



"The lifelong implications of adoption: learning from adoptive families when adopted people become parents"

Professor Elsbeth Neil
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From being adopted to becoming a parent:

when adopted people become parents
and adopters become grandparents

AIM:

To provide a new understanding of the lived experiences and needs of adopted people who are now parents, (and of adoptive parents who are now grandparents) and inform support services

Parenting: rewards & stresses

- All parents: parenting is associated with great joy and significant challenges
- Adoptee parents: reawakening of adoption issues; changing relationships; the biological link; a 'rebirth' or 'healing'
- Care leavers as parents: early parenthood; at risk of child entering care; motivation for parenting; a positive choice/turning point



Who have we heard from?

Parents:

- 20 mothers (mean age 28)
- 20 fathers (mean age 38)

Grandparents:

- 43 grandparents
- 23 grandmothers and 20 grandfathers
- 10 couple dyads and 23 standalone cases

Sampling considerations:

- Focus on those adopted since 1989 – to capture the experience of care-experienced adoptees/adopters
- Diversity of experiences sought

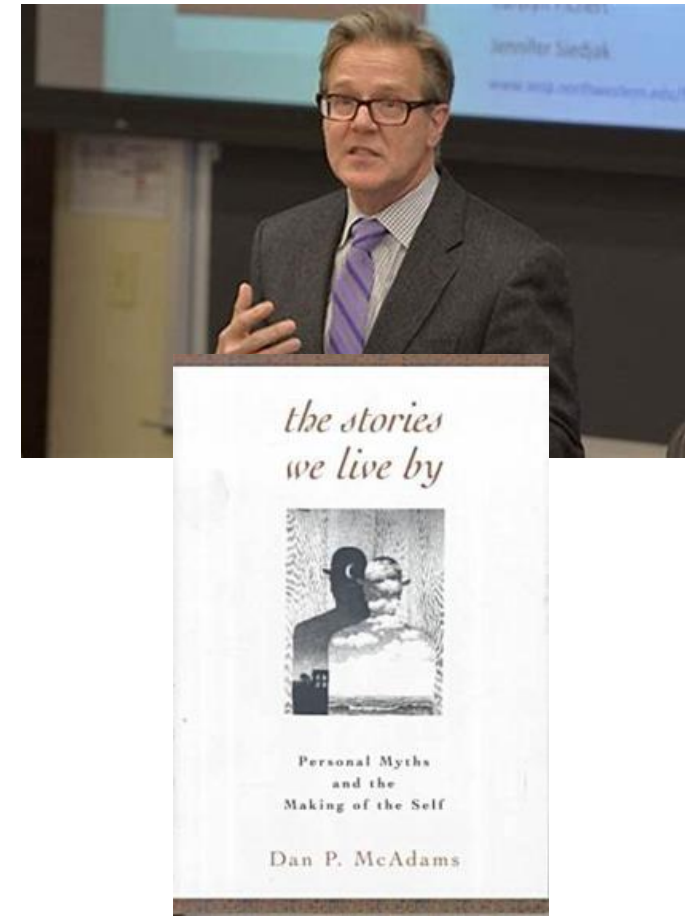


From being adopted to becoming a parent:

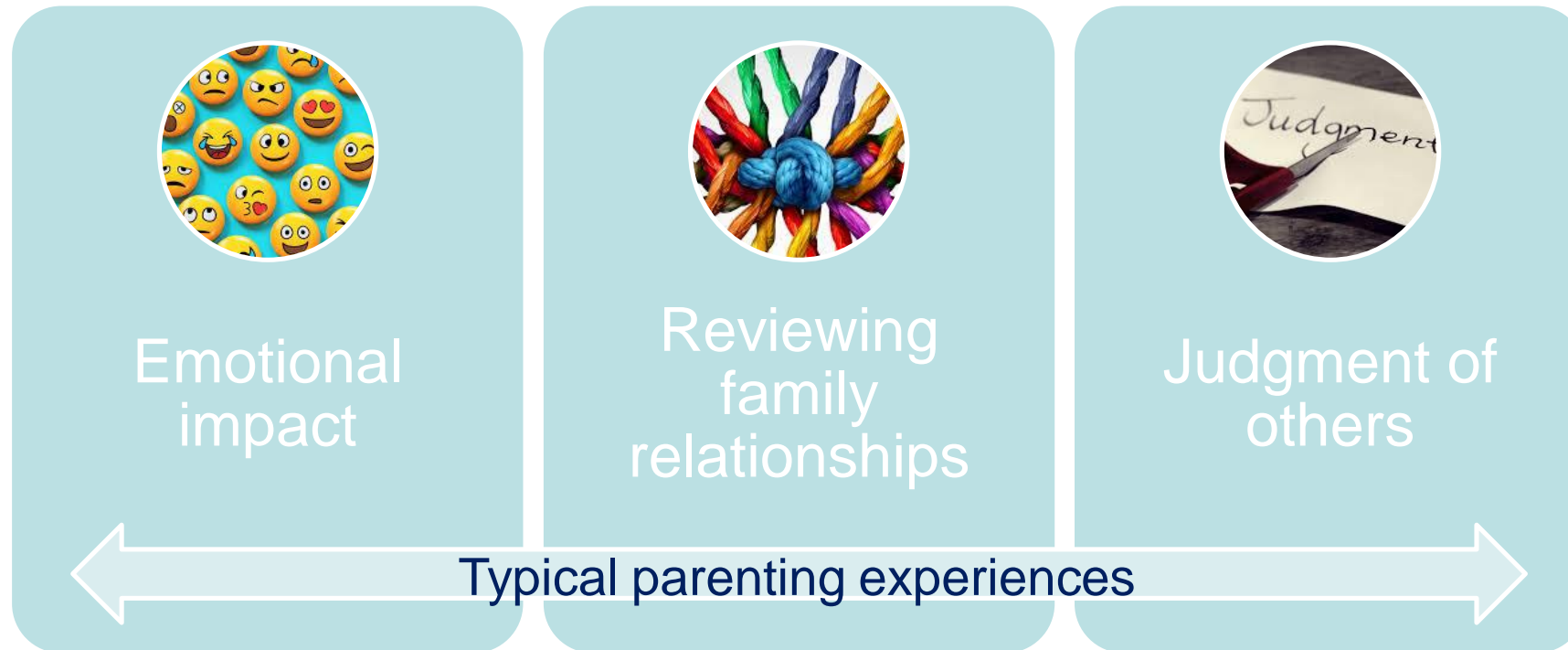
when adopted people become parents
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McAdams Life Story Interview Method schedule (1995) - adapted to project population/aims

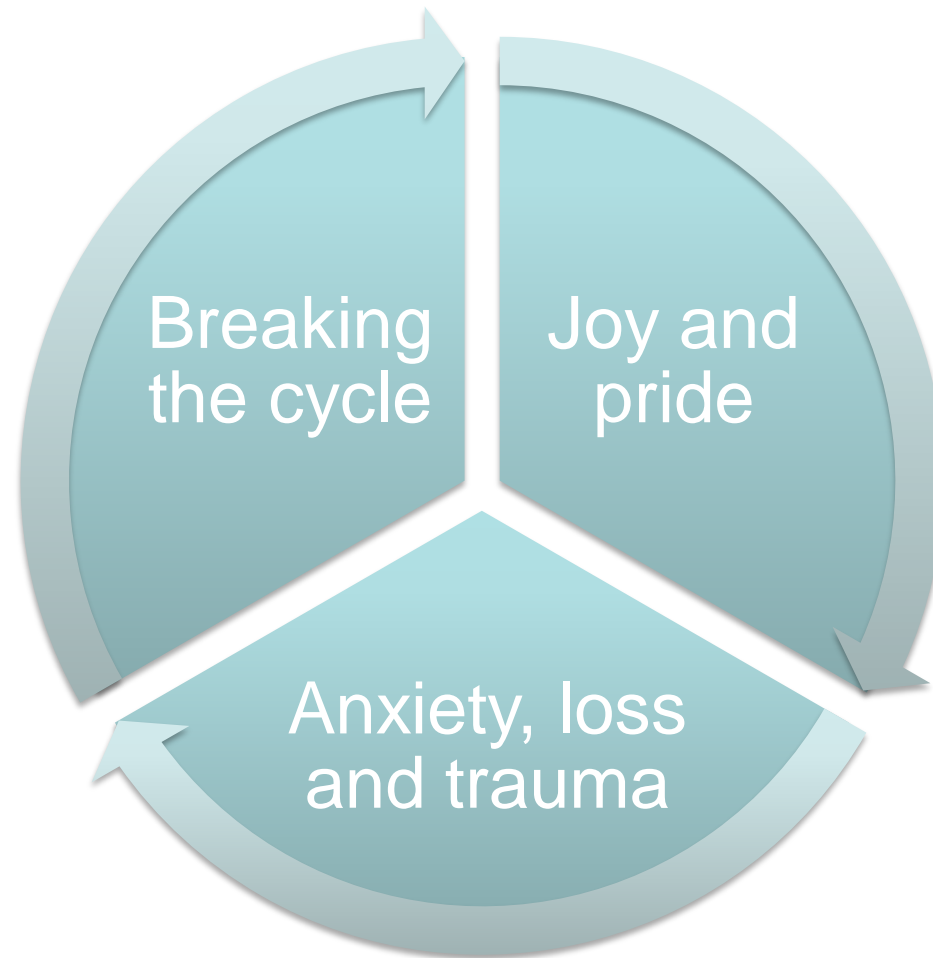
- A. Life now
- B. Life chapters (overview)
- C. Key scenes in the life story as an adoptive parent (or grandparent).
- D. Challenges as a parent/grandparent
- E. Family relationships and dynamics
- F. The next chapter
- G. Message for services
- H. Reflection



Adopted adults experiences of becoming and being a parent



Emotional impacts



Joy and pride in parenting

- Parental pride: *“I think the key moment of my life is bringing my kids into this world... you will never, ever feel the love that you feel when you have kids... that’s the most proudest thing I’ve ever done.”*
- Enjoying biological connections and resemblances: *“this massive world is like seven billion people and finally you've met someone who's half you, ...that was just incredible”*
- A sense of achievement: *“I feel like I’ve proved a lot of people wrong”.*
- Motivation: *“...I want to build a career for myself because I want to be a person that [my son] can look up to”*

Emotional issues: the impact of past (and ongoing) loss and trauma

- Worries about bonding: *“...I was so panicking that I wouldn't be able to make a bond with my baby ...”*
- Feeling inadequate: *“you do, I think, grow up thinking that you were never wanted ... my relationship with [my son], I grew up just thinking I was never good enough for him”.*
- Anxiety & depression: *“...I have throughout my life struggled with anxiety issues... I had that particularly bad when I'd just had [my daughter]”*
- Overcompensating: *“I overcompensate...she's too spoilt”*

Wanting to 'break the cycle'...

- Wanting to give child a better life: *"I want to change like [my daughter]'s beginning of life ...make it better than mine."* *"I tell her that I love her 45 million times a day"*
- Worries about letting child down: *"I get really worried that he might feel unloved...Yes, terrified of failing him,"*
- Not escaping the past:
"I bring so many of my bad family habits with me into my family."
"I got brought up under the care system, I haven't had proper parenting..."

Family dynamics: Partners - breaking or carry on cycles:

“I guess I see marrying my wife as like saving or restoration of ... restoration of some of the things that I lost in childhood and adolescence”

“someone needs to understand me and understand that, the reason I’ve got these insecurities, I can’t trust straight away”

“I was brought up around violence. Because I only used to get bad attention ...so I guess that’s why I went to the ex-partners because it was still attention”

Birth family: re-evaluating closeness/distance

“But they’re all troubled ...I’d rather not put [my daughter] through what I was brought up in.”

“[it’s] brought us all also a lot closer, definitely....”

“I suppose, having my own children, ...I think, cemented my decision to actually start doing something about... looking at my own situation”

“I had chosen not to look [...] But now my choice is having implications on my daughter and I feel like I should begin that process.”

Adoptive family: dependence & independence

- *“I was lucky to have such great adoptive parents, they were probably in a way more supportive than other people’s parents” “... she doesn’t mean to but sometimes she overrides [my view]”*
- Distancing vs seeing parents as role models
- Grandparents lack of experience with pregnancy/babies: *“she didn’t have a baby, so she’s kind of more helpful now that [my daughter]’s older, she’s kind of in her comfort zone now”*
- Improved relationships: *“when I was pregnant we got on like a house on fire”*

The judgement of others

- **Negative assumptions:** *“I think straight away the health visitor] kind of put us in a box, like they’re going to need help.[...] the fact that you’re adopted, you’re going to struggle being a mum”.*
- **Parenting under scrutiny:** *“when you have a baby and you’re under Social you have to be the perfect parent. You can’t make mistakes”*
- **Fears of asking for help:** *“And then, ...the fear of, ...because you want support, then they see you’ve got kids, they refer you to social services, and then you’re scared you’re going to get your kids taken off you.”*

Being an (adoptive) grandparent

- A highly valued role/identity, but with tensions: ‘being there’ vs ‘not interfering’ & ‘having time to oneself’ (Arbor & Timonen, 2012)
- (With supports) “adoptive parents can provide critical compensatory approaches that help adoptees to recover & thrive” (Pinderhughes & Brodzinsky, 2018; p. 354)



How did adoptive parents help their children 'recover & thrive'

Providing love, stability, family membership

Supporting birth family connections and identity

Seeking appropriate supports for children/young people

Providing high levels of support into adulthood

Robin - The family is 'out of the woods'

- Life now: *“where are now is a very good, happy position”*
- ‘Adjusting to the news that they are adopted’: *“when the chips were down, we just had to support her and take all the rubbish she’d chunked at us and take it.” “She met her half-brother ...from that moment onwards, the anger just went slow towards us and to nothing”*
- ‘The coming together of the family’: *“so moving through the adulthood part of the family, this chapter was ...the coming together of the family.”*
- ‘The coming of the grandson’: *“the grandson made it complete ..he’s given [my daughter] the first blood relative and she completely totally loves him to death and can’t get enough of him.”*

Jane- grand-parenting is “like having another child”

- ‘Stickability’ – adopted son struggling as a young adult, turbulent years but they never gave up on him

“No matter how many things he had done wrong, or got into, negative things, I still couldn’t give up on him.”

- Ongoing (incessant) parenting

“Our children will always need us” and “a bigger part of our lives than we had imagined...I still feel like I’m parenting him, while he’s parenting the children...”

Jane (continued)

- Sharing custody of granddaughter & learning to step away:
“I have to remember that I’m not the parent, I am the grandparent...But, I’d just like him to be a bit more ... step up a little bit more, maybe, sometimes, and be more of a parent than he is.”
- Her future hope is that her son *“will be a fulltime parent”*, and they will *“take that backseat and step back”*
- Jane is a *“diplomat”*, managing complex family relationships and emotions, which is *“wearing”* and makes her feel like she is *“in a battle all the time”* (greatest challenge)

What do we know about adoptive families when adoptees become parents?

- Challenges for adoptees in adolescence/emerging adulthood common, but for most adoption was 'a family for life'
- Arrival of children could pose risks or build resilience and parents were highly conscious of 'breaking the cycle'
- Adoptive parenting often remains intense during adulthood of sons and daughters
- Non judgemental, adoption sensitive services may be needed at parenting stage
- Adoptees supported to manage issues of loss, trauma and identity at earlier stages fared better as parents

Thank you for listening

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