ELIZABETH HUGHES

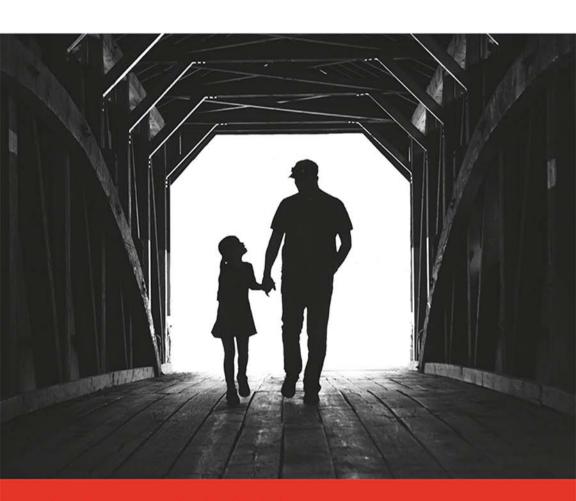# ADOPTED WOMEN AND BIOLOGICAL FATHERS

RE-IMAGINING STORIES OF ORIGIN AND TRAUMA

'The complexity of adoption experiences is nowadays well recognised – how adoptees can find themselves in a dynamic of loss and recovery that can sometimes be intensely painful and at other times radically life-enhancing. In this remarkable book, Elizabeth Hughes takes up a neglected issue in the adoption literature – adopted women's search for their biological fathers – and uses it to cast new light on some of the central issues around adoption. These include gender relations, the idea of a 'primal wound', the debateability of the notion of 'reunion', and – perhaps most compellingly of all – the powerful draw of memory and fantasy in the adopted life. *Adopted Women and Biological Fathers* is a major and novel contribution to the adoption literature.'

— **Professor Stephen Frosh**, Birkbeck, University of London, UK

ADOPTED WOMEN AND BIOLOGICAL FATHERS

Adopted Women and Biological Fathers offers a critical and deconstructive challenge to the dominant notions of adoptive identity. The author explores adoptive women's experiences of meeting their biological fathers and reflects on personal narratives to give an authoritative overview of both the field of adoption and the specific history of adoption reunion. This book takes as its focus the narratives of 14 adopted women, as well as the partly fictionalised story of the author and examines their experiences of birth father reunion in an attempt to dissect the ways in which we understand adoptive female subjectivity through a psychosocial lens.

Opening a space for thinking about the role of the discursively neglected biological father, this book exposes the enigmatic dimensions of this figure and how telling the relational story of 'reconciliation' might be used to complicate wider categories of subjective completeness, belonging, and truth. This book attempts to subvert the culturally normative unifying system of the mother–child bond, and prompts the reader to think about what the biological father might represent and how his role in relation to adoptive female subjects may be understood.

This book will be essential reading for those in critical psychology, gender studies, narrative work, sociology and psychosocial studies, as well as appealing to anyone interested in adoption issues and female subjectivity.

Elizabeth Hughes was awarded the Symonds Prize 2015 for her essay 'There's No Such Thing as a Whole Story: The Psychosocial Implications of Adopted Women's Experiences of Finding Their Biological Fathers in Adulthood', published as a lead article in the journal *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*. She is Associate Research Fellow in the Department of Psychosocial Studies, Birkbeck, University of London, UK.

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ADOPTED WOMEN AND BIOLOGICAL FATHERS

Re-imagining Stories of Origin and Trauma

Elizabeth Hughes

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

PREFACE

Like a lot of children growing up, I lived in a dream world of fairy tales and magic. I am told that the first word I said as a baby was 'light' and that I enjoyed spending time in isolation in the darkness – creating dens and hiding camps. I talked and wrote about the sky, the planets and the moon, and dreamt of living alone in a tree house. I drew pictures of people and wrote stories, imagining lives beyond life and questioning where people came from before they were born and where they went after they died.

I do not remember the first moment I was told that I was adopted. Just as I knew my name and I knew where I lived, I was aware that I was adopted. As the only adopted member of the family, my father told me God had chosen me specially, and I believed him.

I was raised in a haunted house – haunted by the children who had died before I was adopted and the fantasy children I communicated with when I was alone. I had older, living siblings, but we never talked about the ghosts. My mother was usually working, and my father had left. Even when she was present, my mother seemed to occupy a distant world, far away from my own. I envisaged that world as colourless – the adult world of responsibility and pain – and it seemed alien. Often weary and depressed, my mother's melancholia left an eerie sense of absence in her being, and I imagined that she was trapped in No-Man's Land with the missing children and the other ghosts. I was both fearful of and inquisitive about that adult world. If it was a void, I wanted to fill it with my own magical power to make everything better. I was drawn to this unknown world just as I was enticed by the darkness and everything it entailed – secrets hidden in obscure places, memories of another time and space swept under the carpet or repressed and stuffed into cupboards. Anything that was nameless or unreachable fascinated me. I longed to discover it and to conquer it, but I could not find a way in.

Linked to this were questions about my own origins: where did I come from? What was my purpose in life? And where do we go, or return to, in the after-life?

One rainy afternoon when nobody was at home, I searched in my mother's bedroom for clues about this underworld place beyond my understanding. And there at the back of a cupboard, I found two faded photographs hidden away, with the names Paddy and Mary written

on the back in black ink. I recognised myself in these images straight away and immediately felt ashamed. Paddy and Mary, my biological parents, had now been unearthed.

I imagined hearing the key in the door and fearing my mother's reaction as she caught me looking in the places I was not supposed to look. And I imagined these two teenagers, Paddy and Mary, and how they would react if they knew I had found them. I gazed at them both for a while, taking in the expressions on their faces, the youthfulness of their eyes and the shape of their hands. They were not together in the pictures. I wondered what had kept them apart. And then I buried them again and quickly shut my mother's door, repentant and unsettled by what I had found.

I tried to forget about what I had seen, but the seeds of curiosity had been sewn and I began returning to the place where Paddy and Mary hid whenever the house was empty.

With their names and faces now lodged in my mind, I could visualise who they were and how they lived. Something about those images disappointed me. Perhaps it was because they appeared too young and too ordinary, and I wanted them to be timeless and special. Or perhaps it was because they had been entombed in my mother's private cupboard, and I wanted them for myself. Either way, finding them meant that I could take power over them. They belonged to me, even if I did not belong to them, and I could invent them through the language of familiar fairy tales and mythology.

Several years went by before I found the real figures behind the images. Without knowledge about the 'truth' of who they were, I could construct my own truth, and the narratives I created changed from day to day.

The freedom to create different versions of them (and myself) was therefore organised around what I could and could not see. I could see I had his eyes and her hands, but the rest I could only fill in by imagining. The story of my origins and the images of Mary and Paddy then came to represent fantasy objects of excessive investment. I did not speak about them, for keeping them secret meant that they could remain inside me, my own creators and my own creations.

But as time passed it seemed that it might be running out. Doctors asked whether there was a family history of illness and, although I had many stories to tell about what I thought I was and who I thought they were, I could not give answers for that.

And so, on another rainy afternoon, a long time after I had first found 'them', I approached a nun at the adoption agency to ask for more clues. I recall the shame I felt as I told her the half-truth about my predicament. I let her know about the doctor's request but not about the fantasies that had been haunting me. She went away and returned with a shoebox containing letters Mary had written to me as well as more recent photographs. The story she told me was radically different to any of the stories I had told myself about her. She suddenly had a life, and a mind, of her own. The abrupt death of my fantasies about her marked a disjunction between who I thought she was or who I thought I was, and what I could say about my position within a world that had suddenly been turned inside out.

But there was still nothing about Paddy; nothing except a hand-written line saying simply that 'he was troubled'. On my birth certificate, an empty space had been left next to the word 'Father', and this gap represented the void I had long been trying to triumph over. The image of Paddy now embodying the final unknown, I set out to find him.

INTRODUCTION

'The very terms by which we give an account, by which we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and to others, are not of our making.'

(Butler, 2005, p. 21)

What does it mean for adopted women to meet their biological fathers for the first time in adulthood? The female adoptee is the figure of a certain ambiguity, discursively constituted by early loss and the desire to return to maternal roots. The original mother symbolises the site of traumatic separation, of primary attachment and imagined wholeness. Adoptee subjectivity is then largely understood through the lens of the 'primal wound,' (Verrier, 1993), a prevailing theory that positions adoptees as victims and reunion as a pathway to healing. Indeed Verrier's (1993) book, *The Primal Wound* is popularly known in the field as 'the adoptees' bible', and promoted by the Post Adoption Centre and British Association for Adoption and Fostering in the United Kingdom, outlining the model of adoptee trauma. But whereas adoptees are constituted as being submerged in the loss and subsequent fantasy of the biological mother, the daughter–father relationship is positioned outside of reunion discourse, eclipsed by the elemental and naturalised infant–maternal bond. To imagine the function of the biological father is to pave the way for a discussion about this under-researched subject.

Opening a space for thinking about the role of the discursively neglected biological father, this book exposes the enigmatic dimensions of this figure and how telling the relational story of 'reconciliation' might be used to complicate wider categories of subjective completeness, belonging and truth. Working within a psychosocial framework affirms the need to recognise the intersubjective current that surrounds people and the relationality between the psychic, individual or personal sphere, and that of the social. The prevailing origins story and interconnected

notion of 'reunion' as event are dismantled, revealing just how varied and complex female adoptees' experiences of finding their biological fathers in adulthood can be. This book takes as its focus the narratives of 14 adopted women and my own partly fictionalised story of the experience of birth father reunion in an attempt to dissect the ways in which we understand adoptive female subjectivity through a psychosocial lens. The primal wound discourse (Verrier, 1993), prevalent in North American and European adoption psychology, is laid bare and dismantled, opening up a debate for re-imagining adoptee subjectivity beyond narratives of trauma and origins.

By bringing the biological father into focus and critiquing the discourses – the written or spoken communication – that exclude this 'shadowy' figure, this book attempts to subvert the culturally normative unifying system of the mother-child bond, creating a space for thinking about what the biological father might represent and how his role in relation to adoptive female subjects may be understood. In exposing the naturalising assumptions surrounding the mother-child dyad, the work cuts through foundational representations, asking why the biological father's position and the influence he might have on shaping gendered subjectivities has so widely been neglected. Linking together these different threads, the book takes an unfixed position on adopted women's reunion experiences, opening out new debates and possibilities.

Due to the absence of the biological father figure in adoption discourse, there are a number of questions which make the daughter–father reunion a critical theme for consideration. Keeping in mind my argument that the primal wound model of psychic trauma constitutes an explicit paradigm of adoptee subjectivity, multiple issues are raised about the function these women's stories perform.

First, they raise the possibility of subtly subverting the powerful representations of the 'maternal instinct' and naturalisation of 'mother love' and introduce themes around unconventional gendering of the father.

Second, the interviews generate questions about the adoptee's pursuit of personal truth, gendered fantasies of returning to one's origins and finding completeness through the father.

Third, the narratives engage with various other themes such as eroticism and desire, which subtly dismantle the canonical model of abandonment trauma and the need to return to a position of 'wholeness' with the mother.

But added to this, many of the women still tell stories of their fathers as both central and erased, hapless men controlled by women. This reproduces the cultural narratives of abandoned girls found in fairy tales such as Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty and Snow White, in which maternal figures are framed as wicked and invasive and the father as idealised saviour. In this way, the biological father might be constituted as an object of desire, both for his erotic appeal and for the protective function he potentially embodies. And finally, the stories produce questions about the complexities of cultural and familial politics in respect to the constitution of selfhood, signifying the fluidity of reunion as not just a singular event, as the word implies, but also a relation that is open-ended and complex, difficult to restrain or

pin down. Challenging the narrative of healing trauma and returning to "'whole-ness'", the women's stories put into question its principal premise that there *is* an essential self to be recovered. In this sense, I argue that narratives such as these throw notions of prevailing truths into question and can therefore be used to emancipate marginalised or pathologised subjects from the reductive discourses that constrain them, giving them voice and offering up new forms of subjectivity.

Why daughters and biological fathers?

The biological father has historically occupied an enigmatic place in adoption dis-course. Unpredictable and even perhaps threatening, he remains outside the norm in relation to what gets said about the adoptee and her access to genealogical knowledge. In the UK, the 1972 Houghton Committee made recommendations for adoptees to be given access to their original birth certificates. However, due to a lack of legislation, much information was either too limited or had never been recorded in the first place. This is particularly the case for fathers, with far more attention being paid to the role of biological mothers. As such, the technique of writing him into the discourse might dislodge the notion that adoptees depend only on their biological mothers in order to become coherent and complete sub-jects, opening up the field for reformulating and rethinking this dynamic.

   This work is drawn from personal experience, and as a woman and a feminist I want to home in on the particular reverberations and reflections of women to explore how these traces might resonate with my own. In weaving together the stories of adopted women who have met their biological fathers in adulthood and including myself as a subject, I ask how perceptions of this encounter have shaped the adoptive female's subjectivity. Betty Jean Lifton's conception of the adopted self has had the virtue of conferring meaning onto a wide range of life experiences such as the notion of the 'mothered/motherless self', the problem of a fractious identity and the strive towards achieving 'wholeness'. In her book *Journey of the Adopted Self*, a chapter entitled 'The Fathered/Fatherless Self' is devoted to the idea of the adoptee's search for the lost father. In this rare focus on the biological father's role, she writes that 'a child who grows up without the father who gave him life will feel abandoned and unprotected in the world' (Lifton, 1994, p. 191). And she draws parallels between the adoptee's search for the 'lost father' and the subjective need for reconciliation or the creation of self. She also draws a distinction between the experiences of daughters and sons, citing the poetry of Stanley Kunitz, 'the songs of daughters are different from that of sons' (Lifton, 1994, p. 191). She puts these differences down to the biological father-son's shared masculinity, theoris-ing that the adoptee perceives the adoptive father as 'asexual (infertile), henpecked (dominated, like the children, by his wife), and tied down (by the family), while the birth father, who lacks the adoptive father's deficiencies is perceived as virile (he produced a child), macho (sexual) and a free spirit (he refused to be tied down)' (p. 192). At its core, the biological–father encounter is constituted as an opportunity for renewal and self-discovery, as Lifton writes: 'Just as Athena sprang into being

from the head of Zeus, so the adoptee may hope to achieve some kind of rebirth through the father.' (p. 192)

Lifton's radical claim that the biological father is seen as virile, macho and free-spirited may go some way towards explaining the differences in constructions of the son's and daughter's experiences, although these are not elaborated on further. The picture she paints of fatherhood as a fixed character gendered role is unconvincing and problematic. But aligning with normative representations of masculinity, one might suppose that father-son relationships are charged with similar feeling and emotion to mother-daughter relationships, and there is some support for this notion in the proliferation of wider discourses on the theme. Films such as Sokurov's (2003) *Father and Son* and the more recent *The Place Beyond the Pines* (Cianfrance, 2012) enact ideas about how fathers shape their sons' subjectivities and identifications, but locating these portrayals within the adoption field is more difficult. Fitting the focus of the current study, Nola Passmore and Heather Chipuer carried out research in 2009 on 'Female Adoptees' Perceptions of Contact with their Birth Fathers', but rather than interrogate the issues theoretically or mark out the specificities of the daughter–father link, the study contents itself with a positivist empirical analysis of the 'satisfactions and dissatisfactions with the process', concluding rather conventionally that 'successful reunions' were dependent on, among other things, the biological fathers' attributes and behaviour. In this sense Passmore and Chipuer's investigation exposes the lack of data on biological fathers but does not go further in probing questions about gendered identity or notions of belonging to origins.

Returning to the question: 'Why Daughters?', one might suppose that there are differences in the ways in which adoptive sons and daughters forge encounters with their biological fathers based on gendered identifications, fantasies and expectations, but I want to resist making fixed claims and leave this open to interpretation. Berebitsky pointedly contends that 'the history of adoption . . . is necessarily a history of women' (Berebitsky, 2000, p. 9). Although she is referring here specifically to the issue of adoptive and biological motherhood, it is possible to craft a new vision as to what this remark might entail: a history of adoption that has overlooked the role of fathers. Rather than diagnose 'the problem' of adoptive female subject positions, it is useful to expose the tensions surrounding the ways in which they have been organised – as wounded and traumatised subjects – and complicate these constructs by asking how they play out in reunion stories with the biological father, thus opening a space for multiplicity.

If the primal wound discourse has brought into being a notion that there exists an essential 'adoptive self' to be recovered when one undergoes the process of healing from trauma, something similar can be said about the ways in which the concept of a stable, natural and coherent family has been presented in adoption work. The normative family form, bound together through biological ties, often appears in this discourse as unproblematic. Just as the adoptive subject might eventually uncover a 'true' self in the experience of reunion with her biological parents, the question of a core, integrated family that has not come apart through separation

appears transparently self-evident. Yet it belongs in a particular cultural and temporal context related to hegemonic western discourses of biological determinism. In 1959, Fortes commented that, 'Kinship, being an irreducible factor in social structure has an axiomatic validity' (Barnes, 2006, p. 326). Since then, however, profound challenges have been directed toward the idea that there exists a bounded, fundamental family form, and the notion of kinship system, 'as an isolable structure of sentiments, norms, or categorical distinctions' (Geertz and Geertz, 1975, p. 156) has been overturned.

What is significant with respect to adoption discourse, however, is the nostalgia for the nuclear family form and the all-encompassing maternal bond which goes largely unchallenged and seemingly unnoticed. If we think about the adoption reunion not as an individualised, private practice experienced by two or more psychically wounded subjects craving reconciliation, but as a culturally and politically located activity – an image of an isolable kinship structure of sentiments and norms (Geertz and Geertz, 1975, p. 156) – something emerges which is neither 'natural' or 'whole', but rather discursively invented. Thus, when Gary Coles – whose work on biological fathers I will be referring to in more detail later – contends that 'No one who has an adoption experience emerges unscathed. It is the degree to which each person admits to and addresses the impact of adoption on their life that makes the difference' (Coles, 2012, p. 1), what is being implied is that something in the origin of the subject and biological kin existed which provided a structure of wholeness. The biological parents and child they produced were all 'in one piece' until they separated. The adoptee's decision to find his or her biological parents may thus be framed as a practice of working through the trauma that came about in the founding disconnection. Indeed, some researchers have suggested that adoptive children may be haunted by incipient memories of being in utero and then being 'abandoned' (Piontelli, 1992). The historical contingency of this idealisation of the normative family form is obscured by the representation of reunion as a regime of truth. The adoptive subject is set up to engage in a process of becoming free and complete. It is this essential notion of 'homecoming' and totality which demands constant interrogation.

One way of critiquing this idea of homecoming might be to frame it within the radically anti-essentialist family discourse alluded to above. The ideal of the whole and integral family structure comes apart when its instabilities are exposed. Assertions such as Needham's (1971) idea that 'there is no such thing as kinship, and it follows that there can be no such thing as kinship theory' (Barnes, 2006, p. 326) cluster around the theme of family unity, emphasising its flaws. But this counter-argument is in itself too contentious since what adoption discourse signifies is that kinship does exist and is important, but the ground on which it is structured is not set in stone. This raises issues about what it means to belong to a family, in that the word 'family' somehow exceeds itself, symbolising something more than just the name for our biological lineage. Turning toward the overlooked issue of the adoptive daughter–biological father relationship creates a space for problematising these kinship relations and finding new meaning in their production.

Truth-telling and writing the self: Foucault and the constitution of subjectivity

Telling stories of adopted women's experiences of finding their fathers in adulthood involves making meanings and re-writing the narratives that shape our lives. In many ways, to give an account of the other is to write an autobiography. Writing my adoption reunion story is a way of accounting for my own subject position, but questions arise as to how best to critically represent the self and other through writing. How do we address issues of the personal and self-reflexivity? How do we work with tensions between the inner and outer worlds?

Wanda Pillow offers a way into the debate by identifying four prevailing tenors in the use of reflexivity: 'reflexivity as recognition of self, reflexivity as recognition of other, reflexivity as truth, and reflexivity as transcendence' (Pillow, 2003, p. 175). But the binary that places the researcher in opposition to the researched is always a difficult conflict to manage. Confronted with the chasm between the reflexive subject and the empirical world, we might argue that the trend towards confessional self-narratives in the form of Internet blogs and autobiographies has opened a space for bridging that gap and exploring the ways in which we constitute our subjectivities. Patrycja Polczyk (2012) attempted to address the dualistic problem of researcher and researched by voicing her personal experience, arguing that 'by explicitly bringing the researcher's own experiences and emotions into the ethnographic process, [this work] points to the socio-cultural embeddedness of all human and social research because fundamentally, no researcher lives outside of social reality' (Polczyk, 2012, pp. 3–4).

Emphasising the socio-cultural embeddedness of subjectivity can help us move away from the reductive techniques of locating subjects within discourses that essentialise, constrain and limit them, recognising instead that subjects are fluid, always politically produced and historically contingent. But this is not easy. As Hook (2001) indicates, 'the effect of discursive practices is to make it virtually impossible to think outside of them; to be outside of them is, by definition, to be mad, to be beyond comprehension and therefore reason' (Hook, 2001, p. 2). It seems as though, in an attempt to speak of oneself – make the self visible, or as Butler puts it, 'return to self' (Butler, p. 23) – one is repeatedly confronted with the impossibility of the narrating 'I'. There is no 'staying inside' the 'I'; the 'I' is always other to itself. 'I am compelled and comported *outside myself*; I find that the only way to know myself is precisely through a mediation that takes place outside of me, exterior to me, in a convention or a norm that I did not make, in which I cannot discern myself as an author or an agent of its making' (Butler, p. 23).

If 'true' autobiography cannot be written, this draws attention to the limits or impossibility of giving a true representation of the other. Nevertheless, critical self-reflexivity is a growing field. Foregrounding the position of the author, the notion of bringing the researcher's own story into focus is seen as a method of addressing the boundaries between self and other and thus working more transparently with narratives and life histories. Muncey (2010) understands personal experience of a