

The Emotional Experience of Adoption

a psychoanalytic perspective



Edited by Debbie Hindle and Graham Shulman

The Emotional Experience of Adoption

Adoption is an extremely complex and emotionally demanding process for all those involved. This book explores the emotional experience of adoption from a psychoanalytic perspective, and demonstrates how psychoanalytic understanding and treatment can contribute to thinking about and working with adopted children and their families.

Drawing on psychoanalytic, attachment and child development theory, and detailed in-depth clinical case discussion, *The Emotional Experience of Adoption* explores issues such as:

- the emotional experience of children placed for adoption, and how this both shapes and is shaped by unconscious processes in the child's inner world
- how psychoanalytic child psychotherapy can help as a distinctive source of understanding and as a treatment for children who are either in the process of being adopted or already adopted
- how such understanding can inform planning and decision making amongst professionals and carers.

The Emotional Experience of Adoption explains and accounts for the emotional and psychological complexities involved for the children, parents and professionals in adoption. It will be of interest and relevance to anyone involved at a personal level in the adoption process or professionals working in the fields of adoption, social work, child mental health, foster care and family support.

Debbie Hindle is Head of the Clinical Training in Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy at the Scottish Institute of Human Relations, and also works in the Looked After and Accommodated Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service in Glasgow.

Graham Shulman is a consultant child and adolescent psychotherapist who currently works in NHS Lanarkshire. He was until recently Senior Tutor for the Clinical Training in Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy and Organising Tutor for the Therapeutic Skills with Children and Young People Course at the Scottish Institute of Human Relations. He is Joint Editor of the *Journal of Child Psychotherapy*.

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and Graham Shulman**

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Foreword

Adoption is a theme of both universal interest and profound and unusual particularity. In this book, Hans Christian Andersen's tale of *Thumbelina* and the story of Heathcliff in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, which appear in the first and final chapters, attest to the former. In between, we are offered a series of rich, moving, and often very painful stories arising from therapeutic engagements with adopted children and their families by some of the most experienced and thoughtful practitioners working in this field.

Recent developments in UK government policy with respect to adoption and children in public care embody the difficulty, or perhaps the impossibility, of ever properly bridging the gap between these polarities of the universal and the particular when it comes to adoption. Policies advocating the removal of barriers to opportunity for children in care or placed for adoption are laudable in their intentions, but tend to be silent on the complex and unique emotional realities facing these children and young people, and their carers. This book is a courageous and important contribution to redressing this balance.

The emotional realities of abuse, neglect and abandonment experienced by so many of the children who are placed for adoption are almost unthinkable painful. Yet the task of trying to live lives as 'ordinary' as possible in the face of such experiences, and of helping adoptive families integrate this 'unthinkability' is *the* crucial contribution that therapists and social workers can make in this field. The need to link understanding of inner and outer world experience in this work requires therapists who can move creatively 'beyond the consulting room', and social workers who can engage with the emotional complexity of inner worlds. One of the great strengths of this book is that it shows these two professions working together at their best to support what John Simmonds calls an 'environmental therapy' – adoption.

The state of mind that is quietly but insistently advocated here is a kind of unflinching capacity to bear emotional pain. As Lisa Miller writes in her chapter, 'We have no wish to believe it. Our minds shy away from thoughts of a harmless baby's pain ... Social workers and adoption workers do their best in most cases to prepare prospective parents for the potential difficult times as they receive a small child into their family. Yet it remains hard to remember that the years before adoption do not go away and that the problems may not be temporary'. Because

we 'have no wish to believe it' adoption practice and policy is often subtly undermined by the need to believe the opposite – that a clean slate, a new start, a happy ending can be magically produced. The structure of fantasy that pervades adoption work is therefore a recurring theme in these pages. Grasping the power of such fantasies is part of the 'self-knowledge' we need, but it is also what makes sense of the universality that is inscribed in each unique and particular story of adoption.

I am privileged to have been asked to write the foreword to this book. Although replete with the accumulated experience and wisdom of the authors, it is also highly accessible. Everyone who takes the time to read it will learn much, and their appreciation of the demands and rewards of adoption and the supporting work of professionals in the field will be considerably deepened.

Andrew Cooper
Professor of Social Work, the Tavistock Clinic and
University of East London

Preamble

Debbie Hindle

Lives and stories are enmeshed in a complex interweaving of disparate elements which can never be summed up as a totality but only ever grasped in partial and transitory ways.

(Phil Cohen 1995: 3)

‘Are you adopted?’ asked a 9-year-old girl. After a brief pause, she added that she was. She said she had three families and named each one in turn – her birth family, her foster family and her adoptive family. She went on to tell me what being adopted meant – that she would stay with her adoptive family – ‘it’s a forever family, no matter what’.

All this took place in the first few minutes of our meeting to think about whether ongoing psychotherapy could be helpful to this young girl. I took up her question to me, wondering if she thought that *only* if I too had been adopted would I know what it was like for her. Her description of her three families encompasses so many of the issues that arise for children who have been adopted – likeness and difference, discontinuity, transitions and loss, as well as the hope of something sustaining and enduring. But in spite of her explanation and apparent understanding, I was left with a question about what it meant to her to be adopted and whether she and I together could begin to apprehend the emotional complexity of her experience.

This vignette was one of many starting points for the inception of this book. Not long before this, Graham Shulman and I had begun working together as Senior Tutor and Organising Tutor for the clinical training in child psychotherapy at the Scottish Institute of Human Relations. Students on the training came from Scotland, Northern England and Northern Ireland and in their respective work settings, undertook a range of clinical work, under supervision, with children, young people and their parents. During this time, in our teaching and training and in our own clinical work, we were struck by the number of primarily late-placed adopted children who had been referred to child and adolescent mental health services and other agencies where consultation, family work or psychotherapy was being offered. This led to many hours of reading and reflection as we thought about and tried to understand the very particular issues and dilemmas that arose for these children and their adoptive parents.

Two books were influential in the genesis of this book. The first was *After Adoption: Working with Adoptive Families*, edited by Rena Phillips and Emma McWilliam and published by the British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering in 1996. Taken together, this wide-ranging selection of papers promoted the importance of and need for comprehensive post-adoption services that would be sensitive and responsive to the needs of adopted children and their families. They advocated the importance of listening to the views and experiences of adoptive families, the need for access to a range of different approaches to meet different circumstances, perhaps at different times, and what they described as the ‘twin imperatives’ – continuity of service and a co-ordinated approach to service provision. In her chapter on ‘Psychotherapy’, Mary Boston raised a question that we found resonated with our ongoing thinking: ‘Why is it that good parenting and loving care are not always enough to make up for these early deprivations, and why do some adopted children appear to be doing their best to repeat the pattern of their lives and to cause further disruption of placement?’ But how this question is addressed in relation to the provision of therapeutic post-adoption services varies. Our aim in bringing together the chapters in this book has been not to promote a particular treatment modality, but to understand what can be learned from clinical work about the complexity of an adopted child’s inner world and how this may impact on and reverberate with the inner worlds of their adoptive parents.

The second book that has most closely fitted with our proposed theme is *The Dynamics of Adoption: Social and Personal Perspective*, edited by A. Treacher and I. Katz and published by Jessica Kingsley in 2000. This book arose from the work of the Centre for Adoption and Identity Studies at the University of East London and the Tavistock Clinic. It is informed by psychoanalytic theory and highlights the complexity of the adoption experience for all those involved in the adoption process – the birth parents, the adoptee, the adoptive parents and the professional networks involved. Throughout this book, several themes emerge and re-emerge – the importance of a sense of personal narrative, the capacity to find meaning in the context of relationships, and the necessity of apprehending, however intangible, a sense of truth. While the book covers a wide range of issues and combines moving personal accounts with chapters from professionals, no direct work with children or young people is described.

These two books prompted us to consider whether there were aspects of clinical work with children, adolescents and their families, already published in different journals which could be brought together with newly written material and could extend and inform what has previously been written. It is our view that a psychoanalytic perspective provides a distinctive source of understanding. We believe that the detailed clinical work described in this book reflects the emotional and psychological complexities – for the child, parents and professionals – involved in becoming an adoptive family, and the need to take such complexities into account.

There are many issues that are not touched on or addressed in this book – open and kinship adoption, trans-racial and inter-country adoption, among others. Sadly, space has prevented us from exploring the importance of sibling

relationships to children who have been separated from their families of origin and the many different ramifications of this. However, we are firmly of the view that a psychoanalytic perspective has a useful contribution to make in the field of adoption. As Brodzinsky *et al.* (1998: 13) write: 'Despite the absence of strong empirical support for many of the psychodynamic assumptions regarding adoption, the theory continues to inform clinical and casework practice with adoptees, adoptive parents and birth parents in very meaningful ways.'

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- Brodzinsky, D., Smith, D. and Brodzinsky, A. (1998) *Children's Adjustment to Adoption: Developmental and Clinical Issues*, London: Sage Publications.
- Cohen, P. (1995) *Frameworks for a Study of Adoptive Identities*, Working Paper no. 1, London: University of East London and Centre for Adoption and Identity Studies.

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We are particularly grateful to Robert Fleming, Martin Lyon and Marta Vaciago Smith for the time they gave to reading and commenting on various drafts of chapters. Their responses were supportive and also challenging and helped to keep us focused and to task.

Special thanks must be given to John Simmonds, who encouraged us to continue at the very points when we felt most uncertain and reminded us of the importance of drawing on psychoanalytic thinking in seeking meaning and in grappling with difficult or uncomfortable insights. We are also appreciative of the time that Andrew Cooper gave to reading the text and writing the foreword to this book.

None of this could have been undertaken without the support of our partners, Moira Shulman and Ken Ross. Ken spent many hours formatting, proofreading, cross-referencing, keeping track of e-mails, various versions of the papers sent and generally keeping the whole project in order. Without his help in the preparation of the manuscript, it would have been impossible for us to have managed all the organisation that editing a book like this requires.

Finally, it would have been impossible for this book to have been written if it had not been for the courage and commitment of the adoptive children and their families, who have engaged in the challenging struggle to understand and make sense of their lives and relationships.

Permissions

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Note on confidentiality

Throughout the book, all names of persons referred to have been changed and every effort has been made to disguise their identity, but not in ways that change the meaning of the clinical material.

Note on terminology

The spelling of fantasy with 'f' and phantasy with 'ph' have been used to distinguish between those which are conscious and those which are unconscious.

Introduction

Debbie Hindle and Graham Shulman

... the unseen forces which shape our emotional responses through life, are ... the patterns of emotional experience with other people, most powerfully set up in infancy. These patterns are not immutable but ... once established are hard to break.

(Gerhardt 2004)

Adoption is profoundly complex. It encompasses issues of identity and sense of self, the question of origins and the sense of belonging, the experience of loss and the capacity to form new attachment relationships. These are in turn intimately linked with attachment relationships and emotional life and development from infancy. Adoption offers the possibility of a new beginning and of regeneration, but it also contains the potential for disappointment, destruction and at its worst psychological disaster; psychologically, adoption is therefore a highly charged – one might say ‘supercharged’ – process. It is a field in which diverse realms of individual experience and society interact. It spans the inner and outer worlds in particularly complicated ways. It involves the internal worlds of the birth family and adoptive child and family; the themes of parental sexuality, procreation or infertility; the professional networks around looked after children and around adoption and adoptive families; the law and the legal system; social and cultural values and beliefs; ideology; and even myth. As a psychological field, adoption thus involves *a distinctive constellation of emotional forces*.

Our aim in this book is to consider the emotional complexities of adoption, and how these affect the experience and dynamics of adoption for the child, adoptive parents and professional system. We believe that a psychoanalytic perspective – with its focus on the inner world, and on emotional and unconscious processes – can contribute to the thinking, planning and practice of all those involved in adoption. It goes without saying that this is one perspective amongst many, and we hope that readers will find their own applications and ways of making meaningful links according to their experience and place in the adoption process. We also believe the book has implications for policy makers, in terms of highlighting the need for post-adoption therapeutic services.

Changes in patterns of adoption

Triseliotis *et al.* (1997) outlined five periods of adoption in the Western tradition from ancient to modern times. Only in the second period, in the latter part of the nineteenth century (in the United States) and the early part of the twentieth century (in the United Kingdom) was adoption legalised as we know it today. Since the Second World War, there have been significant changes in the patterns of adoption coinciding with medical advances, social changes and changing societal attitudes. These include: the availability of contraception and the legalisation of abortion, the changes in the composition and types of family structures, and changing attitudes towards illegitimacy. Adoption has become one of many different ways of being a family and of raising children.

The third period of adoption came to be known as the era of the 'perfect baby' for the 'perfect couple' (Triseliotis *et al.*, 1997: 7) and was characterised by the matching of 'healthy' infants (under one year of age) with families seeking to raise a child as their own. From the late 1960s and early 1970s (the fourth period) fewer infants were 'relinquished' for adoption, while simultaneously, more children were received into care, many from backgrounds of abuse and neglect. Along with these children, placed in foster or residential care, there were also an increasing number of children with special needs, children with mental or physical disabilities, children from different race or ethnic backgrounds or groups of siblings who were 'hard to place'. An increasing number of children were living a life in care that was too unstable and uncertain and did not provide them with the security and sense of belonging to a family that could meet their lifelong needs. In this period in the evolution of adoption, there was a trend towards a more child-centred approach where the primary objective is the long-term welfare of the children placed for adoption.

A fifth period, however, emerged in the latter part of the twentieth century with the increase in inter-country adoption and acceptance of a wider range of parents and families available to adopt children (including single parents, same sex parents, re-constituted families, as well as extended family members). These latter two trends have taken adoption into an often turbulent public debate and have highlighted the at times competing needs of adults seeking to adopt a child and the needs of children. Throughout all these phases, there has also been a growing awareness of the importance of knowing one's origins and heritage. Now embedded in good adoption practice, there is an increasing openness about adoption and an understanding of the significance of this with regard to a sense of identity.

Many of the children being adopted from care will have been cared for and have relationships with their birth parents, know other members of their birth families and may have formed close relationships with previous foster parents and their extended families. For these children, being adopted needs to be set against a recognition that the child is bringing with them experience, memories and relationships that have been formative and developmentally significant. Watson (1994) in Triseliotis *et al.* (1997: 2) provides a definition of adoption that captures

the continuing role of the child's biological family in the context of a child's adoptive family:

Adoption is a means of meeting the developmental needs of a child by legally transferring ongoing parental responsibility from birth parents to adoptive parents, recognising that in the process we have created a new kinship network that forever links these two families together through the child who is shared by them both. This kinship network may also include significant other families, both formal and informal, that have been part of the child's experience.

In England, the Prime Minister's Review of Adoption (PIU, 2000) provided an impetus to this new landscape of adoption by modernising the legal, policy and practice framework and increasing the number of children placed for adoption. To this end, local authorities are encouraged to include adoption as a permanency planning option and to ensure that where it is in the child's best interests adoption is pursued. Along with the increased numbers of children from a wider age range and varied circumstances, there has also been a recognition of the need for the provision of adoption support services. The complexity of children's needs, the lifelong implications of adoption and the three parties to adoption – child, birth parents and adoptive families – together with the evidence from research have all highlighted the fact that family making through adoption is a complex and challenging process. It is recognised that some families need to access adoption sensitive services at different points in the adoption process and family life cycle. Local authorities are required to set in place a range of services, to work in partnership with universal services, such as health or education or to commission services from specialist providers. While the provision of services post-adoption are not comprehensive, the framework and principles supporting the importance of ongoing services for all those affected by adoption is formally acknowledged.

This book is not an attempt to address systematically the whole range of issues in relation to adoption, or to produce a comprehensive account of psychoanalytic writings about and approaches to adoption. Our aim is a more modest one: to promote interest in, and curiosity about, the potential applications of a psychoanalytic perspective to the adoption process, and its relevance to the experience of adoption, amongst a wider audience than those who might access articles in professional journals. Although a number of articles on adoption using a psychoanalytic framework have been published in journals, and some chapters in books, these are scattered and some are not easily accessible. We wished to gather together a selection of these for publication in book form, combined with a number of contributions that we have invited for the book.

We should stress from the outset that the central theme of this book is not the question of what type of therapeutic help or support adoptive children and families need or should be given, though consideration of the emotional complexities of adoption certainly has implications for this question, and we do aim to convey what psychoanalytic child psychotherapy in particular can offer. However, it is not

our purpose to advocate a single approach to supportive or clinical interventions for adoptive children and their families, and indeed we would be wary of any approach presented as ‘the’ appropriate model of intervention. In our experience, as in all areas, the therapeutic or supportive input suited to a given child or family depends on many complicated factors, and an approach that is helpful for one child or family may not be for another. In short, we aim to promote not a particular way of working but *a way of thinking*.

The emotional complexities of adoption

The emotional tasks and challenges for the adopted child are formidable. Equally, so are the emotional tasks and challenges for adoptive parents. We feel this cannot be overstated. Indeed, one of the points we wish to highlight is the way in which failure to sufficiently acknowledge or understand the former can lead at times to failure to adequately recognise the latter. When this occurs, at best it may result in unanticipated or misconstrued problems – problems which an adoptive family might be able to overcome either within their existing supportive framework or with additional input; at worst it may have psychologically disastrous consequences for all involved, with either the breakdown of an adoptive placement – sometimes within days or weeks – or a chronic or cyclical situation of severe difficulties and stresses within the family.

There has been an increasing awareness of the impact of early experience on later development and relationships. At the same time, the way in which complex emotional difficulties are manifested can sometimes be hard to identify or make sense of (see Chapter 17). The curious fact is that while there is widespread professional and public recognition of the general nature and scale of the emotional challenges for adoptive child and parents, we regularly continue to hear of cases where there have been significant difficulties for those involved in giving adequate attention and thought to the *specific* nature and severity of the emotional challenges for a given child and family. It is not realistic or possible to avoid or bypass difficulties, and this is not the aim; however, we believe a process which is mindful of, and attentive to, the nature and scale of emotional challenges and complexities for an individual baby or child and their adoptive family, is both possible and desirable.

The emotional complexity for the adopted child of forming attachments to new parents while *simultaneously* being faced with the task of mourning the loss in relation to birth parents (and often other carers) is well recognised and has been extensively written about. This is also true for the parallel, though not identical, situation for adoptive parents who have the task of forming a new relationship with, and becoming new parents for their adopted child, while simultaneously being faced with or reminded of (consciously or otherwise) their own losses, whether in relation to having children or other past losses.

The adopted child experiences multiple losses, though the exact combination will naturally depend on the child’s individual history and the circumstances of the adoption: these include the loss of the birth mother or primary attachment

figure; the loss of the birth parents as carers; the loss of the birth family (however bad the actual circumstances might have been); the loss of foster carers or other family carers; the loss in relation to the discontinuity of the child's 'personal narrative' – the lack of the ordinary experience of a child's early history and development being known directly and held in mind by their primary attachment figures; the loss that may be involved in the painful recognition of what the child has missed in their early experience; and the loss associated with the reality that the adoptive parents may be less than the ideal parents the child might have hoped for or expected.

In addition, the adopted child will have in mind a version – more or less conscious – of what their birth mother and father felt about the loss of their child; this may be the product of imaginative conjecture, or what the child has been told, or a combination of the two. However it is arrived at, it is likely to have a significant influence on the adopted child's sense of self and self-image; that is, whether the child imagines the birth mother and father felt sadness at the loss of their child, or relief, or indifference, or – worst of all – felt glad to be rid of them. This question clearly links with – though it is not the sole determinant of – the adopted child's inner sense of worth and of being valued.

An individual child's inner capacity to process and bear disturbing and sometimes overwhelming feelings and anxieties connected with loss will always depend on the one hand on the capacity of the supportive environment and network around them to provide containment of these, and on the other hand on the child's inner resources, the balance of strengths and vulnerabilities of the child, and the child's temperament and capacity to make use of the support and help that are available. Particular problems arise when patterns of emotional response and interaction that have been laid down from infancy and the earliest years *seriously impair a child's ability to form and make use of relationships with new attachment figures and other adults*.

When this happens in the circumstances of an adopted child in an adoptive family, adoptive parents often find themselves in the perplexing and hurtful situation where their adopted child seems unable to respond to and make use of the ordinary parental love and care they have to offer. This can lead to a situation where adoptive parents feel hurt, rejected, incompetent, powerless, helpless and even guilty either because they feel their parenting is not ameliorating the child's underlying difficulties or disturbance, or because they feel responsible for the child's inability to form the kind of attachment to them that they had hoped for. A powerful sense of failure may ensue, though aspects of this may not be entirely conscious. *Molly Ludlam* has written about this issue in her chapter 'The longing to become a family: support for the parental couple'.

A further level of complexity involves the question of when losses are actually *felt* or recognised by the adopted child, and how they are experienced and worked through at different developmental stages and transitions. The already considerable challenges of different developmental stages – and transitions between these – are heightened for the adopted child by the additional issues in relation to adoption; at the same time, these developmental stages in turn revive or intensify issues of

adoption. An obvious example is that of adolescence and puberty: for instance, the ordinary challenges of puberty and emergent sexuality may for an adopted child be considerably more difficult to negotiate because they touch on painful issues such as the child's conception, their birth parents' relationship and so on, as well as the possible issue of infertility in adoptive parents. Developmental stages and transitions may present opportunities for adoption issues to be further worked through, but equally they may reveal a child's underlying profound lack of internal resources to manage these. Trying to disentangle how far an adopted child is struggling with developmental issues and how far they are struggling with adoption issues – for example, ordinary separation anxiety as against out-of-the-ordinary, catastrophic anxiety associated with the actual loss of the birth mother – and thus how to make sense of what the child is feeling, is an especially difficult task for child, parent and professional.

Key psychoanalytic concepts

Five key psychoanalytic concepts are central to the theme of this book. The first is the *inner world*. This has a more specific meaning than the notion of the 'inner life' of a person; here we are drawing on Klein's (1940) formulation of the inner world as in effect an internal 'theatre of the mind', peopled by 'characters' with relationships, and made up of scenarios, actions, events and qualities. Klein suggested that a baby's primitive 'versions' or internal representations of its mother and others, and of experience, are built up from the very beginning of post-natal life. The 'characters' in the inner world are based on significant figures in an individual's life – mother, father, siblings, grandparents and others.

However, a young baby's understanding of, and capacity to represent, experience in the mind are at a rudimentary stage of development, and lack the coherence and organisation of a mature mind: consequently the 'inner world' of people and events – with its foundations in early *pre-verbal* experience – is thought to be coloured and shaped partly by emotions and fantasies (the earliest workings of the 'imagination'). Furthermore, the earliest contents of the inner world are thought to be embedded in the 'deepest' layers of the mind, and may be only partly, or not at all, available to waking consciousness. It may be difficult for some to conceive of the mental life of young babies in this kind of way, but recent research has found evidence that even foetuses in the womb dream (Hopson, 1998), as do babies from birth onward, and this seems to be suggestive of some form of primitive, pre-verbal 'representational' mental life even from before birth.

In this psychoanalytic model of the inner world, later versions and internal representations of people and experiences – from childhood, adolescence and adulthood – do not supersede or erase earlier ones but co-exist in the mind, though they may vary in the degree to which we are conscious of them or have conscious access to them. These different internal representations from different stages of development may also vary in the degree to which they influence our perceptions and experience of people and situations in the present, as well as our everyday moods and states of mind. Where the earliest of these continue to exert a

significant or disproportionate influence on a person's mental life in later stages of development, this may have a serious and possibly profound effect on attachment and intimate relationships. It is for this reason that an awareness and understanding of an individual adopted child's inner world may be so important, particularly where trauma, abuse or neglect in infancy and early childhood have significantly influenced their earliest internal representations of people and experiences.

Freud (1914) ingeniously suggested that *what cannot be remembered gets repeated*. He argued that feelings and patterns of relating from infancy and very early childhood that are not accessible to conscious memory are repeated 'in action' in later relationships. Repetition in action, he suggests, is in effect a form of 'memory'. For Klein, this meant the enactment of 'internal scenarios' from the inner world of the past which may override living life in the present.

The second psychoanalytic concept central to this book is that of *psychic pain* (or 'mental pain'). Perhaps it would be more accurate to refer to this as a concept which psychoanalysis has formalised and elaborated, since literature and the arts through the ages contain many expressions of the idea of psychic pain, of which the following lines from Shakespeare are a superlative example:

... Better I were distract:
So should my thoughts be sever'd from my griefs
And woes by wrong imaginations lose
The knowledge of themselves.

(*King Lear*, IV.vi.: 278–81)

Psychoanalysis has in part been the systematic study of psychic pain, the ways in which the mind deals with psychic pain, and the impact of psychic pain on the development and growth of the mind, the personality and relationships. Meltzer and Harris (1976 [1994]), discussing mental pain in the context of families, raised the important and extremely useful question, 'Whose pain is this?' The answer to this question is not always clear or obvious when the emotional currents of two or more individuals converge. Meltzer and Harris (1976 [1994]: 389) thus suggest that, 'Study of mental pain requires not only definition of its quality and reference, but also of its distribution and source.'

We start from the assumption that psychic pain has a significant organising effect on the development of the mind and personality; that it may be partly or wholly unconscious; that the communication and containment of psychic pain is a primary – though by no means exclusive – function of relationships, beginning with the mother–infant relationship; and that psychic pain which is experienced as unbearable or overwhelming by an individual, family or wider system can have a disturbing or destructive effect on attachment and family relationships. This has obvious relevance to adopted children who have experienced severe neglect, trauma or abuse, and to the parenting of such children. It also has relevance to adoptive parents themselves, who often have their own painful and deep-seated issues of loss; here Meltzer's question 'Whose pain is this?' can be helpful in trying to sort out what feelings belong to whom and how the psychic pain of child

and parents can significantly affect interactions in attachment relationships. This phenomenon is not specific to adoptive child–parent relationships, but we would suggest that typically there is *a distinctive interaction and intensity of psychic pain for adoptive child and parents*.

The third psychoanalytic concept is *ambivalence*: this refers to feeling both love and hate toward the same person. Although hate is part of human nature, it is inherently painful and anxiety-provoking to have feelings of hate toward the person you most love, and this gives rise to an inner state of conflict and tension. In infancy, the primary object of love and hate is the mother or primary attachment figure. When a very young baby feels cared for, understood and loved by the mother, it will evoke intense loving feelings toward the mother; in contrast, when a very young baby feels pain, frustration or distress it will evoke equally intense opposite feelings towards the mother. From earliest infancy therefore, these opposite currents of feeling co-exist in the baby and are in dynamic relation to one another. Because the ‘constant *interaction* of love and hate’ starts in the first weeks or months of life, Klein (1937) saw this as the most fundamental and archaic dimension of emotional life. The integration of love and hate, and the capacity to hold these opposing feelings towards the same person, is for this reason a primary emotional and developmental task, and remains a challenge in relationships throughout life.

The fourth psychoanalytic concept is *splitting*. The state of inner conflict and tension arising from the co-existence of love and hate felt toward the same person, may be experienced as overwhelming or threatening, and can lead to the fear that hate will outweigh or destroy love. This can in turn give rise to unbearable anxiety or psychic pain. One unconscious response to this is known as ‘splitting’. This involves keeping very separate and far apart in the mind feelings of love and hate toward the same person; the function of this is partly to preserve the loving part of the self and to protect the object of love, and partly to avoid awareness of one’s ambivalent feelings toward one person because the pain and anxiety of such awareness is felt to be intolerable. Splitting as a defence against the pain of ‘love-and-hate’ is a primitive form of intra-psychic mental functioning which has its origins in infancy and the relationship to the mother or primary attachment figure, but it can occur at any stage of development and mental life, and can extend to other areas of experience. Moreover, the concept has been extended in its application to include inter-psychic processes; thus, splitting can be seen to occur within families, groups, agencies, professional networks or society in general, wherever there is an unconscious need or desire to keep ‘good’ and ‘bad’ aspects of the same person, situation or experience separate and far apart because integration of them is felt to be profoundly painful, discomforting and disturbing.

The fifth key psychoanalytic concept is Bion’s (1962) formulation about a type of knowledge (and learning) based on *truthfulness to emotional experience*. Bion conceptualised this in the context of relationships in terms of what he called the ‘K link’ between two people, where ‘K’ represents a particular kind of knowing based on emotional experience; in a relationship, ‘K’ involves ‘getting to know’ someone and ‘getting to be known’ by someone. These in turn involve being

concerned with the truth about the other person; for Bion this means being open and truthful to the emotional experience of knowing that person and of being in a relationship with them.

Bion regarded this openness and truthfulness to the emotional experience of a relationship as essential to the development and growth of the mind. He saw the mother–infant relationship as the foundation and prototype for this process. Bion discusses some of the problems that arise, and the psychic consequences of these, when one person's emotional experience of another person is felt to be overwhelming or even unbearable. At its most extreme, emotional experience in a relationship can be 'unprocessable', and may be experienced as indigestible or even harmful to the self; in this situation either the emotional experience, or the other person, may come to be felt as hateful. Although Bion formulated these ideas in somewhat abstract terms as part of a wider scientific theoretical framework, they are readily applicable to any relationships and have a particular relevance to the adoption process, where being open to the emotional truth of knowing and getting to know someone can present profound challenges – especially when this involves a child with a seriously disturbed inner world, or for whom psychic pain is extreme.

In addition to these five concepts, individual chapters draw on or make reference to other psychoanalytic concepts and these are described by the authors of those chapters.

Multiple perspectives

Much of what follows is based on clinical work which illustrates ways of thinking from a psychoanalytic perspective. However, we feel there is a need for a wide theoretical base for understanding the complex emotional experiences of children, young people and their families where adoption is concerned. Developments in attachment theory, neurobiological research, and work on trauma have all greatly increased our understanding of the ways in which early relationships and experiences impact on the developing personality and mind, as elaborated on in *Sally Wassell's* chapter 'Why is early development important?' Family therapy and systems theory have contributed to an understanding of dynamics that can occur in families, between families and the professional network, and within the professional network. To this, we would add the importance of attending to the child or young person in context. For a child who has been adopted, this context will necessarily include their previous relationships and experiences, their developmental history and temperament, what sense the child has made of what has happened, their position in their new family and their *meaning* to their new parents, their new parents' own histories and the relationship between their parents, as well as the wider social, ethnic and cultural context.

For children who have suffered early adversity, the experience of family life has often been shattered. Lindsey and Barrett (2006: 14) poignantly describe the way in which 'the meaning of everyday concepts such as mother and father, daughter and son relationships' are changed and distorted by the experience of

abuse and neglect. How these primary relationships are restored is the focus of much supportive and therapeutic work with adoptive families. But this work also must be seen in context – why have problems arisen at a particular point? How have the family tried to deal with their concerns? How do they formulate what is wrong? What help are they hoping to receive?

With complex situations, it seems to us that different treatment modalities may be needed, perhaps to address different aspects of presenting problems, as described by *Kate Cairns* in her chapter, 'Enabling effective support: secondary traumatic stress and adoptive families'. What seems important is that problems, should they arise, need to be sensitively and thoughtfully explored from a number of perspectives. When services and professionals are involved, they too are part of the wider context and need to find ways of not only of 'providing help', but also engaging *with* families in a way that makes sense to them and appreciates the reality of the many issues they may be facing. In this sense, we are very much in agreement with *Brodzinsky et al.* (1998: 89) who state that, 'In our opinion, no one treatment approach necessarily addresses the problems of adoptees better than others. What is more important than treatment modality or the therapists' theoretical orientation is a clear understanding of the adoption-related issues that are likely to emerge in the course of treatment and the availability of specific intervention strategies, incorporated into an overall treatment plan, that can help adoptees work through their unique life circumstances.'

A psychoanalytic perspective offers a window into the inner world of the adopted child through clinical encounters (Hart and Luckock, 2004). As Margaret Rustin (Chapter 4) eloquently expresses: 'Individual psychotherapeutic work can offer detailed descriptive accounts of adoptive experience from the perspective of internal reality, thus taking account of unconscious elements...' Single case studies give us in-depth and fine-grained narratives which elucidate these aspects of experience. While the clinical population of adopted children and their families is unlikely to represent a cross-section of adoptive families in general, it is our view that the kinds of emotional dynamics and processes seen in the clinical context reflect or throw light on particular features of the adoption process and experience – sometimes in heightened or accentuated form – and have broader applications. Much of what follows in this book is based on clinical work and it is of note that from Freud onwards, single case studies have contributed to the development of clinical practice and psychoanalytic theory. Yet the status of single case studies as a research modality and as a recognised source of new ideas has waxed and waned, although more recently this has been the subject of a lively and fruitful debate with the field of psychoanalysis (Midgley, 2006). It is our view that descriptive accounts of, and reflection on, clinical work capture something of the complexity of the human experience as it is felt and lived; and that they illuminate 'the complexity and multidimensionality of emotional and thinking processes as the essence of psychic structure and process' (Rustin, 2002: 127).

In relation to child psychotherapy, it is our experience that it is particularly when problems persist after the adoption, or have already persisted prior to the adoption, that individual work with a child may be considered in discussion with