Understanding Adoption: Epistemological Implications

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Abstract

Knowledge and power are linked. In order to reveal the nature of the knowledge/power nexus and its relationship to the process of adoption we must not only ask what we know about adoption but more importantly, ask how we come to know what we know about adoption. When we do this it becomes clear that adoption in Australia has been misunderstood and misrepresented. Until we are able to re-locate and reposition our understanding of adoption as a social construct, understanding of adoption's inherent contradictions and the nature and origins of the knowledge positions and political projects of each set of stakeholders will remain beyond us. As will meaningful reunion, reconciliation, healing and an adequate understanding of the true potential of the process.

Introduction

Social researchers, social workers, mental health professionals, policy makers and members of the legislature are assigned the privileged status of expert in Australian, and other western industrialised societies. They hold a powerful, mainstream position as creators and arbiters of knowledge. Consequently their understanding of adoption has particular influence on the way it is presented and represented both theoretically and as practice. It will be argued here that various discursive, mainstream understandings of the social institution of adoption have not been based on conclusions arrived at through relevant, inclusive systematic study but rather have emerged as a result of distortions of the knowledge process. These distortions are products of the power/social nexus whereby power validates certain kinds of knowledge by promoting certain narratives and silencing others. The effect becomes the acceptance and adherence to sets of philosophical positions that often define the object of the social sciences in such a way that effectively legislates away their most important problems. These distortions emerge as scientifically derived knowledge discovered as the result of the application and acceptance of poor theory, personal bias, exclusionary sampling, inappropriate research methods, including problematic measurement instruments. These distortions, as well as mere chance, have been posited as value-free science and this has served to assist in defining our understandings of adoption. Very often the discursive, mainstream knowledge positions that have emerged are more reflections, in a variegated and mediated form, of the values and beliefs inherent within the dominant culture. These are understandings that are human products that have emerged within a particular time and context rather than as the result of the systematic application of value-free, scientific methodologies. However, through primary, secondary and tertiary socialisation processes, knowledge distortions are often legitimated as emerging from value-free science and they become manifest as the correct way of knowing. Statements about the real nature of adoption become everyday knowledge discourses and these in turn become objective architectural monuments for judging the truth about adoption and its effects.

An archaeology of knowledge may reveal positivist, value-free science as the central tenet of

modernity because of its success in revealing the secrets of nature. Universal laws have been discovered involving physics, chemistry, astronomy, and biology and it has been assumed that the same value-free, scientific approach could be applied to understanding questions about collective human existence. Modernity has embraced and elevated value-free scientific knowing to the pinnacle of the hierarchy of knowledge and privileged the academic/scientific professions as the ultimate knowing and acting agencies, without earthly equal. The uncompromising belief in the power of value-free science to provide answers about the real nature of collective human existence and to help human kind evolve and harness nature is central to beliefs about enlightenment, progress and freedom. This uncompromising faith in science and the belief that it will eventually provide answers to everything has become institutionalised, habitualised, authoritative dogma that demands unquestioning belief. The habit of understanding social phenomena with our unquestioned beliefs (because they are scientifically legitimate) instead of first attempting to understand the nature and origin of those beliefs is especially evident when we take a holistic and reflexive view of the social sciences.

Traditionally, the primary task of the social sciences has been the explanation of social systems, processes and in general, social phenomena. However, in order to understand complex social systems and social phenomena it has often been the habit to examine processes that are internal to the system. This has involved the examination of component parts or units that are at a level below the system such as its individual members. The desired outcome has been to provide understanding about behaviour of the system by recourse to the behaviour of its parts. This internal analysis of systems behaviour has concentrated on utilising particular illegitimate positivistic,_ analytical methodologies that embrace aggregation and the representative agent._ However, it can be argued that positivistic methodologies have not fulfilled their original promise. An analysis of the history of the application of positivistic methods, as the appropriate means for the investigation of social issues reveals a methodology that has not been successful in unifying social thought or in providing a consensus on appropriate schemes for social and political reconstruction and healing. Arguably, what value-free, social science has accomplished is the maintenance and replication of the fundamental values and beliefs that are implicit within the dominant culture and that underpin particular kinds of social organisation and social power.

Much of our understanding of the process of adoption in Western Industrialised countries in the past 100 years has evolved within a social/cultural environment where faith in the so called value-free, positivistic, theoretical methodologies to answer social questions has been paramount. However, this scientific approach to understanding has tended to ignore the premise that understanding of social phenomena as social systems, processes, problems or needs relates specifically to how those systems, processes, problems or needs are defined and analysed and by what standards. The belief that the discovery of universal social laws through objective observation can be realised so long as the subjective role in constituting concepts, theory and methods is denied has become a pervasive characteristic of modernity. In the scientific study of the social, positivistic monistic,_ methodology has been applied in an attempt to find answers to social questions without acknowledging or identifying the basic theoretical and value laden assumptions that is fundamental to all social research. Adoption research has more often than not, been underpinned by an unstated, theoretical orientation that assumes that social facts could be discovered by application of methodologies applicable to the physical sciences and that social realities can be understood as something external to the researcher and the researched. Positivistic, value-free, scientific social research designs have been constructed in ways that have attempted to completely eliminate subjectivity in favour of objectivity.

Some would have us believe that the primary motivating force behind much excluding, value-free social research has been conspiratorial, that it has been little more than a premeditated and conscious desire by the powerful to control the less powerful. However, when one examines the history of social research and adoption it becomes evident that the motivating force has often been altruistic and the desire of the researcher has been to discover social facts in order to minimise alienation. Unfortunately, the possibility of discovering social facts has been seen as conditional upon removing the discrepancy between subjective understanding and objective reality. In other words, reason as objective, absolute truth has been seen as the guiding light in a sea of darkness, that will reveal hidden social facts and provide control and prediction. Models of the approximations of social events have emerged that are testable, reproducible and verifiable. However, the nature of confirmation and verification is social and there are unstated social forces at work that underpin social research and are also implicit in the formations of claims about value-free, objective social knowledge.

Legislation and Policy

Positivistic theoretical and methodological approaches to discovering and developing knowledge about adoption have resulted in particular understandings that have also been utilised as the basic conceptual and theoretical premises for the justification of the creation and implementation of ameliorative measures in the form of legislation, policy and practice. What has not been acknowledged is that these ameliorative measures have been based on conceptual understandings that depend entirely on the basic causative assumptions brought to the problem by the investigator, the researcher and those involved in the creation, administration and implementation of legislation and policy.

In many incidences these understandings or ontological positions have been accepted as valid and legitimate by mental health and other professionals and applied as a common sense, scientifically derived, therefore legitimate conceptual framework for attempting to deal with the unwanted and unintended effects of adoption. In other words much of our knowledge of adoption has been knowledge generated from certain positions and then applied in practice and policy contexts. However, these knowledge positions have tended to deny us access to the nature of adoptions social construction, its effects and the origins of the massive social contradictions inherent within it. Worse still, the acceptance, legitimisation and application of objectified, positivistic notions about the real nature of adoption have denied us access to the multi-level experiences of those who have been subjected to it. Moreover, blind faith in the power of positivistic social science has further resulted in the institutionalised devaluing and belittling of those suffering its effects.

Those individuals who have been, in some way, consumed by the process and who have spoken out loudly about their experiences have been viewed as little more than emotionally charged, angry and therefore irrational and out of touch with reality. Their subjective, and therefore illegitimate, expressions of their experiences of the process have been systematically reduced and they have been categorised and labelled as people who are psychologically underdeveloped, pathological, maladjusted and/or deviant.

These reductionist and deterministic attitudes do not stop at the mere devaluing of the individual

however, they go on to place and fix the ultimate responsibility for the adoption related problem squarely with the individual. In other words not only has the individual been blamed for the socially created, contradictory, unintended and unwanted effects of the process but they have also been systematically alienated, ridiculed and stigmatised.

How Have We Understood Adoption?

Our understanding of adoption has not been placed in a framework of a more general analysis of knowledge. Everyday knowledge about adoption has been created and recreated within a social environment that demands undying faith in a legitimated, positivistic, social science to find the right answers. This has served to constitute and reconstitute the very fabric of meanings that we have brought to the process. The resultant, pervasive, underlying assumption is that adoption has an essential reality all of its own. This reality has clearly defined boundaries that presents adoption as a homogenous,_ benign institution that has, and continues to serve the functional (biological, emotional, economic and social) needs of the individual and of society. Adoption has been understood and presented in discourse as an objectified, universal reality separate from its historical and social/context. It has been presented, and consequently understood in Australia as an institution that cannot be compared, other than with adoption in a few other very similar Western Industrialised countries such as the USA and the UK. Adoption has been portrayed and presented as given, unalterable and self-evident and as a consequence it confronts the individual as a historically and scientifically justified, objective and benign process and therefore, it is undeniable fact. The biography of those consumed by the process is apprehended merely as a reactive, subjective personal episode, separate and distanced from the institution of adoption. However, individuals continue to experience the power of institutionalised adoption as an objective coercive, and in many cases, an oppressive force.

Any attempts by them to resist tend to be subsumed by the sheer force of the institutions objectified facticity. This sheer force is not diminished when the individual does not understand or accept the institutions purpose or its mode of operation because adoption is reality, perceived as external to the individual. The individual, struggling for understanding, finds that the dominant culture demands that proper understanding will only eventuate when the individual applies the same value-free, rational rules of analysis that are seen as appropriate for investigating nature. This even in the face of the social world as a humanly constructed reality that is understandable in a way not possible in the case of the natural world.

As we have seen the objectification of adoption makes it separate and above the unavoidable emotional bias of the human subject and therefore it is a valid entity that cannot be, and should not be subjected to critical analysis. This homogenising of adoption is further assisted by a limiting reductionist emphasis on the nuclear family (mother, father, and child) as the primary and
only relevant, objective unit of analysis in adoption research. This limited focus has served to obfuscate a range of social institutions that are undeniably implicated in the creation and perpetuation of the process. This limiting concentration on the nuclear family presents adoption as a private and beneficial, consensual transaction just between members of the adoption triangle. The crucial importance of the centrality of the social constructedness of adoption is blended out and it assumes a legitimised position as part of everyday knowledge, obscured from its inherent complexity and its very real, unwanted and unintended effects.

History has shown us however, that even in the face of its objectified reality, the unwanted and unintended effects of adoption have come to characterised the process to its detriment and arguably, to the detriment of many who could have benefited by it if it had been understood and constructed differently. The subjective experience of many thousands of individuals who have, in varying degrees, been consumed by the process remains as an enormous yet ambiguous contradiction that struggles to push through the institutions objectified facticity. In Australia many of those consumed have translated their personal experiences into political and social action. Individuals have collected together and formed support and action groups that have tended to take two dichotomous paths. The first, while acknowledging the inherent problems associated with adoption, have accepted its objectified reality and worked alongside those institutions that maintain and present the process as a legitimate entity, understandable only as objectified everyday knowledge. Examination of the operating philosophies or mission statements of these groups reveals a theoretical orientation that appears to again be contradictory. While attempting, on the one hand, to address adoptions unwanted and unintended effects, on the other they legitimate the process by refusing to challenge, question or relocate understanding of the process. For them the State, and its expert agents are the only legitimate arbiters of our understanding of adoption. Many of these groups receive generous annual funding from the State to provide services to those affected by adoption, services which rarely address or question the fundamental cause/effect nexus.

The second type of group that has come to be part of the adoption landscape in Australia is the action oriented, social change group. Like the first they are usually comprised of people who have been, in some way, consumed by the process. However, examination of their philosophical approach to the process reveals a differing set of beliefs. More often than not these groups tend to be problem orientated. They see adoption as an inherently problematic and contradictory process that has often resulted in the institutionalised denial of human rights. They believe that not all are equal in the adoption process and those birthmothers and adopted people in particular have been exposed to unjust processes that others have not. They argue that the rights of all those implicated in the adoption process cannot and should not be legislatively balanced because the basic human rights of two sectors of the adoption triangle have been denied in favour of the third. They ask the question, how can the rights of all ever be balanced and equal when the rights of two factions have been corrupted to serve the needs of the third? However, while this social action group questions the contradictions inherent within the process of adoption, they are more often than not subsumed again by their exposure to the social objectification of reality. Understanding of the process becomes obstructed by the sheer facticity of the institution. Their experiences of the process tells them that something is drastically wrong, yet they are trapped within an ontological prison that limits and reduces understanding to existing, legitimised, and prescribed ways of knowing the world.

Both of the groups described above however, have served to provide a greater awareness of the problematic dimensions of adoption. The second in particular has provided permission for those affected to speak out and question what has been done to them. Unfortunately, the kinds of ameliorative measures ratified by the State and by mainstream Australian society have been geared towards addressing issues relating to the individual or family rather than towards understanding the process and addressing its underlying historical and social context/cause. This top down approach reveals a fundamental theoretical and conceptual framework that again locates and places the responsibility for the problem, and for change, at the level of the individual rather than with adoption as a social product. It seems that while logic has assumed a powerful and privileged position in human thinking, in practice when we don't have to deal with

the question of how we know what we know, when we are able to discount and devalue the stated experiences of the powerless as irrational, subjective anger, then perceptions become much more acceptable than logic.

How Should Adoption be Understood?

How should adoption be understood and represented? Is there an inherent logic to the process that is being disguised by its objectivity? In order to understand the nature of the process of adoption as it has existed within the past 120 years in Western Industrialised countries like Australia we need to take a reflexive, questioning position and look again at not only what we know, but how we come to know it. Western positivistic, social science with its top down approach and its need to eliminate the subjective has provided us with a one dimensional and rigidly compartmentalised view of adoption as a blue print from above. As McIntyre quite correctly states in her book, Tools for Ethical Thinking and Caring, there is a responsibility to ensure that theoretical literacy guides the decisions and actions of social researchers, social workers and mental heath professionals, and that theoretical literacy needs to be combined with a highly developed sense of ethics. Professionals who enjoy a privileged position in society have an inherent responsibility to ensure that what they do and how they do it does not place those who are powerless and marginalised, at risk. For the adoption worker and researcher, being theoretically literate involves the need to adopt a reflexive approach to analysis both in terms of the structural societal shapers and the human perceptions of all stakeholders. The theoretically literate adoption worker and researcher will strive to understand the assumptions underpinning different policy and practice decisions and locate them both ontologically and epistemologically. The theoretically literate adoption worker and researcher will know that the assumptions, beliefs and attitudes that they bring to the situation need to be critically analysed so that their implications are understood. Most importantly of all the theoretically literate adoption worker and researcher will realise that truth lies in their preparedness to listen to the view point of others whilst maintaining a belief in the potential power of individual creativity and the core values of human rights and dignity._ When we take this reflexive approach the socially constructed nature of adoption and answers to questions about the origins of adoptions contradictions and unwanted and unintended effects begin to emerge.

By listening to the real life experiences of those who have been touched by adoption it becomes clear that this is a process that is a human product, that it is socially constructed. It becomes evident that adoption is not something that exists, divorced or separate form the workings of human beings. It is not a reified entity that should be attributed the status of being ridged and thing like because it is more properly the result of complex and changing sets of social relationships. In order to understand the nature of adoption as an institutionalised, human product we must first address the question of the nature of the social construction of reality.

It should be stated here that the fundamental, theoretical premise on which my thesis rests is not new. Since Comet's 1822 plan of the scientific operations necessary for reorganising society, theorist such as Mannheim, Schutz, Scheler and others have written about sociology of knowledge. However, it was not until 1966 that Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann produced a systematic account of the social construction of reality and identified the role of knowledge, in particular the role of common sense knowledge in constituting the reality of everyday life. Berger and Luckmann presented a view of human existence in which everyday knowledge involves a dialectical process between objective and subjective realities that serve to create and

recreate each other. For Berger and Luckmann human beings together, produce an environment that is the sum of its socio-cultural and psychological formations. The importance of the dichotomy between structure and agency that seems to pervade modern sociology is seen as being over stated because both structure and agency serve to inform, influence and recreate each other in a cyclic fashion that is temporally and socially connected. As McIntyre indicates, the macro level of structural shapers are as relevant as the micro level of human creativity and perception; they are part of the same moment in time. However, the human habit of reducing complexity, of ordering chaos in an attempt to simplify and categorise complex abstractions demands an answer to the question, which came first, structure or agency? In order to answer this question we must revisit the factors that have worked to produce what we know as the social world.

For Berger and Luckmann there is a fundamental necessity located in human biological equipment. The human being must continually externalise itself in activity yet the organism lacks the necessary biological means to provide the stability necessary for human conduct and without social order, total chaos would prevail. The inherent instability of the organism makes it imperative that homo sapiens provide themselves with a stable environment where drives can be directed. For Berger and Luckmann these conditions presuppose the production and re-production of a social order.

Empirically, human existence takes place within a context of order, stability and direction that is a distinctly human product separate from the laws of nature. All human activity, once it has been ordered and found to be necessary or appropriate, is repeated frequently. This ordered activity then becomes subject to habitualisation and cast into a pattern which can then be reproduced with an economy of effort. Habitualised actions retain their meaningful character for the individual and meanings become embedded as routines in the general stock of knowledge. Understandings become taken for granted and provide the individual with important cognitive relief from having to examine the other 999 possible ways of doing something. This allows for the directed specialisation of activity that is lacking in biological equipment and relieves the tension that develops from undirected drives. Habitualisation makes it unnecessary for each situation to be defined as something new. A large variety of situations may be subsumed under existing definitions and action can be anticipated. Even differing conducts can be assigned standard weights and activity will be designated and habitualised in accordance with the human's biographical experience of a world of preceding social institutions._

The question then follows; how do institutions arise? For Berger and Luckmann institutions arise whenever there is a reciprocal typification of habitualised actions by types of actors. For particular typification to constitute an institution there must not only be the typification of the action but also of the actors in institutions. This typification are always shared ones and they are available to all members of the social group. The institution then works in a cyclic fashion to typify actors as well as actions.

Institutions further imply historicity and control. Reciprocal typification are built up in the course of shared history. In other words institutions and their actors always have a shared history, of which they are the products and the producers. Understanding an institution without first understanding the historical process in which it was produced is impossible. Institutions also, by the mere fact of their existence, control and determine human conduct by operationalising predefined patterns of conduct which channel in one direction against the many other possible directions that may theoretically be possible. When the process of

institutionalisation becomes less than completely successful, the institution of law provides sanctions that exemplify a few who offend against the institution and this controls the majority. However, if the majority reacts collectively and challenges the institution then it becomes in danger of disintegration. In this case the institution will adapt to avoid psychological discomfort by either redefining its reason for existence and methods of operation or by dismantling itself. One method of redefinition is to remove all responsibility for socially constructed processes by objectifying them as realities external to the institution and therefore, not produced and unalterable by the actions of those within the institution.

When a new generation emerges the objectification of the institutional world manifest even more strongly as separate and distant. Parents provide explanations of human behaviour to the new generation as; this is how things are done. The institutional world then attains firmness in consciousness; it becomes real, larger, with an identity of its own. Because the new generation views the institution as a separate objectified reality and because it is experienced as such... it becomes that. This is compounded by the fact that institutions have histories before the individual's birth and are therefore not accessible to biographical recollection. When this occurs institutions cannot be understood by retrospection. The individual must go out and learn about them just as one learns about nature.

It is important to remember that the objectification of the social world is a human construct, humanly produced through a process whereby products of human activity are externalised and attain the character of objects. In other words human kind produces a world which, for the most part is experienced as something else. The relationship between the social world (the product) and human beings (the producers) remains a dialectical one. That is human kind in their collectives, and the social world interact with each other and that which is produced turns back on the producer. Externalisation and objectivation are moments in a continuing dialectical process which is internalisation. This is the process by which the objectified social world is reverted back into human consciousness in the course of socialisation. It may be evident now that there are three important, clearly identifiable characterisations or dialectical moments in the theory of the social construction of reality. Society is a human product... Society is objective reality... Humans are social products. For Berger and Luckmann any knowledge that emerges from an analysis of the social world that leaves out anyone of these dialectical moments will be distorted.

For Giddens the process of how we appropriate, mediate and accept particular knowledge positions as valid is also a product of pre-established habits that obey the principle of the avoidance of cognitive dissonance. Giddens, while remaining within a slightly modified version of the social construction of reality, utilises an analogy of the daily newspaper to exemplify the processes involved in the appropriation of knowledge on a day today basis. Giddens presents the newspaper as a vast array of information yet each reader imposes their own order on the information and consciously selects those items to be read. The available information confronting the reader is systematically reduced by rountinised attitudes which serve to exclude or reinterpret potentially disturbing knowledge. This systematic avoidance forms part of what Giddens calls the protective cocoon which helps to maintain ontological security and acts as a means of preserving a coherent narrative of self-identity in a complex, post-traditional world of multiple realities. The individual's self-identity is further confirmed in the interaction with others because others recognise those behaviours and attitudes as individualised free choice. They are seen as appropriate and reasonable rather than expressions of the socially constructed values and beliefs inherent within patterns of the dominant culture. Social survival therefore, becomes a matter of internalising those attitudes and beliefs that protects the individual from

threatening personal and social environments._ However, this does not mean that the individual does not experience doubt. When doubt does occurs the protective cocoon tends to defend the individual from periods of radical doubt and emerging dilemmas are usually resolved via a mixture of routine and commitment to certain forms of lifestyle as well as investing trust in a given series of acceptable, very often authoritative abstract systems. A very good example of the pervasive anthologising effect of authoritative abstract systems and the individuals protecting behaviour can be found within particular economic rationalist discourses that are becoming common in the1990s. Acceptable authoritative abstract systems now discursively include market governed, freedom of individual choice as a pervasive, inescapable framework of individual and group expression.

What are the socially constructed adoption related problems/contradictions?

Most certainly in the case of Aboriginal people the process of adoption was used as a means towards cultural genocide implicit in the white Australia policy. This racist, exclusionary and inhuman policy was informed by particular ontological perspectives that were imported into Australia via colonisation. These Eurocentric perspectives were importations of particular discursive knowledge positions that emerged from within, and as a consequence of the socially constructed, economic and political contexts of 18th century Europe. After colonisation in Australia many thousands of Aborigines were separated by force from their natural families and transported to white institutions or adopted into white families. The real effects of forced separation from family and culture are known only to well by those aboriginal people who were subjected to the process. They are experienced as a complete, unjust corruption of their traditional culture that was designed to exterminate their race over time. However, these issues are only just beginning to be acknowledged publicly by white Australia. It can also be argued that while the effects of the process of cultural genocide as assimilation, via adoption on aboriginal people are becoming increasingly acknowledged, the effects, for many non-aboriginal children who were removed from their families of origin are not. The effects of traditional, non-aboriginal adoption and the suffering experienced by many of those exposed to it remains publicly unacknowledged. In both aboriginal and non-aboriginal adoption it was used as a means towards the satisfaction of particular socially constructed ends. Both aboriginal and non-aboriginal adoption involved social dislocation and physical separation in order to satisfy different socially constructed purposes. It is to these social purposes and their effects that we shall now turn.

For aboriginal people adoption was used as a means towards the destruction of aboriginal culture and race. In the case of non-aboriginal adoption it was used to satisfy a multitude of different, yet still socially constructed purposes. These included the need to protect the child from socially constructed illegitimacy and the unmarried mother from socially constructed shame. It was used to satisfy the socially constructed need of childless, often infertile couples to socially reproduce by presenting another's child as their own. And it was used to provide so called unwanted children with homes and rescue them from (socially constructed) poverty and disadvantage.

At the core of the effects of the process of legal adoption on adopted people in Australia lies the issue of the socially contrived separation from biological kin and the socially contrived attempt at the re-establishment of normative (objectified as crucially important) biological kinship

relationships through social/legal contract. This attempt to socially engineer new sets of kinship relationships as though they were biological kinship relationships is fundamental to the related issues of the institutionalised denial of information, of contact and the adopted person's identity. The adoption contract (a social contract) involves a shift from paternal authority to contractual authority as well as the physical movement of the child and the changing of its birth name. These movements have involved an uneasy and often contradictory synthesis between overlapping socially constructed discourses. Adoptive kinship demonstrates that the rationally contrived form of modern adoption is internally contradictory. On the one hand biological kinship is presented as sets of normative kinship discourses that proclaims the natural, normal and therefore, the desirability and importance of biological kinship. On the other hand adoptive kinship discourses proclaim that the adoptive family is the social equivalent of biological kinship.

Dogmatic biological kinship discourses are social constructions that involve the metaphorical transfer and re-establishment of the importance of biological lineage as the basis for normal, natural, socially acceptable kinship relationships. In other words, normal, natural, biological kinship is essentially a metaphor for the action domain of reproduction which involves predefined, socially constructed sets of frames of action structured by those individual and collective acts that are intended to secure the reconstitution of behaviours and states of consciousness that will reproduce and maintain collective human existence in a particular form. Yet biological kinship is not the same as adoptive kinship. However, dogma of no difference that has come to characterise adoption discourse leads to unnecessary inequities, deeply felt injustices and serious social tensions.

For Giddens_ self development (and it could be argued even survival) depends entirely on the opportunities for individuals to master appropriate responses to others. The individual who is different from others has no chance of reflexively developing a coherent self-identity. In the case of adopted people lack of access to their real kin denies them access to a source of stabilising authority that is directly relevant to sustaining trust relationships. Traditional, biological kinship based on genetic lineage has been and arguably, remains as a crucial, socially constructed, binding doctrine that precedes forms of behaviour and that is endowed with strong normative compulsion. It is apriority, a doctrine that is so pervasive that it is manifest as a fundamental component of the thinking, acting individual to the point where it is not negotiable. The mere fact of being ascribed a child and then being expected to think of, and treat that child as ones biological child evokes cognitive dissonance that can never conceal the resultant psychological discomfort. Arguably, the child who has never been given verbal recognition of its adoption status will still, because of its proximity to the adopting parent, sense varying degrees of the projection of the parents psychological discomfort with what are internalised, taken for granted, non-negotiable yet conflicting and contradictory discourses. In other words a problem arises when we live by, and accept socially constructed concepts of the importance of biological kinship and then introduce adoption and its need to recreate, by social engineering, new sets of kinship relations as though they were biological. We habitualise, internalise and institutionalise kinship relations based on objectified perceptions of the importance of genetic lineage then in the case of adoption, deny their importance by attempting to socially engineer them.

Following Berger and Luckmanns thesis, identity is formed by social processes. Once it is established it is maintained, modified and even reshaped by social relations. When the adopted person experiences the unavoidable cognitive dissonance projected by the non-disclosing adopting parent or when they are given knowledge of their difference they have no chance of reflexively developing a coherent self-identity. Adopted people who lack, or are prevented from

accessing their real kin are, at the same time denied access to a source of stabilising authority that is directly relevant to sustaining trust relationships.

However, adopted people are often also accomplices in the closed or excluding nature of their adoptive family life. For many adopted people complicity in the maintenance and recreation of the socially engineered world of adoption is necessary in order to maintain a survival level of acceptance by their adoptive families. They are forced through sheer necessity to deny the differences between them and their adoptive families. Embracing the objectified reality of adoption propagated by public and private institutions is welcome psychological relief in times of severe cognitive dissonance. For many adopted people, to outwardly acknowledge a need to search and to know is, at the same time, acknowledging that they had biological families and to do this would destroy the opportunity to master appropriate responses to others. Acknowledging difference places the adopted person in danger of losing the chance of reflexively developing a coherent self-identity, even when those chances and opportunities are already absent.

The Professional/State View of Adoption/Political Implications

The rise of professionalisation during the past 100 years has served to exacerbate and in turn has been exacerbated by the distortion of knowledge phenomena. Underpinned and legitimated by an undying belief in scientific rationality to provide access to universal social laws, everyday knowledge encompasses a belief in the skills, knowledge and right of experts to define and then deal with social problems. This belief in the ability and therefore, the legitimacy of experts to provide the right answers, without due examination of the origins and nature of their knowledge bases, has resulted in an over dependence on these experts. However, as argued previously, embracing positivistic rationality has not provided answers to the unwanted and unintended effects of adoption other than to level blame at those who have suffered. Could it be that the kind of rationality permitted by universal law is not much more enabling than that permitted by divine law. Both demand that human beings defer to an authority or be considered mad or evil. Moreover, it could be argued that given the lack of adequate, inclusive and systematic social inquiry into the process of adoption in Australia, the beliefs and actions of many so called experts have been little more than attempts at social closure. Has an opportunity to increase personal and group advantage by monopolising resources, restricting access to their profession and refusing to identify and state the knowledge base or position that informs their actions been provided by the institutionalised objectivation and elevation of expert knowledge's?

As we have seen in the case of the objectivation of those suffering the effects of adoption, there is an inherent danger in ascribing total blame to any one particular sector of our society. Nevertheless, it has become very fashionable during the past 10 years for those consumed by the adoption process to level blame for the misunderstandings, the misrepresentations, the wrong-doings and abuses of adoption firstly at the feet of adoptive parents and now more so, directly at social workers. Those individuals whose responsibility it was to provide people in need with services that enhanced their (and the society's) general state of health and well-being continue to be accused of performing or assisting and condoning horrendous acts of human rights abuse against birthmothers and adopted people. Acts that include physical assault, kidnapping, obtaining the consent of birthmothers by drug and/or deceit, of trading in human flesh for profit or gain and of commodifying children. They have been accused of purposefully maintaining and propagating a particular socially constructed and objectified morality that is hostile and oppressive to many single mothers and adopted people. These include the maintenance and support of the institutionalised restriction of the release of familial, genetic and historical information to birth relatives either through advising the policy and legislative process or

through the actual administration of those policies and legislation. They, and their educators, have been accused time and again of failing to learn from the lessons of the past, yet is it really that simple? If the consumed level blame for the socially constructed problematic, contradictory and damaging effects of adoption at one sector of our community, are they not then guilty of objectifying the understanding of what is a socially constructed process? Are they not then guilty of pathologising one group, of reducing the responsibility for cause and effect to one small sector within the adoption process. This again is the objectification of knowledge and the pathologising of the individual. It may be therapeutic to vent anger at social workers for the problematic dimensions of adoption but is it accurate. When we think in these reductionist ways we limit our understanding of a socially constructed process to the level of the individual and label, stigmatise and potentially damage one group. Social workers did then, and do now operate within the acceptable normative dimensions of an objectified human existence. Their actions were then, and are now a reflection of the normative values and beliefs that underpin western industrialised societies. These are values and beliefs that in the 1950s, 60s and 70s where underpinned by particular socially constructed knowledge positions that demanded uncompromising faith in the power of a value-free, social science to provide answers to questions about how human organisation should proceed and by what means. The fact that we may now understand and question the problematic and contradictory nature of adoption does not mean that the knowledge positions that produced it were not premised on altruistic motives.

As Berger and Luckmann have indicated, the sets of assumptions which we use and the values from which they emerge are shaped by our existence and position within a socially constructed reality. Our life experiences, the time and place in which we find ourselves and our interpretations of our experiences relate directly to the values and beliefs habitualised, institutionalised, and received through primary, secondary and tertiary socialisation. As human beings and as social workers the way we understand a particular problem, and even whether or not it is a problem, will depend not only on the training we have received but also on the experiential assumptions we bring with us as part of a temporal social construction of reality. This reality, internalised, will in turn define and dictate any action that we may take towards the problem. Our socially constructed and internalised reality will also define, produce and replicate the realities that develop as we move through time and space. However, as we have seen the objectification of social reality, underpinned by notions of a positivistic, social science separates the knowing subject from the creation of their environment. This not only tends to provide a particular, very often one dimensional understanding about our clients, it also defines our role as professionals and the role of politicians who create adoption policy.

The reified, socially disconnected understanding of adoption has not only become manifest as legitimate adoption discourse but it has also underpinned and validated the values and beliefs of the dominant culture towards adoption as expressions within the political process. The term political process is used here in a broad sense to define the entirety of the social relations that precede, create, maintain and then in turn are themselves shaped as the political system. These processes are at work both at the level of the collective as well as at the level of the individual and involve a concern with expressing personal issues and influencing the content, goals and policies that are implicated in the creation and recreation of social reality. The state as the socially constructed, institutionalised, legitimated authority encases its members within ideologically linked activities that, in the case of adoption, have involved both private and public issues. Bureaucratic, public purposes have emerged that include the need to reduced public expenditure for the care of children whose parents were defined as relinquishers or unknown. Adoption here has provided the opportunity for the socially constructed transformation of public problems into private ones. Adoption has also served to publicly exemplify the most desirable form of socialisation environment e.g. patriarchal nuclear family, husband wage

earner, wife home carer, middle class, church-going etc, and as a public resource in the child welfare tool kit.

The Adoptive Parent View/Political Implications

Post war adoption discourse in Australia reflected the belief that adoption should be oriented to the needs and interests of children rather than adults. Questions about the emotional health of prospective adoptive parents took centre stage. Scientific adoption based on psychodynamic ideas and assumptions about the mental health of adopters underpinned the adoption workers expertise in the selection of potential adoptive parents and exposed prospective adoptive parents to intense scrutiny. When demand for children outstripped the supply claims to expertise in assessing prospective adopters became even more important in legitimating social work's claim to licence and to monopolising adoption arrangements. Social workers operating within the values and beliefs of the dominant culture controlled the process of assessment and selection of prospective adoptive parents by application of scientific positivistic diagnosis and prediction. However, modern adoption has also been characterised by secrecy provisions. In this case professional interests again embraced positivistic science as the appropriate method for deciding questions about how to best protect children and they claimed that secrecy alone could protect the welfare of the child and the interests of adoptive parents, without knowledge of the consequences for both.

For adoptive parents the problems emerging from the social construction of adoption are many. Contrary to the views of many who have been consumed by the process first hand, adoptive parents have also suffered as a result of the adoptions inherent and un-resolvable contradictions. Socially constructed adoption discourse has elevated the importance and deterministic value of biological lineage, creating concerns for the adopting parents over the social and biological origins of the child. Adoptive parents have had to face the socially derived stigma of infertility even if they were not. They have been treated in many cases, almost as deviants because they are not natural, therefore not normal parents. However, the most pervasive, sinister and cruel trick played on adoptive parents is implicit within the discourses relating to the best interests of the child and secrecy. Adoptive parents have been led to believe that their social contract with the state would provide them with their own biological child as long as they complied with the socially engineered, scientifically validated adoption blueprint.

The Birthparent View/Political Implications

The socially constructed messages that natural mothers have been exposed to include relinquishment is the best thing for your child be free of the stigma of ex-nuptial conception and birth. Chances of marriage will be greater, adoption will help you to forget the child, you cannot give the child the care that it needs and the life it deserves, adoptive parents can. Disappearing will protect the child from the stigma of illegitimacy. The private sphere of the family or the state gave single unmarried mothers little support and many were economically and ideologically trapped by a patriarchal society that benefited from the systematic exploitation and denigration of woman. Adoption for many natural mothers became a metaphor for a violent act of aggression. Many came to view the institutionalised separation of a mother from her child as a violent political act against a female who has offended against the (socially constructed) sexual mores of the dominant culture._ However, many mothers who have lost a child to adoption have

been unable to forget as easily as they were led to believe by agents of the state. They have continued to grieve and mourn the child that is lost to them and many have ultimately, paid with their lives through suicide or death via substance abuse.

The Way to Understanding and Reconciliation

The way we continue to understand and construct the process of adoption leaves us nowhere to go other than to continue down the path toward painfully felt injustices and serious social tensions. For McIntyre reflexivity is the basis of theoretical literacy and ethical practice and theoretical literacy is the appropriate response to the competing and often disempowering constructs of post-modernist realities. Adopting methods and practice that do not drown the point of view of disempowered stakeholders can not only lead to more compassionate interaction but also to an enlightened understanding of the subjects' world and reveal the factors implicated in their creation and recreation. If we as adoption workers and researchers wish to work with individuals and groups of people who have been touched by the process then we must be able to deal with the often competing constructs of truth of the various stakeholders by locating them not only ontologically but also epistemologically. The modern adoption worker in the late 1990s exists within a changing socially constructed world where professionals are being exposed to increasing pressure to increase their hard skills at the expense of developing a capacity to challenge existing orthodoxies. Competency is defined as a measurement of what people can do rather than what or how they understand.

It should be clear now that the human organism exists within, and recreates a particular social environment where there is little human thought that is not influenced by the ideologising influences of the social context. When we view the propositions of positivistic social science as legitimations of significant constructions of a modern social reality and then bracket the question of scientific validity, such questions become part of the data in understanding the objective and subjective realities from which they emerge and, which in turn, they influence.

Legitimising the voices of those marginalised by the adoption process, including social workers, is something that must begin at the individual level and move to the collective or community level. Reconstructing previously objectified, personal problems as socially constructed, therefore political problems legitimises the voices of the marginalised and provides logical understanding of an inherently problematic, contradictory, process that is characterised by distortions, absurdities and legal untruths.

Social research and social work of all kinds is essentially an ideological activity, it is political practice. Those who engaged in it for reward must be well informed, broadly educated, critically reflexive and sensitive to others. Theoretical literacy demands an inclusive tolerance that begins with a willingness to listen to the voices of others, even in the face of competing truths. Social work and its practice must move from the individualisation and objectivation of social problems to more collective, historically respectful and socially located understandings and action._ Ethical practice must be built on the assumption that power and knowledge are linked and that we must not accept blindly what we know, but also question how we come to know what we know.

Social researchers, in their role as discoverers and legitimaters of social knowledge must acknowledge that they are intimately attached to the research process. They must acknowledge that their own knowledge positions will influence, shape and eventually serve to define particular research questions, as well as the operationalisation of those questions and their eventual conclusions. While there are a multitude of methods available, unless we understand and acknowledge that we cannot totally separate our (socially constructed) personal knowledge positions from the theoretical and methodological implications of our research, then we are in danger of engaging in research which is unethical.

Conclusion

When we take a theoretically literate stance and then listen to the perceptions of others we are able to map their emerging constructs epistemologically and ontologically. Compassion becomes possible and in the case of adoption, we are able to re-negotiate and re-locate our understanding of it from an objectified, homogenous, untouchable reality to a socially constructed and maintained entity. Adoption becomes redefined, understandable, disempowered and demystified. The origins and nature of the massive contradictions that have come to characterise the process emerge and clearly locate the problematic dimensions of adoption as a product of those contradictions. When we take what McIntyre calls a critical humanist approach_ to understanding, not only do we acquire a new understanding of adoption that is historically respectful and socially connected but those who have been consumed by the process gain a sense of mastery over what has been done to them. Blame for the unwanted and unintended effects of adoption is shifted away from the individual to the collective, organising human consciousness and a better way of knowing emerges.

Finally, the question of the future of adoption must be dealt with. Is there any value left in a process that has been shown to be so damaging. Arguably there is, so long as we are able and willing to re-think our understanding of it and reconstruct the process so that we avoid the problematic dimensions that occur when we deny the social construction of reality and then build in sets of massive social contradictions. While it is acknowledged that the rescue ideology that has informed the traditional form of adoption is culturally specific and even ethnocentric it is nevertheless, difficult to ignore the potential of a redefined and reconstructed adoption process to provide children in need with a safe, socially connected environment. The starting point of a re-constructed adoption process would involve the institutionalised recognition of the complexity of adoptive relationships and of the need for respect and recognition of adopted person's life histories. This new understanding could even strengthen existing or traditional western kinship norms by enhancing the life experience of all individuals and institutionalising new supports for authenticity, empathy, compassion and communicative abilities.

ENDNOTES

The term Positivism is used here to describe a sociological approach that operates on the general assumption that the methods of the physical sciences can be carried over into the social sciences. It involves the expectation that scientific knowledge will formulate logically interrelated general propositions grounded in statements about basic social facts derived from observation.

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_ Monistic, the belief that there is one and only one objective reality.
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_ McIntyre, J.J., (1996) Tools for Ethical Thinking and Caring: A reflexive approach to community development theory and practice in the pragmatic 90s, Community Quarterly, Melbourne.
_ ibid., p. 44.

_ ibid., p. 38.

_ ibid., p. 49.

_ ibid., p. 21.

_ ibid., p. 48.

_ Berger and Luckmann, op. cit., p, 66
.
_ ibid., p, 74.

_ The term institution is used here to describe an established order where activities become regularised and routinised.

Behaviour, beliefs and attitudes become standardised and patterned and knowing becomes operationalised as rules.

_ Berger and Luckmann op. cit., p. 72.

_ ibid., p. 73.

_ ibid., p. 78.

_ Giddens, A. (1991) Modernity and Self Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age, Stanford University Press, USA.

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_ Boulet, J. cited in OShaughnessy op. cit. p. 208.
_ Giddens, op. cit. pp. 187-201
_ ibid., pp. 187-201.
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_ OShaughnessy, op. cit., p. 81

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_ OShaughnessy, op. cit., p. 6.
_ McIntrye, op. cit., pp. 69-86
_ ibid., p. 66.