

**Childhood Loss and Adoption:
The Unending Search for the Perfect Other**

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Introduction

Whether openly acknowledged or present in an unconscious form, the experience of adoption, for all those involved, carries its own special set of feelings and fantasies. Despite the many stories of successful adoptions the word “adoption” itself, evokes a curious mélange of affects. In this single word the terror of relinquishment joins the elation of affirmation to create a tension-filled counterpoint. Perhaps it is this tension that accounts for the unending fascination about adoption in both life and mythology.

Legends of abandoned children, rescued from despair and eventually adopted, flourish in countless mythologies. These stories usually have a happy ending. While they touch upon the trauma of the abandonment they primarily emphasize the positive pole of the ambivalence, the rescue from despair and the turn of ill

fortune into golden opportunity. The examples are many: The infant Moses, set adrift in the Nile, rescued from the water, adopted by Pharaoh's daughter, eventually leads his people from slavery to freedom; Romulus and Remus, adopted by a she-wolf, eventually establish the city of Rome; Tarzan, orphaned by an airplane crash, adopted by a group of apes becomes lionine in courage and ape-like in strength and Superman, another hero, is cast away from his exploding planet to be adopted by the humble and loving Kents.

Further, in Frances Hodgson Burnett's well-known "The Secret Garden," orphaned Mary Elizabeth is adopted by her wealthy, but grief-stricken, reclusive uncle. Through the joy inherent in her personality, Mary Elizabeth restores her uncle's metaphorically dead garden, returns him to life and rehabilitates his crippled son. Similarly, Little Orphan Annie wins the heart of fabulously wealthy Daddy Warbucks and, in the process, brings him new life.

The Oedipus story, another famous abandonment myth, does not end with such good fortune. Freud's take on this Greek tale was, of course, influenced by the theory he was developing. Viewed through the lens of his evolving ideas, Freud explained Oedipus' disastrous behavior as motivated by sexual and aggressive drives. Another possible understanding of this story is that Oedipus' actions were vengeful expressions of his rage over his father's abandonment and intended infanticide. One explanation is as plausible as another.

In terms of life situations, the successes of adopted people usually catch our

attention. It invariably seems remarkable, and of special interest, when we learn that accomplished people like Aristotle, Louis Armstrong, and the playwright, Edward Albee, were all adopted.

Because of the uniqueness of adoption within the usual flow of life events, its difference presents an intriguing opportunity for psychoanalytic study. Yet, the psychoanalytic literature on adoption is startlingly sparse in comparison with the adoption literature in other fields. The new Psychoanalytic Education Publishing CD ROM contains only 9 title references to adoption among its 33,000 fully encoded articles. Renee and I are puzzled by this discovery in view of the notion, perhaps misguided, that adopted children come for treatment in disproportionate numbers (Schechter, M. 1960, 1967, Watkins & Fisher, 1993). While we don't have an explanation for this paucity of psychoanalytic literature, we view the act of adoption, aside from the emotional situation it creates for its participants, as a psychoanalytic situation that is rich in learning opportunities.

In this paper we hope to add a new conceptualization to the psychoanalytic literature on adoption. Our interest resides in the persistent fantasy of an idealized birth parent that is elaborated by some adopted children. We have noticed in our clinical work that many children who do elaborate such a fantasy, coincidentally, seem to have troublesome relationships with their adoptive parents. We hope to demonstrate that the presence of their persistent idealizations support Heinz Kohut's conceptualization of an unconscious

configuration he called the idealized parental imago. This unconscious configuration is a primary, non-defensive structure. It is concerned with the “search” for, and merger with, an omnipotent “perfect other” or in Kohut’s terms, an idealized selfobject.

Before proceeding, I think it will be useful to first briefly review Kohut’s concept of unconscious narcissistic configurations. All psychoanalytic theories conceive of a dynamic unconscious – a non-conscious part of the mind that influences thought, feelings and behavior. This was Freud’s great discovery and it is this conceptualization of the unconscious that makes a theory psychoanalytic.

The unconscious is thought to contain clusters of needs, wishes, feelings, fantasies, and memories. We call these clusters within the unconscious, unconscious configurations. While all psychoanalytic theories conceive of an unconscious, they vary in their ideas about the specific contents of the unconscious. The Oedipal story with its particular cluster of wishes, feelings, fears, and fantasies is one such unconscious configuration familiar to all. It is, of course, possible to conceive of other unconscious configurations. Kohut conceived of three additional configurations. He called these the idealized parental imago, the grandiose self, and the twinship configuration. To appreciate Kohut’s theory, one must grasp the idea that these configurations exist as unconscious fantasies, each forming out of the young child’s attempt to restore an initial disrupted state of bliss. Each configuration pursues its own

developmental course and eventuates respectively in the establishment of ideals, ambitions, and a sense of belonging. For Kohut, these configurations sit at the core of the narcissistic sector (Siegel 1997).

We will focus on only one of these configurations, “the idealized parental imago” which is the unconscious fantasy of an idealized, perfect other. In relation to the fantasy of this perfect other I need to make one more clarifying comment. The feeling quality associated with the sense of the idealized other is “You are perfect. When I am part of you I feel whole and alive. All is well with the world.” Merger with this omnipotent other brings a sense of safety, contentment, strength, and wholeness. The story of the idealized parental imago then is the story of the child’s unconscious need to merge with a perfect other who possesses wisdom, kindness, unending knowledge, and a capacity to sooth, settle and manage the child’s emotional state. Union with this object brings a sense of peace; separation, in any form, brings fracture.

In psychoanalytic language a person is referred to as an “object.” When a connection to the idealized object is established through the idealized object’s provision of essential psychological functions, like soothing and settling, the idealized object is experienced as an extension of the self, hence Kohut’s term selfobject.

Returning now to our central thesis, we contend that oftentimes, when the adoptive child’s healthy idealizations of either adopted parent is disrupted, the

child, acting under the influence of its unconscious need to be connected to an idealized selfobject, searches for another idealizeable figure. In this search for an idealized selfobject, the adopted child has the unique opportunity of having an omnipotent object readily available in the lost, but imaginable, birth parent. We have noticed that when the conscious fantasy of the lost, but now idealized, birth parent is fueled by the persistent unconscious need for an idealized selfobject, the fantasy of the “better parents” somewhere “out there” takes on a life of its own and further interferes with the already disturbed relationship with the adoptive parents.

Literature Review

We emphasize, along with other authors (Brinich 1990, Watkins & Fisher 1993), that the unconscious attitudes and fantasies of the adopted person do not automatically imply psychopathology. Rather, the attitudes and fantasies of adopted people are understandable and arise from the special circumstances of their birth and later adoption. Many navigate the issues of adoption, both conscious and unconscious, without untoward internal disorganization. This especially seems to be the case when the adoptive parents are psychologically equipped to create a loving, understanding and accepting ambiance in which the sadness, pain and mourning of everyone involved, both parents and child, can be acknowledged, embraced and worked through.

Mindful of the complex interactive system that is created in any adoption, Brinich

(1990), in his sensitive and thorough review, reminds his readers that:

“It is impossible to understand adoption from an intrapsychic point of view without taking into consideration these two facts: first, that the child was not wanted by his biological parents; and second, that the adoptive parents were unable to conceive.” (although this is certainly not always the case).

Brinich debunks the notion of the “chosen baby” as a piece of denial since, in

fact, the child usually is available for adoption precisely because he or she was

unwanted, for whatever reason. He adds:

“Adoptive parents must manage this transformation of their child – from unwanted to wanted – not only in the mind of the child but also within their own thoughts. This process is not easy, for adoptive parents are often also infertile parents, with all that is implied by that... Infertility is not usually something that “happens.” Rather, it is a reality that is forced on a couple over a period of months which then stretch on into years....[I]t requires mourning...as infertility implies some very significant losses.”

Brinich describes the struggle of the adoptive parent, whose attitudes affect their adopted child in the following way:

“Unfortunately the adoptive parents’ fantasies regarding their (nonexistent) biological child are not at all inactive. They silently color many aspects of the relationship between adoptive parents and their adopted child. And, of course, they are not alone in this process; sooner or later the adopted child also develops his own fantasies about his biological parents. These fantasies – whether they reside within an adoptive parent or within the adopted child – are not necessarily pathogenic. However, the clinical literature contains many examples of families in which such fantasies prevented one person or another from being the real person in front of them. (The adopted playwright, Edward Albee, offers an

especially powerful example of such fantasies as the focal point of his play, "Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf?")

Brinich describes the unique psychological task that confronts each partner of the adoptive threesome as one in which each member needs to mourn his or her particular lost fantasy object. For the parents it is their lost fantasized biological child and, for the child, it is the lost fantasized birth parents. Brinich asserts that ambivalence will inevitably complicate the adoptive situation since all parents and children have the experience, at some time, of loving and hating each other. In the biological triad, the reality that all three members belong to each other aids their individual integrative tasks of containing the loved and hated parts within the image of one person.

The situation for the adoptive triad is different, however, since the adopted child does have another set of parents. Because birth parents do exist, it is possible for the child to split the affective components that relate to the adoptive parent and project them onto the lost but fantasized birth parents. The situation that enables such a split in the child exists for the adoptive parents as well since the child, who now belongs to them, also carries genetic endowments from others. This biological reality enables the adoptive parent to attribute any "bad" elements in the child to the genetics of the birth parent rather than to their own possible contribution to what has become an unhappy situation.

It is an interesting historical note that the psychoanalytic literature on adoptive fantasies actually begins with Freud's 1908 paper entitled, "Family Romances" (Freud, 1908). In this short paper, Freud describes the separating child's attempt to gain distance from his parents through the elaboration of a fantasy that he is actually an adopted child

The paper begins with Freud's description of the young child's idealizing experience of his parents as the "only source of authority" and the "source of all belief." He notes, as well, that the young child's greatest wish is to be big like father and mother. Freud is clear that this idealization is a primary psychological event and is not part of any defensive operation. He then describes the child's inevitable painful discovery that the parents are not as perfect as he had originally envisioned. In addition, Freud suggests that the child sustains an injury when he feels slighted by the parents' attention to each other as well as to the other siblings. The disappointments engendered by the newly discovered parental imperfection, plus the painful slight that comes when his exclusive love for his parents is neither fully appreciated nor exclusively reciprocated, culminate in the child's elaboration of the fantasy that he must be adopted. In the child's mind it is impossible for him to be the "real" child of these disappointing people.

Freud asserts that at this point the child wishes for new parents who:

"...as a rule, are of higher social standing. He will make use in this connection of any opportune coincidences from his actual experience, such as his becoming acquainted with the Lord of the

Manor or some landed proprietor, if he lives in the country, or with some member of the aristocracy if he lives in town. Chance occurrences of this kind arouse the child's envy, which finds expression in a phantasy in which both his parents are replaced by others of better birth. The technique used in developing phantasies like this (which are, of course, conscious at this period) depends upon the ingenuity and the material which the child has at his disposal... This stage is reached at a time at which the child is still in ignorance of the sexual determinants of procreation." (Freud 1909 p 239).

In this passage Freud describes exactly what Renee and I are talking about. He notes how the child, in the elaboration of his conscious fantasy, attaches unconscious contents to the reality situations that present themselves, although Freud does not pursue this idea any further. We hope to demonstrate that the disrupted adopted child has the unique opportunity of being able to attach his or her unrequited unconscious need for an idealized selfobject to the knowledge of a set of birth parents somewhere else in the world

Freud asserts that there are two elements, in his version of the adoption fantasy. I have just described the first element, the element that Freud calls the "asexual stage" of the fantasy and an element in which Freud seemed to have little interest. The second element, which did capture Freud's attention, occurs after the child has learned of the sexual processes. In the second element Freud describes how the father becomes a fantasized sexual rival and the mother becomes a person with whom the child can now be sexual. In this element of the adoption fantasy the pre-pubescent child rids himself of his father but retains the mother as a sexual person. Freud asserts that the second element of the

adoption fantasy serves a defensive function since it helps the child gain some distance from the tensions that have become associated with the birth parents. What is of interest is that despite Freud's acknowledgement that the fantasy began as an asexual, non-defensive idealization, Freud names the entire fantasy the "neurotic's family romance."

Freud's de-emphasis of the asexual stage is especially noteworthy in that, at paper's end, he returns to the theme of the child's need for an idealized experience with his parents and reminds his possibly offended readers that the young child's "faithlessness and ingratitude," expressed through the wish for another family, are only apparent since the wish actually represents the child's unconscious attempts to preserve the idealization that had been lost. In this regard Freud writes:

"If we examine in detail the commonest of these imaginative romances, the replacement of both parents or of the father alone by grander people, we find that these new and aristocratic parents are equipped with attributes that are derived entirely from the real recollections of the actual and humble one; so that in fact the child is not getting rid of his father but exalting him. Indeed the whole effort at replacing the real father by a superior one is only an expression of the child's longing for the happy, vanished days when his father seemed to him the noblest and strongest of men and his mother the dearest and loveliest of women. He is turning away from the father whom he knows today to the father in whom he believed in the earlier years of his childhood; and his fantasy is no more than the expression of a regret that those happy days have gone." (Freud 1909 p 241).

We call attention to the fact that while Freud describes the young child's healthy idealization, neither he nor those who have written after him sufficiently

appreciated the developmental import of the non-defensive exaltation of the parents. Freud explains the “so-called” asexual stage of the fantasy as a wish to return to a happier time but Freud doesn’t explore the psychological microelements that made the earlier time happy.

Our interest concerns the “asexual” first element of the fantasy that Freud and others have undervalued. Many authors, following Freud’s lead, write about the adopted child’s fantasy of the idealized birth parents only in defensive terms (Greenacre, 1958, Schechter 1960, 1967, Glenn 1975, Weider 1977, Brinich 1995). They understand the idealization either as a defensive splitting of the child’s ambivalence or as a way for the child to gain distance from sexual tensions and conflicts with the adoptive parents. The defensive splitting is characterized by the statement; “these parents I live with are bad, those parents I imagine are good.” The sexual defense is characterized by the statement; “these aren’t really my parents so I need not fear my incestuous feelings.” While idealizations certainly can be defensive, these authors, like Freud, overlook the non-defensive, developmental meaning of the unconscious idealization that Kohut eventually came to conceive of as the unconscious search for an idealized selfobject (Kohut 1971).

Hypothesis

The wish to merge with a perfect other exists in all children and, when the adoptive parents are sufficiently idealizeable, the child’s wish attaches to the

parents who are present, regardless of whether they are birth parents or adoptive parents. When parents, birth or adoptive, fail in their assigned function of idealizability, either because of physical absence or emotional unavailability, the usual course of development is disturbed in the idealizing sector and the wish to connect with a perfect other eventually seeks another target. Often parent surrogates such as idealizeable relatives like aunts, uncles, grandparents, or other surrogates like nannies, teachers, coaches and yes, even therapists, fill this role.

As we noted earlier, the adopted child has yet another option since the unconscious idealization can readily attach to the known but unknown birth parent and create one or both of them as ideal creatures. We contend that the unrequited unconscious need for an idealized selfobject sits at the heart of the disrupted adopted child's persistent fantasy of an idealized birth parent. We also note that when the persistent idealization of the birth parents occurs, the adopted child's already disrupted relationship with its adoptive parents worsens since the child, having created the illusion of a source of safety and wholeness in union with the idealized birth parent, can now afford to turn against the disappointing adoptive parent. Union with the idealized selfobject can occur in childhood fantasy or, later in life, the wish for merger with the idealized selfobject can stimulate a search for the lost, but unconsciously retained, idealized birth parent. Of note, however, is the fact that not all adopted children

have this fantasy, a finding that leads to interesting questions. For example, can we explain why the fantasy arises in some children and not in others? Is the fantasy always present but remains silent in some and becomes noisy in others? If this is the case can we see a difference in the behaviors of the differing children? Finally, when the fantasy is elaborated, can we explain its meaning and the function it serves the adopted child?

Like Freud, Kohut recognized the persistent childhood wish to retain a connection to a powerful, idealized, and idealizeable parent. Unlike Freud, however, Kohut pursued the analysis of the non-defensive aspects of the idealizations of some of his adult psychoanalytic patients and eventually incorporated what he learned from these explorations into his broader conceptualization of narcissism (Kohut 1966, 1968, 1971).

Evidence: Fantasy Revealed in Artistic Work

We found the data for our hypothesis in three sources: the fantasy-life of adopted children and adults in our practices; the fantasies reported in the scant literature about adoptees who have been in treatment; and the fantasy-based creations of artists who were adopted as children. We'll now explore the data from these sources and begin with the playwright, Edward Albee, an artist whose work reveals illuminating details of this adopted person's fantasy life.

Adopted at two weeks of age, into a wealthy family with an emotionally

unavailable but intensely dominating mother, Albee writes both implicitly and explicitly of his experience as an adopted child. For instance, a lost child is a central feature of "Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf," while Albee's grizzly "The American Dream" speaks of an adopted child who was purchased as an object rather than as a child to be loved. In "The American Dream," the adoptive parents, disappointed with their new infant's behavior, invite the worker from the Bye-Bye Adoption Service to their home to discuss their unhappiness. It seems that when the infant only had eyes for Daddy, Mommy poked out "its" eyes. When "it" masturbated they cut off "its" hands and penis and when "it" spoke obscenely to Mommy they cut out "its" tongue. Piece by piece they dismember the child and when "it" eventually dies they call the agency to complain and seek recompense for the damaged goods they were given.

While Albee's conscious issues concerning his adoption are overt in "The American Dream," some seemingly unconscious issues emerge in "Tiny Alice," a play considered by critics to be Albee's most enigmatic work. Briefly summarized, "Tiny Alice," is the story of Brother Julian, a lay Catholic priest who previously doubted God and now is sent on a mission to collect the contribution of two billion dollars that has been offered to the Church by fabulously wealthy Miss Alice. Albee flags a central theme early in the play when he scripts Lawyer to warn Brother Julian "never to confuse the representative of a thing with the thing itself." (Albee 1963 p25) This theme, in a play that struggles with the

issues of reality and illusion, and in which a butler is named Butler, a lawyer, Lawyer and a cardinal, Cardinal, is sounded repeatedly. Paraphrasing Albee, the warning could be stated, "Never confuse the representative of a thing (an abusive adoptive mother) with the real thing (an idealizeable mother)."

In "Tiny Alice," as in "Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf?" Albee plays with the surreal notion of an absent presence while in "Tiny Alice" alone he toys with the idea of merger with something greater and more powerful than oneself. Albee creates the sense of an absent presence in "Tiny Alice" through the use of an on-stage miniature model of the mansion in which the play's action actually occurs. The model of the mansion is constantly on-stage and assumes life-like quality as it eerily follows the play's movement by lighting its rooms in correspondence to the rooms of the mansion where the action occurs. For example, when action occurs in the living room, the model's living room lights up, when the action takes place in the mansion's chapel, the model's chapel lights up. The model is a metaphor that restates Albee's earlier warning not to confuse the representative of a thing with the thing itself. At the same time, the metaphor also expresses the merger of a lesser thing, the model, with a wondrous other thing, the actual mansion. The intriguing character of Miss Alice is yet another vehicle Albee uses to express his interest in the merger with an idealized object. While not God herself, Albee makes it clear that Miss Alice is God's representative and, in a powerful marriage scene, Brother Julian unites with God

through his marriage to Miss Alice who welcomes him in the enveloping wing-like arms of her robe.

Much of the play's dialogue is an ironic repartee among all the characters with Brother Julian, the outsider, bearing the brunt of their cruel irony until finally he is shot. Abandoned and dying at play's end, Julian delivers the play's most poignant lines as he voices his sense of abandonment and his yearning to merge with a powerful other. (As you hear this, listen through the ears of the disappointed adopted child)

Excerpt from "Tiny Alice"

Julian: ALICE!?! Oh, Alice, why hast thou forsaken me? Alice? Hast thou forsaken me...? Come talk to me; come sit by my right hand... Oh, what a priesthood is this! Oh, what a range of duties, and such parishioners, and such a chapel for my praise. (Turns some, leans toward the model, where the chapel light shines.) Oh, what a priesthood, see my chapel, how it...(Suddenly the light in the chapel in the model goes out. Julian starts, makes a sound of surprise and fear.) Alice?...God? SOMEONE? Come to Julian as he ebbs. (We begin to hear it now, faintly at first, slowly growing, so faintly at first it is subliminal: the heartbeat...thump thump...thump thump...And the breathing)... Thou art my bride? For thee I have done my life? Ah God! Is that the humor? IS THIS MY PRIESTHOOD, THEN? THIS WORLD? THEN COME SHOW THYSELF! BRIDE? GOD?

(Silence, we hear the heartbeat and the breathing some). SHOW THYSELF! FOR THEE I HAVE GAMBELED MY SOUL? I DEMAND THY PRESENCE. ALICE! (The sounds become louder now, as, in the model, the light fades in the bedroom, begins to move across an upper story. Julian's reaction is a muffled cry.) AGHHH! You...thou...art...coming to me? How long wilt thou forget me, O Lord? Forever? ...How long wilt thou hide thy face from me? COME, BRIDE, COME, GOD! COME! (The breathing and heartbeats much louder now. The light descends a stairway in the model.) ALICE? MY GOD, WHY HAST THOU FORSAKEN ME? (A great shadow, or darkening, fills the stage, it is the shadow of a great presence filling the room. The area on Julian and around him stays in some light, but, for the rest, it is as if ink were moving through paper toward a focal point. The sounds become enormous. Julian is aware of the presence in the room, "sees" it, in the sense that his eyes, his head move to all areas of the room, noticing his engulfment. He almost whispers loudly.) The bridegroom waits for thee, my Alice... O Lord, my God, I have waited for thee, have served thee. (His arms are wide, should resemble a crucifixion. With his hands on the model, he will raise his body some, backed up against it) ALICE?...GOD? (The sounds are deafening. Julian smiles faintly.) I accept thee, Alice, for thou art come to me. God, Alice...I accept thy will. (Sounds continue. Julian dies, head bows, body relaxes

some...Sounds continue thusly: thrice after the death...thump thump thump
thump thump thump. Absolute silence for two beats. The lights on Julian
fade to black. Only then, when all is black, does the curtain slowly fall.)

While many critics find “Tiny Alice” confusing and even without meaning, we believe the enigmatic nature of this play stems from the unconscious underpinnings of its material. In “Tiny Alice” Albee gives dramatic voice to the fantasy we are investigating, the fantasy of a merger with an idealized object. Albee’s enigmatic lines assume a new clarity and power when we hear them as the voice of an adopted child caught in the confusion between the thing, an idealizeable mother, and its representative, an abusive adoptive mother. In Julian’s final soliloquy we also hear his yearning for the safety and comfort that are the outcome of a bond with an idealized selfobject.

In this play Albee seems to be concerned about the distinction between reality and illusion. Although it is impossible to know the source of this struggle, we believe that it might have originated in a childhood confusion over which set of parents was real and which illusory. It is safe to assume that quite early in his life Albee’s adoptive mother was probably idealized as an object of hope, but the reality of an optimal mother became a despairing illusion when she failed him as miserably as she did. Albee confirms our sense of his mother’s failure in a conversation with Studs Terkel, Chicago’s peripatetic interviewer, when he says: “We didn’t get along at all. And I left home when I was eighteen. And didn’t talk

to her, didn't see her for the next thirty-some years. It was a question of her saying: 'You become the kind of son we wanted when we adopted you or get out.' And I figured, well, hey, it's me, you know. I can't be what I'm not. I can't be what other people want me to be. So I shrugged and left" (Terkel, 1999).

In "Tiny Alice" we find evidence of Albee's wish to merge with an idealized other. We speculate that the origin of this yearning rests within the unconscious configuration of the idealized parental imago and that this unconscious yearning persisted, in relatively unmodified form, because the infantile need in the idealizing sector of Albee's personality was inadequately fulfilled during childhood. We further speculate that Albee's unconscious yearning for merger with an idealized selfobject is similar to the unconscious yearning of other adopted children whose adoptive parents are emotionally out of step with them.

Evidence: Reports from the Literature

For further data to support our hypothesis we turn to the sparse psychoanalytic literature on adoption that does contain reports of adopted children who have been in treatment (Sherick, Wieder, Brinich 1990). In these papers, when an idealization of the birth parents is reported, the authors all attribute the idealization to the defensive functions of either splitting the affective ambivalence or gaining distance from the Oedipal objects. We note, however, that whenever the children in these reports have elaborated the fantasy of

idealized birth parents there simultaneously has been a disruption in the relationship with the adoptive parent.

Evidence: Clinical Material

Finally, we turn to material from our practices to obtain additional data to support our hypothesis and at this point I turn the paper over to Renee.

We begin with Jon, a six and a half year old boy who, while not adopted, will help us understand the power of the attachment to the perfect other that is fueled by the unconscious fantasy of the idealized parental imago. Jon is the fourth eldest boy in a sibship of six. His family constellation is unusual in that his parents had adopted a four- year- old girl when Jon was only three and one half. A further complication lay in the fact that Jon's mother was pregnant at the time of the adoption and gave birth to a girl four months after the new sister entered the family. Tragically the baby was born with a congenital defect that required immediate surgical repair. Repeated lengthy hospitalizations, infection, reactions to medication and the need for further surgery, however, brought the baby back to the hospital many times and at frequent intervals during the first two years of her life. With each hospitalization Jon's mother left the home to be with her infant daughter. While she returned home most days for brief periods, she spent the night at the hospital with her ill child. During this time, Jon stopped speaking to anyone other than family members, two playmates, and the mother of another very close friend. He stopped talking to his teacher and other

adults. Before this difficult time, Jon had been an easy child. Despite the obvious connection between the trauma of the ill daughter and the onset of Jon's symptoms, Jon's parents were unable to make that link on their own.

I understood Jon's elective mutism as a reflection of his sadness and then anger over the loss of his mother as well as an expression of his unwillingness to acknowledge the importance of almost anyone but his mother. In our sessions, Jon played with toys but did not speak. His play, however, created opportunities for me to comment on what I thought he might be thinking or experiencing. For example, if it seemed to me that his play expressed his anger, I gently commented about what I thought he might be feeling. I added my speculation he might be angry because he missed his mother and probably felt he had lost her forever when she disappeared for days or weeks to tend his sick sister. Jon never protested my comments. Instead, he remained attentive but never verbalized what he felt. During the last two months of a yearlong treatment I invited Jon's mother to join us in our sessions. In these sessions Jon was able to whisper to his mother, telling her of his frustration, sadness, anger, and of the fantasies that she had, in fact, become lost to him when she was away with his sick sister. Jon terminated treatment without having said a word to me but he now was able to speak in school, to other adults, to friends, and to family members.

While Jon's experience does not directly address the issue of the adopted child's fantasy of an idealized birth parent, we offer his experience as a preface to our other clinical material. We do so in an effort to underscore the unyielding power of the unconscious yearning to merge with the stabilizing strength and security of the omnipotent idealized object.

Next we look at Mary, a twenty-eight year old woman who came for treatment because she was depressed and anxious at work over a situation that involved a man whom she believed was "looking at her." Although he never spoke to Mary, nor she to him, Mary felt that the man had been flirting with her. She believed he stared at her but when she returned the stare he seemed to avert his eyes. After a year of this perception, and with the encouragement of a mutual friend, Mary confronted the man and asked him for a date. He turned her down. Then he told their mutual friend that he never was interested in Mary, who, of course, was crushed. She was certain he had been paying special attention to her.

Mary, adopted at birth, never considered her adoption to have any special meaning for her. She did, however, describe a difficult relationship with her adoptive mother and explained that she couldn't remember ever feeling close to her. She felt constantly misunderstood by her mother and, in fact, stopped talking to her about anything important when she was only seven years old. Mary currently finds it difficult to be in her mother's presence and has minimal

contact with her except during family celebrations. She turned to an older woman in her neighborhood for nurturing.

Mary longs to have a meaningful relationship with a man but she has never dated anyone who is truly available. In her relationships Mary becomes anxious and protects herself by anticipating the needs of the man she is dating. In the first year of her treatment, Mary talked of the discomfort she felt in these relationships and of the overwhelming task she set for herself of anticipating what the other person required. Mary described how, when she was involved with someone, she neither expressed her wishes directly nor confronted the man's behavior. Instead, she became paralyzed and withdrew into fantasy conversations without articulating what it was that she felt.

During the second year of treatment Mary began to embrace her profound sadness over what she called "missed opportunities" in her life. She felt she had wasted time hiding within her self, unable to experience relationships of true mutuality. At about the same time she became involved in a similar fantasy with another man. Once again, Mary thought the man was looking at her and that he turned away as soon as she exchanged his glance. Six months elapsed before Mary spoke to the man, asking him for help with a work-related project. While he expressed interest in joining her in the project he never followed through and when she called to ask about his plans he didn't return her calls. Mary wanted her attraction to him to end but she found that his continuous stare captured her.

Several months later Mary was able to ask if he were interested in her. He denied any interest and explained that he already was involved with someone.

After Mary's second fantasy flirtation we explored her fantasy more deeply. Exploration of her fantasy revealed Mary's silent wish to be recognized, to be known for who she is, and to be admired. Coincident with this new awareness, Mary developed an interest in her adoption and turned to her father for information. He responded openly, told Mary what he knew about the adoption, and then together they tearfully explored the archive of family pictures.

The persistence of Mary's fantasy of an admiring other piqued our curiosity and directed our attention to its possible unconscious origins. While the meaning of the fantasy was unclear at first, the fantasy reminded Allen of the experience of an adopted woman in his practice. This woman, whose birth father died when she was two, and who was adopted by her stepfather when she was seven, carried a life-long idealized fantasy about her lost father. Although she had no active memory of her birth father, she did have the fantasy, beginning in childhood and persisting throughout her adult years, that her birth father was hanging vaguely "overhead," watching her admiringly, intent on keeping her safe. This fantasy experience of a child who lost her parent early in life called our attention to the persistent unconscious childhood idealizations that, as with Mary, can continue into adulthood. In concert with our hypothesis we note that this woman had a troubled experience with both her difficult mother and her loving

but insensitive adoptive stepfather.

We now present the obverse of the above situations with the study of two adopted children, each of whom had a reliably idealizable adoptive parent. We call attention to the fact neither of these children elaborated a persistent idealized fantasy of their birth parent. This is especially noteworthy since each child was adopted into a complicated and potentially problematic situation.

The first child we present is Tommy, initially seen for evaluation when he was five years old. Tommy, adopted into a white family, has a white birth mother and an African American-Hispanic birth father. In his adoptive family he is the middle child in a sib-ship of three. Neither of Tommy's siblings is adopted. They are of fair skin, have blond hair, and look like their mother. Tommy's was an open adoption and his adoptive parents have created an atmosphere in their home where discussion of Tommy's adoption, of being bi-racial, of the differences and similarities between and among the children in the family, and of tolerance about differences among people can all be openly explored.

Mother first voiced her concern about Tommy after an incident in which Tommy hit his baby-sitter with a hockey puck. Coincidentally, during that same week, Tommy had become frightened when his mother left the children with a new baby sitter. The search for a possible precipitant of Tommy's agitation revealed that mother's attention had been diverted to Tommy's younger brother who had been ill that week. Tommy had another outburst during that week when mother asked

him to put on his coat before he went outdoors to skate. Tommy refused, saying that he “did not want to look different than the other kids,” a concern Tommy had voiced earlier in terms of having different skin color than either of his siblings.

When I saw Tommy for the first session, I told him that I knew about the hockey puck incident, that mom told me he had been angry with his sister and brother, and that he was having trouble when mom left the house without him. He complained that his younger sister wouldn't let him into her room and that his older brother wouldn't let him play with his gerbils. Tommy had brought the special blanket he sleeps with to the session. For the second session Tommy brought his adored, very black, stuffed puppy. As Tommy held his own puppy, he eyed the black and white puppy I had sitting on my bookshelf. He suddenly pulled my puppy off the shelf, bit it, threw it to the ground, and jumped on it. I asked why Tommy treated my puppy that way and he said it was “bad,” but he couldn't explain how or why. He did show me, however, how his own black puppy could do flips and summersaults. I understood this behavior to be an expression of Tommy's strong need to show me his sense of adequacy, independence and strength.

We next talked about colors and I commented that in our previous session Tommy had told me about the eye color of his entire family. I wondered about colors of other things such as skin color. I gently teased Tommy and asked him if he had ever seen green people since he had just told me that people are all

different colors. I asked what color his skin is and he pulled up his sleeve and said that his arm is brown but other places on him are white. I wondered what color his mom is and Tommy said, "Green!" I wondered if she was born green and, with a straight face, Tommy said, "No, she is Green Slime," a reference to a toy called Slime. He then moved to the window to see if his mother had returned in her car and whether she was waiting for him. When he saw she wasn't there Tommy said, "No car." I asked Tommy if he was worried about her returning and he said that he wasn't. Tommy next played with an older doll in my dollhouse and said it was a babysitter. I wondered aloud whether it was difficult when his mom went away and left him with a sitter. Tommy denied having any trouble when she left him. I replied that his mom told me it was hard for Tommy when she left. She said that he often cries but again Tommy denied that was a problem.

A few days later, Tommy's mother told me that after his session, Tommy had been merciless with his younger sister. He tortured her verbally, telling her that she is a baby and isn't able to do the things Tommy could do. In addition, Tommy announced to his sister that her birth mother was dead! Mother corrected Tommy by telling him that she is his sister's birth mother and asked Tommy if he thought his birth mother was dead. When Tommy said that he didn't think his birth mother was dead Tommy's mom took the opportunity to speak once again about his birth mother. She told him that his birth mother was

only sixteen years old when he was born and that she “could not take care of any baby.” Tommy seemed to settle down after she told him that.

Mother said that people often comment about how much Tommy’s siblings look alike and that these remarks are difficult for Tommy to hear. I suggested that she continue her affirmation of Tommy’s distress when that happens. In terms of information about Tommy’s birth mother, I suggested that she give Tommy only factual information when he requested it. I told her that I didn’t think explanations about the abandonment softened Tommy’s pain and that references not requested by Tommy about his birth mother might be upsetting for him. I suggested that she continue to tell Tommy that he is an important member of the family and that he is very much loved.

When Tommy came for his third appointment, he was carrying a black and white spotted Beanie Baby dog and a brown Beanie Baby dog. He held both animals closely and with great affection. He looked for my stuffed puppy again and this time he called it a fox. He took it off the shelf, stomped on it, pulled its neck, stuck its tail under the door and said it was “dead.” I told Tommy that I knew from his mother that he had difficulty settling down after he left here last week and that he had been particularly hard on his sister. While he denied this, he did say that he had some “feelings.” He told me that he had been a good brother today because he found his sister’s ball in his room and had given it back

to her. With pleasure, he also told me his older brother had allowed him to pet his gerbil.

When mother came to pick Tommy up she told me that the week had been much better. Tommy was more settled and she was looking forward to celebrating his birthday, although she was concerned about what that day might mean for him in terms of his adoption. Confirmation that Tommy's birthday might stir upsetting issues came in the form of Tommy's question about who picked his name when he was born. Mother assured him that she chose his name and reminded him that he was named for her own father and brother.

I saw Tommy one year later, when he was six and one-half years old and about to enter first grade. Mother came for help this time because she was worried over another incident with the babysitter. Trouble began when the sitter suggested that the children eat lunch and she gave Tommy's sister the one remaining yogurt. Tommy became enraged, jumped on his sister, and began to choke her. In an effort to help Tommy settle down, the sitter sent him to his room where he immediately began throwing things around and became totally out of control, and then he ran outside when the sitter tried to calm him. Tommy ran to his school and told a neighbor who found him running around that he "did not have a family."

With close examination of what might have led up to Tommy's outburst, mother was able to identify a precipitant. It seems that a week earlier Tommy had

accompanied his father on a trip to attend the christening of Tommy's bi-racial seven-month old boy cousin who had been adopted into a family that had a three-year-old biological daughter. Mother didn't go on the trip because she was afraid to leave Tommy's younger sister who was ill. During the visit the family spoke often about adoption. Upon his return, Tommy learned that his brother, sister and mother had gone to a movie without him. He became furious about being left out despite having had a good time with his father.

During this period of our work I saw Tommy and his mother together for three appointments. Tommy volunteered his fantasy that he had lived with his birth mother for a while before he came to live with his adoptive family. Mother told him that he had been with his adoptive family ever since he was two days old. Tommy didn't seem convinced and had no apparent response other than to continue his play and conversation. In the following two sessions Tommy was able to talk about his recent upset and jealousy over his brother and sister having spent the weekend with his mother. He was able to say how frightened he became when he lost control of himself.

The story of Tommy reveals some of the expectable, non-pathologic upsets an adopted child might experience as he struggles to integrate the facts of his birth and "who he really is" with the question of "To whom does he belong?" This material also demonstrates the positive impact an adoptive parent can have upon an adopted child when he or she is attuned to the child's special struggles.

Despite her periodic anxious responses, Tommy's mother was reliably idealizeable. Her emotional availability and sensitivity to Tommy's special issues enabled him to form a secure bond with her and aided in his selection of her as a reliably idealizeable object. Having a reliably idealizeable parent enabled the developmental process in the idealizing sector of Tommy's personality to unfold without undue interference. Tommy's healthy idealization of his adoptive mother and father obviated the need for an idealization of his birth parents, even though Tommy did have a momentary wish to return to his birth mother during times of marked vulnerability. In both instances of Tommy's rage, his vulnerable state developed when the tie to his adoptive mother was threatened. Tommy became vulnerable when he was uncertain about the strength and security of that tie and resorted to a fantasized merger with his birth mother. In the fantasy, mother was a good provider who, in fact, did care for him.

The last child we will present is Maria, an eleven and one-half year old girl at the start of treatment, born in Nicaragua and adopted by her current family of a mother, father, and two older brothers, when she was seven years old. To the best of our knowledge, Maria's birth mother died while giving birth to a sibling when Maria was three years old. After her mother's death, Maria had lived with her birth father in their Nicaraguan village until the age of four when her drunken father knocked her into an open fire. She sustained burns over thirty percent of her body and was taken from her village to a large city nearby where she spent

the following year in a hospital. Her severe burns involved her neck, torso, and upper right arm that had eventually become fused to her chest.

An American film team documenting the pro bono work of American surgeons in the area discovered Maria in the hospital when she was five years old. Being a lovely, likeable child, one of her surgeons developed a fondness for her and brought her to the United States to live with him and his wife, and to eventually adopt her. Sadly, this living arrangement didn't work out and after nine months Maria moved in with the woman film editor who had discovered her. The arrangement with this woman also failed and Maria was then legally adopted into her present family. The adoption occurred shortly before she began first grade at the age of seven years.

Maria seemed to make a good adjustment to her new family. Her adoptive parents had always wanted a daughter and both were supportive of Maria's needs and understanding of her traumas. Maria's school personal required that she make up two lost academic years (due to the disruptions in her life), and she was scheduled to begin sixth grade the next fall. Six months earlier, according to mother, Maria became "weepy" and complained of generalized anxiety when her adoptive mother suffered a brief depression. Prior to mother's upset, Maria was an easy-going, friendly, accommodating child, happy to have people's attention. Mother said that Maria was sensitive to people's opinion of her and that she censored her stories if she thought someone might disapprove of what she had

to say. Mother also worried that Maria didn't seem to have any noticeable reaction when her brothers reminded her she didn't look like the rest of the family. Worrisome, too, was Maria's stoic response to sad movies.

When I first saw Maria she had already begun her surgical reconstruction. She gave me a chronological history of her past experiences but was unable to remember her family of birth. She said she felt "lucky" to have been adopted and said that she would be dead if she were still in Nicaragua. When I asked if she was curious about her birth family, without hesitation, she denied any curiosity.

A talented artist, Maria expressed her feelings through her drawings. She spoke little of her life prior to her move to the United States but spoke easily and openly about her sadness at feeling insecure in her friendships. She did share her thought that she daydreamed about her birth mother every night before she could fall asleep. Maria wondered what her mother looked like and whether she resembled her. In our sessions we spoke about Maria's many losses and about her sadness. She wished that someday her adoptive mother would take her to Nicaragua but she was afraid to suggest this fearing she would hurt her adoptive mother's feelings. Wonderfully in tune with her daughter, Maria's adoptive mother told me of her desire to take Maria to Nicaragua when Maria was ready and able to ask to go there. About four months into the treatment Maria went to an art fair and told me that when she came upon the portrait of a Latino woman

she said, "I'll bet that is what my mother looked like!"

After one year of treatment Maria felt much better. Although she faced additional surgery she was less frightened about it. She felt ready to end her treatment. During termination Maria talked about her excitement over celebrating her forthcoming thirteenth birthday, of her anticipation at entering a new school for seventh grade, and of not feeling like a little girl anymore. Maria was upset that she did not perform at grade level in math yet, but she felt happy about her improved reading ability. She was proud that she was going to be a paid day camp counselor in the summer.

Maria returned to see me one year later, following surgery for the reconstruction of her chest. While this surgery was "minor" compared to previous procedures, it necessitated Maria's wearing an elastic body stocking to promote the proper healing of her skin. She told me that she felt "like a freak" and she was uncomfortable because people stared at her. In our sessions she remembered that her first "adoptive parents" didn't keep her, and that she had been "rude and queenly-acting" with the film editor who had initially befriended her. Now, at fourteen, she felt that "nothing was right."

Maria's mother reviewed the past year with me. She let me know that Maria was caught shoplifting last spring when, according to Maria, a girlfriend had threatened to tell Maria's schoolmates about her burns if she did not steal. Mother also told me she worries that Maria feels ugly. Recently Maria shared

with mother that she wished her adoptive family were Latino because it was painful that she did not look like any members of her family. She also shared that every night she has a fantasy/wish that maybe she looks like her birth mother.

Maria resumed treatment with me for the next six months. In our work this time she was open about her fears and her curiosity over sexual development. She mourned her lost family and expressed her anger and disappointment about her early years. She spoke about her fear of being abandoned and of her interest in eventually visiting Nicaragua. During this period Maria became more confident in her appearance and more comfortable with her scarred body. She finished the school year feeling upbeat and confident.

Maria contacted me twice after our last termination. In the first contact, six months after we ended, she sent me a birthday card in which she wrote "I really want to thank you for everything...so thanks!" One year after that Maria sent me a note in response to a gift of shower gel and lotion (my unconscious wish, perhaps, that she now be able to admire her body) that I sent for her eighth grade graduation. She wrote;

"Oh god I just noticed how I'm writing a little like my mother!!! You've been so great w/me the times we talked was great. I got a lot off my chest. Thanx. I really like to talk and use those intellectual words (smiley face)...but enough cheese, thank you so much (hearts drawn), I miss ya, Maria."

Maria presents an unusual situation for us in that her adoption occurred at a later age and under unusual circumstances. Her fantasy experience with her

birth mother differs from the others we have talked about in that she did experience an actual idealization of an actual mother. Maria's bedtime fantasy, therefore, partakes of memory as much as it does of fantasy. Even so, Maria is able to form an idealization of her admirable adoptive mother and she is capable of forming other idealizations as well. It is at times when Maria is vulnerable, such as when she faces surgery or even when she is falling asleep, that she returns to the memory of her earlier idealization for succor and stability. Maria's idealization of her birth mother, however, does not have the driven intensity and persistence that precludes the development of an idealization of others. We ascribe this experience to the comfortable relationship Maria has with her reliably idealizeable adoptive parents. Despite a traumatic life, Maria is an engaging and resilient child. We wonder if this resilience is reflective of what Marian Tolpin calls the "leading or forward edge" of development. In Tolpin's conceptualization, a healthy part of the self remains, despite the traumas, and that part eventually becomes accessible to the patient and therapist during the working through of the transference (Tolpin, 2000).

Conclusion

Although our series is limited, we believe that our observations about the adopted child's persistent fantasy of an idealized birth parent point to an important direction for those who treat adopted children. We assert that the fantasy of the adopted child's idealized birth parent is an expression of the child's

unconscious need to merge with an omnipotent object and that the fantasy persists because the fulfillment of that need has been complicated by a disruption in the idealizability of the adoptive or step-parent. This observation carries clinical implications for those who treat adopted children since the presence of such a fantasy draws attention to the subtle, but possibly disrupted, nature of the interactions among the adoptive triad. Recognition of this possibility alerts the clinician to an area of exploration and working through that might otherwise be overlooked.

Finally, we have taken the phenomenon of the adopted child's fantasy of the idealized birth parent as an opportunity to discuss and underscore the import and clinical utility of unconscious fantasy in therapeutic work. We highlight this issue because of our concern about the trend in current psychoanalytic thinking that places growing emphasis on the therapeutic relationship itself as the major curative element in psychoanalytic treatment, while the understanding, exploring, interpreting, and working through of unconscious elements has become under-emphasized (Siegel 1999).

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