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Toward a Deeper Understanding of Adoption Family Structure: Concepts Borrowed From Social Justice, Attachment Theory, and Relational Dialectics

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Abstract

Adoption and adoption family issues are not a regular part of most counselor preparation programs and, as such, mental health professionals do not have adequate training in adoption and adoption issues. The studies on adoption often reflect a lack of birth family participants and are focused instead on the adoptee and the adopted family. This paper provides a conceptualization of the adoption family system that integrates four perspectives: social justice, attachment theory—specifically object relations, the adoption triad (i.e., adoptee, all members of the adopted family, and all members of the birth family), and relational dialectics. These four dimensions comprise a fundamental conceptualization that mental health practitioners can use to help design treatments for adoptees and their families.

Keywords: adoption, adoption triad, attachment theory and adoption, relational dialectics

According to the United States Census Bureau (2010), between 2–4% of the American population is adopted, and this is an underestimation because only the adopted children in the home were counted. Adopted adults and stepchildren living in the home were not counted, nor were children informally adopted by grandparents or others. Neither the general population nor mental health field personnel have a full or clear picture of adoptees and their families. What is known is that the history of adoption reflects oppressive laws, religious practices, stigma, and misunderstandings over
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adoptees’ mental health concerns (e. g., therapist telling an adoptee to “be grateful for being adopted” or failing to assess for adoption and subsequently misunderstanding client grief). Not only is it known that each adoption may affect up to 30 individual family members (Sass & Henderson, 2007), it is also known that studies on adoption and treatment are most often based upon an adopted family structure that neglects to include birth families.

The purpose of this article is to more fully explore the adoption family structure (AFS). Such an understanding can provide new areas of research by reshaping the lens through which adoptees’ families are viewed. The lens through which adoptees and their families are presented is one based upon dialectical thought—described by Basseches (1984) as development movement through forms. This dialectical view of adoption family structure is comprised of social justice, attachment theory, the adoption triad, and relational dialectics. The social justice view is based on the “managerial class” concepts of Darity (1983) and Harrison, Gentile, and Harrison (2012) and posits adoptees as being marginalized by a larger social narrative that creates multiple marginalizations. The separation or “split” that is created through this managed marginalization can be described through attachment theory—specifically through object relations theory (Winnicott, 1960). Although described in binary terms, object relations theory has a dialectical motion inherent in its structure that clearly suggests a need to work with the adoption triad (adoptee, birth family, and adopted family) in order to enhance the identity development of adoptees. The final element in this perspective centers on the relational dialectics, multivocalics, and distant voices of Montgomery and Baxter (1998) and Hoffman’s (1981) rules of congruence of triangles. Woven together into one lens, these various perspectives can suggest new ways to configure treatment for adoptees and the families. As a result, mental health professionals may be able to provide more effective treatment services.

**Background and the Need**

It is important that more is known about adoptees and their mental health concerns because it is believed that an estimated 100 million Americans and their families are directly or indirectly affected by adoption (Siegel, 2013). Moreover, it is estimated that 15% of individuals in residential treatment centers or inpatient psychiatric facilities are adopted (Kirschner, 2007; Palacios, & Brodzinsky, 2010). That adoptees and their families request mental health services at a higher rate than the normal population (Miller, Fan, Christensen, Grotevant, & van Dulmen, 2000; Weir & Brodzinsky, 2013) should suggest the importance of having knowledge and training in adoption. Yet many counselors are not adequately prepared to deal with adoption and adoption family issues. For example, a mental health professional may try to adapt conventional approaches such as a behavioral approach when working with parents and their adopted child or children. However, without understanding the potential for the adoptee to experience “cognitive distortion” with regards to behavioral approaches, mental health professionals may unwittingly exacerbate the problem (Weir, 2011a, 2011b). According to Weir, an adoptee—especially one who had experienced abuse or other trauma—may end up personalizing the consequence in terms of his or her relationship with the adopted family due to relational issues around trust. A result could be hatred of the “punisher” (similar to...
the hatred a child has for the punishing mother in object relations theory). Clearly, this outcome is the opposite of what is anticipated from traditional behavioral contracting. Even traditional family systems theories fall short of directly addressing the multiple marginalizations and multivocals that occur with adoptees and their families. Bowenian therapists are taught to attend to the multigenerational influences in families in terms of anxiety and differentiation (Bowen, 1985). However, adoptees are influenced by both vertical (parents, grandparents) and horizontal generations (siblings, aunts, uncles), and counselors need to know how these often estranged, unknown, or hidden family constellations influence the mental health of their adoptee clients.

It is difficult to get information about adoption to aid in treatment, and this includes information from adoptees as well as information about adoptees. Counselors who do know they are working with an adoptee may correctly associate adoption issues with attachment issues. However, many counselors do not know they are dealing with an adoptee because they may not ask, and adoptees may not be forthcoming with that information. College counseling textbooks—an effective resource for information for students—contain little if any information on the adoption family structure (AFS). If indeed adoption issues are mentioned in a textbook, it is usually from a disease, pathology-oriented perspective (Javier, Baden, Biafora, & Camacho-Gingerich, 2007), where adoption is mostly presented as “a problem” that needs to be treated. For example, a well-written and engaging book on adoption by Kirschner (2006) nevertheless describes adoptees as suffering from the Adopted Child Syndrome. Professors who train graduate counseling students about adoption and adoption issues often have little training themselves. On a more subtle level, Fisher (2003) pointed out that the lack of attention in training suggests that adoption is not an important professional issue. The lack of training is also noted by Weir, Fife, Whiting, and Blazewick (2008), who pointed out the deficiencies in training in spite of the fact that 14–26% of the graduate students in their study were going to be working with adoption agencies such as Child Protective Services.

However, the lack of information is only one dimension of a larger issue that exists in the field: What information and training should be included? This question is reflected in the works of Atkinson, Gonet, Freundlich, and Riley (2013), who called for the need for a definition of an “adoption-competent mental health professional” (p. 156). On another level, these same authors also underscored the fact that, while there is a need for competent mental health service providers, the mental health field itself does not have any competencies or standards for treating adoptees and their families. What standards and treatment modalities that do exist are found in various manuals of state child welfare agencies.

In spite of the lack of definitions and standards of practice for treating adoptees and their families, there are demonstrated treatment approaches. These approaches are generally separated into “coercive” and “non-coercive” categories. While the former approaches (e.g., rebirthing therapy, holding therapy) have questionable practices and results, the latter attachment-based therapies (e.g., filial family play therapy, dyadic developmental psychotherapy, and theraplay) have some demonstrated positive results with adoptive and foster families (Weir, Lee, Canosa, Rodrigues, McWilliams, & Parker, 2013). These same researchers see integrated systems approaches as having potential—especially non-coercive and non-directive approaches. Booth and Jernberg (2010) evaluated their Theraplay approach, which includes play, structural, and experiential
dimensions, and worked for 15 weeks with 12 adoptive families, including 23 of the 24 parents and 30 children. While many of the results were not significant, some promise was shown. The researchers concluded that their model should be seen as a practice model that “may have some level of clinical efficacy” in helping adults improve their relational skills, improving adoptive family communications, and improving adoptees’ mental health (p. 192). While the researchers are commended for the rigor of their study and the creative integration of family systems theories and play therapy, it should be noted that this study only involved adoptive families and family members. No members of the birth family were included.

Family systems approaches need to be adapted to incorporate the birth families as well as the structural, cultural, and idiosyncratic complexities inherent in adoptees and their adopted families. While studies such as Weir and Brodzinski (2013) clearly inform the practice, marriage and family counselors are currently left mostly to generalize concepts and practices from non-adoption family theories and combine them in various ways in attempting to understand adoption family structure and configure interventions. This could be yet another explanation to support Wegar (1997) and Riley (2009) who say that families with adoptees have to try many therapists before finding one that understands adoption issues and one that can be effective. Family systems practitioners need to incorporate the birth family and adoption family structure so that attachments, inherent constructs in adoption, are understood on an appropriate foundation.

Adoption Family Structure

The adoption family structure (AFS) is comprised of the intersection and integration of social justice, attachment theory, the adoption triad, and relational dialectics. While the structures of some family systems theories such as those advanced by Bowen (1985; multigenerational) and Minuchin (1974; structural) appear flexible enough to extend and rather easily incorporate the adoption family structure, each traditional theory is predicated on the “normal” family—a family whose members have biology as the lowest common denominator. This family structure can be organized into a set of systems and subsystems with power and influence distributed varyingly within and throughout the biologically-fenced relational structure (Minuchin, 1974). In contrast, the AFS is based upon loss and has both biology and social dimensions as the lowest common denominator, and the systems and subsystems in the AFS are biologically and socially-fenced. The differences between these two structural configurations are a priori in nature and profound in their implications.

The adoption family structure is a singular family structure founded and built upon two families. The AFS, as opposed to traditional biological families, consists of two mothers; two fathers; any number of known and unknown siblings; two sets of maternal and paternal grandparents, two sets of great-grandparents, etc., and any number of known and unknown aunts, uncles, and cousins. The dynamic interplay between and among traditional biological family members becomes geometric when adoptees and adoptive parents are considered part of the larger system and even more complex when the concepts and practices of attachments, hierarchies, and power are entertained.
Social Justice Dimensions: Working With the Other

It is clear that adoptees are a hidden population and are marginalized from mainstream culture through systematic institutional oppression that in some cases presents formidable challenges to adoptees. A perspective on the general challenges is described in the early works of Darity (1983). He suggested that our culture is organized and maintained by a “managerial class”—intellectuals who have the wherewithal and the knowledge, skills, and abilities to create paradigms and organize society into managers and managees. Darity maintained that the managerial class includes, among other entities, institutions such as publishing houses and government agencies, while a subsection of the managerial class (called “petit class”) includes teachers and mental health professionals (among others) who are trained to carry out the paradigmatic interests of the managerial class. For example, each state has a Department of Human Services or some such agency that manages adoptions, and this system was essentially created by intellectuals (statisticians, legislators, etc.) who agreed upon some standards for adoption that includes screening potential adoptive parents. Once the standards were drawn up, it created a group of potential adoptive parents and another group of potential parents who were not considered appropriate for adoption (for whatever reason). While clearly standards are needed as well as screening for adoptive parents, the sub-narrative reveals a managerial class who was able to section off large groups of potential parents and separate them from those potential parents who were not deemed appropriate for adoption. After identifying appropriate adoptive parents, these families are then managed through various laws governing the degree of information that would or could be shared about the adoption. In essence, the managerial class tenets both create the pool of potential adoptive parents and manages them through laws.

As a group, adoptees have been managed through the medical field and hospital regulations, religious views, privacy laws and practices, and by mental health counselors who receive little or no training in their graduate programs about adoptees and how to treat their mental health concerns. Harrison et al. (2012) extended Darity’s (1983) work and said that the managerial class invokes an epistemological narrative which has autonomous paradigms that are limited by binary structures and, when exercised in society and on its members, creates and separates one from another into “the one” and “the other” (i.e., manager and managee respectively vis a vis “appropriate” and “not-appropriate” adoptive parents). These same authors went on to say that this separation occurs along a lateral plane that identifies and separates “the one” from “the other” and also occurs along a hierarchical plane that identifies and separates the “one who has more” and “the one who has less.” When applied to adoptees, these binary dimensions are inextricably woven together in space and time, and the result is multiple marginalizations that occur exogenous to the adoptee’s family and endogenous to it as well. The exogenous marginalization is seen in the social creation of the adoptee (“the one”) who is different from non-adoptees (“the other”) so that non-adoptees have more rights and privileges than the adoptee. Hence, horizontal separation occurs between the adoptee and non-adoptee, and the vertical power differential reflects adoptees having “less power than” non-adoptees. The endogenous marginalization is also reflected in the separation of the adoptee from their biological roots into adopted mother and biological mother with concomitant processes and procedures put into place in the form of laws and
practices that reify this separation. In the process of separating, the managerial class manages the rights of the adoptee to know their origins. This is significant because attachment theory strongly suggests that the initial bonds of attachment are formed with the biological mother (Bowlby, 2005). Since adoptees have two mothers, attachment to both mothers seems to be an important consideration. The managerial class principle of separation and management of adoptees and their families seems to fall short of a social and ethical mandate.

**Object Relations/Attachment Theory**

According to Levy and Orlans (2000), many adoptees experience attachment issues, and a review of the professional literature on adoption will find numerous articles related to various attachment concerns. Bowlby (2005) is considered the seminal theorist in attachment theory. His work on affectional bonds between infant and mothers was in direct contrast to the historically popular views of Freud’s secondary drive theory (Freud, 1992). The dependency/satisfaction dynamic that had posited the infant as needy and one who could be physically satiated and thereby bond appropriately with a mother was overturned in favor of a much more robust view of infant and bonding. Bowlby saw the infant as a more vibrant being who interacted with the mother and with the environment.

Although Weir and Brodzinsky (2013) saw limits to attachment/object relations theory in working with adoptees due to the inflexibility of the theoretical concepts, object relations theory (e.g., Kohut, 1977; Winnicott, 1960) has particular significance in the conceptualization and understanding of adoptee attachments. In addition, while setting up a binary structure of Environmental Mother (EM) and Object Mother (OM), object relations theory reflects a strong element of dialectics. Clearly, object relations theory has structural similarities and common ground with the structure of adoption, and these similarities reveal the complexities that counselors face when conceptualizing adoptees’ issues.

In general, object relations theory describes attachment/separation, introjection/projection, and stability/change. Winnicott (1960) described the context of the “Environmental Mother” (EM) and the “Object Mother” (OM) in a child’s development. At birth, the EM is the child’s central focus and provides nurturance, containment, support, protection, and unconditional love. As the child grows, the OM provides the introjects and conditional love related to what the child can and cannot do, should and should not do, and must and must not do. During this process of development, there are two categorical imperatives for the Environmental Mother: 1) the EM must never be out of sight so long that the child forgets the EM; and, 2) the EM must never allow the child’s frustration to outdistance the child’s abilities to negotiate the frustration. Regarding adoption, it appears that both mandates are violated.

According to object relation theory and child development, children eventually “split” their singular primary caregiver into two “mothers.” There is the overly gratifying mother who gives the child unconditional love and what he or she wants and there is the depriving-punishing mother whose withholding of love creates “conditions of worth.” This split into “one all-gratifying mother” and “another mother who is depriving/punishing” is maintained in the child’s experience until 3–6 years of age (Hamilton, 1990; Kohut 1977). However, the degree to which the split is rectified is
reliant upon the dynamic interplay between the EM and the OM. According to traditional
object relations theory, an over-preponderance of either EM or OM will leave the child
dependent on others and lacking in trust of self and others. In this scenario, the child does
not fully integrate the split, and this produces anxiety characterized by binary coping
mechanisms such as dependency, rigidity, all-or-nothing thinking, enmeshed and
disengaged behaviors in relationships, and over-controlling and under-controlling
behaviors. In essence, the child sees the world in terms of self or other—not self and
other. Many object relation theorists believe that healthy and dynamic interplay between
the Environmental Mother and the Object Mother in child development will lead to a
dialectical resolution of interdependency in relationships, flexibility, and self-regulating
behaviors. According to the theory, as the child integrates the world of part objects into
whole objects and negotiates the boundaries between the outer world and the inner world,
the child settles on a “good enough” mother (Winnicott, 1960). In more formal terms,
this settling on a more realistic and integrated mother figure is known as the “Also-I”. It
is helpful to think of this as an integrated psychological state where the child says, “At
first, there was only You (object). Now, there is also Me! (“Also-I”).”

The concept of splitting in object relations is directly related to adoptees and their
families, and splitting is also a social justice issue because splitting is reinforced through
the managerial class ideology (Harrison et al., 2012). For example, adoption creates a
split between the biological and the adopted family. Yet, as the managerial class value
would suggest, this split is at once created by the concept of adoption and then the split is
systematically reinforced through laws and practices of the “petit managerial class.” This
exogenous and social splitting is in addition to an endogenous splitting described above
that occurs inside the family. This double-whammy in splitting becomes a quadruple-
whammy by the fact that the adopted child has two sets of Environmental Mothers and
Object Mothers. The splitting that naturally occurs in children’s perceptions of the object
is magnified by the splitting that occurs between the two sets of mothers.

In addition, while children in biological families work to rectify the split, adoptees
are hindered from resolving the effects of the split with their biological EM and OM.
Hence, unless the adoptee is able to reconcile with their biological family, a split remains
regardless of the child’s attempts—successful or less successful—to reconcile the split
within their immediate family. The adopted child must negotiate the split on two levels:
One level is negotiated with their immediate adopted Environmental and Object Mother,
and the other level is negotiated with the birth Environmental and Object Mother. The
process is clearly complicated in situations where there is little or no communication
between members of the adoption triad.

It would be entirely possible for the child to work through the split with their
adopted families and be precluded from working through the split from their birth
families because of no contact. The result of this exclusive reconciliation of the split with
the adopted family leaves the child fragmented and incomplete in terms of their
integration and differentiation within their adoptee family system. This structural splitting
between two sets of families is one reason why the adoption family structure (AFS) is
significantly different from the non-adoption family structure.
The Adoption Triad

In addition to object relations and the issue of splitting, adoption family structures also differ from normal family structure because of the “adoption triad” (i.e., adoptee, all members of the adoptive family, and all members of the birth family). The structure of the adoption triad includes the myriad of relationships that are known to exist as well as those relationships that are “hidden” or unknown to the adoptee and/or the adoptee’s family(s). While there are biological and social influences present in the adoption triad, these alone are not what make the adoption family structure complex. The complexity is created through the psychological cross-pollination of the adoptee’s birth and adopted families.

Laws of Congruence of Triangles

When one configures each set of Environmental Mothers and Object Mothers through the lens of the adoption triad, another dimension comes to the forefront: “Laws of Congruence” for triangles (Hoffman, 1981, p. 128). According to this author, the narrative of these laws is often presented as:

- The friend of my friend is my friend
- The enemy of my friend is my enemy
- The friend of my enemy is my enemy
- The enemy of my enemy is my friend

An understanding of the structural interactions occurring within and between the adoption families provides the hope for integration and change. This is due to the fact that the laws of congruence allow for the sudden shifts in coalitions—some of which will reach across the two sets of family lines. Some realignments will foster changes so that former “enemies” become “friends” in and across families. Since shifts in one family both influence and are influenced by shifts in the other, this interactive, shifting hexagonal ego mass may rarely experience healthy levels of differentiation—tending instead towards seemingly constant chaos and disengagement. Conceptualizing the AFS more holistically as comprising the adoption triad seems an important consideration in understanding the larger family dynamics.

The rules of congruence would suggest that when the two mothers in the adoption triad are getting along (i.e., the adopted child and the adopted mother are on friendly terms and the birth mother and adopted mother are also on friendly terms), the birth mother is the friend of the child because the friend of my friend is my friend. In those cases where the adopted child and adopted mother are on friendly terms, and the adopted mother and birth mother are not on friendly terms, the child’s relationship with the birth mother would be characterized as inimical because the enemy of my friend is my enemy.

A particularly intriguing situation occurs when the child and adopted mother and birth mother are friendly and then something happens so that the adopted mother becomes the “enemy” of the child for however long and for whatever reason. Here, the birth mother suddenly becomes the child’s enemy because the friend of my enemy is my enemy. This means that the relationship between the adopted child and the birth mother is partially regulated through the relationship of the adopted child and the adopted mother. When something negative happens to the relationship between the child and the adopted mother, the triadic relationship between the child and the birth mother is affected as well.
so that the adopted child and his or her birth mother are not friendly. Even in cases where the adopted child does not know the birth mother and the adopted mother does (and has withheld the birth mother’s information from the adopted child), the relationship between the adopted child and birth mother is affected negatively. The same holds true even when the child is aware that they are adopted yet may not know the birth mother. How the adopted mother discusses the birth mother or the situation surrounding the adoption has a direct effect on the relationship between the adopted child and birth mother (Dennis, 2014). For instance, whenever the adopted child and adopted mother are getting along and the adopted mother speaks admonishingly of the birth mother (e.g., “she was a drug addict,” “she was too young to have children,” “she could not support herself,” etc.), the adopted child sees his or her birth mother as an enemy because the enemy of my friend is my enemy. However, according to the laws of congruence, there are some benefits to the adopted mother and birth mother not being friendly: In the case when the child and adopted mother are having difficulties, the adopted child would see the birth mother as a friend because the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

In conceptualizing a two-parent biological single family structure, the laws of congruence work within the framework so that the relationships that are affected involve parents and siblings such that if the child is upset with one parent the dynamics move from one parent or sibling to another depending upon the nature of the relationships. With the AFS, the laws of congruence work both within and across the two families so that individual relationships and entire family units are governed by these laws of congruence of triangles. The various relationships are affected within and across families and make the dynamics quite complex so that individual family members, subsystems, and entire family systems are constantly shifting depending upon the various relationships being friendly or inimical.

Relational Dialectics

The triadic nature of dialectics is as helpful a construct in adoption family structure as are the laws of triangles in understanding the potential interactions that occur in the adoption triad. Montgomery and Baxter (1998) saw dialectical approaches as implicating interactive opposition, which allows for a focus on the illogical, paradoxical, and anomalous shifts that occur. Moreover, dialectical perspectives are not easily subjected to monologisms and linear views of change. Even though the synthesis (of the dialectic) is a singular voice, Bahktin’s (1986) work and the works of others (e.g., Montgomery and Baxter, 1998) show that the inherent structure of dialectics is fluid. This means that while it appears that the synthesis is achieved, there is never a merging so that the synthesis is at once the binary pole of another dialectic.

Multivocality and Distant Voices

From a postmodern perspective, the adoptee exists only in relation to others and “… is premised on an ever-present multiplicity of meanings and points of view” (Montgomery & Baxter, 1998, p. 160). Hence, it is important to know one’s relationship with the “others” and to know how communication occurs between the adoptee and the “others.” Relational dialectics are seen as a dynamic and never ending interaction between dependence and differentiation. In relational dialectics, individuals create dialectics in communication patterns known as the “dialectical praxis” (Montgomery &
Baxter, 1998, p. 162). This praxis incorporates multivocality and temporal dimensions of communication so that an exchange between individuals in present time is a stream of thought that includes recognition of the history of what has been said, what is being said in the present, and an anticipation of the response in the future from both the individual in the exchange and a hypothetical other (known as superaddressee; Bakhtin, 1986). The superaddressee may be the birth mother who is also back-grounded with a distant voice. The superaddressee may also be the larger social narrative reflected in a proximal voice. Regardless, it is important for mental health professionals to acknowledge the multivocalic nature of adoption and to explore the narratives.

The adoption triad clearly includes many voices—both immediate and distant and both friendly and non-friendly—and its dialectical praxis is potentially even more complex. In many cases, the voices in the immediate foreground include those of the adopted family while the more distant voices are echoed from the members of the birth family. According to the laws of congruence, the distal voice may become proximal when certain conditions prevail such as in the case where everyone is friendly and then something happens to diminish one relationship. The voice of my friend’s enemy becomes foregrounded in a friendly way in the child’s experience.

The tension between the different voices can become significant and can impact the spatial relations between the individuals—especially when these spatial relationships become fixed and rigidly defined. When the adopted mother and birth mother are “not friendly,” a system is set in place so that the relational choices become binary and exclusionary: The child cannot love both mothers because loving one betrays the other. The laws of congruence concomitant with the implications of attachment theory posit a binary nature of “mothers” where adopted mother is “the mother” the birth mother is the “other mother” or vice versa. A rigid configuration depicts these two mothers as categorically separate and precludes a reconciliation in this split.

A relational dialectics perspective can help mental health professionals’ work with the various illogical, paradoxical, and anomalous shifts occurring in the complex family structure of the adoptee. For instance, since the adoptee has two punishing/depriving mothers (and two gratifying mothers), a relational dialectics approach concomitant with awareness of the laws of congruence of triangles can help adoptees and their families better understand how to predict the dynamics of relationships so that they can have more choices over their behaviors: Mothers who get along help the adoptees bond with all family members. The adopted mother can learn to see how her relationship with the adoptee’s birth mother is influenced. Normalizing an adoptee’s experiences through this lens may help provide a more clear pathway for adoptees and their families to diminish the social distance between them and “the other” families. The normalizing of the complex family dynamics that adoptees and their families experience may help diminish the multiple marginalizations that have occurred. Just as children work to rectify and integrate the “split” in their development, mental health professionals can work to integrate the splitting that occurs between members of the adoption triad through relational dialectics.
Conclusion

The adoption family structure (AFS) is comprised of elements of social justice, attachment theory, the adoption triad, and relational dialectics and is offered as a reflection of the complexities related to adoption. Traditional views of adoption and adoption treatments have focused on adopted families and often exclude birth families. Helping clients reconcile the “split” in the adoption triad involves mental health professionals’ understandings of how adoptees have been managed as a class/group and an enhancing of their sensitivity to how they can inadvertently perpetuate the split by conceptualizing the “Other family” rather than seeing the adoption triad in all of its depth and nuance. Sensitivity by mental health professionals would yield an exploration of the various voices a client hears and would include voices that are near (adopted family) as well as distant (birth family). This exploration can help clients better understand current attachment issues and integrate them into a meaningful whole.

Being denied access to one’s biological history is marginalizing and upsetting. By inquiring if the client is adopted, mental health professionals can better assess a client’s anger over the injustices they experience as adoptees rather than assigning that anger to some other issue or characterological deficit.

Finally, all relationships have dialectical tensions—the center of which revolves around autonomy and connection. When adoptee clients present with relational issues, having mental health workers understand that this dialectical tension is mediated through both adopted and birth families seems a more integrated way to proceed.

References


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