tors to include adoption as an equal and positive option in creating families when developing curriculum, literature, and classroom activities. Tax credits, inheritance laws, benefits to support adoption costs, adoption leave for parents, and medical insurance that fairly includes children adopted with preexisting conditions are further examples. Adoption can be viewed as a form of diversity, and it intersects with multiculturalism as this becomes integrated into new belief systems.

The last form of resistance described by Robinson and Ward (1991) is *resistance for liberation.* This form of resistance challenges oppressive or destructive cultural norms and seeks to offer new visions and voices to the culture. Moving beyond a vision of simply experiencing equality, resistance for liberation would involve a profound reconceptualization of many aspects of our lives. In this regard adoptive mothers offer much in helping all people consider the social construction of family, the concept of "ownership" of children, the dangers of mother blaming that occur for all kinds of mothers, and mythologies regarding blood ties. An example of this kind of change would be parents working with teachers of elementary schools to transform curriculum on families. Instead of asking children to draw or write about their "family tree" (a more traditional way of conceptualizing families that emphasizes the centrality of blood ties), teachers could consider using a circle with the child in the center and then including important people in the child's life in outlying circles. This may more accurately capture the fuller relational matrix of not only adopted children but many children with multiple webs of relationships in all kinds of family structures.

The developmental path for adoptive mothers that we are prescribing is a liberatory path, drawn in part from the work of Paulo Freire, the leader of Brazil's literacy movement. Freire describes liberation as coming about in two stages. In the first, called *conscientization,* members of a group become aware of the cultural ideologies that shape their day-to-day life (Freire, 1989). In the second, *annunciation,* the group envisions in a more ideal fashion how things could be structured for the good. Adoptive mothers must become aware of the ideologies they labor under. They must identify the thoughts and feelings to which these ideologies give rise. They must radically question these thoughts and feelings, eventually disidentifying from ones that are not supportive of their families—both children and adults—created through adoption. We believe that this work is best done within a community of adoptive mothers whose membership promotes sharing among veteran adoptive mothers and newer ones who are particularly vulnerable to the stresses and stigmas we have outlined above. Through

creative dialogue in such communities, we believe that adoptive families can actually begin to see themselves as pioneers in consciously constructing forms of family that serve children and honor difference and that aid in liberating other kinds of mothers from oppressive ideologies.

In addition to community building, reconceptualizing psychological models of adoption also leads to a more liberatory way of considering adoptive mothers. The psychiatric literature and research has caused significant damage and pain for many of them throughout this century. Until recently, with rare exceptions, the literature and advice to adoptive mothers and their children was dominated with images of the "primal wound" on the child and the inadequate "bonding" of adoptive mothers to their children. Clinicians working with adoptive mothers may want to consider "prescribing" or helping to create consciousness-raising groups for them and assisting clients in accessing other peer supports and resources to help build communities of resistance. Research projects that look at nonclinical populations of adoptive mothers and adopted children should be explored in greater depth. Continued development and reinforcement of nonblaming, nonjudgmental language to describe members of the adoption triangle are important, for example, birth mother, biological mother; instead of "real" mother, "natural" mother, or "abandoning" mother; adopted child instead of orphan. Use of language, such as "primal wound," that presents adoption as an affliction needs to be curtailed as well.

With the development of strong community networks for adoptive mothers, pressure can be applied in the political and policy-making arenas regarding adoption legislation and decisions. If serious consideration were given to the perspectives of adoptive mothers and children, community responses might be stronger in response to insensitive or inaccurate images about adoption represented in many places from the media to school curriculums.

CONCLUSION

Adoptive mothers have much in common with other marginalized mothers in the path to liberation. The notions that guide our understanding of the possibility of reconstructing motherhood and family do not arise from adoption alone. We stand with other mothers whose lives and mothering practices challenge traditional views of what constitutes healthy families and good mothers, and that move us toward embracing

a more experiential and relational definition of mothering (see especially Benkov, Chapter 5, and Schnitzer, Chapter 7, this volume). We support the cross-fertilization between and among different groups of marginalized mothers, both as a support to recognizing and deconstructing sources of marginalization and in evolving strategies of resistance. We offer this chapter in an effort to develop such an enlarged community with other mothers.

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10

Against All Odds

Resistance and Resilience in African American Welfare Mothers

ELIZABETH SPARKS

I AM an African American woman who grew up in the 1950s with friends and relatives who received "aid"—the colloquial term for the Aid to Dependent Children program. It was later also commonly called "welfare." Many of the families of children who attended my elementary school received this assistance, and my aunt and cousins were recipients of the "commodity food" distributed to the poor each month under this program. As a college student during the 1970s, I read descriptions of welfare-dependent families in the popular press, but I did not recognize the individuals described in this material. My aunt and friends' mothers were not lazy, promiscuous women who had different values from the rest of society. They were respectable, church-going women who instructed their children to get a good education so they could get good jobs and not become dependent on welfare. When they were able to find jobs, these women worked as private maids in the households of white families or as beauticians working out of their own kitchens, often being paid very little for their work. They scrimped and saved so their children could go to college, and they found ingenious ways to feed and clothe their families.

As a social worker during the 1980s, I visited the homes of many mothers who received Aid to Families with Dependent Children