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THE INSTITUTE FOR CLINICAL SOCIAL WORK

SELF AND ALMA MATER: A STUDY
OF ADOPTED COLLEGE STUDENTS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Based on clinical practice in a college counseling center this researcher has observed that there are special problems which adopted students face as they adjust to the college environment. Problems which have been identified by adopted students when they present for psychological counseling include: (1) relationship problems, (2) sexual identity concerns, (3) conflict with adoptive parents, (4) curiosity about biological parents, (5) academic concerns/ definition of life and career goals, and (6) behavioral difficulties including sexual promiscuity and substance abuse. Although these are problems that may be represented in college students across the board, it has been this researcher's observation that each of these problems for the adopted student is connected with the adoption experience. This observation has been substantiated by many authors on adoption and adolescence who report that the adopted adolescent does have greater difficulty with the tasks of this stage (Frisk, 1964; Sorosky, Baran, & Pannor, 1975; Tec & Gordon, 1967).

While the degree to which adoption is viewed by the student to be a contributing factor in the stated problem is unclear, the fact that the student is adopted is usually expressed by the student in the first session. In all of the cases in this researcher's experience, these problems have been sufficient to interfere with academic functioning to the extent that the students were either on academic probation or near academic probation status. Inability to succeed academically creates a situation wherein the student is less likely to identify and develop his or her unique skills and talents. The lack of information available on adoptees in late adolescence/early adulthood and the fact that adoptees do present for psychotherapy in college counseling centers warrant rigorous inquiry into understanding the experience of the adopted college student.

A review of the literature suggests several variables that affect the adjustment and learning of adopted children which serves as an underpinning to the research inquiry. The experience of being adopted is seen as a potentially painful and traumatic event. In the general population adopted children are referred for psychological treatment two to five times as frequently as their nonadopted peers (Brinich, 1980). The general consensus is that there is a preponderance of behavioral problems and personality disorders reported in adopted children (Blum, 1983; Brinich, 1980; Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, 1992);

Weider, 1977a). In addition, there were substantial reports of learning difficulties in children who were adopted. Many of these learning difficulties began around the age of 8 or 9 when children enter what Piaget (Ginsberg & Oppen, 1988) calls the concrete observational stage and were exacerbated around the age of 13 when children were in danger of failing in school and referred for treatment at that time (Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, 1992; Weider, 1977a). This fact seems to substantiate the researcher's observation that the problems associated with the formation of identity which are heightened with the onset of puberty, and greatly more complex for adopted children, do interfere with the learning process.

The family communication style (Reitz & Watson, 1992) and self and object representations (Brinich, 1980) were among the variables reflected in the literature which were most significant in the adjustment of the adopted child.

It is hoped that findings from this study will be directly beneficial to college psychotherapists, who are usually clinical social workers or psychologists, as they struggle with the complex issues of providing treatment to adopted students. In addition, the findings will be useful to clinical social workers in various forms of practice as they work with adoptees in adolescence or young adulthood, and their families. It is further expected that the

findings may suggest preventive measures to clinical social workers who work with younger adoptees, and will point to future areas of research.