

African American Perceptions of Adoption

By Azzizi Powell

It should be expected that African Americans would so strongly value blood ties. We are a people who were created by the tearing asunder of families beginning on African shores and continuing legally and church-approved, under American skies. It was a commonplace occurrence for United States slave holders to sell Black children away from mothers and siblings, and fathers from them all. Black blood ties were of no significance. And because blood ties did not matter to whites, they mattered a lot to Blacks.

From early childhood, Black children are taught to respect family. At all costs, families are to be kept together. Family looks out for family. A member of your family can be counted on to come to your defense, to lend you money when your funds are low, and take in your kids when you are too sick and beat down to look after them yourself. You are obligated to do for family. For a Black person to fail to help blood kin, to turn his back on his family, is to commit a terrible moral act against his self, against members of his family, and against the whole society.

Blood ties people together. In the past, it was believed that, in the womb, babies inherited their mother's values as well as the traits she inherited from her people. The mother is the life force. Because institutional racism in the United States affects Black males more harshly than Black females, Black children depend more on the parenting of the mother than their fathers. Mothers are supposed to be there for their children. They are supposed to be strong, self-sacrificing, and able to endure despite the oppression around them. And if she needs a temporary respite, a woman's mother or her aunt or her sister is obliged to mother her children.

Blood speaks to blood, and flesh and blood counts for much - but how much? Things are bad all over and the Black family's mutual aid system of informal adoption is breaking down under the pressure of crack, prison, poverty, middle-class material success, death, and do-your-own thing individualism. What are we to do about the children? There are a lot of motherless children unable to go home to blood kin. Before there was a Los Angeles gang called "Bloods," Black people called all people of African descent "bloods." And blood flows in every body. So what is the problem?

Lack of Information/Lack of Access

Most Black people have considered agency adoption to be a "for Whites only" parenting option. In spite of specialized adoption recruitment efforts targeted at Black communities,

some African Americans still believe that the only children available for adoption are healthy White infants and the only people who can adopt them are rich, infertile, White couples. African Americans usually equate agency adoption with the child welfare system. And the one thing most Black people know about "child welfare" is that its first name is "problem," its second name is "red tape," and its last name is powerlessness....

African Americans often identify child welfare with its protective services, and foster care components, not adoption. Child welfare doesn't give kids to people; it takes their kids away. Although agencies are always lamenting that they do not have enough Black foster and adoptive families, it is common to hear African Americans tell that they contacted an agency to adopt children or "take in" a foster child, but that they either did not get a call back or got such a run-around that they finally gave up.

Lack of Obligation to Non-Blood Kin

Notwithstanding the disproportionately large number of Black children in the child welfare system, African Americans do not feel a real moral duty to incorporate non-related children into their family unit. But among many segments of Black society, there remains a great deal of community acceptance and approval of informal adoption. Persons who temporarily or permanently take on this added responsibility are respected as having met their obligation to their family. Failure to provide assistance to blood relatives - especially children - is perceived as reneging on one's duty as a family member. One's guilt in failing to make room for one more is greatly multiplied if the bureaucratic child welfare system steps in and removes the children, perhaps forever, from the family.

Classism, Resentment, and Buying Babies

Most Black children available for adoption are from poor families. Most Black people who apply and are approved for adoption are at least middle-class in income. This dichotomy causes some African Americans to resent agencies who don't do enough to keep families together in the first place. Some also express resentment against "middle class Black people who take poor people's kids and adopt them."

Agencies that charge fees to adoptive parents are particularly looked down upon. No amount of explanation about staff salaries, rent, and utility bills will change the fact that fees for adopting children can be interpreted as "buying babies." Even African Americans who have money do not want to be

accused of buying children. And what of Black people who cannot afford to pay the fees but who can provide a secure, loving home? Economic barriers should not be placed in the path of creating new kinship ties.

Perceptions About Birth Mothers

Few Black adoptive parents want to share adoptive children with their birth mothers. Many Black adoptive parents feel that the birth mother had her chance to parent, forfeiting any contact with the child when she signed away her parental rights. These parents do not see themselves as hard-hearted. They say they are protecting their adopted children. They feel that contact or information will prompt the birth mother to want more. It is believed that birth mothers should move on with their lives, that contact only increases birth mothers' pain. They feel they have to protect their adopted child from the confusion that is bound to occur from having two mothers. Besides, who is to say that the birth mother has the same values and lifestyle as the adoptive parents? Most Black adoptive parents do not even consider meeting the birth mother, and will only send non-identifying letters and photographs if the agency strongly suggests or insists they do so.

Open Adoption

Black adoptive parents' fear of open adoption is as real as it is baseless. The fears about birth mothers coming back to claim their birth children are constantly fueled by community sentiment, sensationalized television programs and the gossipy tabloid press. Black adoptive parents have few first- or second-hand experiences with open adoption. They know no success stories.

Stigma, Fear and Love

Many people hold the view that the relationship between adoptive parents and their adopted children can only approximate the relationship between "real" parents and their "own" children. Many African Americans retain a latent conviction that parents cannot help but love their biological

children more than they love other children - even if they are raising these other kids. The love they feel for an adopted child is different, lesser than what they feel for their "own" flesh and blood.

Many Black adoptive parents feel that if you open up your family to the birth mother, you open your family to community stigma. There is a stigma to being an adoptive parent and there is a stigma to being an adopted child. Black people still accept the notion of a child having "bad blood" because his mother and father were considered to be no good. There will be questions about an adopted child's background. If a school-age child is adopted, "obviously" there has to be something wrong with him or his family. And if a couple goes public with their adoption, they'll hear questions such as, "What's wrong with you? Couldn't you have your own children?" As a result, many adoptive parents just want to get their adopted child and blend back into the crowd of "regular" African American families.

The Stigma of Voluntary Adoptive Placement

Particularly in poor and working-class neighborhoods, Black birth mothers who voluntarily place their babies for adoption catch much hell if the community finds out about this decision. Many Black birth mothers face tremendous pressure from family and peers to keep their babies. In some cases, mothers of pregnant young teenagers may already be raising other grandchildren and will let their daughter decide whether she wants to keep her baby or place the child for adoption. Just the fact that birth mothers have this choice marks a new era. It used to be if you were pregnant and did not believe in abortion, you had the child and you and your family raised the child. If you were not ready to parent psychologically, you got ready.

The rise of Black adoption recruitment efforts is changing all of this. Birth mothers who hear about Black adoption figure that if agencies are accepting Black people as adoptive applicants, they must be accepting Black babies, because agencies sure are not going to give White kids to Black people. And so, gradually, an African American birth parent has a does-she-parent or does-she-not-parent choice that White pregnant women have had for years.