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A Few Remarks on Counselling in the Adoption Process

Adoption guidance is a special form of family guidance whose aim is to support people involved in adoption. They include the biological family, the child and the candidates for adoptive parents. Each of them needs specific kind of aid. It is difficult to unequivocally classify adoption guidance in one of the standard counselling categories (i.e. as directive, liberal or dialogical guidance) since it displays traits of them all. Influencing the advice-seekers strongly, the counsellor is crucial to the process. S/he fosters the clients' maturation, builds trust and creates possibilities to accompany them in the post-adoption follow-up even for a period of several years.

Key words: adoption, adoption counselling, biological family, child, candidates for adoptive parents

About adoption

Adoption is a precious, ancient, interesting and still not fully explored process of accommodating a stranger's child in one's own household. It affects equally a child's biological parents, who for various reasons are not able to take care of and bring up the child, as well as the family who decide to adopt the child. Even though programmes are implemented and social institutions established to help families take care of the child and reduce their reliance on welfare and foster parenthood, adoption still proves necessary. The public should thus be made aware that circumstances discouraging or disabling parents from responsibly caring for children have always existed and might prove irremovable (at least in some social groups). Since, indisputably, the biological family is the best environment for a child's growth and development, it is important to reduce the incidence of such cases as much as possible and by any means available. However, if a child happens to lose its family, it is crucial to realise that s/he must be placed immediately in another environment resembling his/her biological family.

Adoption counselling as a category of family counselling

Counselling applied in adoption process – named ‘adoption counselling’ here – is a subcategory of family counselling focused on solving the non-biological family’s, culture-generated problems. Adoption counselling consists both in publishing guidebooks and in offering advice in direct contacts of the counsellor with a particular group (most commonly, the adoptive family or the family giving the child away into somebody else’s custody). Even though relatively young, Polish adoption guide-writing has its own tradition. The first publications appeared in the 1960s and 70s (Bielicka, Stelmachowski, Sztekiel 1966; Szymborska 1976; Szyszkowska-Klominek 1976). More titles have appeared in bookshops in the last twenty years. Theoretical reflection on adoption counselling started developing in the aftermath of legislation that authorised establishment of private adoption centres in Poland. Whereas previously such facilities had been run either by Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Dzieci (The Society of the Friends of Children) or by public agencies, now non-public organisations could also do that (Ładyżyński 1996). This changed the previous models of adoption procedures; new institutions came into being, new initiatives were implemented and a range of new solutions were allowed. Foundations and associations working for families and children were established, meetings and conferences of adoption communities were organised and the advice-seekers came to be treated as subjects and not objects of the adoption process. A substantial number of institutions engaged in adoption appeared, which produced a specific ‘aura of competitiveness’. Namely, in some big cities, several adoption and childcare centres came into being. Managed by various organisations, they kept improving their services, transforming in this way social attitudes to adoption. All these developments have not always turned out to be desirable, and now in 2012, we find ourselves on the threshold of another change, i.e. considerable reduction, centralisation and, in consequence, greater supervision of adoption centres in Poland.

The targets of adoption counselling

Adoption counselling targets problems involved in adoption of a lonely child abandoned by the biological family by the new family (a married couple or a single person). This counselling sector is not adequately developed. It works through specialised social services, which target first of all foster parents and prospective adoptive parents. Adoption counselling covers the period spanning from a family’s first thought about adoption to the completion of adoption formalities. In the meantime, adoption counselling concentrates particularly on preparations for taking a child up into the family’s household. More precisely, it could be said that adoption counselling encompasses the period from the personal decision up to its legal realisation. In practice, it can be a few months or even years.

The group involved in adoption counselling includes biological parents, the child and candidates for adoptive parents. Post-adoption counselling, the analysis of which I have excluded from this text, is mainly concerned with the problems of a family with adopted and foster children. All people served by adoption counselling are profoundly emotionally challenged throughout the process. First of all, adoption is inextricably linked with the breaking of the family bonds, which constitute the core of the family – the basic environment for the development of man (Termińska 2008, p. 11). Secondly, adoption entails also a child's spatial displacement into new, different social and cultural conditions. As a result, adoption gives rise to parenthood born in pain and suffering of the infertile couple, the orphaned child and the biological mother (Gutowska 2008, pp. 13-14).

A family who have decided to adopt a child must prepare for the admission of a child to the new family and for creating a bond with the new child. The process is profoundly emotional for all family members. Working on the interrupted, lost and recreated bonds constitutes the main field of adoption counselling activity.

Although actually crucial and essential to the adoption process, the biological family is often underestimated and unappreciated. It is owing to the biological family (*because of it* in the popular social discourse) that adoption exists in the first place. This family is most frequently represented by women – biological mothers who go through the agonising experience of lack of support from other family members, social exclusion or financial deprivation. It is often aggravated by their young age or illness. To a lesser degree, these phenomena concern also married couples bringing up many children, who are afflicted with various social dysfunctions. We hardly ever witness 'normal families' putting up children born out of wedlock for adoption. It must also be mentioned that children of families who have forfeited their parental rights are put up for adoption.

Overall, a family putting a child up for adoption faces many problems. Deciding to entrust a child into somebody else's care, biological families experience considerable doubts and anxieties. Sometimes mothers come to adoption centres before making their minds up about adoption, inquiring about procedures or a potential adoptive family, which implies that they care about their child's future. Simultaneously, it is one of the few occasions to diagnose whether there is any chance for the biological parents to take care of the child or whether adoption stands a chance of being socially approved and supported. Parents who have lost custody rights far more rarely consult adoption centres on such issues. Those that do stay in touch with a counsellor usually inquire about the possibilities of regaining the child. Grandparents also frequently come with such inquiries.

In the pre-adoption period, counsellors' work focuses less on the problems experienced by a child. The child, namely, remains somehow in the background since s/he rarely comes in direct contact with the counsellor. The concern with a child comes down to an in-depth analysis of the psychological and medical documentation as well as contacts with the staff of childcare facilities. Counsellors are also

involved in introducing a child to the potential adoptive parents, observing the new family's first interactions with the child and conducting a community interview on the family prior to the legal conclusion of adoption.

Specificity of adoption counselling

Adoption counselling defies unambiguous classification in one of the traditionally recognised counselling types, i.e. in directive, liberal and dialogical counselling (Kargulowa 2004, p. 40). At the same time, it undeniably bears features of directive, liberal and dialogical counselling. In the past it usually aligned itself with directive counselling. Counsellors assessed then the emotional, health and financial condition of the prospective adoptive parents and checked their qualifications. On such basis, they exercised their right to decide on placing a child in a particular family. In the course of time, some of elements of work in the adoption centres have changed. Currently, a family is assigned to a child rather than a child to a family, but such decisions lie within the counsellors' competence and are their most important statutory obligation.

However, adoption counselling can also be characterised as liberal, because its object is to foster the advice-seekers' psychological comfort and security. It also seeks to help them cope with the challenges posed by the ongoing changes and to stimulate their self-development. This pertains mainly to candidates for foster parents, who arrive to the centre declaring their wish to adopt a child but are frequently not ready to fulfil this promise. Sometimes they have not come to terms with their infertility, and sometimes they prepare themselves for adoption and continue treatment in parallel, trying to get pregnant by the *in vitro* method. Candidates for parents need some space and time for reflection. In this time individual or group conversations with counsellors stimulate them to consider all the aspects of the decision they are making. Frequently, during such conversations opinions and views on adoption are exchanged. Also, the possibilities of raising the child are analysed from the angle of available support sources (family), the prospective parents' actual attitudes to the child and an empathetic insight into the child's feelings. Counsellors try to ensure that the parents-to-be understand the feelings and experiences of a lonely child, but also reflect upon their own motives and assess their potentials. In this way they try to raise the parent's consciousness about the consequences of their decision and make them realise that it entails an enormous responsibility for the rest of their lives.

Adoption counselling can also be defined as dialogical. This work is based on verbal and non-verbal communication between a counsellor and the people seeking advice. Previous experiences of candidates for adoptive parents bound up with their attempts at having their own child are often unpleasant or even dramatic. These include inability to procreate, miscarriages or deaths of newborn babies, long-lasting,

expensive and painful infertility treatment or *in vitro* insemination attempts. The biological parents, similarly, experience difficulties when deciding to entrust their child into other, anonymous people's care. These difficulties, though, are of a different character. It is, namely, not easy to decide to stop being one's own child's parent. Families, women in particular, frequently struggle with dilemmas. On the one hand they find it impossible to take care of the child adequately and satisfy their own desire to keep the child by their side. And on the other hand, putting the child up for adoption also seems an impossible decision to make. A woman especially experiences the pain of loss, depression and mourning. These experiences call for genuine understanding, reflection and analysis, and a counsellor must also emotionally support such advice-seekers through an open, friendly dialogue.

In terms of the methods it uses, adoption counselling relies on direct contact of an advisee and a counsellor. A counsellor's duty is to sustain the dialogue in order to arrive at certain reflections and exert a supportive and therapeutic influence. Apart from individual contacts, group work methods are also very important in adoption counselling. Adoption centres conduct such work primarily with candidates for adoptive parents, organising a-few-week-long courses based on verified and tested activities. Therefore, adoption counselling has educational, therapeutic and training functions.

Adoption counselling can also be analysed in terms of its formal or informal effect on clients. Mainstream adoption counselling has a formal character and is carried out by the staff of adoption centres and other institutions. e.g. children's shelters. Thereof, counsellors work mainly in adoption centres. Professionals working in childcare facilities practise adoptive counselling by way of contacts with people who visit the institutions providing care for abandoned children.

Medical services professionals and employees of municipal and communal social welfare tend to engage in informal counselling. Advice is also provided by various non-official adoption communities and societies. Evolving from formal course groups and often transforming into legally recognised foundations and associations, they tend to work also in the post-adoption period. They include, among others, The Adoptive Families Foundation in Warsaw, The 'Pro Familia' Adoptive and Foster Families Association in Cracow and Adoptive and Foster Families Association in Gdańsk.

Important informal sites of adoption counselling include also the internet forums and discussion panels for people interested in adoption. In addition, some websites providing adoption counselling are worth mentioning, such as specialised adoption counselling websites (e.g. *Adoptuj.pl*) or educational institutions' websites (e.g. *Stowarzyszenie Misja Nadziei*, *Towarzystwo Nasz Dom*, *Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Dzieci*). They offer opportunities of direct e-mail contact with specialists and receiving advice concerning adoption. A certain form of counselling is practised by discussion forums, which enable people to contact and make friends with foster families or those who want to adopt a child. Everyone can join in a virtual

discussion (*niusy.onet.pl*). An alternative to official adoption assistance is provided also by various websites covering different spheres of social life. They include, for example, the upbringing of small children (*'Maluchy'* website), religion (the Catholic Church websites: *'Opoka'* and *'Katolik'*), healthcare (websites of The Association for the Treatment of Infertility and Support of Adoption, *'Nasz Bocian'*, *'Polski Serwis Kobiet'*, *'Instytut Psychologii Zdrowia'*, *'Strona Osób Niepełnosprawnych'*) and the like (*Polish jutro.com*). There is a vast mosaic of options to choose from, which enables all those interested to find out about and discuss adoption regardless of whether they want to do it purposefully and methodically or merely casually (Ładyżyński 2009, pp. 200-202).

The adoption counsellors' crucial tasks

The obligations that adoption counsellors face are extremely complex. In terms of the adoptive families, Antonina Gutowska elaborating on David Kirk's concepts states that these tasks can nevertheless be located in only a few primary areas (2008, p. 33). Candidates have to (1) manage the preparations for parenthood, (2) establish their autonomy as parents and (3) obtain social approval. Each of these tasks is difficult for future parents. Discharging the first one, they confront a social pattern in which the natural life-course includes preparation for conceiving and giving birth to one's own child. In their case, this natural sequence is unfulfilled. The sequence can hardly be 'corrected' since the adoption process tends to be repeatedly prolonged. Additionally, as families often do their best to keep the adoption plans secret, they are deprived of social support. This is considerably different from what couples who expect their own biological child experience. Their plans of and preparations for expanding the family are facilitated by care and benevolent interest of a network of immediate and distant social support. Adoptive candidates have little autonomy because they are strongly dependent on their counsellors and other professionals, childcare facilities and courts that decide on and mediate adoption. Obtaining social approval and recognition is also fraught with difficulty since adoption is still regarded as an inferior version of parenthood, which in consequence hinders foster parents' identification with the parental role they are to fulfil.

Tasks that adoption counsellors are obliged to carry out can be approached more optimistically if we assume that it is the counsellor's help that enables the family to successfully overcome at least some of the difficulties they will inevitably cope with. However, it cannot be forgotten that some problems will continue to afflict the adoptive family. These dilemmas classically include the necessity to inform the child about adoption, to tell him/her about his/her past, or to compensate for the harm suffered in life before adoption (Cattabeni 2008, p. 46)

Counsellors fulfil the salient role of therapists, 'selectors' and educators for adoptive parents-candidates, accompanying them and participating in their

experiences. They apply rigid diagnostic criteria but also rely on their experience, beliefs and intuition (Ładyżyński 2009, p. 239). Counsellors are in a rather peculiar position. On the one hand, they guard the child, making sure that its needs are fulfilled and deciding to whom it should be entrusted. On the other hand, they try to gain the candidates' full trust and create a positive atmosphere of cooperation. And this is necessary to establish a bond which contributes substantially to effectiveness of adoption and facilitates post-adoption intervention. Counsellors, namely, should remain in touch with adoptive families in order to assist them after the adoption procedures are concluded.

Noticeably, psychologists and pedagogues differently understand their roles in the adoption process. The former assess adoptive parents more frequently by means of their diagnostic tools, while the latter have a more empathetic attitude towards parental candidates. These differences result from their distinct functions in the institutions they work in. In adoption centres, however, counsellors, psychologists, pedagogues and social workers often fulfil similar tasks: they certify the adoption process, assess and support candidates mentally as well as recruit them. This may hamper or delay the candidates' security since they do not always trust the counsellors from the beginning. Potential parents find themselves in the role of applicants who might not get a chance to achieve their goals. This awareness makes them reserved and, to some extent, unwilling or unable to open up. Overcoming the resistance and promoting confidence are extremely important and demanding counsellors' tasks.

Adoption counsellors are generally professionals employed in adoption and childcare centres. Apart from the formal requirements of education and qualifications, some personality traits are extremely useful in this sphere of social help. Among them Lawrence M. Brammer (1984, p. 40) enumerates empathy, warmth and protectiveness, openness, authenticity and trustworthiness, a positive attitude to and respect for other people. On the one hand, such set of traits is 'a theoretical construct' but, on the other, it indicates the direction of (adoption) counsellors' desirable self- and vocational development. As mentioned at the beginning, adoption has always been, is and will continue to be one of the crucial processes creating optimal life and development conditions for children abandoned by their parents.

Certainly, the argument above does not address the problems of adoption and adoption counselling exhaustively. The main point of this paper are the psychological and pedagogical aspects of adoption counselling in Poland. Important ethical and legal issues as well as international and global problems of adoption have been purposefully left out of it. For, indeed, these subject require separate studies conducted with a view to the Hague Convention. Its regulations stipulate the child's right to grow up in its own family or an adoptive family in its homeland, etc. Only in very few special cases is there a possibility of or a need for international adoption on condition that the child's fundamental rights are respected (the Hague Convention 1993).

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