

# **Bulidng An Adoptive Identity It's Not Just about Adolescence Anymore**

*By Harold D. Grotevant*

Identity. We all know what it means until we have to define it. What do you think of when someone says "identity?" Ethnic identity? National identity? Identity crisis? Identity theft? The Bourne Identity?

This article focuses primarily on adoptive identity, which addresses the questions: "Who am I as an adopted person? What does being adopted mean to me? How does this meaning fit into my understanding of my self, relationships, family, and culture?" Having a clear sense of identity helps us feel that the different aspects of our selves fit together in an understandable way. It also helps us to make meaning of the past, situate our self in the present, and anticipate the future.

We often associate identity with adolescence. Indeed, identity is a key issue during adolescence, and there are good reasons for that. Important developmental changes are happening then. Adolescents begin to think in new ways; for example, they think about the world of possibilities rather than just the here and now. They are better able to connect the dots between different aspects of their personal and social worlds. And their thinking leads them to question the status quo and consider new issues. Adolescents also change physically from children into adults who are sexually mature and able to reproduce. These cognitive and biological changes stimulate curiosity and can motivate adolescents to question their origins and consider what implications their pasts may have for their futures.

Adoption adds complexity to the identity process. Adoptees often have incomplete information about their genetic or health history, family, and culture. What information they do have may be difficult to understand and integrate. They may need to understand how they fit in when they don't look like the people closest to them.

Adoptive identity does not develop in isolation from other aspects of identity: career path, religious and political values, race and ethnicity, gender, view of self-in-close-relationships, sexual orientation, and so on. For some people, adoptive identity is tightly linked to other identity domains: for example, with career identity in the case of the person who is preparing to become an adoption social worker, or with ethnic identity for the person adopted transracially. For others, adoptive identity may have little connection with other domains on the surface, but there may be subtle connections regarding

religious or political values about reproduction, relationship preferences, or racial tolerance.

Constructing an identity is like writing a story. Both activities have an individual (author) at the center. Both begin without knowing fully how the story will end. Both take time; perhaps even a lifetime. Both are embedded within a particular culture and a particular time in history. And both involve intersections between the individual and other important people.

"Identities exist only in societies, which define and organize them. Thus, the search for identity includes the question of what is the proper relationship of the individual to society as a whole." This quote from psychologist R.F. Baumeister makes it clear that identity does not occur in a vacuum. It is historically and culturally bound. In 1959, we would have had a very different conversation about adoption. What will the discussion be like in 2059? Different again, I am certain.

Identity does not develop in isolation. The world presents opportunities and barriers, some created by others and some self-created. We encounter some people who are gatekeepers, preventing us from moving forward. A gatekeeper is like the bouncer at the door of the nightclub, only letting certain people in. Perhaps being adopted doesn't seem to confer the ticket required for admission. But we also encounter brokers, who can help us overcome barriers and see new possibilities. Brokers may be people who have "been there before," who can help us find our way, and who can help us see that what we are experiencing is neither unique, weird, nor incomprehensible.

Identity development doesn't follow a straight line. A better representation of the process is an identity spiral. Each bend in the spiral represents a change from a time of relative stability or consolidation to a time of exploration and disequilibrium. And, as this diagram illustrates, each successive circuit (moving around the spiral from bottom to top) is wider, as our worlds of ideas and people expand. Identity formation does not end at adolescence at all. In fact, that's just the beginning; adolescence marks the first time that identity is based on (relative) maturity of mind and body.

Development through adulthood consists of repeated "rounds" on the spiral. In the world of work and school, new skills may lead to new jobs and new understandings of our



abilities, likes, and dislikes, which then shape our thinking about future schooling or employment possibilities. In the world of relationships, we meet new types of people in school, at work, and in our growing families. In each of these settings our knowledge of who we are becomes sharpened, and our awareness of possible selves is expanded.

Adoptive identity follows a similar non-linear path. For children adopted as infants, it begins with the adoption story told in childhood. As parents feel their children are ready to comprehend more, the story may expand with more detail, more people, and more context. The “what if” thinking of adolescents may provoke a whole series of questions that never arose during childhood. These new questions may encounter barriers or facilitators, gatekeepers or brokers. Moving from adolescence into young adulthood means that the young person takes more control of the questions for which answers are sought. In my ongoing research with adoptive families, the question that adolescent adoptees most want their birthparents to answer is “Why?”

For children adopted later, memories of birth family may play a role in how they understand or participate in their adoptive family. Identity involves figuring out how one is positioned in a complex network of people, some of whom are physically absent, yet psychologically very present.

In my research across many years and different projects, we have found a wide range of ways in which individuals come to terms with being adopted. One size does not fit all. Individuals experience adoption differently and construct different meanings of it. As we have seen, these differences come about through the complex interplay of what the person brings to the situation (curiosity, problem-solving ability, interpersonal skill) and the opportunities presented by key people in their social worlds, both within and outside their families.

Numerous activities can challenge the status quo of one’s identity and lead toward new growth. Several involve writing: blogging, journaling, writing stories or memoirs, maintaining a life book. Blogging is an intriguing 21st century example. It provides a way to proclaim one’s sense of identity to the world without interference, develop an online community that is one step removed, and explore the intersection of multiple identities (such as adoption, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender). It allows the blogger to externalize thoughts and feelings into cyberspace in order to examine and work through them, perhaps with the benefit of comments from readers. It also provides a venue for developing solidarity with other adopted persons and perhaps even organizing for change or reform.

There are many ways to take advantage of this opportunity; Google produces over twenty-three million hits in a search for “adoption and blog.” In a very small, unscientific sample of these adoption blogs, I noted that the majority (about seventy-five percent) were written by women, that they were primarily written by adults (from the mid-twenties to the mid-fifties in age), and there was a significant amount of cross-referencing among bloggers, demonstrating evidence of a real online community. Each individual blog had its own specific theme, but it was clear that all the authors were writing as a way of working through some of the key questions of adoptive identity for themselves and/or for others. Ten years ago, we hadn’t even heard of blogs. Now, as some bloggers are migrating to Facebook and other social networking sites, yet another tool has become available for constructing and refining identity and for building community. The possibilities are only limited by our imagination and ingenuity.

Identity is also challenged and strengthened in conversation. These discussions might be with other adopted persons, birth relatives, adoptive family members, friends, or professionals such as therapists. They might take place in a support group, at Pact Camp, in a college dorm, or in an army barracks. Any of these can provide opportunities for the next round of identity exploration and growth.

Taken together, we can see that identity development is an active process, one that engages the adopted person in many settings and with many people over a lifetime. Different adoptees will traverse this process differently, because we each bring our own individuality to the process and we encounter different experiences along the way. There is no single best way to “do” identity, whether it’s about adoption or other core aspects of ourselves. A liberating conclusion of current research and theory is that identity is not something done to us; it is something that we shape, interacting with others, over the course of a lifetime.

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