



## *Adoption as a Means to Parenthood and a Family*

### SUMMARY

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For a long time adoption and adoptive parenting has been the center of attention for social scientists dealing with the issue from both theoretical and practical perspectives. The aim of the article is to contribute to the academic reflection in the area. The article focuses on the compensatory aspects of adoption, On the one hand, adoption is a form of compensation for social orphanacy, and, on the other hand, it gives childless couples a possibility to create a family and to fulfill their roles as parents. The author analyses selected aspects connected with shaping the identity of an adoptive family From the methodological perspective, the article offers a synthetic overview of subject literature and its constructive criticism.

→ **KEYWORDS** – **ADOPTION, ADOPTEE, ADOPTER, ADOPTIVE FAMILY, SOCIAL ORPHANCY, ADOPTION TRIANGLE**

### STRESZCZENIE

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#### *Adopcja drogą do rodzicielstwa i rodziny*

Zagadnienie adopcji stanowi przedmiot zainteresowania przedstawicieli nauk społecznych, zarówno teoretyków, jak i praktyków, od kilkudziesięciu lat. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest włączenie się w nurt refleksji naukowych z tego zakresu. Problematyka niniejszego artykułu koncentruje się wokół kompensacyjnych aspektów adopcji. Analizuje adopcję jako formę kompensacji sieroctwa społecznego oraz możliwość tworzenia rodziny i realizowania się w roli rodzicielskiej. Autorka analizuje wybrane czynniki kształtujące tożsamość rodziny adopcyjnej. Pod względem metodologicznym artykuł stanowi syntetyczny przegląd literatury przedmiotu i jego konstruktywną krytykę.

→ **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE** – **ADOPCJA (PRZYSPOBIENIE), PRZYSPOBIENY, PRZYSPOBIAJĄCY, RODZINA ADOPCYJNA, SIEROCTWO SPOŁECZNE, TRÓJKĄT ADOPCYJNY**

Adoption as an act of taking a child of other parents legally as your own child has been known for centuries. The examples of adoption can be found among primitive societies, in the Bible, and in ancient Greece, although as a legal measure it was introduced in ancient Rome. In the Polish law adoption was first mentioned in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The modern era witnessed a gradual decline in its popularity, yet it changed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a result of the World War 1 and saved the lives of numerous orphans. Nowadays it is one of the forms of foster care. It is considered the most beneficial, because it gives children an opportunity to be reared in a family. It also offers a chance for parenthood to the couples who, due to various reasons, cannot have their own biological children.

For a long time adoption and adoptive parenting have been the center of attention for social scientists dealing with this issue from both theoretical and practical perspectives. The aim of the article is to contribute to the academic reflection in the area. The article focuses on the compensatory aspects of adoption, On the one hand, adoption is a form of compensation for social orphancy, and, on the other hand, it gives childless couples a possibility to create a family and to fulfill their roles as parents. However, an adopted child cannot be treated as a substitute who is to compensate for the lack of a biological child. The author analyses selected aspects connected with shaping the identity of an adoptive family – the aim of adoption is to connect those who desperately need love and bonding, that is parent-less children, with those who want to offer this love, that is childless parents. Together they can build an adoptive family and satisfy the need for love experienced by both parties. From the methodological perspective, the article offers a synthetic overview of subject literature and its constructive criticism.

### Adoption and its types – the complexity of the phenomenon

Adoption (łac. *adoptio*), is a process in which a married couple or a single person assumes the parenting of an orphan. “It is thus an act of recognition of other parents’ child, which whom there is not blood relation, to be one’s own child. This act, apart from its psychological dimension, also has a legal dimension.”

Legal issues connected with adoption are regulated by national and international legal laws, such as: the European Convention on the Adoption of Children signed in Strasbourg on 24<sup>th</sup> April 1967 (ratified by the Republic of Poland on 24th April 1966); the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption from 29th May 1993 (ratified by the Republic of Poland on 2nd November 1994); the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child signed on 20 November 1989 (ratified by the Republic of Poland on 30th April 1991); the Family and Guardianship Code (Act of 25th February 1964); and the Support and Alternative Care System Act of 9th June 2011.

In Poland, according to the legal regulations, adoption can assume three forms: full adoption (irrevocable, indissoluble), pleni-ere adoption (it can be dissolved) and simple adoption; their aim is to create a suitable family environment for an adopted child. Each form of adoption entails different legal consequences. Additionally, with regard to the child's place of residence, two types of adoption can be distinguished: national adoption, in which a child is adopted by people who live in Poland, and intercountry adoption, in which a child is adopted by people who live outside Poland. The adoption order is issued by the Family Court following the request of prospective adoptive parents. Only persons under the age of 18 can be adopted, and, if they are over 13, their consent is required. An adoptee is a child who is either an orphan or a child whose biological parents have released him/her for adoption or have been deprived of parental authority. The "best interests of the child" is an overriding principle in adoptive procedures, and the phrase 'the best interest' is understood as creating favourable conditions for the child's development and upbringing. It naturally stems from the fact that children are helpless and totally dependent on adults, who should protect them. That is why during the adoption process it is the parents who are selected as the best option for a child and not the other way round. However, it does not mean that prospective adoptive parents are marginalized, as adoption procedures always respect their agency.

Full adoption (*adoptio plenissima*) is irrevocable and serves as a basis for shaping lasting family bonds. It is possible only in case of children whose parents are dead, are unknown, or who have formally released them for adoption without indicating an adopter and who have not withdrawn their consent for adoption

before adoption procedures begin. After adoption a new birth certificate is issued for the child with adoptive parents being named as his/her parents. When the adoption order takes effect, all financial and non-financial rights and responsibilities abide adopters and adopted and their relatives. This form of adoption is the most beneficial for both parties, as it most closely resembles biological families and terminates all connections with the child's biological family. This form of adoption is also dissoluble, as it should be analogous to the dissoluble relations between biological parents and their children.

Pleniere adoption (*adoptio plena*) is similar to full adoption, because the child becomes a member of the adoptive family. When the adoption order takes effect, the rights and responsibilities abide both the adopters and the adopted and their relatives, and it terminates all connections with the child's biological family. The only difference lies in the birth certificate – it is not rewritten, only the information about adoption is added to the full copy of the birth certificate, while in the abridged copy adoptive parents are named as parents. A new birth certificate can be issued but only on the basis of the court order requested by an adoptive parent. This form of adoption usually takes place if biological parents have been deprived of parental authority or released their child for adoption indicating an adopter. In situations justified by paramount circumstances and only if the welfare of the child is not affected, the court may dissolve pleniere adoption at the request of one of the parties.

The last form of adoption is simple adoption (*adoptia minus plena*), which creates loose family bonds, and does not protect the child's rights as well as the two previous forms. From the legal perspective, it affects only the adopters and the adoptee, excluding their relatives, and the child's rights and responsibilities towards his/her biological family are not terminated. Consequently, the child preserves the ties with the biological family and does not integrate with the relatives of the adoptive parents. In this form of adoption, it is not possible to issue a new birth certificate, It is rarely ruled, because it is the least beneficial option from the adoptive parents' point of view. Simple adoption can be changed into pleniere adoption or can be dissolved on condition that the welfare of the child is not affected.

Summing up, it should be emphasized that an adoptive family is created when the court order formally establishes legal

bonds between an adoptee (a child) and adopters (parents) with the same rights and responsibilities as in the natural family. It is possible only after careful consideration and analysis of the situation of both the child and the prospective adoptive parents. It is performed by an adoption center, which plays a key role before, during and after adoption procedures and can offer any kind of help and guidance adoptive families might need. Prospective adoptive parents can choose any adoption center in Poland.

### A parent-less child: adoption as a chance to compensate for the inferiority complex

During the whole adoption process, in all its stages, the best interest of the child is the most important factor. An adoptive family offers a child a chance to feel loved and to develop a secure attachment style.

The situation of children waiting for adoption is very complex; each child has different past experiences, which, in most cases, are extremely painful. Not many of them are natural orphans; most do have biological parents, who, however, due to various reasons, do not fulfill their parenting roles in an appropriate way. Such children are orphans in a social sense (the phenomenon of social orphanity). They experience rejection, which leads to feeling unwanted, unloved, and, consequently, lonely. Their basic needs of love and safety have not been satisfied or have been distorted, which finds its reflection in their behaviour. The consequences of being an orphan are numerous and varied and depend on many factors, including the child's age, the period of time spent without parental care, the child's past history and experiences.

Social orphanity is frequently accompanied by hospitalism, which affects all children deprived of life within a natural, non-pathological family. There are three stages of hospitalism: protest – despair – indifference, and it embraces various types of disorders in the course of the development of the youngest children who have experienced a long separation from the family. As a result, they crave for love, closeness and tenderness in a distorted way. The only treatment available is to offer these children a possibility to develop stable emotional bonds.

Social orphans have been abandoned by their parents, and this experience leads to a belief that they are worse than others, and they do not deserve love, care and trust. The range of their coping strategies in this area is wide and includes, for example, fantasizing about their mothers' death or serious disease, about being kidnapped or that their biological parents have been forced to give them away as a result of the lack of money or too young age.

Thus, taking the above considerations into account, if the adoption process is to be successful, prospective adoptive parents must accept the fact that the child they want to include in their family has his/her own pre-adoptive past with various memories, images, feelings, painful experiences and even traumatic events. All these experiences constitute an integral part of the identity of adopted children, who expect that their new new parents will fully accept their life history, and, what is more, will help them overcome problems that stem from it.

An orphan experiences a loss of something most important in life – biological parents, siblings, distant relatives and genealogical continuity. If the biological parents are alive, the child starts fantasizing about reuniting with them. It also happens after the adoption order is issued. Many adopted children look for their biological parents and face numerous obstacles on the way, which intensifies their sense of loss.

A child deprived of the care provided by biological parents can find a new family if his/her situation is legally regulated. When a child is waiting for a new family, he/she is placed in the care of a foster family or in a special institution.

Adoptive parents should try establish the link between the child's pre-adoptive history and the history which a new family will create together. If adoptive parents put this past history aside, because they are scared of pain or threat it might pose for the child or their new family, it will remain hidden below the surface resulting in negative consequences. "However, if the child's memories can be freely expressed and linked with the present, they will create time continuity, in which thoughts can come and go, and the past regains its life value."

It is important for an adoptive family to help the child understand his/her past and biological parents and to teach how to forgive them, how to accept the loss and how to respect the bonds with the biological family. It is connected with the existence of the adoption triangle. An adopted child has two families, and, what is

more, is a member of both families at the same time: a biological one (physical similarity, mutual genes, genetic relationship) and an adoptive one. Biological parents are permanent inhabitants of the adopted child's inner world. This situation may lead to difficulties in accepting two pairs of parents, and, as a result, their mental image may become split. It sometimes happens that positive features are associated with adoptive parents only, and negative ones – with biological parents, although a contrary option may also be found. That is why it is so vital for adoptive parents to understand that an adopted child will never be their biological child and accept it.

Each child needs and expects unconditional love and acceptance, which can be provided by a properly functioning family. For an orphaned child this chance is offered by an adoptive family. However, it should be remembered that a child also has his/her own expectations, dreams and needs connected with the image of adoptive parents. For a child adoption always signifies a kind of promotion. It might be promotion in family terms: a child finds his/her place in a family, which offers love, care and upbringing, emotional support, and good health prospects, or promotion in social terms: a child is adopted by a family which is able to successfully cope with various problems, which represents a specific system of values, rules and norms, and which guarantees a secure standard of living, or promotion in financial terms: a child is adopted by a family which guarantees stability, safety and development in all aspects.

### Childless parents: adoption as a chance to fulfill parenting roles

Bearing in mind the best interest of the child, nuclear families are considered the best ones as prospective adoptive families, however, it does not mean that a single person cannot adopt a child. Single candidates have to prove that in the process of rearing an adopted child they will be supported by other family members. Due to the complexity of the issue, the analysis below will embrace only married couples.

Motivation for adopting a child is an important factor in shaping the identity of an adoptive parent and in the proper functioning of an adoptive family. In most cases the decision to adopt is

taken in the context of the inability to have one's own biological children (infertility or sterility). People affected by these disorder experience the loss in the area of their procreation, the ability to become biological parents and forming a family. The lack of biological children makes it impossible for the couple to move to the next stage of the family life cycle.

Motivation connected with the lack of biological children and a simultaneous need to become a parent can be considered either positive and conducive to successful adoption or negative and adversely affecting the functioning of the family and relations within it (deficiency motivation).

It results from the complexity of the situation and various experiences childless couples go through. They usually undertake numerous attempts to treat infertility, which is always accompanied by constant stress. Everything in their lives is subordinated to one goal – pregnancy. Medical infertility treatment procedures can have a negative impact on the quality of marital relations, their attitude towards each other, and their defence mechanisms. Their love life becomes task-oriented: to get pregnant. Experiences connected with the inability to become a parent are accompanied by a whole system of fantasies, images and desires, open or hidden hostility towards the world, other people, pregnant women or even the partner. The decision to adopt a child taken in such circumstances may stem from the desire to improve the relations between spouses (adoption as therapy) or the desire to eventually have a biological child (adoption as a means to an end: “first she adopted, then she gave birth”). However, in order to develop the right type of motivation and to overcome a marital crisis, it is vital to accept the lack of one's own biological child and to rework this loss. Adopting a child will not solve internal problems, will not fill with optimism and will not bring back the feeling of worth. Grief connected with the lack of biological children is a process which should be completed if one wants to build a happy family and accompany an adopted child on the way to accepting the fact that he/she has been abandoned by his/her biological parents. “The death of dreams” is time necessary for a childless couple to prepare for the other paths, that is becoming a parent of an adopted child.

The most frequent reason why people decide to adopt is motivation resulting from the desire to have a family and fulfill



parenting roles in a situation in which they are unable to have a biological child. Motivation to adopt in order to help a child and to have an heir is not often reported. The final decision concerning adoption is taken as a result of numerous different experiences and events, often painful and difficult, which usually means resigning oneself to the inability of becoming biological parents. That is why such decision should be taken in a mature and deliberate manner because it is always connected with assuming full responsibility for the life and development of the adopted child and for the functioning of an adoptive family. What is more, adoptive parents must be emotionally mature enough to be able to love someone else's child.

Transparency is one of the most important aspects of the adoption process. Nowadays it is believed that adoption should be overt – an adopted child should be informed that he/she has been adopted. However, the opinions on this matter evolved through time.

In the past it was thought that the act of adoption somehow cuts off the child's past and marks the beginning of his/her new life, building new relations and new identity. Usually the information about adoption was hidden from a child.

Also today many parents have a dilemma whether to tell the child that he/she is adopted or not, even though they participate in numerous workshops and talks in the adoption center, which are supposed to guide them in this matter. They are afraid that the truth about adoption and the fact that the child has been abandoned by his/her biological parents may be a traumatic experience, difficult to understand. They might also be afraid that the child will stop loving them, will feel worse than his/her peers, or will start looking for biological parents. However, telling the truth about adoption is the best option in terms of the integrity and the proper functioning of an adoptive family, as it is not possible to build a family – a community of love and trust – using a lie or concealment as its basis. Besides, the child has the right to know the truth concerning his/her roots and origin. By talking to a child, adoptive parents accompany him/her in difficult moments and teach how to cope with problems. Being open about adoption protects a child against a brutal discovery of this fact revealed by other people. A child learns to value and appreciate truth and honesty.

Adoptive parenthood is a specific kind of parenthood, and many specialists consider it more challenging than biological parenthood, because one has to learn to love a child born by someone else. Adoptive parents are haunted by numerous questions, worries and doubts non-existent in non-adoptive families. Proper understanding and resolving these problems is particularly important if adoption is to be successful. Questions and doubts voiced by adoptive parents should not be ignored. Some of them appear before a decision to adopt is taken (e.g. concerns whether they will be good parents), other have to be faced after adoption (e.g. when to tell a child that he/she is adopted, or how to cope with the child's hospitalism). Hence the significance of the proper preparation process before adoption and support given to adoptive parents afterward.

Summing up, it should be emphasized that an adoptive family is a multi-faceted phenomenon and a special form of parenthood. It is perceived as a "non-normative family model." It is inextricably connected with a loss. Adoptive parents worry about their ability to become parents of an adopted child (parental identity crisis). Additionally, they usually have been married for longer than couples with biological children. They also have to address the issue of transparency of adoption and the opinions of people around them. What is more, the development of parent – child relationship begins later than in a biological family, because of the age at which a child is adopted. When an infant is adopted, the adoptive family misses biological aspects of the bond developed in the prenatal and neonatal period. When a pre-school child or early school child is adopted, the number of stages in the development of the family is respectively lower. Adoptive parents have to face their child's experiences from the period before adoption and the existence of the adoption triangle. Despite all these differences, studies on adoptive parenting reveal

that in fact adoptive parenthood brings as much joy and satisfaction as natural parenting, and the feelings and bonds that are formed between adoptive parents and their children can be as strong and powerful as in biological families.

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