
Searching for family: Psychological and bioethical considerations

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Abstract

Using a critical adoption framework, I interrogate the history of international adoption as a closed adoption process that privileges adoptive parents over the human rights of birth families and adopted children. I focus on the ways in which adopted individuals and adoptive parents are challenging the remnants of a closed adoption mentality by using new technologies to address questions about birth/biological family.

Critical Adoption Studies

Pivotal role that power and privilege play in who is adopted, who is allowed to adopt, and how birth families are treated; whose voices are represented in adoption research

Closed Adoption

Nuclear family

Best interest of the child

Best interest of the adoptive family

Closed → Mediated → Open

State/agency and adoptive parents
have control

Adoptee and birth family have
limited power

Birth Family Search

1 out of 6 families have searched

5-10% have found or reunited with
birth family

Birth Family Search Agents

Parent initiated, adoptee uninvolved

Adoptee interest, parent initiated

Adoptee interest, parent resistance

Adoptee initiated, parent (un)involved

[Adoptees] want to know whether they are genetically predisposed to developing diabetes, cancer or other diseases. Most adoptees are hungry for information that will lead to their birth parents, but some are also expanding their conception of family as they embrace a far-flung constellation of second, third and fourth cousins.

I want to know things that a medical questionnaire wouldn't reveal. I see myself in my biological daughter every time she rolls her eyes. I hear my mother in my own voice. Somewhere on this planet, there are people who hold the keys to my sons' pasts and the little mysteries that make them unique.

Part of the reason I wanted to find my birth mother was to get answers to basic questions like "where do I come from?" and "why was I put up for adoption?" Another reason: FOMO, or fear of missing out. Around the mid-2000s, I started to see more and more stories about international adoptees in the U.S. searching for their birth parents.

Genetic Testing as Disruptor

Disrupts the concept of closed adoption

Disrupts who has power and control over information

Genetic Testing

Medical - health risk, assessment,
diagnosis

Direct-to-Consumer - family
ancestry and limited health risk
assessment

Genetic Testing Studies

2007 - 431 Korean adoptive parents

2014 - 120 Korean adolescent
adoptees and parents

2018 - 60 international adult
adoptees

Genetic Testing Interest

Interest has grown from 2007 to
2014

Half of adoptees and adoptive
parents have expressed an
interest

Parent Reasons For Genetic Testing

Health/medical

Birth family search/reunion

Ancestry lineage/identity

Adoption legitimacy

Parent Reasons For Not Genetic Testing

Interested Don't Know Enough

Interested

Costly

Not Interested Don't Know Enough

Not Interested

Morally Against; Don't Want to Know

Genetic Testing and Identity

Genetic testing was related birth family thoughts, not adoptive or ethnic identities, in adolescent and adult adoptee samples

Genetic Testing and Well-Being

Genetic testing was not correlated with mental health or family functioning

Bioethical Principles

Autonomy

Justice

Beneficence

Non-Maleficence

Bioethical Issue #1

Whose right matters most?

Birth family

Adoptee

Adoptive parent

Bioethical Issue #2

Lack of biological family health history

Risk for genetic diseases

Preventive intervention

Need for donor

Bioethical Issue #3

Who is responsible for coverage?

Adoptee

Insurance company

Agencies or government?

Bioethical Issue #4

What happens after family reunions?

When adoption was not legal?

When families (adoptive/birth)
resist reunion?

Conclusion

Genetic testing is a disruptor

Closed adoption is no longer tenable
as a policy

Nuclear family → Triadic family

Bioethical dilemmas

Thank you

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