

## The Primal Wound: A Preliminary Investigation into the Effects of Separation from the Birth Mother on Adopted Children

**Author:** Verrier, Nancy

**Publication info:** Pre- and Peri-natal Psychology Journal 2. 2 (Winter 1987): 75-86.

[ProQuest document link](#)

**Abstract:** None available.

**Full Text:** Headnote ABSTRACT: Although adoption is considered by many people to be the optimal solution to the problem of relinquished children, the growing number of adoptees searching for birth parents and the advent of pre- and peri-natal psychology suggest that it is not so simple a solution as had once been thought. This paper examines several problems adoptees have to face as they adapt to living with people with whom they have no biological connection: a loss of the "ideal self," as a possible result of premature separation from the biological mother; an assuming of the "false self," as a means of dealing with the fear of further rejection and abandonment; and the relationship with the adoptive mother, which is often ambivalent and conflictual. This paper is excerpted from a study of 15 adult adoptees, which inferred the existence of a wound to the Self as a result of having been separated from their birth mothers and the awareness that this separation was one of "choice" and not "fate." Its purpose was to broaden our understanding of relinquishment and adoption, as experienced by the adoptee, in such a way so as to encourage more research and lead to more effective methods of dealing with the emotional problems of this population. This aspect of the study focuses: on the sense of Self, which may be damaged as a result of premature separation from the biological mother; on the subsequent assuming of the exaggerated persona or "false self as a means of dealing with the fear of further rejection and abandonment; and on the relationship with the adoptive mother in all its ambiguity and poignancy. Although other children may have similar problems as a result of premature separation from the mother or failure to bond for various reasons, the case of the adoptee is unique in that the separation is one of "choice" by the birth mother and cuts the child off both from his heritage and from trying to work out the resulting conflict with her. One of the difficulties in doing research with adoptees is that they often use denial as a defense against painful feelings, including feelings of guilt toward their adoptive parents. The taboo against talking about adoption as being different from a "natural" family is very strong, not only within the families themselves, but in society as a whole. To those who asked me, when they heard of my study, "Why would the separation from the birth mother affect a newborn baby?," I had to admit that I had, at one time, asked the same question myself. Now, however, having had personal experience with adoption and being more acquainted with pre- and peri-natal psychology, I believe the more appropriate question to be, "Why wouldn't the separation from the mother to whom he/she was connected for nine months affect an infant?" Most of the adoptees in this study lead ordinary lives and do not stand out as having anything "wrong" with them. Nevertheless, they felt as if adoption were something they needed to talk about. Although many could not say why, perhaps we can get a clue from Lifton (1975), who began her book *Twice Born this way: I am adopted. You wouldn't know it to meet me. To all outward appearances I am a writer, a married woman, a mother, a theater buff, an animal fanatics, I can pass. But locked within me there is an adopted child who stirs guilty and ambivalent even as I write these words. The adopted child can never grow up. Who has ever heard of an adopted adult? Perhaps the willingness to talk about their adoption was an attempt on the part of the participants of this study to begin to understand the adopted child within the adult, so that they might learn to know themselves more completely and thus become more complete. One adoptee said, "There is a big empty hole inside me, and I need to plug it back up. That would be my birth mother" (L).\**

**THE PRIMAL WOUND** How can one prove or even support something which is preverbal, such as a wound to the psyche resulting from a trauma about which a person has no conscious memory? In discussing this difficulty in connection with her work on early childhood development,

Mahler (1975) said that we can probably only infer such feelings and experiences on the part of the infant. At the current state of our understanding, such inferences can neither be proven nor disproven, only believed or disbelieved. The integrity of the self is necessary to the healthy development of the ego and its ability to relate to others. Any injury to the basic goodness of Self interferes with that healthy ego development. If the injury occurs at the beginning of life, while the child is still in primal relationship to the mother, the result may be called the "primal wound." This wound, occurring before an infant has begun to separate its own identity from that of its mother, which Mahler refers to as psychological birth, may result in a feeling that part of oneself has disappeared, leaving an infant with a feeling of incompleteness or lack of wholeness. That incompleteness is often felt, not only in the geneological sense of being cut off from one's roots, but in a felt sense of bodily incompleteness. In two separate 1985 seminars on adoption, this incompleteness was described by Deborah Silverstein as "phantom limb pain, a hurt from something missing" and by Annette Baran as "the truncated self." For the child relinquished at this earliest phase of development, then, we may be dealing, not with the loss of the "primary love object," but with the loss of part of the Self. At that stage of primal relationship, Neumann (1973) noted that the mother "not only plays the role of the child's self, but actually is that self." The search for the birth mother takes on new meaning in this context, for it may mean reestablishing a connection, not only with her, but with one's Self. Often, when asked why they want to search for birth parents, adoptees will give a socially approved answer, such as wanting medical information or having an interest in their geneology. I asked a more specific question: "If you had to make a choice, for which parent would you search?" Almost everyone answered, "the mother." Why? Frantz (1985) suggested that abandonment causes one "to be in a constant state of connection to the lost object." That sums up the reasons given by most of the adoptees in this study. They felt a profound emotional connection with the birth mother, even though they had no conscious memory of her. As one adoptee put it, "Trying to find my mother is connected to trying to find my sense of self (A). Another said, "Somehow there is a much more powerful connection with her" (I). When asked why she would look for her mother instead of her father, another participant said, "Oh, he was just someone who loved her. She was the one I was connected to" (H). One woman gave this explanation: "It has something to do with finding out about myself, and it has something to do with trying to explain to myself what happened. I want to know why?" (B). I asked one woman why she happened to be reading the Personals in the newspaper, and she answered, "I always read them. I keep hoping that someday there will be an ad from a woman asking to meet someone born on [her birthday] in [her city of birth]." She is waiting for a message from her birth mother (L). Two people wanted to look for siblings, instead of either parent, feeling that there would be less chance of rejection from them. Perhaps the conflict and ambivalence about searching felt by many of the adoptees I interviewed can best be summed up in the testimony of the adoptee who said, I think it would be interesting ... at the same time terrifying. There's that fear of rejection! I'm torn between a rock and a hard place. I would search for my mother, though. I don't understand why, because I've always thought it would be interesting to find out if my father really was artistic. Did he do that for a career? And then I could see definitely where I inherited by artistic ability. I think it would be fascinating. But I don't know ... there's that pull back to the mother bit. The father is much more an intellectual thing, and the mother is emotional. Hmmm, I'd never thought of that . . . very interesting (and she began to cry). (N) This tie to the mother and the apparent need to reconnect with her as a means of attaining a sense of Self might be a result of the premature "wrenching experience" described by Machtiger (1985), which occurs at a time when the infant would still be cathected in psychological oneness to the mother. It might be a yearning to return to the state of wellbeing which that union implied. The lost object is needed to complete the Self. Joffe and Sandler (1985) suggested that because of the biological object relationship, which begins at conception, and the long period of dependency on that connection, when object loss occurs there is also a loss of an aspect of the self. The attention which focuses so exclusively on the object is a means by which one hopes to reattain the lost state of the Self. Perhaps the strength of this relationship has been underestimated because of the apparent adjustment most children make to the new environment. Machtiger said, "Though the

psychological effects of childhood trauma may only become apparent in later years, the actual damage to the personality has been there since childhood, even though it may be masked by a superficial adjustment." This "superficial adjustment" disallows a true mourning of the original loss and inhibits the libido from transferring and reinvesting in new images or objects. The inability to deal with loss "coincides with the development of a false self or a persona wherein feelings are bottled up." THE FALSE SELF A tendency toward a false self or exaggerated persona was evident in most adoptees interviewed for this study. They related an inability to express feelings, especially negative feelings, such as anger, hostility, or disappointment. They formed a persona which was compliant and "good" in order to avoid rejection. Some perceived the "real" self to be not only less than ideal, but defective or "bad." One woman, who is in fact charming, beautiful, and very talented, and who had always felt loved by her adoptive family, described herself as a "rotten, crummy, unworthy person" (A). Although most adoptees were not so vehement in their denunciations of themselves, they, nevertheless, voiced apprehension about allowing anyone to see the "real" person beneath the persona. As one woman put it, "I don't want people to know how insecure I feel. Not letting people know keeps me more in control" (F). A woman, who said that it was much easier for her to address huge crowds of people in an impersonal manner than to have a one-on-one in-depth conversation with anyone knows that people see her as a competent, worthwhile person. Inside, however, she feels very insecure and distrusts other's motives (J). Another person gave a similar example: Many people see her as dynamic, dramatic, and extraverted, yet she feels small and lonely. Sometimes she is afraid that others can see what is really going on inside (A). One woman, who said that she uses her false self for protection, said, "I'm not always sure against what, except rejection" (H). Another said, "If people didn't know how insecure I felt, then they wouldn't . . . couldn't get a reaction from me" (B). A man offered that some of the false self is necessary: "Some of that's discipline. It has to be." To others he knows that he seems in charge of himself, but inside he feels "a wreck" (P). Perhaps an observation from my daughter, when she was 14 years old, encapsulates the general feelings: "If someone rejects the outside you, that's not so bad, because it isn't really you; but if you let someone know who you really are inside and they reject you, that's really rejection." The fear of rejection is one of the primary fears of adoptees. LOVE, TRUST, AND THE ADOPTIVE MOTHER The fear of rejection often appears to manifest first in the child's primary relationship to the adoptive mother. It was evident in this study that the relationship between adoptees and their mothers was often conflictual, as had been found in other studies (Brinich, 1980; Wieder, 1978). This was in contrast to that with the adoptive father, which, if not always positive, seemed fairly consistent. Although five adoptees found it easier to bond with their fathers than with their mothers, many said that their fathers were either absent or emotionally distant, placing most of the responsibility for the emotional well-being of their children on the mother. For those whose fathers were not distant, the relationships seemed more straightforward and easier to define than that with the mother. Fathers are often confused by what is going on with the mother. One adoptee said, "It was between me and Mom. Dad was outside it" (A). "All the hoopla," said James Mehlfeld at an adoption seminar, "is the child trying to connect with the mother." The danger which this seems to pose is what might make the relationship so difficult. Will the child again be abandoned? Who was the abandoner? Wieder claimed that the confusion about the mothers, which mother is which, is often reflected in their confusion about the meaning of adoption as a process: "The child starts to believe that the adopting mother is the abandoning mother, and that the term adoption means abandonment." This confusion is further noticed as adoptees alternately refer to their biological mothers and their adoptive mothers as the "real" mother. As I was talking with adoptees, it seemed as if the term "real" was used consciously for the adoptive mother and unconsciously for the biological mother, as the participants became more relaxed and less guarded about what they were saying Stone (1972) pointed out that the question, whether spoken or unspoken, "Why did my own mother not keep me?" is almost always followed by the unexpressed equally anxious thought, "If she could do that, what about you?" This inability to trust the permanence of the mother/child relationship may also be at the root of many adoptees' failure to feel love and affection from the adoptive mother. "No matter how much he is

told by his mother that he is loved, he is unable to accept or believe this" (Taichert and Harvin, 1975). I found this to be true with my daughter and me. My attempts to express affection were rejected right from the beginning. She seemed to need to keep a distance between us as a way to be less vulnerable. I mentioned this to a participant during one interview and said that it was different when we were in public. There my daughter became very affectionate herself and allowed for more closeness from me. I said that I attributed this to her feeling that we could not get too close in public; but the adoptee said, "Oh no! I know what she was doing. She knew you wouldn't dare reject her in public, so she could allow her true feelings and needs to surface" (H). One learns from those who know! If a child, even an infant, doesn't trust the love and permanency of the relationship, why should he put himself in a position to be hurt again? Might it be possible that in many cases the adoptee feels the need to defend against further devastation by initiating a distancing response to bonding? This idea comes as a surprise to some adoptees, if, indeed, it ever becomes conscious at all. In one such case, a woman, who had described her relationship with her mother as negative, never considered what part she may have unconsciously been playing in the rift until she volunteered to do a regressive hypnosis with Dr. David Cheek of San Francisco, as a way of reexperiencing her birth and adoption. She discovered that as an infant she did not want anything to do with her adoptive mother, but instead wanted to be left alone. (This was corroborated by her mother's memories.) It had never occurred to the adoptee that her adoptive mother needed to feel accepted by her and that she may have felt rejected instead; yet it seemed to fit with her own feelings and with what her mother had at one time told her (B). This is not to suggest that a baby could do anything differently, but it is interesting to entertain the idea that adoptees may not realize the impact they had on their adoptive mothers at the beginning of their lives. And it might be important for adoptive mothers to know the possible reason for their felt sense of rejection: The substitution of mothers might not have been unnoticed by the babies. As Cheek (1986) reminded us, "We must ... rid ourselves of the belief that the central nervous system of infants is incapable of sensing and remembering prenatal and perinatal existence." Distancing may be there even when the child seems compliant and affectionate. Most adoptees interviewed noted an inability to feel truly intimate with their adoptive mothers. Even when describing the relationship with the mother as positive, this was often qualified by statements that it was shallow or superficial. One participant, who felt very connected to her mother and modeled herself after her, said that she now realizes that the relationship was shallow emotionally: "I cannot discuss intimate feelings with her." She described herself as "numbing out" her own feelings and aligning herself with her mother, becoming what her mother wanted "a la Alice Miller" (I). Another woman, who began by saying that she and her adoptive mother got along fine, added that it was difficult for them to talk very deeply about things and that they always ended up arguing (F). The only woman who didn't equivocate about her positive relationship with her adoptive mother, describing many positive memories of mother/daughter activities, has very strong and angry feelings towards her birth mother, whom she had identified as the abandoner and "bad" mother. Her adoptive mother is obviously the "good" mother. Eiduson and Livermore (1953), in describing their experiences with adoptees, noted that the children failed to accept the fact of their adoption in the sense of seeing their adoptive parents as encompassing both "good" and "bad" and with whom they would have to work out their own inner feelings of love and hate. Indeed, many adoptees tended to split the images of good and bad, both for themselves and for their parents, especially the mother, which often resulted in an ambivalent, conflictual relationship with her. This splitting between the "good" and "bad" mother, by means of the mechanisms of reversal and displacement, often results in the adoptive mother being the recipient of the anger, which is actually felt toward the mother who relinquished the child (Brinich, 1980; Wieder, 1978). The adoptive mother is often seen as both savior and potential abandoner, so that a child vacillates between an attitude of compliance to maintain his position in the family or, in sharp contrast to his self-demeaning, restricted behavior, he may act out in order to test the permanence of his relationship with them (Wieder, 1978; Taichert & Harvin, 1975). In most cases in the literature, due to those being adoptees in treatment, the hostility was overt and the compliance was covert. In my study, it was the other way around. Most adoptees acted in their families

in a withdrawn, compliant manner. The anger and hostility were there, however, and would burst forth unexpectedly at times. As one man described it, "I would be withdrawn and quiet, then all of a sudden do something 'off the wall,' " which everyone would consider his not being himself (P). The problem was that, as with many adoptees, the "not-being-himself part was the way he actually felt a great deal of the time, but could not express for fear of rejection. One adoptee often referred to her withdrawal as "hiding out." This "hiding out," "numbing out," or living the "false self may have seemed a matter of survival. Distancing and withdrawing appears to be a defense against the anxiety which the uncertainty of the permanence of the relationship evokes. At the same time, there is a deep wish to bond with the adoptive mother and to be able to accept love and affection. This need for love and the concomitant inability to trust it confuses the relationship with the mother, with both adoptee and mother frequently feeling rejected. There is also confusion, conscious or unconscious, about who is the real mother and the place of the biological mother in their lives.

**ATTACHMENT AND BONDING** Perhaps this would be a good place to stress the difference between attachment behavior and bonding, as I see it. I believe that it would be safe to say that almost all adopted children form attachments to their adoptive mothers. This is crucial to their survival. Bonding, on the other hand, may not be so easily achieved. It implies a profound connection, which is experienced at all levels of human awareness. In the earliest stages of an infant's life, this bond instills the child with a sense of well-being and wholeness necessary to healthy development. The significance of this very important beginning of life is now being stressed by many experts in the fields of obstetrics and psychology (Cheek, 1986; Verny, 1981; Arms, 1982; Pearce, 1977). The question as to whether or not an adoptee is at a disadvantage as a result of missing the earliest imprinting or bonding experiences has been postulated by Baran (1985), Winnicott (1965), Clothier (1943), and many others. From my own study, it appears that this is an aspect of the adoptee's circumstances which needs further investigation. It has been indicated that basic trust, as described by Erikson (1950), and its concomitant feeling of hopefulness are frequently replaced by anxiety, depression, and hopelessness. In the case of the adoptee, this may be an attempt to mourn the loss of the first mother and to attach and bond with the adoptive mother. This process may be at the root of the conflictual adoptive relationship, whether it takes the form of acting-out or withdrawal and compliance. The compliant adoptee is not necessarily less wounded than the acting-out adoptee. He has only found a different way to adapt. Both need understanding, steadfast love, and a way to facilitate the mourning process. Whatever adaptation the adoptee may employ, he gives up his basic right to be himself, which may be quite different from his adoptive parents. Nickman (1985) has pointed out that adoptees are particularly prone to rebel against parental pressures and standards because of their knowledge of separate origins and their need for autonomous self-definition. "Simply stated, an adopted son or daughter cannot be expected to be a conformist." That is, unless he or she has decided that this is the only way to survive in the family, in which case he does what Nickman described as "inhibiting an important part of himself for the sake of basic security, or out of a sense of guilt or responsibility toward his adopters." What then seems to happen is that the child becomes hypervigilant as he assesses the "climate" around him in order to know what is expected of him. To many adoptees I interviewed, this need to be vigilant felt like walking a tightrope. Or, as one woman put it, "It was like walking a narrow ridge in the middle of the Grand Canyon" (B). The anxiety which this evokes sometimes leads to exaggerated behavior. A woman, who felt loved by her mother, nevertheless described her relationship with her as "love/hate" and said that her anger at her mother was "way out of proportion to what was going on. I would just explode." She doesn't remember her mother ever getting mad at her or raising her voice, but she felt manipulated by her and angry at her (A).

**VICTIMIZATION AND CONTROL** This brings up another feeling described by some adoptees: that they are "victims." Mikawa and Boston (1968) suggested that adoptees often use their adoptive status as a rationalization for conflicts which arise with parents and that this hinders understanding. While this may be true and cause parents and children to overlook some obvious interpersonal conflicts, it might be important to realize that adoptees are victims of manipulation of the gravest kind: the severing of their ties to the birth mother and their biological roots. The feeling of being a victim is not

just a fantasy, but a reality. As Maduro (1985) put it, "Just as in myth, the individual ego, in every abandonment scenario, is left feeling at the mercy of something or somebody else." The fact that a child does not consciously remember the substitution of mothers should not detract us from this truth. One adoptee told me that the most important thing that I told her was that feelings have memories. That statement validated a variety of feelings, the sources of which she could not trace, but which were very strong and persistent. One such feeling was that of being a victim, about which she often felt guilty. Understanding the possible source of that feeling may be the first of many steps toward her being able to feel more in control of her life and less a victim. Having been manipulated at the beginning of their lives makes some adoptees, including the majority in this study, manipulative and controlling. There seems to be an almost desperate need to be in control at all times. Some adoptees control situations by becoming isolated and detached, others are more overt in their controlling mechanisms. In either case, there seems to be a need to avoid being in a situation again which might trigger rejection and possible abandonment. Rather than dismissing the feeling of victimization on the part of the adoptee as a rationalization and a means of avoiding the resolution of parent/child conflicts, as suggested by Mikawa and Boston, perhaps first acknowledging the child's feelings, then going on to the interpersonal problem would be a better way to proceed. Validation of feelings is always important, but it may be especially so for adoptees, who sometimes feel as if they are living a lie. Not only does it seem difficult to trust the people they love or want to love, but they often cannot trust their own feelings or sense of themselves. The loss of the "ideal Self," experienced at relinquishment and often exacerbated by the inability of even the most responsive adoptive mother to successfully mirror her child in the same way as the biological mother might have been able to do, may put the adoptee at a disadvantage in each subsequent relationship (Clothier, 1943). Difficulties in all relationships with significant others was another finding of this study, but one which goes beyond the scope of this paper.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS** There is an assumption throughout this paper that the primary relationship is that between mother and child. This assumption is made because of the nature of the prenatal physiological, hormonal, and psychological connections to the fetus in utero and because of the subsequent part the mother plays as representative of the newborn's Self, as related by Newmann and Mahler. Human beings are very adaptable, but there is much that is yet to be learned about the cost of that adaptability so far as the substitution of mothers is concerned, especially if that adaptation had to begin at the preconscious, preverbal stage of post-uterine life. Adoption may be the optimal solution to the problem of children who cannot be kept by their biological mothers for various reasons, but it is a complex solution which needs more research, education, and understanding.

Footnote \* The letters in parentheses represent the various participants in this study.

**REFERENCES** Arms, S. (1982). Social character may be set by birth practices. *Brain/Mind Bulletin*, 7(4). Baran, A. (1985). *The Unbonded Adoptee* (Cassette Recording). Westminster, CA: Triadoption Library. Brinich, P. Some potential effects of adoption on self and object representation. *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 35. Cheek, D. (1986). Prenatal and perinatal imprints: Apparent prenatal consciousness as revealed by hypnosis. *Pre- and Peri-Natal Psychology Journal*, 1(2), p. 109. Clothier, F. (1943). The psychology of the adopted child. *Mental Hygiene*, 27. Eiduson, B., & Livermore, J. (1953). Complications in therapy with adopted children. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 23. Erikson, E. (1950). *Childhood and Society*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co. Frantz, G. (1985). Birth's cruel secret/0 I am my own lost mother/ to my own sad child. *Chiron*, p. 170. Joffe, W., & Sandler, J. (1965). Notes on pain, depression and individuation. *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 20. Lifton, B. J. (1975). *Twice Born*. New York: McGraw-Hill, p. 3. Machtiger, H. (1985). Perilous beginnings: Loss, abandonment, and transformation. *Chiron*, pp. 101-103. Maduro, R. (1985). Abandonment and deintegration of the primary self. *Chiron*, p. 135. Mahler, M., Pine, F., & Bergman, A. (1975). *The Psychological Birth of the Human Infant*. New York: Basic Books. Mikawa, J., & Boston, J. (1968). Psychological characteristics of adopted children. *Psychiatric Quarterly Supplement*, 42. Neumann, E. (1973). *The Child*. New York: G. P. Putman. p. 13. Nickman, S. (1985). Losses in adoption: The need for dialogue. *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 37, p. 172. Pearce, J. (1977). *Magical Child*. New York: Bantam Books.

Stone, F. (1972). Adoption and identity. *Child Psychiatry and Human Development*, 2(3), p. 126. Taichert, L., & Harvin, D. (1975). Adoption and children with learning problems. *The Western Journal of Medicine*, 122(6), p. 469. Verny, T. (1981). *The Secret Life of the Unborn Child*. New York: Delta Books. Wieder, H. (1978). Special problems in the psychoanalysis of adopted children. In J. Glenn (Ed.), *Child Analysis and Therapy*, p. 567. Winnicott, D. (1966). *The Family and Individual Development*, New York: Basic Books. AuthorAffiliation Nancy Verrier, M.A. AuthorAffiliation Mrs. Verrier has a Master's Degree in Clinical Psychology from John F. Kennedy University. She is presently doing a private practice internship toward licensure as a Marriage, Family, and Child Counselor, where she specializes in working with adult and adolescent adoptees.

**Publication title:** Pre- and Peri-natal Psychology Journal

**Volume:** 2

**Issue:** 2

**Pages:** 75-86

**Number of pages:** 12

**Publication year:** 1987

**Publication date:** Winter 1987

**Year:** 1987

**Publisher:** Association for Pre&Perinatal Psychology and Health

**Place of publication:** New York

**Country of publication:** United States

**Journal subject:** Medical Sciences--Obstetrics And Gynecology, Psychology, Birth Control

**ISSN:** 08833095

**Source type:** Scholarly Journals

**Language of publication:** English

**Document type:** General Information

**ProQuest document ID:** 198678024

**Document URL:** <http://search.proquest.com/docview/198678024?accountid=36557>

**Copyright:** Copyright Association for Pre&Perinatal Psychology and Health Winter 1987

**Last updated:** 2010-06-06

**Database:** ProQuest Public Health

---

**Contact ProQuest**

Copyright © 2012 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved. - [Terms and Conditions](#)