

Through the Window of Choices: A Study of Adoption in Kolkata City

Megha Saraogi^{1*}, Thippeswamy Vaddar², Monica Kaothala³

ABSTRACT

Background: Adoption refers to taking another's child and bringing up the child as one's own. This process vests in the child all the rights and privileges that a natural-born child would otherwise inherit. Adoption can also be termed as the process of becoming non-biological parents. It is also building a family through the process of concentrated, dedicated, enduring love, rather than biology. A major consideration during the adoption process has been the sex of the child. **Objectives:** To determine the reasons, understand preferences in terms of variables such as gender, age, skin colour, religion, ability or disability, etc. while adopting and analyse the perceptions of adoptive parents on adoption. **Materials and Method:** The study adopts a qualitative method, descriptive research design; an interview was administered to five families, recruited using convenience and snowball sampling. **Results:** Most parents simply go for adoption to have an 'heir to their throne'. Cooperation entails understanding on part of both the child as well as the parents who are willing to adopt. Lack of emotional expression may lead to emotional numbness and lack of transparency in the parent-child relationship. It could be determined that all of the respondents expressed grief at not being able to conceive a child, biologically. **Conclusion:** Adoption is a choice. However, at times it can also become a mandate. It imposes demands on society, creating social stratification and stigma.

Keywords: Adoption, preferences, intersections, choices

INTRODUCTION

Adoption is not only about receiving a new family and living around people who accept you. It is also building a family through the process of concentrated, dedicated, enduring love, rather than biology. The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act (Constitution of India, 1956), ensures a family to those children (below 18 years) who have been abandoned by, have lost their families, or may have been parted from them due to miscellaneous reasons.

A quite essential criteria on for adoption of child since historic times has been gender or rather, the sex of the child. For a very long time, in the patriarchal society of India, male children or boys have been preferred over female children or girls for adoption, as, females would mean an outflow of wealth, in terms of dowry, which in case of males, would be exact opposite i.e., there will be an inflow of wealth. Secondly, sons are seen as carriers of family lineage and history whereas daughters are seen as "the other" after they are married (March 1995).

Finally, it is perceived that sons, even after marriage, live with and take care of their parents as and when they step into old age, whereas in case of daughters, this is practically impossible as they discontinue being a part of their family after marriage. Not only that, but sons also add on to the social status of not just the family but also to the woman who gave birth to him (Davenport, 2009).

¹M.Phil. Scholar of Psychiatric Social Work, ²Assistant Professor of PSW

Dept. of Psychiatry, Kasturba Medical College, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Manipal, Karnataka, India

³Assistant Professor of Social Work, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Guwahati Campus, India

*Email: meghasaraogi94@gmail.com

Several criteria were taken into perspective to holistically understand the frame of mind of the prospective adoptive parents. For instance, when looking at adoption, one also must critically analyse one's preferences for skin colour, gender, family background, age, religion, the physical and mental health of the child and the like (March, 1995). A multitude of issues may arise when children are informed that they have been adopted. They may feel a sense of loss in terms of their birth parents and the life they would have had with them. They may also feel a sense of either loss of their original identity that they would have attained from their birth parents or on the contrary, a feeling of having a dual identity, of which one would come from the parents who adopted them and the other from the knowledge of their birth parents.

A major reason why parents adopt is the absence of children in their lives, particularly due to lack of potential, the inability to reproduce or even the feeling of the need to not do the same. Such parents, therefore, approach adoption centres, orphanages, shelter homes and other similar institutions to adopt child/children to give them the love, support and care that they would have received from their birth parents (Homans, 2002).

Often, even though the process of adoption is a two-way process i.e., from the birth mother (BMO) to the potential adoptive parent (PAP), the ultimate decision for adoption lies in the hands of the birth mother in terms of whom to hand over the child to. The potential adoptive parents have to go through a series of assessments, including personal interviews after they apply for adoption (Baccara et al, 2014). The concerned institutions attain complete information about the couple or individual willing to adopt alongside a stretch of interrogative sessions, to conclude that the parents are fit to adopt the child and will raise him or her the right way. It also becomes a tedious task for the applicants as it is not just strenuous but time taking as well.

In her book, "Our Son a Stranger: Adoption Breakdown and Its Effects on Parents," Marie Adams discusses her personal experience with adopting a son named Time, who later turned out to have behavioural issues which made him leave the house. She also describes the sad demise of her son, on the streets after his act of departing from the home of the parents who adopted him. It is, therefore, crucial to understand that the success of the adoption depends not only on the prospective adoptive parent but on the willingness and the inclination of the child towards the idea as well. Human behaviour lies at the crux of all relationships and can in no way be anticipated or predicted (Adams, 2002).

According to the article 'Child-Adoption Matching: Preferences for Gender and Race', adoption is a process involving two parties- one who is willing to withdraw their parenthood, particularly motherhood, and the other who is willing to enter into the same. The withdrawal and entrance are usually a mutual process, carefully taking into consideration the requirements of both ends (Baccara et al, 2014).

The aim of this study is to determine and analyse the various dimensions of adoption, in terms of preferences and choices and whether it has an impact on the entire process of adopting.

Other than gender, the family structure and dynamics also play a role in determining the adjustment factor and adaptability of the child. The communication patterns in the family and role of parents and parenting styles influence the upbringing of the child and thereby his or her demeanour (Brodzinsky, 1993). Furthermore, there are a number of consequences of prohibiting certain sections of the society such as the homosexuals, eunuchs, unmarried individuals and the like, from parenting children through adoption. First and foremost, it reduces the number of potential adoptive parents and second, it has an implication on the type or category of children that are adopted (Fitzgerald, 1999). The rationale behind this study is

to understand the concept of adoption not just from the child's perspective but also from the parents' perspective. Very little literature is available on this particular topic, one that focuses on preferences of adoption in the upper-middle-class families of Kolkata city.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Aim: The core aim of this research was to understand the concept of adoption with respect to variables such as gender, ethnic background, religion, colour, caste, etc. and to find out the various factors influencing decisions with regard to adoption.

Objectives: The research objectives which provided direction to the study are:

- To determine the reasons and causes for the practice of adoption.
- To understand preferences in terms of variables such as gender, age, skin colour, religion, ability or disability, etc. while adopting.
- To analyse the perceptions of adoptive parents on adoption.

Research Design: A qualitative study, using the descriptive study design, was conducted.

The tool of data collection: A semi-structured interview guide was used to conduct a face-to-face interview, to attain in-depth data.

Sampling: Those couples who had adopted a child in their lifetime, from the upper-middle-class society, in the city of Kolkata. Convenience and snowball sampling methods were used to identify the respondents with ease as adoption is a sensitive issue due to which not many families may be willing to speak about it. A total of 5 respondents were recruited for the study.

Statistical Analysis: During the process of data analysis, audio taped interviews were transcribed in English and field observation notes were added to this. Upon the recommendation of qualitative researchers, the investigator was involved in conducting the interviews, transcribing, coding, and the data analysis. Recorded in interview was transcribed and thematically colour-coded to be able to distinguish between the various themes considered in the research. The data was then interpreted based on the thematic arrangement of the same.

Ethical Considerations: Individual informed written consent was taken from respondents. Respondents were given the space to withdraw from the interview at any given time. Confidentiality of all information was ensured and maintained.

RESULTS

The mandate or demand for an heir: Based on the data, it can be interpreted that most parents simply go for adoption to have an heir to their family, someone who can carry their legacy after them and make the family name last longer. Having an offspring, who can carry on the family name for generations, keep the ancestral property within the family often, becomes the crux of any marital relationship, and failure to do so may lead to schisms in the family, particularly in the relationship between the husband and wife. However, with changing times, people have started to deconstruct the puzzle of biological sciences and now focus on not just women in case of reproductive activities but men as well. Both the man and the woman in a marital relationship, freeing most women of the burden of experiencing stigma and discrimination in society, bore any apparent "liability" of not being able to reproduce. The mandate of having an 'heir to the throne' keeps getting bigger like air being blown into a balloon. Therefore, unanimity and commonality of decisions between both the

husband and the wife and their families become quintessential, to keep the balloon from bursting, intact and in shape.

The truth: keeping vs. revealing: 80% of the parents, i.e., the 1st quarter in the pie chart of truth (blue), had informed their children about them being adopted. In their opinion hiding the fact would lead to complications in the future and could also lead to a breach in trust that the child has for the parent. In addition, 60% of the parents mentioned that it was better for the child to find out about the adoption from the parents than from a third person as it may have a traumatic impact on the child and the child may end up not trusting the parents any longer. Truth becomes the soil on which trustful relationships are built and if not carefully nurtured, and wisely placed, the plant may be withered.

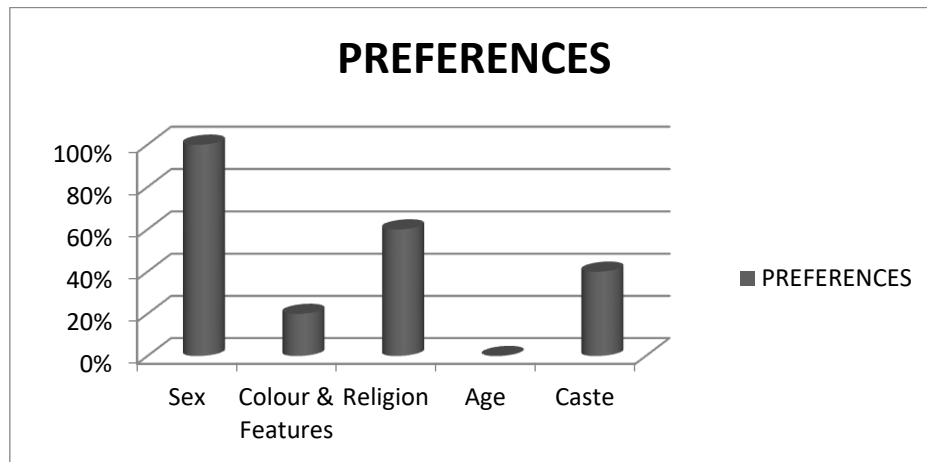
The effect of affect: an emotional outlook- Every healthy relationship has some level of emotional aspect and no criterion of having or not having blood ties should have an impact on how one feels for the other. The only thing that one needs to ensure and sustain a healthy relationship is cooperation. Cooperation entails understanding on part of both the child as well as the parents who are willing to adopt. In addition, it is essential that in the likely incident of a problem, one needs to first convince one's self, as only then will they be able to convince others that the decision they have taken is right for them. Lack of emotional expression may lead to emotional numbness and most importantly, lack of transparency in the parent-child relationship. This can further lead to deviant behaviour being projected by the child as a lack of a sense of emotion also prevents parents from accessing control and certain emotional rights over the child (Adams, 2002).

Therefore, particularly in case of an adoption, to avoid the possible gap that may exist between the parent and child, which is common in case of a forced or unwilling adoption, emotional bonding becomes a prerequisite, which allows the enrichment of the relationship and ensures sustainability.

Mentis impulsum: A mental health perspective: Both 'mentis' and 'impulsum' are Latin terms that mean 'mental' and 'impact' respectively. It could be determined that all of the respondents expressed grief at not being able to conceive a child, biologically. However, each interviewee handled the situation differently. Though all of the respondents did resort to other methods of conception, they failed in the process, leading them to make the decision of adopting. While for 80%, the decision they made was mutual between particularly the husband and the wife, for the remaining 20% it was not so. In the case of the latter, the respondent was not in favour of adoption as both the husband and wife were working, the spouse of the respondent wanted an heir to their family name.

Through the window of choices: Adoption is a choice. It is an option one selects when one is unable to reproduce a child, despite having tried all possible methods. However, at times it can also become a mandate rather than a choice. Societal pressure, familial stressors and the need for an heir to carry the legacy of the family name affect choices of couples or individuals in adoption. On conducting the research and while interviewing the respondents, it could be determined that each respondent had their own set of preferences and requirements for the kind of child they would like to adopt. In addition, in some way or the other, each of their preferences was influenced by the demands either of the family or spouses or the norm of the society. Acceptance and validation from society, of the child, become a matter of concern for parents going for adoption. There is a constant fear of the child and the family being stigmatised and discriminated for the sole reason that the child in the family is adopted. Not only that, but it also reveals about the impotence of one or both of the parents in being able to reproduce. Perennial importance is given to the concept of 'son-preference' due to various reasons such as inheritance issues, carrying forward the family name, taking care

of parents when they become dependents and most importantly, in rural terms, since sons mean incoming of capital unlike in case of daughters who are seen in terms of and are synonymous dowry, which means loss of property.



DISCUSSION

From the study conducted, a number of inferences have been made in terms of first, the need for adoption. Adoption is often the last resort of those seeking to raise a child but is unable to conceive. Such individuals usually opt for other measures and alternatives such as in-vitro fertilization, intrauterine insemination, and very few take up surrogacy as an option (Fitzgerald, 1999).

Other than sex, the family structure and dynamics also play a role in determining the adjustment factor and adaptability of the child. The communication patterns in the family and the role of parents and parenting styles influence the upbringing of the child and thereby his or her demeanour. The study, therefore, addresses the very issue of what it is to adopt and to be adopted in a society where concepts such as that of stigmatization and discrimination freely float. This will not only lead to empathy for the parents and children who desire a child and a parent respectively but will also generate a sense of acceptance among the people in the society. Historically, very little evidence is available on the acceptability of the act of adoption, which is seen to have changed over generations (Brodzinsky, 1993).

One of the major observations of this study was that the decision of adoption is not always unanimous. Most studies have previously focused on the PAP as a couple; however, here the focus is on the individual parent's views (Baccara et al., 2014). Therefore, particularly in case of an adoption, to avoid the possible gap that may exist between the parent and child, which is common in case of a forced or unwilling adoption, emotional bonding becomes a prerequisite, which allows the enrichment of the relationship and ensures sustainability.

CONCLUSION

Often adoption can also become a mandate rather than a choice. Societal pressure, familial stressors and the need for an heir to carry the legacy of the family name affect choices of couples or individuals in adoption.

From the research conducted, it can be concluded that each individual has their own set of preferences and requirements, which are influenced by the demands either of the family or spouses or the norm of the society.

It is very similar to the concept of having a pizza base and selecting its toppings as per one's liking. There is a plethora of variables that prospective adoptive parents choose from such as, age, class, caste, skin colour and complexion and most importantly, the biological identity of sex.

In conclusion, adoption is a choice that not only comes with terms and conditions but instead, it also imposes on the PAPs the demands of the society in terms of the various existing intersections that create social stratification leading to discrimination and marginalization.

Awareness must be raised to outdo prevailing practices of preferring one child to the other due to the lack of certain characteristics. This is only possible if a conscious effort is made by individuals to make the world, not just a better but also a deserving place to live in.

Source of Funding: Nil

Conflict of Interest: None

Ethical Clearance: Taken

REFERENCES

- Adams, M. (2002). *Our son a stranger: adoption breakdown and its effects on parents*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill Queen's University Press.
- Adoption Network.(2018). *Gender selection in adoption*. California: Adoption Network Law Center.
- Baccara, M., Collard-Wexler, A., Felli, L., Yariv, L. (2014). Child-adoption matching: preferences for gender and race. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 6(3), 133-158.
- Bagchi, J. (2013). *Towards equality*. New Delhi: Social Scientist.
- Bo & Jay.(2012). *Adopting gender specific*.USA: Adoptive Families Circle.
- Brodzinsky, D. (1993) *Long-term outcomes in adoption*. New Jersey: Princeton University.
- Caughman, S., Motley, I. (2015). *Selecting gender in adoption*.USA: Adoptive Families.
- Davenport, D. (2009). *Gender preferences in adoption: snips &snails v. sugar &spice*. *Creating a Family*.
- Fitzgerald, B. (1999). Children of lesbian and gay parents: A review of the literature. *Marriage & Family Review*, 29(1), 57-75.
- Gravois, J. (2003). *Bringing up babes*. Slate: Hey Wait A Minute.
- Homans, M. (2002).Adoption and essentialism. *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 21(2),257-274.
- Latty, L. (2016). *What we lost: undoing the fairy tale narrative of adoption*. The Rumpus.
- March, K. (1995). Perception of adoption as social stigma: motivation for search and reunion,57(3), 653-660.
- Perrin, E.C. (2002). *Technical report: Co-parent or second-parent adoption by same-sex parents*. Illinois: American Academy of Pediatrics.

How to Cite this Article: Saraogi, M., Vaddar, T., & Kaothala, M. (2020). Through the Window of Choices: A Study of Adoption in Kolkata City. *National Journal of Professional Social Work*, 21(2), 106-111. doi: 10.29120/njpsw.2020.v11.i2.252