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ABSTRACT

To illustrate the problems and possibilities in the adoption of older special needs children, two case studies based largely on informal interviews are presented. The case studies describe the experiences of two families, one of which adopted a mentally retarded 9-year-old boy with severe facial deformities while the other adopted an 11-year-old boy with a history of abuse and severe emotional and behavioral problems. The families' experiences are recounted from perspectives of: (1) the implied objective past, that is, the past that must have been and is remembered; (2) the symbolically reconstructed past, which redefines past events so that they have meaning and utility for the present; (3) the social structural past, which structures the experiences found in the present and conditions the future; and (4) the mythical past, which refers to symbolic creations used to manipulate social relationships. The families' experiences were also examined in the context of postmodern theory, which sees individuals as having an absence of reflection on the past and a perceived inability to control the future. Letters from the two families that describe reactions to their adoption experiences are included. The case studies show that without the benefit of a shared past for families and adopted children, the connecting of past, present, and anticipated future can be problematic, leading to misunderstandings and disruptions in everyday life. (AC)

ADOPTION: THE RECONSTRUCTION OF UNSHARED PASTS INTO A SHARED PRESENT AND A PROJECTED FUTURE

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Abstract

In this paper, we examine how two families who adopted older special needs children reconstructed the past, experienced the present, and projected the future. We use both a pragmatic theory of the past and a postmodern theory of the past to guide our interpretations and understandings of these families' adoption experiences. Through the parents' accounts, we present their attempts to merge their own and their adopted children's separate stories into a coherent family narrative. We found that without benefit of a shared past, the connecting of past, present, and anticipated future can be problematic, leading to misunderstandings and disruptions in everyday life.

Adoption: The Reconstruction of Unshared Pasts Into a Shared Present And A Projected Future

Adoption of a child is often seen as an ending; we think of it as a beginning.

Mrs. Litner

Our adoption failed because we underestimated the past and overestimated our ability to create stories with happy endings.

Mrs. Beck

The process of adopting special needs children, specifically how history permeates this process as parents reconstruct the past, experience the present, and project the future is the focus of this paper. In examining this process, our central question is, what

happens in adoptive families in which children and parents do not share early histories and come to understand each other in the present and project a shared future without benefit of a shared past. We use both a pragmatic theory of the past and a postmodern theory of the past to guide our interpretations and understandings of the adoption experience. Using the stories told to us by two families -- the Litners and the Becks -- we investigate their experiences in merging their own and their adopted children's separate histories into a united family history.[1]

Central to the process of integrating these adopted children into family life is the interpretation of history (Kirk, 1964; Partridge, Hornby, and McDonald, 1986; Hoopes, 1990). History is the influences of the past which are constructed or reconstructed, given meanings in the present, and projected into the future. Common or shared pasts, which are used to assess the present and project the future, create complex layers of relatedness in families (Couch, 1989; Katovich and Couch, 1992). Adoptive parents have their own history, the adopted child has a history, and both the adoptive parents and child attempt to merge these separate histories into a united family history (Bourguignon and Watson, 1988; Crook, 1986; Hoopes, 1990; Kirk, 1964; Partridge, Hornby, and McDonald, 1986; and Powell, 1985). In coming to understand the influences of history on the adoption process, we draw upon a pragmatic theory of the past (Maines, Sugrue, and Katovich, 1983) and upon a postmodern theory of the past (Denzin, 1986, 1990a; Katovich and MacMurray, 1989). We use both theories heuristically, to guide our interpretations and understandings of the adoption experience.

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[1]All names and some identifying information have been changed to protect the confidentiality of these two families.

Maines et al (1983), interpreting the work of George Herbert Mead's theory of the past (1929), identified four dimensions of the past -- the implied objective past, the symbolically reconstructed past, the social structural past, and the mythical past. In this pragmatic view, the past is reflected upon, interpreted, and used in constructing the present and projecting futures. Katovich and MacMurray (1989), drawing upon Mills, Lyotard, and others, view a postmodern theory of the past as "an absence of reflection and an inability...to control the future...the present is no longer conditioned by pasts or futures that are appreciated or deemed useful (p. 2)." We consider the postmodern experience to be those times when people are so caught up in the moment, that they are in a "perpetual present", unable to reflect upon pasts or project futures (Denzin, 1990a). These moments are often ones that are highly emotional and deeply disturbing. In this study, we found these postmodern moments to be interspersed with the more typical and ongoing pragmatic dimensions of the past. When adoptive families experience history pragmatically, they construct, control, and use history to make sense of their daily lives. When they experience a postmodern sense of history, the ability to weave the past and future together into a coherent whole is lost in the postmodern experience of the present (Katovich & MacMurray, 1989; Denzin, 1986; 1990a).

SPECIAL NEEDS ADOPTIONS

Adoption was traditionally viewed as a way to provide healthy newborns to white, middle-class, infertile couples. Although infant adoptions are not problem-free, these adoptions often provide a satisfactory solution for all concerned. However, with the

increase in abortions, the use of effective contraceptives, and unmarried mothers deciding to keep their babies, fewer infants have been available for adoption (Meezan, 1980; Barth and Berry, 1988). At the same time, infertility has increased, causing even greater demand for "adoptable children."

When adoption meant matching infants with infertile couples, certain children were considered "unadoptable." These children became known as "special needs" children. As parents faced increasing difficulties in adopting an infant, the idea of adopting a special needs child became more tenable. Special needs children have a condition or circumstance that makes the adoption process more difficult. Typically these children are older, have emotional, developmental, or physical problems, or belong to a minority group or a sibling group. Most of these children have experienced at least one traumatic disruption in their lives; approximately 86% were involuntarily removed from their home due to termination of parental rights (Meezan, 1980).

Currently, about one-quarter of all adoptions are special needs placements. Moreover, there are at least 100,000 special needs children in the nation's foster care system who are waiting to be adopted (W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 1992). Because of the tremendous influx of older children in need of adoption services entering the welfare system, special needs adoption has become a critical part of child welfare today (Barth and Berry, 1988). When families adopt special needs children they often find their integration into family life problematic (Bourguigion and Watson, 1988; Eheart and Power, 1988). Not surprisingly, as the number of special needs adoption placements increase so do the percentages of adoption disruptions (Barth and Berry, 1988; Festinger,

1990; Rosenthal and Groze, 1992).

Several factors have been identified as predictors of adoption disruption. One of these is the age of the child. Older children make up the largest group of special needs children available for adoption. Several studies have found that as the age of the child increases so does the risk of disruption. One study reports that disruption rates were 7% for children aged birth to five years at placement, 15% for children 6-8 years, 25% for children 9-11 years, and 47% for those children between the ages of 12 and 17 years (Boyne, Denby, Kettenring, and Wheeler, 1984). Boys are often found to be overrepresented in studies of adoption disruption (Nelson, 1985; Barth and Berry, 1988), and although developmental disability is not a strong predictor, emotional and behavioral problems strongly predict disruption (Partridge et al., 1986; Barth and Berry, 1988; Rosenthal and Groze, 1992). These child characteristics in isolation, however, cannot explain adoption outcomes. Various family characteristics also play a role. Families that have a rigid rather than a flexible decision-making style are at greater risk for disruption (Rosenthal and Groze, 1992). Another predictor is the family's ability to conform their expectations to the child's ability to deliver (Partridge et al., 1986). As Fishman (1992:45) notes, "When adoptive families come to grief, it is often from a disparity in expectations: the parents expected something the child can't deliver, or the child delivers something the parents didn't expect."

Because of inconsistencies in reporting, it is difficult to arrive at an accurate estimate of disruption rates. Barth and Berry (1988) report that up to 40% of older child adoptions do not last, and this figure does not include the "unofficial disruptions" --

where the child's departure from the home is not reported to the agency. Further, as noted by Rosenthal and Groze (1992:4), "disruption should not always be interpreted as failure." Nor should a family that stays together, but lives with constant problems, stress, and heartache, always be considered a success. The following adoption stories illustrate both the problems and possibilities in adopting older special needs children.

ADOPTION STORIES

According to Denzin (1990b:7) "...stories are an opening into a person's life. They are accounts of lived, emotional experience and are filled with emotional memories about the past or with hopes and dreams of the future." Stories tell the story-teller's version of why things happened (Maines, 1991a). Several years ago we began to study families who were in the process of adopting special needs children. Informal and extensive conversational interviews were utilized to obtain the parents' adoption stories. As the study progressed, we became increasingly involved with several of the families--talking and meeting with them frequently and informally in a variety of settings. Our contact with these families is ongoing, and we are continually adding new families to our study. All meetings are tape recorded and detailed notes are taken during phone conversations. We have well over 100 hours of tape-recorded, transcribed interviews which provide rich descriptions of adoption experiences. (For an elaboration of this method see _____ _____).

Understandings of the day-to-day experiences of adopted children and their parents

are quite limited (Brodzinsky and Schnechter, 1990). This is, in part, because research on adoption is dominated by retrospective studies where participants recall their expectations, experiences, problems and feelings, sometimes years later (e.g., Nelson, 1985; Barth & Berry, 1988). A strength of our research is its processual nature. We talked with these families over several years and heard their stories often within days of occurrence.

Adoptive families, like all families, attempt to create a coherent narrative through the stories about the past and future they construct and reconstruct (Maines, 1991b, Howard, 1991). McAdams (1985:29) has written that, "...like stories in literature the stories we tell ourselves in order to live, bring together diverse elements into an integrated whole, organizing the multiple and conflicting facets of our lives within a narrative framework which connects past, present, and anticipated future and confers upon our lives a sense of sameness and continuity...." Without benefit of a shared past, the connecting of past, present, and anticipated future in adoptive families, especially those with special needs children, becomes much more problematic. In this study we present the stories of the Litners and the Becks, two families who adopted special needs children. They told us about the problems and possibilities they faced as they attempted to bring together diverse elements (unshared pasts) into an integrated whole (a united family history). A brief introduction to these two families follows.

The Litners were high school sweethearts and married when they were twenty. They both had extensive experience working with physically handicapped children. Once married, they immediately began to pursue the adoption of children with special needs.

Agencies discouraged their pursuit because they felt the Litners were too young. Mrs. Litner became pregnant and was told by one agency to come back when her baby was 9 months old. When that day arrived, the Litners applied to this agency. Within the next two years they completed the adoptions of two young children with physical handicaps. Three years after this they adopted Calvin, the child we focus on in this study. The Litners continue to adopt special needs children.

The Becks had a three-year-old daughter when they decided to pursue adoption. They wanted to adopt a physically and mentally healthy white boy between the ages of six and eight who would be an older brother to their daughter. They felt willing and able to parent a child with some emotional problems. One of the Becks had spent eight years as a child in the child welfare system. After they married, the Becks served as emergency foster care parents. These experiences served as a basis for their "wanting to help an older child who doesn't have it so good." After three years of working with social service agencies and waiting anxiously to adopt a child, they adopted John.

The Litners served as "model" adoptive parents during parent-training classes in which the Becks participated. The Litners devoted themselves entirely to the maintenance and well-being of their children to the exclusion of career and its accompanying higher standard of living. Mrs. Litner was a full-time homemaker and Mr. Litner's work was secondary to his family concerns. While the Becks were totally committed to adoption, they wanted their adopted child to fit into their already busy lives. Although parenting was very important to them, they did not want to give up their careers and outside commitments to devote themselves exclusively to parenting. The

Becks could not relate to the Litners; they saw them as "super parents" and not realistic models for prospective adoptive parents.

The following is an examination of how each of the pragmatic dimensions of the past and a postmodern theory of the past provide a framework for understanding how the Litners and the Becks used history to understand their childrens' pasts, make sense of the present, and project futures.

IMPLIED OBJECTIVE PAST

The implied objective past is the past that "must have been" and "is remembered". This recollected past is often considered to be complete (Crites, 1986), and unchangeable. It is the implied objective past that provides a perceived factual basis for the movement between past occurences and present adoption experiences. The implied objective past for all older special needs adopted children includes the fact that there must have been a problematic past involving disruption, separation, and emotional turmoil.

Adoptive parents first learn about their children's implied objective pasts from caseworkers. It is the job of caseworkers to match adoptive parents with adoptable children. Part of this process entails providing the potential parents with a child's history. Caseworkers are usually the adoptive parents' first and foremost source of information about a child's past. Obviously all of the facts of the child's past can not be retold in

their entirety, so caseworkers select which facts they believe are important for parents to know. Caseworkers, thus, initially establish the child's implied objective past for the parents. Consider the following information about Calvin and John given to the Litners and the Becks by their caseworkers.

Calvin's father was an alcoholic and his mother had several children but did not raise any of them. Calvin was born with severe facial deformities and was abandoned in the hospital by his mother at birth. He lived in the hospital for quite a while and then went directly to an institution for severely retarded children. Calvin was not severely retarded and was favored by the staff who often kept him up at night and played with him because of his high level of functioning. While at the institution, he had several major operations for facial reconstruction with no significant other to support him through these traumatic times. He lived in the institution until he was 9 years old, at which time he was adopted by the Litners.

John's mother was eighteen when he was born. She never married or maintained a relationship with his father. John was hospitalized before he was two for failure-to-thrive. When he was two, his mother married a man who beat both John and his mother for two years before his mother moved out. Eventually she moved in with another man who also beat John and had sexual relations with him. At age six John was removed from this home and placed in an institution for children with severe emotional and behavioral problems. Some of his extreme behaviors centered around inappropriate defecating, urinating, and sexual behavior. He lived in this institution for two years and then lived in several foster homes. Eventually he was placed in a second institution.

When he was 10, parental rights were terminated, and John became available for adoption. A year later he was adopted by the Becks.

Although the Litners and the Becks were given information about the facts of their children's pasts, they had little information about how these pasts would impact their daily lives. Their experiences with the limitations of the "facts of the past" were not atypical (Partridge et.al., 1986). Barth and Berry (1988) found in a study of 927 older special needs adopted children that the information most frequently presented to adopted parents related to a history of neglect and multiple placements. When parents were asked about the overall quality of information they received about their child, "One-quarter reported knowing virtually nothing, 9% thought that the information was too negative, 42% judged it as realistic, and 24% found it too positive. Among the last group, the disruption rate was 59%" (p. 110). Barth and Berry report that, "Perhaps most striking was families repeated ignorance about the emotional and behavioral problems of their adopted children" (p. 109). Likewise, the Litners and the Becks, in our study, were not able to project the difficulties they would have with their children's emotional and behavioral problems. Particularly problematic for them were their children's inability to share affection or take responsibility. They attributed these behaviors to institutionalization. When the children came to stay, the parents often reconstructed their children's pasts in order to bring meanings to the present. This dimension of the past reflects the symbolically reconstructed past.

SYMBOLICALLY RECONSTRUCTED PAST

According to Maines et al. (1983:163), the symbolically reconstructured past "involves redefining the meaning of past events in such a way that they have meaning in and utility for the present." Parents retrospectively interpret past events in light of the current adoption experiences happening in their lives. They reconstruct and reinterpret information from their adopted children's pasts in order to provide understandings of their children's present behaviors. Both the Litners and the Becks attributed many of their children's behaviors, especially their failure to accept responsibility and their difficulty in giving and receiving affection, to their pasts. Both families attributed their children's problems with responsibilities to their past experiences in institutions.

According to the Litners:

> ...Calvin's biggest problem is that he was in an institution for nine years for severely retarded children, and he picked up so many of the traits and habits and idiosyncrasies. He has lived with us for five years, and for a long time had no personal hygiene whatsoever, and he fed himself with his hands. When he fed himself, it did not matter what was on his plate; he laid his face on the table and pushed the food into his mouth with his hands. He refused to dress himself, refused to clean himself after going to the bathroom, refused every-thing....In the institution, there were no expectations....One night we told him he had to put his own pajamas on. He said, "You're fired,

> get out of my life." He fired me; he fired him. He yelled, "Who hired you anyway?" We left the room before we did anything we would be sorry for. We came downstairs and cracked up. We often have to do this.

The Litners were able to reconstruct understandings of Calvin's past in ways that helped them to understand his "habits and idiosyncrasies." They were able to deal with this older child who ate with his hands because they realized that he was not expected to feed himself for the first nine years of his life. Further, they accepted with a sense of humor and perspective, getting fired by a child in whom they had invested so much time and energy.

The Becks also attributed much of John's problematic behaviors to his past life in institutions. The Becks told us:

> The...big thing is the day-to-day lack of responsibility for anything. And that's basically institutionalization as we see it....He has no respect for adults at all. He talks back....He will not do anything we tell him to do unless he is absolutely forced to do it. It is ridiculous as he will not change his underwear unless we stand there and force him to...won't make his bed, won't do the dishes. He'll eat and play. That's all he will do. Eat and play. He will not do his homework. We would spend three hours in an evening forcing this kid to do his homework...and then he wouldn't bother to hand it in. It is so frustrating....I think [it's because] in an institution they don't teach you how to take responsibility.

Although the Becks could understand that John's current behaviors could be traced back to his history in an institution, they, unlike the Litners, could not come to accept his lack of responsibility or respect. Before the Becks adopted John, they knew that he had lived for many years in an institution, but they did not know what this would mean in their daily lives. They were continually frustrated with his "never doing things the way it should be." This was a "continual problem" for them and "really hard to deal with." It meant they were "constantly upset", "constantly yelling", and "continually punishing" John. It seemed that all of their time at home was spent in correcting John and the only time they could relax was when he was out of the house. As they lived with John, they reconstructed their past understandings of "institutionalization" so they could attempt to make sense of his present behaviors, but this did not make life any easier.

In addition to their lack of responsibility, Calvin's and John's pasts also shaped their affective behavior within their families. Both children were angry as a result of their pasts and had difficulty establishing positive emotional ties with family members. According to the Litners, one of their main goals was to help Calvin "get past the anger...and develop a better attitude towards life." They felt that they were making progress when one day Calvin vocalized that he was very angry with them for not coming to get him sooner. He asked, "Why did you leave me there all those years? There are all these pictures of you with the other kids, and I wasn't here, and you were having a good time, and I was stuck where I was stuck." The Becks also were concerned with John's anger. They said, "You can already see some of the influences of the system on his attitude....very bitter and hostile. The anger is so built up that it just bubbles over.

You can see the anger coming up through his eyes." The adoption literature suggests that these types of angry emotional responses are typical of older special needs adopted children (e.g. Barth and Berry, 1988; Fishman, 1992; Brinich, 1990).

According to the Litners, when he first came, Calvin had trouble with indiscriminate affection.

> He loved everybody when he saw them. Especially if he thought he would get anything, particularly food or a hat....He would literally walk up to [strangers] and ask, "Can I go home with you, and can I wear your hat?" It didn't matter who it was. He is our toughest case. Because of him, I can understand other people's frustration with an older child. He is the oldest child [we've adopted], and I can see the lack of return; there's just not a lot of return. You can put in, and put in, and put in, but if somebody else appears on the scene that has something that he thinks would be better, he would go with them without too much thought.

In addition to indiscriminate affection towards strangers, Calvin was unable to establish close ties with his brothers and sister. According to Mrs. Litner, "The kids have to actively work to get him involved and they do it, and they do it, and they just do it....but there's not a lot of return, and they don't see a lot of return either like they do with each other."

The Litner's recognized it would be difficult for Calvin to bond with them. They said, "If a parent is expecting a child to bond as fast as they do, then they're going to be let

down emotionally because you don't get that emotional feedback. The older the child is the less you get back and the longer it takes." Even though Calvin did everything he could "everyday to make life miserable" for them, the Litners were able to manage their anger by "taking each day as it comes" and focusing their frustration on the "specific situations" rather than on Calvin as a person. They also told us that, "The one thing that's really good is once in a while we get away, totally away from the situation and look back....Then we realize how far we've come." The Litners were able to "...emphasize the necessity of living 'one day at a time' and appreciate signs of love and progress 'one inkling at a time'" (Barth and Berry 1988:60).

The Becks also had difficulty establishing close ties with John. Mr. Beck expressed difficulty in bonding to John. He said, "It's hard to get an emotional attachment to somebody who is abusing you." Mrs. Beck questioned, "How can you be expected to hug somebody who has just been nasty to you? How can you have any feelings for somebody who is doing his best to disrupt your life?" Because the Beck's had difficulty in building emotional bonds with John, they continually experienced a sense of frustration and disappointment.

The Becks expected that soon after John arrived they would love him. Three weeks after he arrived Mrs. Beck commented, "The most disquieting thing is, I'm not in love with this child yet. I'd hoped I would feel something, an attraction....I want to love him. He irritates me. I'm irritated at myself for not being able to feel like his mother." The Becks continued to feel frustrated with their inability to love John. The adoption literature shows that it is very common for parents and older adopted children to have

difficulties in bonding (e.g. Nelson, 1985; Barth and Berry, 1988; Fishman, 1992; Jewett, 1978; Partridge, Hornby, and McDonald, 1986). Partridge, et al (1986:11), for example, found, "Some of the most difficult problems [adoptive] parents face are dealing with children who are unable to receive or give warmth or indeed to communicate", and Fishman (1992:68) writes in a review of the literature on older-child adoptions, "...parents should not expect that their affection will be returned in a normal way."

Even though the Litners and Becks both understood that past events in their children's lives would influence their children's present behaviors, they differed in their expectations for their own and their children's emotional responses. The Litners were able to reconstruct Calvin's past in such a way that it had utility for them in the present, making daily life challenging yet rewarding. The Becks were also able to reconstruct the past, but they often were not able to use this past to help them in the present in dealing with their problems with John. They expected that John would have to change his behaviors and attitudes if he were to remain as part of their family. Building on the present, the Litners could foresee a meaningful future with their son, while the Becks could not.

THE SOCIAL STRUCTURAL PAST

A third dimension of the pragmatic past is the social structural past which is defined as the past which structures the experiences found in the present and conditions the future (Maines et al., 1983:163). Just as the past conditions the present, it is used to

establish probabilities for what may happen in the future (Couch, 1989; Crites, 1986). This past directs us towards the future and shows us what that future might be like.

The Litners did not dwell on the future because they believed that, "There's no way you can guarantee what a child is going to be like....Nobody can be prepared; you just have to live it. You take each day as it comes." When asked what type of future they foresaw, the Litners responded that, "it's going to take two years of good family life [for every year of institutionalization] to even begin to undo the damage...so it's going to take nineteen years to break away from what was in the past." Similarly, Barth and Berry's (1988:60) research indicated that adoptive parents "...can expect that it will take as long for a child to unlearn negative coping styles as it took to learn them.." The Litner's one reservation about their future with Calvin related to their concern for the safety of the family. Mrs. Litner explained, "Calvin is very active at night. He goes into the other children's rooms, gathers their things and hordes them....So far he's never gone downstairs where the dangerous things are, like the stove, where real trouble could ensue." She was concerned that if this pattern were established she might not be able to stay awake each night to prevent it. Thus, the only circumstance the Litners could conceive where Calvin would not be a part of their family, would be if they were physically unable to monitor his behavior enough to ensure the family's safety.

As their adoption experiences with John progressed, the meanings the past held for the Becks made the possibilities of a future with John deeply troubling. They desperately wanted to succeed as adoptive parents, but their day-to-day lives were filled with conflict, turmoil, and tension. The following fieldnotes show how they became increasingly

disturbed with possible projected futures.

April 2 Gerald was beginning to feel very stressed. And he was disturbing me because he would say things like "John has got to change. Things have got to change around here. I can't take this situation." ...I told him I would not give this child back so stop threatening me, even indirectly. This is going to drive a wedge between the two of us if we don't look at the problem now and see what we can do about it positively.

Nov. 29 Gerald and I talked a little bit ourselves about at what point we would give up. We're not by any means anywhere near giving up yet, but we had to confront that as a possibility. Things were getting pretty awful....We didn't get a day without really being terribly upset at some point in the day. We don't know whether we can continue this.

Jan. 17 I know what is going to happen to this kid if we give him back to the State. I know what his chances of adjusting normally are if he goes back. I know just exactly how dire the consequences can be. I mean we're not talking about something that doesn't exclude getting killed in an institution....I care about John, even if I don't love him....I have been his mother for a year. I feel protective towards him. How in the hell can I say to the State, knowing what is going to happen to that kid, "Take

> John away from me. I don't want to be his parent anymore." I can't do that until I am to the point of breaking myself. Until I'm at the point of divorcing my husband. Til my daughter is to the point of having real psychological damage. That is the only way that I can justify what I am going to have to do to John.

The Becks, despite their best intentions, repeatedly and unsuccessfully contended with the social structural past and ultimately were unable to project a shared future with John. They experienced not only the day-to-day frustrations with John's lack of responsibility and hostile attitude, but also a build up of fear due to John's inappropriate sexual behaviors and inappropriate behaviors with knives. (He was suspended from school for allegedly attempting to stab a child while they were dissecting worms in lab, and because of his inappropriate use of knives at home, the Becks came to fear that he might stab them.) Their decision to terminate their parental rights for John, however, was not a result of the pragmatic dimensions of the past per se; it was the result of a postmodern moment -- a tragic episode where neither the past nor the future were reflected upon nor given meaning in the present.

POSTMODERN THEORY OF THE PAST

A postmodern experience of the past occurs when one, "moves from one isolated present to another without reflecting on the usefulness of the past or anticipating a sense of structure in the future" (Katovich and MacMurray 1989:9). Denzin (1990b:9) has

written that, "...ordinary men and women of postmodern society...struggle to make sense out of their immediate lives, as these lives and the meanings they bring to them fall away from and cease to be contained within the grand metanarrative myths our culture has taught them about love, marriage, family, self, character, integrity, honor, and their relations with others." For parents caught in a postmodern experience, the cultural myths of love, children, marriage, and the like, cease to make sense in their daily lives (Denzin, 1987c). They lose the ability to reflectively use the past and future within the present and as a result, the past's relationship to the present or future is impotent or rendered impossible.

Katovich and MacMurray use Denzin's (1987a,b) readings of the alcoholic odyssey as representative of the postmodern past. One could just as easily substitute adoptive parents when their adoption experiences turn to one of disillusionment. To the best of our knowledge, the Litners never lost the ability to use the past or the future within the present. Thus they never experienced a postmodern episode comparable to the Becks'.

Shortly before John arrived, we asked Mrs. Beck how she thought John's arrival would change her. Using hindsight and foresight (the social structural past), she replied, "I'm going to have to deal with being able to control my temper and discipline the child with love and restraint and not use overkill so to speak." As was reported above, John's behaviors, which they attributed to his past experiences with family disruptions and institutionalization (the symbolically reconstructed past), caused continual disruption and discord. After a year of family disharmony, the following violent episode occurred:

We'd had a day where John was avoiding more responsibility

than usual. It was Saturday morning; he was doing dishes. And he had to do the dishes over from the previous night because they weren't clean. There was one mixing bowl that I had to make him clean five different times and each time that I would take it back to him, I would point my finger at the spots that were dirty and each time he would not clean those spots....And this goes on and on, 'til you're ready to scream. So that's the way we started the morning.... I had asked John several times during the day if he had made his bed....He said yes, he had made his bed. "Are you sure? If I go up there am I going to be angry?" "No, I made my bed; you are going to be happy." Fine....So I go upstairs to check out everything else....John's bed has not been made. So I say, "John, come up here." John comes upstairs. I said, "John, your bed has not been made." It is not as if it is not made well; the covers are on the floor....He begins to argue with me about whether the bed is made or not. So I said, "Don't argue with me, just make it!" And then he shoots me a very hateful glance, and he looks at me like you should be dead. What the hell are you doing alive woman look. So I balled my fist up, and I put it to his cheek. I was shaking; I was so mad, and I was telling him that he was going to do what I said or else. Gerald

is standing two feet away. He shouted, "Ann, no!" I had my hand against John's cheek; I'm really angry; I'm shaking and I pushed his head with my hand, so that his head is tilted up against the wall, and I wanted to hit him; oh God, I wanted to hit him. In fact, in my mind, I could visualize that if I hit him, that there would be blood on the floor. Gerald said, "Don't hit him!" I said, "But I want to hit him!"....I was screaming, "I want to hit him! I want to hurt him!" Gerald dragged me off, and I didn't want to be dragged off, so I'm struggling with Gerald, and I locked my feet around John to keep from being dragged off by Gerald. John crumples and puts his hands over his head while Gerald is pulling me off John. And then John slithers down the stairs, cause we're standing at the top of the stairs during this whole thing, and he is at the landing with his head covered with his arms in a fetal position. I am still struggling with Gerald upstairs. He wraps his arms around me, you know, in order to contain me. I was crying at this point, sobbing, saying, "I can't help it; I just hate him! I really do hate him!"

According to Katovich and MacMurray (1989:2), "With postmodernism...the present is no longer conditioned by pasts or futures that are appreciated or deemed useful. There is nothing left but a present...a disjointed and fragmented past, and a future that is terrifying, vague, unpredictable, and decidedly suspect." For Mrs. Beck in this moment of crisis, the past had no meaning and the future held no promise. There was only anger,

hatred, and violence. The pragmatic dimensions of the past were not useful in constructing a meaningful story. She was unable to make peace with the past, present, or future -- or with herself. A coherent sense of self was shattered along with any meaningful sense of history. Denzin (1984) has shown that when the understandings which underlie the domestic interactional order (i.e., taken-for-granted structures of rules, objects, rituals and routines in the home) are broken, violence is produced. When the taken-for granted structures of the Becks' domestic rules and rountines were continually disrupted, tensions built and violence ensued. In this moment of domestic violence, Ann Beck is lost in a postmodern present.

After the anger subsided, Mrs. Beck moved from the terror of the postmodern moment into a pragmatic struggle to reconstruct her sense of self through remaking history into a meaningful story. She explained:

> I've done so much self-analyzing to see why I did what I did. I've got all sorts of theories I can give you for my own behavior....Did I create a precipitating incident to give us an excuse to terminate [the adoption]? Did I do it in such a way that I knew Gerald, two feet from me, wouldn't really let me hurt John? I wonder about these things. I didn't plan it, but did I know it and feel free to do it?

In attempting to make sense of the shifting web of meanings about the motives behind her actions, Mrs. Beck worked to recreate a coherent, meaningful narrative (cf., McAdam, 1985; Plummer, 1990; Crite,1986). She and Gerald, emotionally devastated and unable to continue to live with John, returned to pragmatism and symbolically

reconstructed a past that helped them make peace with the present and move on into a future without John. Within days they turned to the social welfare system who then directed the creation of a mythical past to facilitate their surrender of John to the State, thus ending their parental responsibilities for him.

THE MYTHICAL PAST

The mythical past according to Maines et al. (1983:164), "refers solely to symbolic creations which are used to manipulate social relationships....They are fictitious...purposeful creations which control and shape behavior." The use of mythical pasts, unlike the postmodern experience, presumes some coherent relationship between the past, present, and future (Katovich and MacMurray, 1989), and it involves asymmetrical power relationships. Certainly in the case of the Becks and John, power was a factor. One does not know for certain the exact nature or extent of John's inappropriate behaviors. We do know, however, that the Becks, to facilitate their surrender of John to the State, were asked to emphasize John's most extreme behaviors--urinating on other children, sexually acting out with animals, and misbehavior with knives.

Mrs. Beck explained:

> [When we arrived at the Mental Health Center], I find out that this is an intake interview and that they are thinking of placing him in a psychiatric institution....Our social worker told me...to emphasize his misbehavior with knives and to emphasize his sexual acting out....She

> told me to convince them that John could not stay in our family or any family....She had no other place to put him, and she wanted [the institution] to take him....I wasn't going to do a con job on this guy for the [social worker]. I was just going to tell him what happened as nearly and accurately as I could. I emphasized all the problems, not just the sexual ones. So after two hours of talking, [they decided to place him in an institution].

Is this an implied objective past or a mythical past? Clearly some version of the events that were recounted did occur. But during this exceedingly emotional process of the surrendering of parental rights and the commitment of a child to an institution, the negative stories probably were retold with greater frequency and fervor than the positive times they had shared. They were not there to praise and extol John, but to alleviate themselves of their responsibility for him and to find him a new caretaker. Maines et al. (1983) notes that the mythical past "has a material and objective aura when associated with systems of legitimation" (p. 168). When the Becks joined with the mental health and legal systems, John's past, mythical or not, became an implied objective past that became legitimated and vastly impacted his future.

POSTSCRIPT

After the Becks surrendered John, he was sent to an institution for emotionally and behaviorally disturbed children. The Becks tried to ease his way from the family to the

institution. Mrs. Beck described their parting as follows:

> We waited together [in the living room for the social worker to come and take him]....A couple of times John cried, and Gerald held him and talked about it. And I told John, "Let's not be sad. Let's talk about the good things that happened while you were here." So we talked about some of the good things, and we told him we were going to miss him and that we still cared about him. And he asked us to write, and we said we would. We explained where he was going, and I told him to hold on tight to his stuffed animal and that would help.... So we had a long leave taking and that was hard; then he left.

But the story does not stop here. Shortly after John was admitted to a psychiatric institution, the Becks received the following letter:

> Dear Mom and Dad,
>
> I miss you more than ever. I don't like it here or anywhere. I like it with you. I love you. Please bring me back to you for me. I will try better if I come back and I won't pick at Liz. And I won't call kids names. I miss you a lot. I love you. I will kill myself to go back to you. If I go to another family I will kill myself for sure. Please bring me back. I will try better.

Here John is locked in an uncertain and frightening present and is unable to project an acceptable future -- he says he will kill himself. The Becks called his caseworker and asked what they should do. It was suggested that they write John a letter stating what he

did and why they terminated the adoption. Here is that letter:

Dear John,

We are writing you this letter to explain to you our understanding of why you had to leave our family....We decided to adopt a child because we felt our family had a lot of love to share....We also hoped that we would help the child that we adopted. We knew when you came to us that you had not had a lot of experience living with a family and that what experiences you had, had not been very good. We wanted to teach you how to live in a family and how to love the members of that family....We tried and we think you did too, but sometimes that is not enough. There were some things we all did that made us decide that it was better for you not to be a part of our family anymore. You learned some ways of asking people to notice you that make people angry at you....We did not like those ways. Some of them were things like arguing with Liz, calling people names, not doing what you were told or expected to do, stomping out of the room, glaring hatefully at us, lying, dancing and jumping in the wrong places, and making loud noises at the wrong time. It also upset us very much when you showed your penis to Liz, peed on other children, and behaved sexually with our pets. We realized that we were not teaching you about love or about how a family should share concern, responsibility, and caring. We were not happy, and we were not helping you. We were afraid we would hurt you more if you stayed than if you left

our family....

John had a different view of this implied objective past. When we met with him at the institution, he said he never urinated on other children (he spit water on them) or behaved sexually with the pets (he was just lying down next to them). The Becks interpretation of the past, however, became reified -- part of John's permanent records -- while John's version of history is lost -- except perhaps to John.

Traditional assumptions about adoption are that adoptive families either reach some kind of balance, or they disrupt -- the child is returned to the agency before the adoption is final, or they dissolve -- the child is returned after the adoption is final. Each of these scenarios suggests that the adoption story ends for the family. The adoption stories of the Becks and Litners, however, have no end. Following are recent letters from Mrs. Beck and Mrs. Litner in which they respond to this paper. Both letters continue their adoption stories.

Letter from Mrs. Beck (Summer, 1992)

Irreconcilable Differences: Comment on Eheart and Power

I am a sociologist, and my family was one of those discussed in this paper. For the most part I concur with Eheart's and Power's interpretations, but my insights as one who lived this experience may bring another dimension to understanding the adoption of "special needs" children. It has been eight years since we gave up our parental rights to our adopted child. Currently, my daughter is in therapy attempting to reconstruct and reconcile her memories of those experiences, my spouse avoids discussing our adoption

experience, and I continue to struggle with guilt, anger, and bewilderment.

Our child's past was so completely different from mine that my sympathy for him pervaded my imagination of what our life as a family would be like. Even presentations by other adoptive parents with "special needs" children failed to alter my understandings. Our past as a family did not include the kinds of experiences we were to encounter as an adoptive family.

When our child came to live with us, we expected there would be adjustments and difficulties, but we imagined those adjustments would be similar to adjustments we had experienced in our pasts. We had a nescient faith that we would be able to adjust and overcome any problems simply because we were compassionate adults, and we wanted so much for this adoption to work. We could not begin to imagine the difficulties of reconciling our vastly different worlds of experience.

It was the tasks of day-to-day living that were most difficult to reconcile. As parents we expected to set the standards of behavior for our children. We were not at first aware that we were also imposing on our adoptive child our version of reality. We took for granted that our understandings of situations were not only accurate, but shared. Ultimately it was not a contest of whose reality would prevail that stymied our familial adjustment, but the inability to negotiate a shared reality. Because we did not share an understanding of how to interpret the world, we did not share ideas about appropriate behavior, decisions, or goals. If we spent our entire evening helping him with his school work, he would not turn in the completed assignments. If we did not physically supervise his personal hygiene, he would not wash for days nor would he change his underclothes.

These different realities extended to both physical and emotive behaviors. Behaviors he defined as expressions of affection or requests for affection, we defined as abusive. The more we policed his behavior, the more he resisted our attempts to define his world. Frustration marked every attempt we made to teach him our family ways. Accepting his reality was equally impossible. Even if we had been capable of relating to his world, we had been happy with our family and were not willing to abandon what had worked so well for us in our past. We could not "get through" to him, nor he to us.

Eheart and Power use a postmodern theory of the past to explain this breakdown. They explain that not only were our pasts divergent, we could no longer construct a present. Without past or present, they contend, we could envision no meaningful future together. From my perspective it was not that I could not imagine a meaningful future, but that what I imagined was horrible. Even as we began to fathom his world, we were unable to accept it. Unable to accept his reality or to impart our reality to him, we became unwilling to sacrifice our marriage and family for our adopted child. We envisioned that if we continued to live together our relationship with our daughter would deteriorate and our marriage would not stand the strain. Because of increasingly volatile interactions in our past as an adoptive family, we no longer defined ourselves or our daughter as physically safe. In our attempts to protect ourselves and our daughter, we three began sleeping in one room with a dead bolt locked against our adopted child. We removed all knives, forks and other potential weapons from easy reach. Above all we did not leave our biological child alone with our adopted child. Frustration and unhappiness had gradually turned to emotional abuse and potentially to violence. (We

had no history of violence in our family prior to adoption and have had no recurrence of violence since.) Ironically, together with our adopted child, we had succeeded in recreating a family which reflected his prior family experiences. Our story was beginning to sound like the abusive tales he related about his past. Ultimately, we chose not to live that story.

Were we caught in the postmodern experience of the present? The ways in which the past was constructed to us and by us yielded a mythical past that seemed artificial to me even as I was in the act of creating it. If I felt detached from my autobiographical history (required during the preadoption classes), how much more alienated was this child whose official history was created by caseworkers? At the time we lived these experiences, I had never encountered Mead's dimensions of emergent past or any postmodern theory of the past. I can, however, retrospectively fit my memories into these frameworks. I find them useful on a personal level as I continue to try to make sense out of our adoption experience. But at the time I was living the experience I knew only that I was frustrated, disillusioned and afraid. Remembering our eager anticipation and nescient faith in loving and caring, it seemed (and still seems) we had an almost unbelievably naive and simple understanding of human interaction. I believe our adoption failed because we underestimated the past and overestimated our ability to create stories with happy endings.

Letter from the Litners (Summer, 1992)

I found this paper to be pretty much an accurate account of what takes place in the

adoption of older children. My husband and I are often asked to speak to groups about the adoption of older children and the special challenges this type of parenting represents. We have chosen to live our lives in this manner, and we try to emphasize the special challenges because I feel it is critical in understanding why our adoptions have not disrupted as have some of the cases we have known.

As the years have passed, we have come to view the adoption of an older child in a very different light than the adoption of an infant. The relationship of an older child to adoptive parents seems more like the relationship that is established in a marriage. I feel that I am pledged to this relationship for better or for worse and that it is growing and changing all the time. I want to work at the relationship, to study it, trying to make it better for both my child and myself.

If I were training the social workers and judges that make the decisions about older adoptive situations, I would hope to change certain perceptions that adoptive parents may have. Similar to a person looking for a potential life partner, I would hope that adoptive parents would look at the potential adoptive child in terms of how this child would fit into their lives. There is danger in adopting an older child when we tend to believe enough love and attention will solve years of trauma and produce the loving child we have yearned to adopt. While most people do come to love each other at least on some level, when in the family setting, love does not of itself solve all problems. This does not happen in a marriage, so we should not be surprised that it takes more than love to make an adoption work.

My husband and I feel that although we could not anticipate all that would happen to

us as a family when we adopted Calvin, we had been given a fairly accurate picture of our child's past. This knowledge was tremendously helpful as we thought about what behaviors we were dealing with and anticipated our future as a family. We feel that having a clear understanding of our child's past experiences helped us tolerate and confront behaviors and problems as they arose. In fact if there was anything that I could change about this adoption even now, it would be to know more about what took place in our child's past.

Adoption of a child is too often seen as an ending, while we think of it as the beginning. We have learned many things as our family has grown. Adoption of an older child has many frustrations, but also many rewards. The learning process is continuing for both of us and for our child. I hope that as more adoptions of older children take place, placement personnel will spend more time training potential adoptive parents about the demands as well as the pleasures of older children. If families have realistic views of the challenges involved with parenting the older child, there are certain to be more successes.

After receiving Mrs. Litner's letter, we asked her in an interview to bring us up to date on Calvin.

> He is now 19, and we've had him for ten years. He still has many of the same behaviors he had when we adopted him, but many things have changed as well. He will still eat garbage or crumbs off the table or off somebody else's plate. This is a constant; this is something that happened in the institution. He would eat dog food if it were available

and if nobody else were around. The other kids still get frustrated with him when he does things to them, like take their favorite pencil. And this has been from day one, he's done it. Before we got him, he did this; he still does it -- bites the eraser out of the end. Soat any given moment, there's usually somebody pretty teed off because of something like that. But, if you want a book read to the little boys, he's really good at reading and he'll do that at the drop of a hat. He likes to read. So there are lots of good things about being his friend -- he'll push you on the swing, he'll do any number of games. So the little boys have learned to capitalize on that....But they also get frustrated when he breaks one of their toys. And again the biggest thing for all of us, the hardest thing, is trying to constantly remind ourselves that the behavior that Calvin has is not the sum total of Calvin. To teach to the behavior and to punish the behavior but not put him down is very, very hard to do on a daily basis. We all struggle with it. It's our daily challenge, that's for sure. And you try to think about the good things, the positive things, and dwell on those. Because there are lots of positive things. And especially when you compare him to what he was doing 10 years ago -- it's night and day -- the difference!

CONCLUSION

In this paper we examined how two families who adopted older special needs

children came to understand the present and project a future without benefit of a shared past. The Becks and the Litners, like all families, attempted to make sense of their lives through the stories they told. Howard (1991:196) writes that, "A life becomes meaningful when one sees himself or herself as an actor within the context of a story...[such as] a family saga...." He cautions, "beware of the stories you tell yourself -- for you will surely be lived by them." These families' understandings of the adoption process were shaped and controlled by the stories they constructed and reconstructed. They told these stories to themselves, each other, and to us, to help make sense of and legitimate their ongoing family saga.

Individual members of adoptive families may have very different understandings of their family saga. In families with biological children, developing common understandings into a coherent story is relatively easy (albeit paradoxical, see Couch 1989, Ch. 10), because of their shared past (Katovich and Couch, 1992). For these families, Mead's pragmatic dimensions of the past typically address themselves in the present in ways that are too familiar to become seriously questioned. But what about families with adopted children like Calvin and John? What about the families where a child's past has been shaped not by one set of parents and one set of shared experiences, but by many parents or caregivers, and by a series of disjointed and contradictory present-centered webs of experience? For these children and their adoptive parents, to share common meanings in the stories they tell can be a very difficult process. Yet, it is these shared meanings that are pivotal to their creation of a united family history. Katovich and MacMurray (1989:7) have noted that, "Failure to relate a variety of experiences into a coherent social

narrative creates the grounds for misunderstanding and alienation."

When families are able to create a coherent narrative -- tying together the past, present, and projections of the future -- Mead's pragmatic theory of the past often is sufficient to ensure the taken-for-grantedness of everyday life. When confronted with a Calvin or a John, however, adoptive parents, like their children, face a series of unfamiliar and unsettling life experiences -- experiences that bring into question their past, present, and future. Having neither a shared nor a similar common past prior to the adoption, these families must construct a shared narrative out of separate lived realities which are often misunderstood and contradictory. The taken-for-grantedness of everyday life becomes elusive, leaving the adoptive family more vulnerable to being caught in a postmodern experience of the present.

How parents and children adjust to this dissonance in their daily lives determines when and if Mead's pragmatism is sufficient, or if they will become repeatedly caught in the terror of the postmodern moment. Some parents come to represent the postmodern "everyman," whose "...central crisis is to struggle against the tyranny of the present..." (Katovich and MacMurray, 1989). Other parents would agree with Mead who wrote that "...the long and the short of it is that the past...is as hypothetical as the future" (1932:12). It is the specious present, in which 'memory and anticipation build on both ends' (1932:66), that exists" (quoted in Maines, et al., 1983:161). It is these parents who retrospectively interpret acts that have occurred in light of acts that are occurring or which may occur, who are more successful at integrating their adopted children into their family. These parents are able to use stories of the past to gain visions of a shared

future to create the stories they want to live. Drawing upon the insightful comments from Mrs. Beck's and Mrs. Litner's responses to this paper, these are the parents who neither underestimate the past nor overestimate their ability to create stories with happy endings; these are the parents who think of adoption not as an ending, but as a beginning.

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