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ISSUES IN ADOPTION IN IRELAND

HAROLD J. ABRAMSON

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Harold J. Abramson is Professor of Sociology in the University of Connecticut, Storrs, Connecticut. He was Visiting Professor at The Economic and Social Research Institute during 1980/81. The paper has been accepted for publication by the Institute, which is not responsible for either the content or the views expressed therein.

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General Summary

There are many ways of looking at adoption, with many questions, perspectives and biases. This brief study of adoption in Ireland serves merely as an introduction to some of the more important sociological issues involved, issues that relate to social definition, historical background, associations with legitimacy and illegitimacy, demographic characteristics, and conceptual concerns of success and failure. Critically, it is important to emphasise that the following work does not constitute an integrated theory, nor a policy report, a set of organised research findings, or a planned and detailed agenda. The title of the work is quite precise; the publication is an assemblage of issues. It represents a kind of sociological background with which the study of adoption may proceed, and it tries to be a contribution to the larger literature on the sociology of adoption.

The first chapter sets forth the outline of the study and discusses the definition and ideas of adoption. It clarifies what adoption is, as opposed to what many people think it is. It reviews the promise of adoption for permanence and continuity in the care of the child who is not or cannot be raised by the biological parents and kin. It confronts the mystique of adoption in the social and biological realms of identity. And it argues that the practice of adoption has both universal and historical applications, as well as associations with both legitimate and illegitimate birth.

These latter ideas are taken up quite specifically in the Irish context and in Irish history in the second chapter. The factor of illegitimacy is discussed as a stigma in social encounters, but the effects of illegitimate birth have appeared to vary over time. Furthermore, Part 2 argues, the association of illegitimacy with adoption is relatively new in Irish life. The Brehon Law of early Irish society offered elaborate prescriptions for "fosterage," a practice of child care and socialisation which closely resembles modern adoption in that both institutions lead to the acquisition of new and sustained kinship identity. An important difference between the two Irish worlds resides in the "adoption" of both legitimate and illegitimate children under the Brehon Law, and the adoption of predominantly illegitimate children only in contemporary law.

Modern adoption is taken up in the third and fourth Parts, as the available data on adoption cases, the adopted children themselves, and the background of adoptive parents, are presented and discussed, for the years 1953 through 1981. The numbers of adoptions are not keeping up with the increasing rate of illegitimate births, and this trend is discussed in the context of the numbers of

beneficiaries of the Unmarried Mother's Allowance. The major question for social and economic programmes revolves around the prospects of care for the designated illegitimate children, whether adopted, or raised by their biological mothers in their own family arrangements with state support, or in presently unclear circumstances. Additional data are summarised over the years according to the adopted child's sex, religion, and age when placed for adoption.

The adoptive parents are also described in the recent years of legal adoption practice. Figures relating to the place of adoption in Ireland, and to the occupational background of adopting fathers, are examined and discussed. There is further information on the proportions of those parents who have initiated second or subsequent adoptions in their families, as well as a report on the particular agency of adoption placement and the trend in adoption applications and Adoption Board rejections.

The last section, Part 5, departs from the specifically Irish context and presents a more conceptual framework for the consideration of adoption. It probes for the broader social conditions under which an adoption is thought to succeed or fail. Adoption is viewed here as a social force which broadens the meaning of family and kinship, and the ideas of success and failure are discussed along the lines of identity, a sharing of family history and a sense of family belonging. The basic sociological ideas of "culture" and "structure" are explained and applied to the adopted individual. The success of adoption is defined as permanence and continuity, while the failure of adoption may be viewed as variations on this theme, as forms of discontinuity in the adoptee's life.

PART I: *INTRODUCTION*

I did not understand that I, who had so carefully documented the histories of the people I was writing about, had no history of my own to set theirs against. Like a true creature of the nether world, I had no shadow.

—Betty Jean Lifton

Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping
than you can understand."

—W. B. Yeats

Adoption in its modern and legal form began in Ireland with the 1952 Adoption Act, but the fundamental idea of adoption — that is, the acquisition by an individual of new family membership, which is viewed as equivalent to the kinship of the individual's birth — is an ancient and historic one in Ireland. In their own respective periods, both old and new forms of adoption are seen as institutional; they each developed widely acceptable practice, each wearing the cloak of respectability. This fact provides another basis of continuity in the sociology of Irish life over the centuries.

The study of adoption in Ireland, then, provides an excellent opportunity for the sociological reflection of continuity and change, not just on the broader scale of the Irish past and Irish present, but also on the more personal dimension of human behaviour. Questions about the "success" and "failure" of adoption generally refer to the individual's position, the social and private happiness of the adoptee and the adopting family, but these issues also raise important ideas to the society as a whole: pragmatic considerations of social policy and practice, of basic child care, of health and justice and education, as well as more philosophical thoughts of the values of society, the relationship between continuity and change, and the meaning of Irish identity.

Since 1952, and through the most recent recorded data for the year 1981, there have been a total of 29,365 adoptions in Ireland.¹ When one considers the number of people involved, directly or closely, in all these adoptions — the adoptees themselves, the adopting mothers and fathers, the parents of birth, and the relatives and friends of all these families — one is dealing with a substantial segment of the total Irish population. The recency of the modern Adoption Act, the total number of adoptions within the relatively small country, and the growing importance of the subject, all contribute as compelling reasons for adoption research and study. It is in this context that the present work has been undertaken.

On Understanding Adoption

Of all the many legal and social practices in modern societies which deal with the variations of child placement and fundamental child care, it is adoption which suggests the most promise and the greatest possibilities. At the same time, as will be noted, it is adoption which can show signs of the most profound mystique and attendant dilemmas. As a broad category, child placement covers

¹ *Report of An Bord Uchtála (Adoption Board) for Year Ended 31st December, 1981* (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1982), p.3

numerous policies and procedures in any society's decisions of who will be parent to a given child. Birth registration, birth certification, and religious and cultural rites of passage, are the most prevalent, but other practices relate to decisions for child abuse, neglect, abandonment, juvenile delinquency, youth offenders, foster care, forms of adoption, and the judicial and communal patterns of child custody in marital separation, annulment, and divorce.

The mystique of adoption begins with the definition itself. According to one approach, which is useful for its inclusion of both *de jure*, *de facto*, and common-law variations, as well as for its cross-cultural relevance, adoption is "the institutionalized practice through which an individual belonging by birth to one kinship group acquires new kinship ties that are socially defined as equivalent to the congenital ties."² This brief definition does not tell us how the new family attachments replace the old ones, or whether completely, or partially, or not at all. The mystique, at least for legal adoption in Ireland and other Western societies, has its foundation in the social meanings of these old and new bonds. For adoption is the only official practice in child placement which acknowledges a change of identity, or in other words, that someone is no longer what he or she used to be: a new name, a new family, clearly different social networks and inevitable linkage to a different familial history.

Despite the emphases of modern society on social change, on the themes of individuality, social mobility, and voluntarism, and the supports of law for the separation from ascribed bonds, the confusions of adoption remain. They remain, on the one hand, in persisting thoughts about the meaning of race, blood and genetic inheritance. These biological matters are matched in modern adoption, on the other hand, by more social interests, such as family history, biography and genealogy. Above all these questions often looms a kind of cumulative mystery of individual identity and origin: "Who are his people?" "What is her background?" "Where does he come from?" and "Who am I?"

To those who have given the idea of adoption any serious thought, the social dilemmas are clearly evident, at least some of the time, but in a very personal form. If there is any doubt about these difficulties, they are graphically represented in the literature and language of the subject. The number of names and connotations for the adopted child, for example, is overwhelming: the

² Weinstein, *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, (IESS), 1968, p. 96. Definitions of adoption (whether in law, social work, or culture-specific studies) vary a great deal, almost in direct proportion to the variation of adoption practice around the world. From the sociological point of view, the idea of adoption is rather neglected. There is an under-development of the meaning and nature of adoption in broad *conceptual* terms. For further discussion, see Part 5 of this study.

adoptee as the illegitimate, the bastard, the stigmatised, the alternative, the changeling, the substitute, the double, the imposter, the second best, the survivor, the twice born, the compromise, the stranger, the unwanted, the outsider, the alien. The nuances and implications in all these words suggest rather powerfully how complex the historical attitudes and societal sentiments are with regard to the very idea of adoption.³

The confused language of adoption does not stop with the adoptee, but extends to the other central parties involved as well. There is often, in the literature, a groping for the precise term to refer to the natal mother, about whom images abound. She has been designated by many variations of "that other woman" and as a mother who is alternatively called: natural, primary, first, biological, original, birth, physical, bio, real, true, own, other, and blood. Similarly, the muddle of terminology proceeds to the names and adjectives for the adopting mother and father themselves, many times described with some kind of qualification. The term "parents" alone may not suffice, and it may have to be parents who are alternatively: secondary, foster, sociological, environmental, psychological, not real, not true, not own, not natural, and even, unnatural. The language used to differentiate between the adoptee's natal mother and adoptive parents is often laden with emotional overtones, and the excess is stigmatising to all concerned.

Finally, adoption as an important part of child placement in the modern and individualised world of Western societies is characterised by mystique because of the common practices of closed files. There is a complex of laws and regulations which controls the adoption process at all stages, and this leads to the separation of natal mother from adoptive parents, the sealing of records and information, and the overall privatisation of behavior. All of these constraints have their manifest purposes of assurances and protection for one or more of the central parties involved (adoptee, adopting parents, and natal mother), but their latent function and unintended consequence is the sustenance of mystique: secrecy, the mystery of origins, the continuation of stigma, and a contribution to personal and familial amnesia.

At the same time, however, as we consider the outlines of mystique for the nature of modern adoption, we must recognise another major dimension which is a striking counterpart. Of all the many practices and possibilities in

3. This imagery of adoption language, extending to the designations of the adopted child, the natal mother, and the adoptive parents, is evident in both old and new discussions of the subject, and in many sources of literature, whether fictional, historical, psychological, or sociological. For a brief accounting, see Lifton (1975).

child placement, adoption has the most promise for fundamental child care, when the child, for whatever reasons, is not raised by the biological father and mother. As with all promise there are no guarantees, but the hope of adoption rests essentially with permanence, and the probability of continuity.

The rational promise of adoption is not limited to modern practice with its legal structures, nor is it limited to Western societies, the contemporary world, and the societal ethos of privatised family systems. The idea of adoption is a universal phenomenon, practiced across history and diverse cultures; it embraces the many differences of *de facto*, *de jure*, and common-law customs, of ancient societies as well as more recent periods of time, of diverse races, religions, ethnicities, and of both collective and more individualised family arrangements.

While the practice of adoption reflects inevitable variation over different times and in different cultures, the universality of the idea seems to be based on one or more of four major social concerns. It is these functions that emphasise the rationality and the enduring promise of adoption: the concern for, and promotion of, child welfare, as one of solidly permanent and not ephemeral importance; the conferral of parental status on childless couples; the granting of judicial and familial legitimacy to the social status of the adoptee; and the provision of heirs and descendants for property transmission and family solidarity.⁴ Interestingly, these manifest social concerns are consistent with more latent economic considerations. Adoption must also be viewed in the light of public and private expense. Modern society, with its responsibilities for the care of those unable to care for themselves, shows an interest in adoption because it is the least expensive form of child placement and the least taxing on the public purse.

Most important, it is these functions which reinforce the values of permanence and continuity. No other modern form of child care or placement, outside of the biological family, comes close in approximating these values. The shifting of children from institution to institution, within different residential facilities, among foster homes and other temporary arrangements, and even from the custody of one person or relative to another, all contribute to a kind of

⁴ Weinstein, *JESS*, 1968. An earlier, more anthropological discussion of the idea is presented by Lowie, *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 1930. See also the entry on contemporary adoption by Abbott in the same (1930) edition of the Encyclopedia.

temporising dislocation for the child.⁵ Adoption, on the other hand, means permanence and continuity.

The Plan of This Study

It is important to emphasise at the outset what this document will and will not include. As an introduction to the study of adoption in Ireland, the goal is modest and straightforward: a general overview of Irish adoption, based on what we already have available to us, in the existing literature and data sources. The project presents no new data as such, and there are no findings of any originally-designed survey. The study consists only of secondary research and analysis. Because the discipline of sociology is relatively young, and because the practice of legal adoption in modern Ireland is relatively recent, there is not a voluminous amount of material at hand. Thus, one important by-product of this study will be the clarification of needs in adoption research in Ireland and the directions for future investigations. The constraints of the project, dictated by the available data and the introductory nature of the study itself, will point the way.

The social confusions, discussed above, can only be clarified with empirical and conceptual understanding of the practice of adoption. To that end, this project continues in Part 2 with a brief historical accounting of the idea of adoption in the Irish past. Two themes are emphasised: the linkage of the two ideas of illegitimate birth and of adoption, and the social connections between fosterage in early Irish society under the Brehon Law and modern adoption in contemporary Ireland. There is much speculation and there are many questions in the relevance of any historical issue for the present day, but this much is clear: that the seemingly abstract continuities between the past and the present are indeed real in the evolution of social behaviour, and that the notion of adoption — of a child's changing kinship and family relationships — is not an innovation which dates its origin to the legislation of 1952.

Parts 3 and 4 both deal with the available contemporary data, as presented in the annual *Reports of An Bord Uchtála*, the Adoption Board. Since the Adoption Act was introduced three decades ago, many questions have been raised about the process and practice of adoption, the distribution of interest in adoption throughout Irish society, and the social characteristics of the central parties

⁵ It can easily be argued that these alternative forms of child placement are vicissitudes or external upheavals in the life of a child, inasmuch as they are more likely to violate the needs of permanence and continuity. As vicissitudes, these shifts pose problems not only for the child's normal development as an individual, but also for the child's sociological attachments to family, community, and society. These ideas are taken up in Part 5 of this study. On the need for continuity in child care and adoption, from the perspectives of law and psychoanalysis, see Goldstein, Freud and Solnit (1973).

involved — the adoptee, the adopting parents, and the natal mother. This project is unable to provide answers to many of the important questions, for the more comprehensive research is yet to be undertaken. A beginning can be made, however, with a more systematic examination of the data that are published in the annual *Reports*. It should be emphasised as well that this background information is a necessary first step, not only for clarification of the common misunderstandings which surround modern adoption, but also for assistance in the formulation of ideas with social policy implications.

An overview of adoption orders from 1953 through 1981 is presented in Part 3. The general pattern of adoptions, in relation to total births and illegitimate births, is discussed. Part 3 also includes an examination of the major characteristics of the adopted child: the sex of the adoptee, the religion as indicated by the natal mother, and the age of the child at the time of placement. Part 4 includes all available data on the social background of the adopting parents: a discussion of their occupational characteristics, their place of residence as indicated by the place of adoption in Ireland, and the extent of repetitive behaviour as in the number of adopters who adopt a second or subsequent child. The range of information in Part 4 concludes with some selective data on the adoption process itself. This includes a discussion of the different agencies of adoption placement, and a summary of the Adoption Board's applications and their rejections of prospective adopters.

The final section, Part 5, concludes the study with a discussion of the meaning of success and failure in adoption. To most of us who are concerned with the idea and practice of adoption, whether as detached observers or as involved parties, the questions of "success" and "failure" for the adopted child are clearly paramount. As important as these questions are, they have received the least rigorous attention and the least adequate definition. Part 5 offers a new approach to these questions, with a proposed sociology of adoption that is broadly conceptualised and is independent of any specific culture or society. It aims to account for a fuller understanding of the mystique and promise of adoption, with a comprehension of some of the variations in adoption success and adoption failure.

Last, there are bound to be substantial gaps in the presentation of material in this introductory paper. Aside from many additional questions involving the adoptee, the adopting parents, and the natal mother, one important area refers to the policies and procedures of the Adoption Societies themselves. As the study shows, these Societies now control the greater majority of all legal adoptions in Ireland. The ideologies and practices of these agencies, in their

critical roles as gatekeepers in child placement, have far-reaching significance as a form of social control. What is their influence in the philosophy and distribution of adoption in contemporary Ireland? A second important issue revolves around the social state of illegitimacy and the fate of illegitimate children. The study documents the historical and contemporary relation between illegitimacy and adoption; the number and proportion of illegitimate children are increasing, and a growing percentage of these are not being adopted. The questions are self-evident. What are the changing patterns of child care, particularly in adoption alternatives such as institutional custody and the decisions of unmarried parents and their families to raise the children themselves?

Finally, the study points to the need for a sociological investigation of the controversies and contemporary legal developments surrounding the provisions of the 1952 Act. The historical background of the Brehon Law, its provisions for the changes of kinship identity, and the status of illegitimacy and child care in more recent centuries, offer an intriguing context for the sociology of law on modern adoption. Such an approach will convey the sentiments and behaviour of the larger Irish society on adoption itself, and more importantly, will reflect the normative continuities and changes of Irish culture over time. The large-scale debates on legal adoption provide a rich source for the sociological and political description of Irish distinctiveness. These questions, on the Adoption Societies, the state of illegitimacy, and the 1952 Adoption Act, are some of the more important issues awaiting examination. With the substantive questions raised throughout the pages of this study, they constitute an agenda for integrated social research in Irish studies.

PART 2: *FOSTERAGE AND ADOPTION IN IRISH LIFE*

Look back to look forward.

—Frank O'Connor

Quite apart from law, the relations arising from fosterage were in popular estimation the most sacred of the whole social system, and a stronger affection oftentimes sprang up between persons standing in those relations than that between immediate relatives by birth.

—Laurence Ginnell

Any discussion of modern adoption in Ireland should include some accounting of the past, for the sources of both the mystique and the social promise of adoption are to be found in the history of child care in the society. With its reliance on secondary sources, this brief outline of some of the aspects of Irish child care, centred around the sociological character of adoption, fosterage, legitimacy, and illegitimacy, could hardly presume to do any substantive justice to the subject. The more complete story by social historians and sociologists remains to be told. The purpose of this section is merely to point to the continuity and change of some of these issues in Irish life.

Because the vast majority of legal adoptions in contemporary Ireland are restricted to children of illegitimate status — that is, those whose biological mothers and fathers were determined not to be legally married to each other at the time of their birth — the modern association between adoption and illegitimacy has become rather entrenched. It has not always been so, and it becomes important to consider this particular aspect of child care in the course of the Irish experience.

The Factor of Illegitimacy

The idea of illegitimacy appears to be a common thread throughout the history and present day of Ireland, as indeed it is in many other societies⁶. As such, it represents a kind of continuity in social life. But while the *idea* of this contrast between legitimate and illegitimate birth is evident over time, the social

6. Theoretical interest in illegitimacy took hold with the anthropological work of Malinowski and his "principle of legitimacy." The principle is proposed, universally, that "no child should be brought into the world without a man — and one man at that — assuming the role of sociological father, that is, guardian and protector, the male link between the child and the rest of the community" (Cf. Malinowski, 1930, p. 137). The sociological problems and controversies of this formulation were prominently raised by Davis (1939a; 1939b), and there have been ensuing debates in subsequent years. It should be emphasised here that Malinowski acknowledged the great variation in the cultural forms of legitimacy and parenthood. More recent discussion, with valuable data and relevant commentary, is found in Hartley (1975) and in Laslet, Oosterveen and Smith (1980).

For our purposes here, however, it is the cultural response to the fact of illegitimacy which is most important. Society's view of the illegitimate child has varied significantly over time, often because of the prevailing religious ethos. Calverton (1930) argues, for example, that "whenever or wherever Christianity appears the illegitimate child suffers." The status of the illegitimate among the Chinese, Hindus, early Jews, early Teutons, and especially among the early Irish, Scots, and Welsh, was far superior to the corresponding status of the illegitimate in Christian cultures. In the latter, Calverton writes, such a child was reduced to "a moral and social outcast." (Calverton, 1930, p. 200).

The question of the meaning of "illegitimacy" in the context of Irish life and law today, amidst increasing disillusionment with marriage in Western societies, as well as higher birth rates outside of marriage, is an important topic of debate. For some Irish background, see various issues of the *Children First Newsletter* for relevant facts and discussion.

Also, Shatter (1977) provides some fairly recent legal accounting for Ireland.

nature and, more important, the stigma of illegitimacy have changed and varied over the years, corresponding to the changes in marriage, family life, law, kinship relations, and society itself.

Goffman (1968) discusses the sociological basis of stigma, as a deeply discrediting attribute which affects the social relationships of the individual in question; the social identity and moral status of the signifier tend to be overwhelmed by the fact of the stigma. Goffman discusses the background and illustrations of the idea of stigma, and offers three broadly-classed and differentiated types: physical deformities, membership in ethnic minorities, and blemishes of individual character. Although he does not elaborate on illegitimacy, he does refer to the specific stigma of the label of "bastard" (p. 15), and this socially defined attribute belongs to the third category of presumed character failure.

While the effects of stigmatisation vary, the "abnormality" of the illegitimate child is reflected in all the connotations of bastardy: the fears of unknown origin, the anxieties of bloodlines, the questions of mentality and inheritance. When the sins of the mother are visited upon the child, the self-fulfilling prophecy is already at work. Character deficiency or failure, which is presumed to describe an individual, on the basis of a social stigma, may lead to precise fulfilment, at least in the eyes or the subjective judgement of the beholder.

The *belief* in the weakness overwhelms any objective criteria of behaviour, so that the illegitimate offspring is discredited as immoral, or worse, amoral, and outside the moral code of the community. The bastard then suffers the taint of his birth. He is viewed as not legitimate, that is, not acceptable in the cultural norms which govern social existence. The illegitimate child experiences this opprobrium, just as the blind may be viewed as helpless, the dwarf as a fool, the ex-mental patient as unpredictable, the ex-criminal as unreliable, and the individual of an ethnic minority as exotic, dangerous, subversive, visionary, clever, better, and worse, all at the same time. Social normality is withheld from many of the relationships with stigmatised people. They are often dehumanised. In the stigma of the illegitimate child lies the basis of a perceived social difference.

In the Irish past, one may hypothesise that the stigma of the illegitimate child was not always in evidence, or if so, not necessarily as intense or discrediting. The Brehon Law, in force as the native legal system, prevailed in Ireland for an estimated 1700 years (Ginnell, 1894), or at least more than a millenium (Bryant, 1923). In the existing manuscripts, there are many references to the distinctions of legitimate and illegitimate birth (*Ancient Laws of Ireland*, 1865-1901). These

references lead us to some appreciation of the structure of family and community in Irish history.

In a recent study, for example, Robins (1980) argues that the flexible nature of marriage and divorce in early Ireland, with seven conditions possible for legal separation, had undoubted influence on the status of children. The fact of illegitimacy, which was indeed recognised, did not always intrude into important considerations of land and inheritance. The custom of *gavelkind* permitted the redistribution of one's land among all the adult sons of the social community, both legitimate and illegitimate (Robins, 1980, pp. 2-3; Nicholls, 1972). Robins concludes: "As long as the Brehon laws had force, the position of illegitimate sons in Ireland was, then, more favourable than that of irregular sons in other European countries."

The comparison of stigma is inevitably one of degree. Robins qualifies some of the discussion on the status of the illegitimate with acknowledgement of direct discrimination, exposure of unwanted children, infanticide, and the abandonment of infants "because of their irregular origin." The extent to which this behaviour was frequent is unknown. More importantly, the social differences which were employed in early history to distinguish between kinds of illegitimacy, and the perception of illegitimacy at different levels of the society, remain unclear.

To this brief account we can add some references in the laws which connect child care directly to apparent illegitimacy. In a list of many detailed transgressions, the Brehon Law of Distress states a "distress of five days' stay for taking care of the son of a harlot" (*Ancient Laws of Ireland*, Volume I, p. 185). It is not clear exactly what the social position of the "harlot" is, nor what the precise meaning is of this form of care. Upon the assumption that this law refers to adoption or fosterage, it is plain that there are stigmatic conditions involved. Despite these nuances, the Brehon Law clearly lists obligations for child care, and for *all* children, as the responsibilities of "social connections" (*Ancient Laws of Ireland*, Volume II). In her commentary, Bryant (1923) reviews these social requirements with direct reference to the Law's provisions for the care of children, notably of different types of illegitimate birth. As will be discussed subsequently, fosterage under the Brehon Law was extensive and detailed. While there appear to be some inconsistencies, one conclusion is clear; fosterage and child care provisions were not always confined to those of legitimate status within the community, nor to those of illegitimate position outside.

The Brehon Law provided a complex and flexible structure of constraints

and regulations affecting family, community and society. The legal system is the best direct measure of the normative development of Irish attitudes toward the ideas of legitimacy and illegitimacy, and these norms were sophisticated and heavily qualified. Greater rigidity, more arbitrary definitions, and the clearer outlines of social stigma, probably began to take form in those parts of Ireland which were changing under the later norms of Christian matrimony and the influence of English law in the Middle Ages (Nicholls, 1972). By the close of the eighteenth century, at any rate, the stigma of illegitimacy had taken a powerful hold on the cultural values and social system of the Irish people.

The nature of illegitimacy and the decisive stigma it can engender are carefully described in Connell's (1968) work on rural Ireland before the Famine. The prevailing ethos was clearly stated; "A neighbour's illegitimacy was no matter of indifference in peasant society" (Connell, 1968, p. 61). The stigma of shame, ridicule, and dishonour often led to the actual development of a pariah status for the mother and child. In many instances, the disgrace led to infanticide, exposure, abandonment, and the banishment of the mother from the community. She would be reduced to beggary, prostitution, or a life of hard labour in some distant location. Given the fact of illegitimacy, the self-fulfilling prophecy would come to pass.

The conditions of the surviving illegitimate children are described with horrific detail in the studies by Connell and Robins. The poverty of Ireland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is symbolised by the vicissitudes of homelessness in these narratives about foundlings, orphans, evacuees, and the charity children, especially those in the workhouses from the Famine years of the 1840s down to the first decade of the twentieth century. The stigma of illegitimacy is itself intertwined with the stigma of poverty, in the judgements of those outside of these problems. And even among the most deprived and disadvantaged, to be poor *and* illegitimate was the mark of the lowest rank.

Contemporary associations of Irish illegitimacy do not necessarily carry the same stigma of poverty that was evident in much of the discussion in eighteenth and nineteenth century sources. The segment of modern Irish life where these associations do persist, sometimes viewed as a kind of anachronism, is in the subculture of the Irish travellers or itinerants. The social position of this group in Irish society is characterised not only by the stigma of extreme poverty (and the stereotypes of high fertility and alleged illegitimacy) but also by the stigma of a distinctive ethnic culture itself. It is the complexity of all three discrediting attributes which contributes to the kinds of relationships the travelling people

have with the settled Irish of the society.⁷

Early Fosterage and Modern Adoption

The fact that modern Irish adoption has been largely based on the fact of illegitimacy has not always been the Irish experience. The well-known fosterage of the Brehon Law and early Irish society is comparable to contemporary adoption, particularly in its form which led to the acquisition of new kinship connections for the fostered child. The important similarity between the two phenomena lies in this point; the social identity of the adopted or fostered child is changed, through the permanent gain of different family relationships. Theoretically, at any rate, the continuity between the conceptual outline of early fosterage and that of modern adoption is direct, despite a major difference that the system of early fosterage "adopted" all kinds of children, legitimate and illegitimate, free and slave, identifiable and foundling.

The Brehon Law documents the institution of fosterage in great detail. The manuscripts provide, for example, a description of the age structure for the socialisation of foster sons (*Ancient Laws of Ireland*, Volume II, pp. 186-187). In this discussion of the regulations which involve ages and restitutions for offenses, the question is posed: "How long is there power over foster sons?" ("That is, how long is the power of castigation allowed over the sons who are being fostered?") The answer refers to three age categories of foster sons: the first age, which begins with the first year of life and goes to seven years of age; the middle age, from seven to twelve years; and the last age, of twelve to seventeen years. It seems quite plausible to conclude that foster sons were able to begin their fosterage as early as the age of one year, and it would last until the child reached the age of "selection" or marriage; this was the age of seventeen for boys, and of fourteen for girls. Given the young ages and the priority of socialisation, it is not surprising that Mac Niocaill (1972, p. 58) suggests that the family attachments created by the practice of fosterage were more binding, even, than those created by marriage.⁸

7. On the meaning of ethnicity in the distinctive subculture of the Irish travellers, see Gmelch (1977). Dempsey and Geary (1979) provide a profile with demographic, economic and educational information.

8. On the child's age at the beginning of his or her fosterage, the secondary sources seem to conflict with each other. Mac Niocaill (1972) states that it is seven years. In view of the influence of socialisation on the formation of values and attachments in a child's life, and in view of the reputed strength of fosterage bonds, I would lean toward a younger age, younger even than seven years, for the start of the fosterage experience.

There were complex regulations which involved the payments of fees between families, and the many responsibilities on the parts of both the foster child and the foster parents. These refer to the provisions of gifts, education, training, clothes and food. There were distinctions made for sex differences, and there were both civil and criminal specifications. Further distinctions arose as to "good" fosterage, "bad" fosterage, "over" fosterage and "joint" fosterage.

The elaborate detail of the socialisation of the fostered child, and the subsequent relationships, were not surprisingly rather primary, affective and familial. Mac Niocaill (1972, p. 59) writes: "On the child's side this created an obligation at least as strong as those of filial piety; the foster-parents were known by terms, *aite* and *muime*, which in origin were child language ('daddy' and 'mammy'); the slaying of a foster-parent was parricide (or matricide), sexual commerce with them incest." The child's name would often reflect the new foster-family attachments.⁹

The functions of such an institution suggest its own complexity. The "Cain" Law of Fosterage, and the Laws of Social Connexions, list the duties and responsibilities between the parents and the children (*Ancient Laws of Ireland*, Volume II). There was the care and support for the parents in their old age. In return, there was the promise of additional lineage, of wider contacts and loyalties, and of a broader base for social and political opportunities. Fosterage did not seem to be restricted to the highest strata of the early Irish society, although it may have been predominant there; there was evidence of this institution in operation at all levels of the community.¹⁰

9. The changes of names are often mentioned in the biographies of heroes and celebrated figures in Irish literature. See Hyde (1899); Cross and Slover (1936); and O'Connor (1967).

10. Irish folklore and history convey many examples of fosterage and adoption and the idea clearly transcends any particular social category. The great Irish epic, *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, for example, reflects this theme of childhood and youth with understated power (Cf. Kinsella, 1969). There appear to be various group distinctions, with adoptions by the community as well as adoptions or fosterage by a particular family. The more collective solidarity of early Irish society would seem to suggest the former as well as the latter. Maine writes of the diffusion of fosterage through Irish society and of the importance of this practice for sub-categories. "The Irish Family undoubtedly received additions through Adoption. The Sept, or larger group of kindred, had a definite place for Strangers admitted to it on stated conditions . . ." (Maine, 1875, p. 231) The early manuscripts themselves go into great detail. "There are many regulations respecting the adopted sons, i.e. an adopted son of the 'geilfine,' an adopted son of the 'deirbhfine,' and an adopted son of an extern tribe. The adopted son of the 'geilfine' gets a share among the tribe, both in house and land, unless he has been adopted against the will of the tribe. But the adopted son of the 'deirbhfine' if he has not been adopted against the will of the tribe, shares in all the land, but he has his share of the house only after having gone over into the family to be taken care of" (*Ancient Laws of Ireland*, Volume IV, p. 289).

The major function and characteristic of fosterage is generally thought to be the expansion of an individual's loyalties and alliance potential in the social and political structure of the society. These loyalties, of course, rest on the sociological framework of primary relationships, and the development of kinship networks. In this sense, early fosterage was another expression of adoption, defined as the acquisition of new and different family attachments.

This broad interpretation of adoption is consistent with the wider and more universal approach. Variations on this theme are found in many different parts of the world and throughout history (Benet, 1976). The major difference between early Irish fosterage and modern legal adoption appears to lie in the question of the social proximity of a child's natal kinship with the subsequent adopting family.

The modern procedure is the absolute separation of these two networks. The adopted child is removed legally, sociologically, psychologically, and permanently, from his or her biological background. The historical practice of Irish fosterage, on the other hand, appears to add, rather than replace, kinship relations. Unless the fostered child is an orphan or a foundling, there would be sustained familiarity with past as well as present homes. Consequently, one might distinguish between these two styles of adoption as *supplemented kinship*, as opposed to *supplanted kinship*. The sociological distinction is critical and might have a significant bearing in different areas of adoption research and policy.

While the distinctions are important, the continuity between early fosterage and modern adoption is interesting in the context of Irish society. The two forms both reflect the same sociological possibilities in the development of child care and a child's primary associations. Despite the semantic similarity, one should point out that early fosterage is not at all the same as modern fosterage. The latter represents a clearly instrumental style of child care; its design helps to create relationships which are more secondary, that is, those which tend to be temporary, expedient, segmented, and a means to a quite specific end.¹¹ Modern adoption, as with the precedent of historical fosterage, helps to provide the contrast of kinship and group belonging. The socialisation of these primary relationships creates social bonds which are permanent, resolute, integrative, and an end in themselves. In this important and shared similarity, ancient fosterage in Ireland paves the way for modern adoption.

¹¹ See the discussion on modern foster care in Ireland in the *Final Report of the Task Force on Child Care Services* (1980). See also the description in "Fostering," *National Social Service Council* (1981).

PART 3: *LEGAL ADOPTION IN IRELAND (1953-1981)*

One officer of the Adoption Society can remember a rural deputy saying to him that to interfere with the line of succession was 'like interfering with a stud-book.'

—J. H. Whyte

The long history and literature of different forms of child adoption in Ireland find their contemporary expression in the Adoption Act of 1952, and the several amendments in subsequent years. The 1952 adoption legislation was introduced and debated under sharply controversial conditions, and the full story of the 1950s and the continuing adoption-related social policies remains to be told. The best discussion to date of the issues around adoption is provided by Whyte (1980) in the larger political context of church and state. Other relevant contributions on modern Irish adoption are found in the work of Good (1971) on the regulations of the 1952 Act, in Good (1970) and Darling (1974) on social work practices, and in Shatter (1977) on family law in Ireland. These sources are useful as well for some description of the process of legal adoption, and for an assessment of problems with the administrative agencies involved.¹²

An Overview of Irish Adoption

The review of long-range patterns of adoption in Ireland, however, has been neglected, and it is the purpose of this section, and the following part, to present some basic sociological findings. As was noted above in Part I, this project has no original survey material at hand. Instead, the author has collected all available figures from the *Annual Reports* (of An Bord Uchtála, the Adoption Board) for examination. These brief reports, which number twenty-seven separate documents, cover the years 1953 to 1981 inclusively, and are reviewed here in the context of relevant supplementary material.

An overview of adoptions since 1953, along with corresponding figures for total live births and the number of recorded illegitimate births, is offered in Table 1. The column for adoption orders shows an overall substantial increase during the time period. The total number of adoptions for the first five years of the legal process, that is, from 1953 through 1957, is 3,372. The similar calculation for the most recent five years, from 1977 through 1981, is 5,644. The difference between these two figures is 2,272, which represents a 67 per cent increase from the beginning of the period to the present time.

¹² Any listing of sources on legal adoption in Ireland must acknowledge the collected issues of the *Children First Newsletter*, published three times a year by the Children First organisation of Dublin, since the first number in Autumn 1975. Much valuable information is presented on all aspects of adoption in Ireland, and on the practice of adoption in other countries as well. Additional references to contemporary adoption include an unpublished dissertation, with case studies of Irish experiences, on the social work practice of meetings between natal and adoptive parents, prior to the placement of a child for adoption (Ferguson, 1979); and an unpublished report by a Dublin adoption society on responses to their survey of adoptive parents (Protestant Adoption Society, 1977).

Table 1: *Total births, illegitimate births, and adoptions in Ireland, 1953-1981 (absolute figures and percentages)*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Total births</i>	<i>Illegitimate births</i>	<i>Per cent illegitimate of total</i>	<i>Adoptions</i>	<i>Per cent adopted of illegitimate</i>
1953	62,558	1,340	2.1	381	28.4
1954	62,534	1,310	2.1	888	67.8
1955	61,622	1,234	2.0	786	63.7
1956	60,740	1,173	1.9	565	48.2
1957	61,242	1,032	1.7	752	72.9
1958	59,510	976	1.6	592	60.7
1959	60,188	959	1.6	501	52.2
1960	60,735	968	1.6	505	52.2
1961	59,825	975	1.6	547	56.1
1962	61,782	1,111	1.8	699	62.9
1963	63,246	1,157	1.8	840	72.6
1964	64,072	1,292	2.0	1,003	77.6
1965	63,525	1,403	2.2	1,049	74.8
1966	62,215	1,436	2.3	1,178	82.0
1967	61,307	1,540	2.5	1,493	96.9
1968	61,004	1,558	2.6	1,343	86.2
1969	62,912	1,642	2.6	1,225	74.6
1970	64,382	1,709	2.7	1,414	82.7
1971	67,551	1,842	2.7	1,305	70.8
1972	68,527	2,005	2.9	1,291	64.4
1973	68,713	2,167	3.2	1,402	64.7
1974	68,907	2,309	3.4	1,415	61.3
1975	67,178	2,515	3.7	1,443	57.4
1976	67,718	2,545	3.8	1,104	43.4
1977	68,436	2,837	4.2	1,127	39.7
1978	69,844	2,951	4.2	1,223	41.4
1979	72,352	3,331	4.6	988	29.7
1980	74,388	3,691	5.0	1,115	30.2
1981	72,355	3,911	5.4	1,191	30.5
<i>Total</i>	<i>1,879,368</i>	<i>52,919</i>	<i>2.8</i>	<i>29,365</i>	<i>55.5</i>

Sources: For births, *Statistical Abstracts of Ireland*, 1960 (Table 16), 1965 (Table 14), 1970-71 (Table 14), 1977 (Table 13); *Quarterly Reports on Births, Deaths, and Marriages*, 1977-1981. For adoptions, *Annual Report of An Bord Uchtála (Adoption Board)*, 1953-1981.

Figure 1: Adoption orders in Ireland, 1953-1981.



While the overall increase in child adoption is clear from these data, there are fluctuations in the numbers of adoptions through the years, as indicated by the graph in Figure 1. The largest number of adoption orders seems to be centered in the period from 1967 (the peak year of the entire range, with 1,493 adoptions) through 1975 (which has the second highest number, a total of 1,443 adoptions). It is difficult to say here just why there are these variations. They may relate to economic conditions which affect a family's decision to adopt a child, or a second and subsequent child. Additionally, there may be more specific and adoption-related political reasons which affect the overall pattern of adoption increase in Ireland. One such contributing factor was undoubtedly the adverse publicity of the McL. Case, which was highlighted in the mid-seventies, and may well have been responsible for some of the rather abrupt decline in adoptions in the years following 1975.¹³

Finally, the suggested influence of more cultural and demographic factors cannot be overlooked. The overall increase in adoption may correspond to the changes in marriage, family, and sex behaviour in Irish society over the last generation. Alternative styles of family arrangements, increasing usage of the means of birth control, the growth of the women's movement in the politics and consciousness of the society, and the rise in the use of legal abortion clinics in Britain by Irish women, all have their potential effects on the growth of adoption practice.

The presumed influences, however, are complicated, and the same factor may work in subtly different ways. For example, on the aggregate level, the usage of birth control may be said to decrease the number of legitimate children within marriages, and it may contribute to increasing the general interest in adoption by married spouses who wish to enlarge their families but not by their own conception. Keating (1976-77) has shown, in his analysis of demographic trends for the period of 1961 to 1976, that legitimate fertility rates have declined, consistently and substantially, for all married women in age groups over 25 years, and that this decline becomes successively greater from younger to older women.

Illegitimate fertility, on the other hand, is increasing in Ireland. Table 1 above provides the absolute figures for the total live births and for illegitimate births, and the resultant illegitimacy rate (the proportion illegitimate out of

¹³ The McL. Case, drawn out over an extended period of time during the late 1970s, symbolises the fear of many, that an adoption order may not be permanent, and that loopholes and re-interpretations in regulations and laws may force the adopting family to lose their child. There was extensive coverage of this case in the press and in the issues of the *Children First Newsletter*.

total births), from 1953 through 1981. Since the years 1959 and 1960, the illegitimacy rate of births climbs steadily, with no variations at all, from a low of 1.6 per cent, to 1981 with a high of 5.4 per cent. Presently then, illegitimacy refers to more than one out of every twenty births.¹⁴

Adoption in Ireland is mainly limited at the present time to illegitimate children and to legitimate orphans who have survived both parents. The overwhelming majority of adopted children are, at the time of their placement, socially and legally defined as illegitimate; their natal mothers and fathers were not legally married to each other at the time of their birth. Because of this stricture, adoption and illegitimacy have a rather indelible association. Current movements in Ireland to broaden the law, so as to permit the adoption of legitimate children, may be as indirectly interested in removing some of the stigma of illegitimacy from the fact of adoption as they are directly concerned with extending the benefits of adoption and permanent child care to the many categories of legitimate, but needy, children who are abandoned, who experience neglect, and who are subject to abuse and maltreatment.

In the last column, Table 1 attempts to relate the two phenomena of adoption and illegitimate status. The figures show the percentage adopted out of all illegitimate births, from the years 1953 through 1981. The applications and final orders for adoption, as processed by An Bord Uchtála, are not necessarily limited to a specific year, and the ratio of adopted children to illegitimate births is merely a crude measure of association. It does not tell us anything, for example, about the availability of adopted children, about the "supply" factor, since it is clear that many illegitimate children are not placed for adoption to begin with. And because the figures on adopting families come from the administration of the Adoption Board (as the culminating agency), rather than from the Adoption Societies (as the initiating agency), the data do not tell us anything about the "demand" factor, the extent of interest in adoption throughout the society.

Nevertheless, Table 1 does inform us of two major findings. The first refers to the overall total percentage and shows that more than a majority, 56 per cent in

¹⁴ The latest available figures show persisting increase. The number of births registered in the first half of 1982 was 35,949, of which 2,129 were illegitimate — representing 5.9 per cent of the total. Corresponding illegitimacy rates for this time period for England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, show similar patterns of increase. The rates themselves are higher for England and Wales (from 6.0 per cent in 1961, to 10.0 per cent in 1978), and for Scotland (from 4.6 per cent in 1961, to 9.8 per cent in 1978), but are more comparable for Northern Ireland (from 2.5 per cent in 1961, to 5.4 per cent in 1977). Data source: Central Statistics Office, *Annual Abstract of Statistics* (London: HMSO, 1980), Table 2.24, pp. 35–36.

fact, of all illegitimate children have been adopted in the cumulative 29 years. If legal adoption is considered only as one of a number of alternative child-care possibilities, then the general results for the time period are rather impressive. It is only a minority that has experienced, presumably, other forms of child placement: decisions by their mothers and/or relatives to raise them within the natal family; foster care; placement within designated residential facilities; and custody in various kinds of total institutions.

The second finding appears to be just as striking, if more troublesome. This refers to the evident internal pattern in recent years of the combined effect of increasing illegitimate fertility and declining adoption practice. The highest percentage of those adopted from the illegitimate pool is 96.9 in 1967; the corresponding figure has fallen to 30 per cent in the most recent three years. There are many questions that need to be asked about this apparent pattern. We do not fully know, as of yet, what is happening to these thousands of children who are not adopted. Is there an increase in the number of unmarried mothers who decide to keep and raise their children? Is there a disposition by birth mothers to keep their children in infancy, and agree to subsequent adoption after a few years of their own care? Is there a decline in interest in adoption, or is the interest at the same level but unable to keep up with the rising illegitimate fertility rate? Questions such as these will require a more intensive examination of the "supply" of adoptable children and the "demand" by adoptive families. Research which focuses on the various Adoption Societies will facilitate the answers to these new and important issues.

Some qualified answers to these questions are provided, in the meantime, by the data of Table 2. For the most recent years of 1973 through 1981, the table lists the absolute figures of total births (Column A), of illegitimate births (Column B), and of adoptions (Column C), as abstracted from Table 1 above, along with annual data from the Department of Social Welfare on the number of mothers and children who benefit from the Unmarried Mother's Allowance.

The raw data on the number of mothers who are receiving the Unmarried Mother's Allowance (with figures taken at 31 December of each year) are shown in Column D, with the net increase in each year indicated in Column E. The corresponding data on the number of children who benefit from the Allowance are shown in Column F, with the net increases of new children added to this population listed in Column G. The figures reveal a consistent net increase for both unmarried mothers and their children in the years shown. In the last row of Table 2, for example, as many as 955 new mothers and 1,163 new children were added to the scheme in 1981. The absolute increase in the number of

Table 2: *Total births, illegitimate births, adoptions and number of mothers and children benefiting from unmarried mother's allowance, 1973-1981 (absolute figures and percentages)*

(A)	(B)	(C)	(D)	(E)	(F)	(G)	H=B-(C+G)			
Year	Total births	Illegitimate births	Adoptions	Mothers receiving unmarried mother's allowance*	Net increase in each year in (D)	Children benefiting from unmarried mother's allowance*	Net increase in each year in (F)	Estimate of illegitimate children born each year not adopted or receiving allowances	Per cent adopted	Estimate of per cent receiving allowances
1973	68,713	2,167	1,402	—	—	—	—	765 (35.3%)	64.7	—
1974	68,907	2,309	1,415	2,156	2,156	2,760	2,760	—	61.3	—
1975	67,178	2,515	1,443	2,823	667	3,484	724	348 (13.8%)	57.4	28.8
1976	67,718	2,545	1,104	3,334	511	4,031	547	894 (35.1%)	43.4	21.5
1977	68,436	2,837	1,127	3,799	465	4,490	459	1,251 (44.1%)	39.7	16.2
1978	69,844	2,951	1,223	4,041	242	4,940	450	1,278 (43.3%)	41.4	15.2
1979	72,352	3,331	988	4,574	533	5,586	646	1,697 (50.9%)	29.7	19.4
1980	74,388	3,691	1,115	5,297	693	6,419	833	1,743 (47.2%)	30.2	22.6
1981	72,355	3,911	1,191	6,222	955	7,582	1,163	1,557 (39.8%)	30.5	29.7

Sources: See Table 1. For beneficiaries of unmarried mother's allowance, *Report of the Department of Social Welfare, 1972-1975, 1976-1978, 1979-1980*; corresponding figures for 1981 were supplied by the Department of Social Welfare.

*Figures taken at 31 December each year.

unmarried mothers who wish to raise their own children, at least as reflected in these aggregate data, is clearly substantiated.

How does this pattern relate to the larger picture of child care for those of illegitimate birth? Given the difficulties of precise measurement, Column H offers an estimate of the numbers and percentages of those illegitimate children who are born each year but who are neither adopted nor beneficiaries of the Unmarried Mother's Allowance. Column H is estimated by subtracting (for each year) the total of the number of adopted children (in Column C) and the net increase of children covered by the Allowance (in Column G) from the number of illegitimate births recorded for that year (in Column B). The percentages shown in Column H then will, when added to the percentages of those adopted and of those receiving Allowances, total 100 per cent of the illegitimate birth population for each year shown.

Viewed in this context, the proportion of children who are *not* adopted and who do *not* receive benefit assistance has become a plurality of all such children since 1977. Presumably, these children are either fostered or institutionalised or raised in family settings without receiving state assistance. This plurality — which even peaks to a majority in 1979 — also seems to have grown since the low estimate of 13.8 per cent in 1975, along with the increase in absolute numbers of illegitimate births. The corresponding proportions for the adoptions, as noted above, show a decline, from 65 per cent in 1973 to only 30 per cent in 1981. And the estimates of children benefiting from the Allowances, those cared for by their mothers, indicate a beginning of 29 per cent in 1975, a decline in subsequent years, and a 1981 proportion of 30 per cent. In no year have the beneficiaries of the Unmarried Mother's Allowance reached more than one-third of the illegitimate birth population.

The impression received from these data warrants considerable care and investigation. Most illegitimate children, as it would seem in recent years, are not being adopted. Nor are they receiving state support with their mothers in their own family arrangements. Clearly, most of these children are being raised in unspecified situations, whether temporary or long range, whether in foster homes or in institutions, whether unstructured or super-structured. The values of permanence and continuity which incorporation in family life provides a child are likely to be missing in these unspecified conditions.

Characteristics of the Adopted Children

There are also many questions one may ask about the adoptees themselves, and about their background. Because there is no extensive survey which

inquires into the major characteristics of adopted children, this study is limited to the three facts provided by the *Annual Report*: sex of adoptee, religion (as practised by the natal mother and the adopting parents), and the age of the adopted child when placed. Table 3 provides the data for the first of these, the distribution of adoptees by sex.

Table 3: *Sex of adoptee, 1953-1981 (in percentages)*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>(N)</i>
1953	45.4	54.6	100.0	(381)
1954	46.8	53.2	100.0	(888)
1955	45.4	54.6	100.0	(786)
1956	48.7	51.3	100.0	(565)
1957	46.8	53.2	100.0	(752)
1958	46.1	53.9	100.0	(592)
1959	45.9	54.1	100.0	(501)
1960	45.9	54.1	100.0	(505)
1961	46.6	53.4	100.0	(547)
1962	48.5	51.5	100.0	(699)
1963	46.2	53.8	100.0	(840)
1964	49.8	50.2	100.0	(1,003)
1965	53.1	46.9	100.0	(1,049)
1966	52.5	47.5	100.0	(1,178)
1967	51.0	49.0	100.0	(1,493)
1968	52.0	48.0	100.0	(1,343)
1969	52.7	47.3	100.0	(1,225)
1970	51.8	48.2	100.0	(1,414)
1971	50.3	49.7	100.0	(1,305)
1972	50.3	49.7	100.0	(1,291)
1973	51.0	49.0	100.0	(1,402)
1974	49.6	50.4	100.0	(1,415)
1975	51.9	48.1	100.0	(1,443)
1976	52.9	47.1	100.0	(1,104)
1977	50.6	49.4	100.0	(1,127)
1978	53.0	47.0	100.0	(1,223)
1979	53.3	46.7	100.0	(988)
1980	53.1	46.9	100.0	(1,115)
1981	52.6	47.4	100.0	(1,191)
<i>Total</i>	50.5	49.5	100.0	(29,365)

Source: *Annual Report of An Board Uchtála (Adoption Board), 1953-1981.*

The total figures in Table 3, based on all legal adoptions in Ireland, give a nearly perfect 50-50 breakdown between boys and girls. There is no difference with the sex of the adoptee in the total population. The annual figures, however, suggest a slight pattern which is curious. From 1953 through 1963, the first eleven years of legal adoption, girls were consistently more likely to be adopted than were boys. In 1964, the distribution is for the first time virtually equal between the sexes. And then, from 1965 on through 1981, the pattern is largely reversed, with boys showing some more consistent likelihood of being adopted. The differences, as observed here, are not considerable in any event. The interesting point is their respective consistency.

We do not know whether this table measures availability or preference, as far as the sex of the child is concerned for the adopting parents. Kornitzer (1968, p. 53) suggests, with British data, that girls were always more easily adopted than boys, and this seemed to be especially true in earlier years when there was less adoption and a greater availability of adoptable children. It was clear at this earlier period that preference could be exercised. Kornitzer does not discuss the reasons for this pattern, but it may be due to a number of cultural factors and dispositions: the feeling that girls are easier to raise, the belief that girls would be more likely to be nearer the family in later years as a support for parental old age, and perhaps, the sentiment that girls would appear to intrude less on family lineage since they do not carry the family name.¹⁵

As far as these Irish data are concerned, the pattern is interesting, if merely suggested, because of the reversal over the years. Further research into the sex ratio of available adopted children and the behaviour of natal mothers who place their children for adoption could clarify the question. If availability is important here, we might be able to learn whether there have been any changes in the disposition of natal mothers to place their daughters or sons for adoption. If preference is salient, given equal availability of boys and girls, we might learn whether adopting parents have changed their sex choice of an adopted child in this period, or whether indifference as to the sex of the adoptee has become more normative. In all cases, the patterns may be indicative of changing family values in Ireland over the past generation or so.

Data on religion are based here on the religious affiliation of the adopted children, as given in the *Reports*. Table 4 provides the percentage distribution of religion for the children, for years as shown. The overwhelming number of adoptions are Catholic, as expected, and there are signs of increasing Catholic

¹⁵ A more extensive discussion of sex preference in adoption is provided by Kirk (1964, pp. 123-145).

Table 4: *Religion of adoptee, 1953-1981 (in percentages)*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Protestant, Jewish, Other</i>	<i>Total</i>
1953	81.9	18.1	100.0
1954	91.3	8.7	100.0
1955	90.2	9.8	100.0
1956	90.6	9.4	100.0
1957	92.8	7.2	100.0
1958	92.9	7.1	100.0
1959	93.8	6.2	100.0
1960	94.7	5.3	100.0
1961	95.0	5.0	100.0
1962	94.4	5.6	100.0
1963	96.5	3.5	100.0
1964	96.9	3.1	100.0
1965	94.9	5.1	100.0
1966	95.7	4.3	100.0
1967	97.2	2.8	100.0
1968	97.0	3.0	100.0
1969	97.7	2.3	100.0
1970	96.7	3.3	100.0
1971	96.5	3.5	100.0
1972	98.0	2.0	100.0
1973	96.6	3.4	100.0
1974	98.0	2.0	100.0
1975	97.9	2.1	100.0
1976	98.5	1.5	100.0
1977	97.7	2.3	100.0
1978	—	—	—
1979	—	—	—
1980	—	—	—
1981	—	—	—

Source: Annual Report of An Bord Uchtála (Adoption Board), 1953-1981. Figures on religion for 1978 through 1981 are not provided.

homogeneity over the period. The first year of legal adoption in Ireland was 1953, and this was the only year to reflect greater relative activity among Protestants, Jews and other non-Catholics; as many as 18 per cent of the adoptions in that year were outside of Catholicism. This can be explained in

part by the anticipation of the new adoption law in the Republic and the cumulative needs of all Irish residents, regardless of their religious background.

Since 1953, however, Protestant and Jewish adoptions have declined, and the decline is even more pronounced throughout the 1960s and 1970s. The proportions of Protestant and Jewish adoptions are even lower than their respective percentages in the total Irish population. Table 5 offers the religious distribution of Ireland by census year, and the 5 per cent non-Catholic population of 1961 (and corresponding 6 per cent of 1971) are larger than the non-Catholic adoption figures for these time periods.

In speculating on the reasons for this discrepancy, part of the explanation may lie in possible religious group differences in the illegitimacy rate in Ireland. Inasmuch as illegitimate children provide most of the adoption possibilities, and inasmuch as the adoption laws have promoted a conformity of religion between adoptive parents and the adoptee's natal mother, one might anticipate finding lower rates of illegitimacy among the non-Catholic populations of the Republic.¹⁶

Table 5: *Population of Ireland, by religion and year, 1881-1971 (in percentages)*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Protestant, Jewish, Other</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>(N)</i>
1881	89.5	10.5	100.0	(3,870,020)
1891	89.3	10.7	100.0	(3,468,694)
1901	89.3	10.7	100.0	(3,221,823)
1911	89.6	10.4	100.0	(3,139,688)
1926	92.6	7.4	100.0	(2,971,992)
1936	93.4	6.6	100.0	(2,968,420)
1946	94.3	5.7	100.0	(2,955,107)
1961	94.9	5.1	100.0	(2,818,341)
1971	93.9	6.1	100.0	(2,978,248)

Source: *Statistical Abstract of Ireland, 1974-1975, Table 38.*

¹⁶. If there are lower rates of illegitimacy among Irish Protestants and Irish Jews, it may relate to the demographic distribution of these religious minorities, and proportionately to more birth control practice among the non-Catholics. On the religious requirements in Irish adoption law, see Shatter (1977, pp. 166-167).

The last factor to be discussed in this section refers to the age of the adoptee at the time of placement. Table 6 provides the available data by distributing the percentages for each of the years (1972 through 1981) covered by the *Reports* on this question. The total figures present no surprises. Age at placement is not a random phenomenon in adoption. As expected, the youngest children, those less than one year old, comprise 56 per cent or a majority of all Irish adoptions. The next category, children between the ages of one and two years, follows directly with 29 per cent. And the remaining category, those children who are more than two years old at the time of their legal adoption, constitutes 15 per cent of the total.

The fact that a clear majority of Irish adoptions deals with infants, rather than with older children, is consistent with the research on adoption in other Western societies (Kornitzer, 1952; Bohman, 1970; Raynor, 1980).¹⁷ It accords with the familiar and widespread attitude that the younger the adoptee is at placement, the greater the likelihood of adoption success, family integration, and the values of permanence and continuity. Given a choice, it is evident that most Irish adopters desire the earliest time possible in the placement of children.

What is interesting in Table 6, however, is the suggestion of some change over the years covered. The placement by age is not necessarily fixed and static. Rather, there are signs in the most recent years of some increase in the proportions of older children being adopted, those between one and two years of age, and even those more than two years old. As with the factor of the sex of the adopted child, discussed above, the age of the adoptee when placed may be complicated by reasons of availability (delays in consent for placement, in application processing, and in changes of mind) as well as adopters' preferences, and selection and choice may easily affect supply.

More interesting still is the suggestion of an Irish pattern which seems to emerge from cross-cultural analysis. In the American context, Kadushin's important study of the adoption of older children helps to outline much of the background, and the positive and negative aspects, of this special area of adoption research. He makes the critical distinction between relative and non-relative adoptions, and estimates that about half of all the legal adoptions in the

¹⁷ Age at adoption placement is a critical and much cited variable in the research literature. See the work of Bowlby (1951), Jaffee and Fanshel (1970), and Seglow, Pringle and Wedge (1972). In adoption practice there may be substantial differences in time between "age at placement" and "age at time of adoption order". Future research could try to determine whether these differences are meaningful, and whether Irish differences are smaller or greater than those of other societies.

Table 6: *Age of adoptee at placement, 1972-1981 (in percentages)*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Less than one year old</i>	<i>Between one and two years old</i>	<i>More than two years old</i>	<i>Total</i>
1972	57.5	27.8	14.7	100.0
1973	60.1	27.5	12.4	100.0
1974	62.4	24.2	13.4	100.0
1975	66.8	20.4	12.8	100.0
1976	68.1	19.4	12.5	100.0
1977	54.4	32.1	13.5	100.0
1978	54.1	29.3	16.6	100.0
1979	52.9	30.4	16.7	100.0
1980	45.3	38.3	16.4	100.0
1981	35.0	46.0	19.0	100.0
<i>Total</i>	56.1	29.2	14.7	100.0

Source: Annual Report of An Bord Uchtála (Adoption Board), 1972-1981.

United States are relative adoptions (Kadushin, 1970, p. 3). The comparable proportion is much lower in Ireland, as will be shown and discussed in the following section. Adoption placement with family relatives seems to be around 10 per cent of all legal adoptions, in Ireland.

Controlling for this difference of natal kinship, Kadushin cites data which suggest that as much as 85 per cent of all non-relative adoptions in the United States involve the placement of children when they are less than one year of age. Inasmuch as most Irish adoptions appear to be non-relative, the corresponding proportion of child placement at the youngest age — that is, 56 per cent — is considerably lower. Further research should be able to examine this pattern more directly, for it would be important to know whether Ireland is more likely to show greater rates of adoption of older children in non-related situations than other Western societies.¹⁸

If this holds, even assuming there might be differences between Irish and American dispositions to engage the legal machinery for the adoption of a related child in the first place, it might represent an indirect measure of societal integration and cultural homogeneity. It might therefore lend support to the

18. The distinction between related and non-related adoptions is obviously very important in the assessment and understanding of the adoption of older children. Unfortunately, there has been too little research on this subject, and insufficient sociological discussion of the ideas themselves.

idea that Irish family life presumes more uniformity than family culture does in other Western societies, and particularly the United States, with its greater ethnic diversity and cultural mix. The adoption of an older child may appear less problematic in Ireland, among those willing to adopt, because of a more widely shared and tacit understanding of family values.¹⁹

- ¹⁹. The fact of adoption, especially that of adopting an older, non-related child, always raises the idea of incorporating a "stranger" to one's family midst, and this on a level of intimacy that transcends most expected encounters with strangers (Simmel, 1950). One is intrigued here by the possible relationship of social behaviour and mythology. In his paper on the myths of the West in Irish and American culture, Gibbons (1981) sets forth some comparative thoughts on the roles of community and individuality in both societies. He observes the similarities and the differences, and notes the contrast in Irish and American character. The focus in Ireland is on the priority of community, with the individual "needing" the community; the emphasis is on the greater recognition of shared values, uniformity, and communal ethos. In the broader outlines of American culture, the focus is reversed, with the priority on the community's "need" of the individual; the emphasis is on the recognition of individualism, mobility, and greater diversity. Given this hypothesis of culture and character, it might not be too surprising to find overall differences in the adoption of older children in the two societies.

PART 4: *LEGAL ADOPTION IN IRELAND (Continued)*

In a period of just over twenty years it [legal adoption] has become an institution so respected and so familiar that one can only look back with astonishment at the long-drawn-out action that was fought against it.

—Jack White

The preceding section set forth all available data on the long-term patterns of adoption frequency and the characteristics of the adoptees themselves, since the establishment of the legal structure in 1952 and 1953. The present section will turn the attention to two other interests: the available information on the adopters, who initiate their desire to adopt a child with a processed application to the Adoption Board and who receive an Adoption Order, and to existing data on some aspects of the adoption process itself.

Social Background of Adopting Parents

The first set of figures which helps describe the background of the adopting parents refers to the regions of Ireland. These are described in the *Reports* as places where the adoption was made, or alternatively, as places in which the adopted child resided at the time of adoption. The *Reports* then do not specifically claim this information as the place of residence of the adopting parents, but it is quite probable that most applicants for adopting a child apply in the district where they currently reside. Table 7 offers the place of adoption for the years, 1953 through 1981, distributed separately into the two larger urban concentrations of "Dublin Area" (which includes both Dublin City and Dublin County) and "Cork Area" (which comprises Cork City and Cork County), and the residual category of "Elsewhere" (which refers to all remaining areas of the country).

The total figures of Table 7 reveal that a bare plurality of all adoptions over the years is in the Dublin area, but further, that a clear majority of these adoptions is associated with more urban background. The combination of both Dublin and Cork areas provides the total proportion of 58 per cent. The remaining 42 per cent is designated as "Elsewhere," and while this includes smaller urban locations, such as Limerick, Galway and Waterford, it also represents most of rural Ireland as well. For comparative purposes then, it is reasonable to conclude that Irish adoption has a decidedly more urban character.

Furthermore, we can argue that the major pattern of Table 7 is not expected simply on the basis of the distribution of the population of Ireland as a whole. The number of people in the combined Dublin and Cork areas does not constitute a majority of the Irish population, as the figures of Table 8 confirm. In fact, although the Census shows steady increase in the population size of Dublin and Cork from 1951 to 1981, the pattern of total Irish population is the reverse of adoption behaviour: the majority of Ireland still resides in the "Elsewhere" category of smaller towns and more rural communities.

Table 7: *Place of adoption in Ireland, 1953-1981 (in percentages)*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Dublin area (City and County)</i>	<i>Cork area (City and County)</i>	<i>Elsewhere in Ireland</i>	<i>Total</i>
1953	64.0	23.9	12.1	100.0
1954	39.6	22.6	37.8	100.0
1955	47.3	12.7	40.0	100.0
1956	46.5	12.6	40.9	100.0
1957	48.1	7.0	44.9	100.0
1958	50.3	7.1	42.6	100.0
1959	46.7	12.8	40.5	100.0
1960	42.4	10.5	47.1	100.0
1961	49.0	7.5	43.5	100.0
1962	47.8	14.2	38.0	100.0
1963	50.6	14.6	34.8	100.0
1964	46.5	18.8	34.7	100.0
1965	48.0	17.0	35.0	100.0
1966	44.8	15.6	39.6	100.0
1967	42.6	15.9	41.5	100.0
1968	44.4	15.4	40.2	100.0
1969	45.4	14.0	40.6	100.0
1970	44.6	13.6	41.8	100.0
1971	45.5	12.3	42.2	100.0
1972	43.3	14.8	41.9	100.0
1973	40.1	15.6	44.3	100.0
1974	40.0	18.0	42.0	100.0
1975	36.0	17.9	46.1	100.0
1976	35.4	18.0	46.6	100.0
1977	37.8	15.4	46.8	100.0
1978	37.5	13.8	48.7	100.0
1979	35.0	17.9	47.1	100.0
1980	29.5	22.2	48.3	100.0
1981	35.5	14.3	50.2	100.0
<i>Total</i>	42.4	15.4	42.2	100.0

Source: Annual Report of An Bord Uchtála (Adoption Board), 1953-1981.

Closer inspection of Table 7 provides another important fact. While the more prevailing character of adoption is urban and this is in the context of a more rural Irish population, there are clear signs of change. The adoption proportions are shifting, as the distribution in the Dublin area declines and the

percentage in the rest of the country increases. This pattern is evident particularly in the most recent years, from 1973 to 1981. The practice of adoption, it is suggested, is becoming more universal in contemporary Ireland, at least in terms of location. More detailed analysis in adoption research, especially among urban and rural families who inquire about adoption at the different Adoption Societies located around Ireland, should be able to examine this finding more carefully.

Table 8: *Population of Ireland, by area and year, 1951-1981 (in percentages)*

Year	Dublin area (City and County)	Cork area (City and County)	Elsewhere in Ireland	Total
1951	21.8	11.5	66.7	100.0
1956	22.7	11.6	65.7	100.0
1961	23.8	11.7	64.5	100.0
1966	25.8	11.8	62.4	100.0
1971	26.8	11.9	61.3	100.0
1979	27.6	11.8	60.6	100.0
1981	27.5	11.7	60.8	100.0

Source: *Statistical Abstracts of Ireland*, 1960 (Table 8), 1965 (Table 8), 1974-1975 (Table 8),* Dublin Area refers to Greater Dublin (City and County), and Cork Area refers to Greater Cork (City and County). Population figures are not exactly comparable, because of boundary changes in some years.

*1979 (Table 8), *Census of Population of Ireland 1981, Preliminary Report* (Table B).

It is important to emphasise some qualifications of these data on the location of adoption. As presented in the *Reports*, the figures are unrefined and non-specific. In some years, the data refer to the places where the adoption was made, and in other years, the numbers apply to places where the adopted child resided. Residence then could be quite misleading, particularly when the birth of an illegitimate child takes place away from the mother's home and the adoption is arranged in different counties by the major agencies, the registered Adoption Societies and the government Health Boards (Cf. Darling, 1974). In any event, the urban or rural background of the adopters themselves, as distinct from the adopted children's origins, could be more easily determined in a straightforward survey of adopting parents.

Table 9: *Occupational background of adopters, 1953-1981 (in percentages)*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Agricultural</i>	<i>Working Class</i>	<i>White Collar</i>	<i>Total</i>
1953	—	—	—	—
1954	—	—	—	—
1955	12.7	56.0	31.3	100.0
1956	12.9	52.5	34.6	100.0
1957	11.9	52.1	36.0	100.0
1958	10.9	49.6	39.5	100.0
1959	13.9	47.8	38.3	100.0
1960	13.4	41.5	45.1	100.0
1961	13.4	44.3	42.3	100.0
1962	11.2	46.7	42.1	100.0
1963	10.7	43.6	45.7	100.0
1964	11.9	44.5	43.6	100.0
1965	14.3	40.9	44.8	100.0
1966	12.5	42.5	45.0	100.0
1967	12.3	43.9	43.8	100.0
1968	11.4	41.3	47.3	100.0
1969	10.6	38.8	50.6	100.0
1970	11.0	36.7	52.3	100.0
1971	9.5	36.5	54.0	100.0
1972	10.0	37.4	52.6	100.0
1973	9.3	38.3	52.4	100.0
1974	9.1	37.8	53.1	100.0
1975	10.3	34.9	54.8	100.0
1976	9.5	31.9	58.6	100.0
1977	7.4	33.7	58.9	100.0
1978	7.4	33.4	59.2	100.0
1979	8.7	40.8	50.5	100.0
1980	8.3	42.5	49.2	100.0
1981	9.3	49.5	41.2	100.0
<i>Total</i>	10.5	40.9	48.6	100.0

Source: Annual Report of An Bord Uchtála (Adoption Board), 1953-1981.

Figures for 1953 and 1954 are not provided. Occupational backgrounds consist of the following categories, as given in the *Reports*: Agricultural (Farmers); Working Class (Labourers, Industrial Workers and Tradesmen, and Transport); White Collar (Professional, Commercial and Technical, and Public Administration and Defence). Home Duties and Other Occupations are excluded from the calculations. Occupations refer to adopting fathers.

Any major consideration of the social background of the adoptive parents would be interested in the social class distribution. The data provided by the *Reports* do not include educational attainment or income level, but they do offer the figures for the occupations of the adopting fathers. The occupational categories are broadly-based, but they are exclusively and exhaustively presented, and relatively few need to be disregarded because of designations as "Home Duties" and "Other Occupations."²⁰

Table 9 summarises these data on occupations, by arranging the categories into three distributions: Agricultural, Working Class and White Collar. The first is based solely on the category of "Farmers," and this does not distinguish among sizes of farm holdings, nor between farm ownership and farm labour, nor among other kinds of agricultural work. The term "Working Class" is arbitrarily designated to include various levels of unskilled, semi-skilled and skilled labour, and it is defined here by the sum of three categories listed in the *Reports*: Labourers; Industrial Workers and Tradesmen; and Transport. The third occupational class, "White Collar," is equally arbitrary and corresponds to the two remaining categories given in the *Reports*: Professional, Commercial and Technical; and Public Administration and Defence. As with the Agricultural category, no sharper gradations are possible within these classifications.

The overall total percentages of Table 9 reflect a "white collar bias" in adoption behaviour in Ireland; nearly half of all the adopting fathers from 1953 to 1981 have white collar occupations, while 4 out of 10 have working class jobs, and only 1 out of 10 is in agriculture. This distribution contrasts sharply with the distribution of male occupations in the labour force of the entire country. Table 10 offers this information for the six years of 1951, 1961, 1966, 1971, 1975 and 1979, and the occupational categories are constructed to be as similar and comparable as possible to those of the adopting fathers in the *Reports*.

Although the percentage of working class and white collar occupations have increased from 1951 to 1979, and the corresponding proportion of agricultural work has declined in this period, the distribution is strikingly different from that of the adopters. Considering only the figures for the 1970 decade, we find an average of 25 per cent of all male occupations to be white collar. Yet, as shown in Table 9, the proportion of white collar among adopters is often twice

²⁰. The following occupational analysis of Adoption Board and Census data lacks important controls for age, education and other relevant variables. Future research, based on more complete information, should qualify the social class or occupation distribution rather heavily.

Table 10: *Population of Ireland, by occupation (males only) and year, 1951-1979 (in percentages)*

Year	Agricultural	Working class	White collar	Total
1951	47.6	35.1	17.3	100.0
1961	43.8	36.8	19.4	100.0
1966	38.5	40.6	20.9	100.0
1971	32.4	44.9	22.7	100.0
1975	30.7	44.7	24.6	100.0
1979	27.3	45.4	27.3	100.0

Source: *Statistical Abstracts of Ireland*, 1960 (Table 41), 1965 (Table 38), 1970-1971 (Table 37), 1974-1975 (Table 34). Occupational backgrounds consist of the following categories, as given in the *Census*: Agricultural (includes all farm owners and workers, plus fishermen and workers in mining, quarries, and turf); White Collar (includes clerks and typists, commercial, insurance and finance, entertainment and sports, administrative, executive, and managerial, professional and technical, and defence forces); Working Class (includes all other categories). No answers on occupation are excluded from the calculations.

Labour force survey 1979 (Table 13, and Revised Table 13 for 1975):

Agricultural (includes farmers, other agricultural workers, forestry workers and fishermen, workers in other products — including mining, quarrying, and turf); White Collar (includes clerical workers, proprietors and managers, shop assistants and barmen, other commercial workers, professional and technical workers, administrative, executive and managerial workers); Working Class (includes all other categories). The "Others (including not stated)" category is excluded from the calculations.

or more this frequent. The working class proportion of the Irish population increases from 35 per cent in the 1951 Census to 45 per cent in 1979. And among adopters, the working class has become roughly proportionate to their percentages in the greater population, if with some suggestion of recent underrepresentation.

It is clearly among farmers in the agricultural sector where the differential is greatest. The decline of farming occupations in Ireland is steep, from 48 per cent or nearly half of all employment in 1951, down to less than one-third of the labour force in 1979. Regardless of the time period, agricultural backgrounds are invariably underrepresented among the adopters; there are three, and even four, times as many farmers and agricultural workers in Irish labour as there are among Irish adopters.

Culturally-based factors, such as rural conservatism, anxieties about land inheritance, and even perhaps, the fear of modifying kinship and lineage, may all play some part in the reluctance of farmers to admit a "stranger" to their family structure. But it is also important to note, demographically, that farming communities in Ireland do have higher proportions of unmarried men and women (Hannan, 1979). Even assuming any disposition one way or the other, these single people would be ineligible by law to adopt a child. The agricultural sector is also characterised by an older population, as Hannan has shown, and although the legal statutes do not determine an upper age limit for adopters, many adoption agencies suggest a guideline to be no more than forty years or so (Shatter, 1977). Finally, the geographical distribution of relevant guidance and information in adoption organisations may indirectly bias actual adoption behaviour away from scattered and more rural communities and towards the more urban concentrations of the population, as reflected in Table 7 above.²¹

In any event, more elaborate survey research on the occupational backgrounds of adopters and non-adopters should be able to sort out some of these questions, by controlling for age, marital status, head of household, and location. The general findings of this exploratory section on social class are consistent, however, with the Irish survey conducted by Darling (1974) of a sample of 158 adoptive couples.

Finally, another point of interest emerges from Table 9, and this refers to the nature of changing proportions, *intra* class background, and over time. Within the agricultural sector, as noted, there is relatively little interest in adoption, and this pattern holds through the years. If there is any evidence of change at all, it is a suggestion of declining involvement, of a loss of about 5 or 6 percentage points between the mid-fifties and the late-seventies. This decline is consistent, moreover, with the job decline in the agricultural work force down the years.

It is within the two remaining occupational categories — the working class and white collar segments — that we find some substantial changes. From the 1950s to the end of the 1970s, the working class component among adopters loses rather consistently, with a drop of 20 or more percentage points, and this is taking place as working class occupations become more numerous in the labour force and assume a plurality of all jobs. At the same time, the white collar representation in adoption grows considerably, taking on the 20 percentage points or more that the working class has lost. In other words, the

²¹ See Darling (1974) for a listing, by geographic place, of the different Adoption Societies.

white collar bias in adoption has not been a fundamental characteristic of adoption in Ireland, ever present from the beginnings in 1953. Rather it has evolved, and further changes in the Irish society and economy may help bring about additional class variations in future years. The three most recent years shown in Table 9, for example, may indicate a reversal of the past 25 years, as they point to an increase of working-class adoptions, and a decline in white collar participation.

In explaining these patterns, additional research should focus on economic indicators as well as more occupational and cultural factors in interviews with adoptive parents and prospective adopters. In Part 3, we suggested that the overall rise and fall of adoption orders may have been associated with economic conditions in the larger society. It may well be true with this pattern as well. If there is a fluctuating overall decline in adoptions throughout a period because of economic factors, then the rearrangement of occupational backgrounds among those who do adopt should reflect an increase in more advantaged jobs and a decrease in more vulnerable positions. Table 9 may be simply pointing out that white collar workers have persisted in having the economic opportunities for adopting a child, while those of the working class have been losing them.

Just as important, however, would be any possible bias which is introduced by the process of adoption itself, either at the initial stage of inquiry with different agencies, or during the many investigative relationships required by the Societies and the Adoption Board. Class bias is, of course, not unknown with formal organisations and government bureaucracies, and adoption in general is precisely that kind of social phenomenon which could facilitate a systematic prejudice.

In many cases, for example, the middle class world of the white collar may not only be more encouraged to adopt in the first place, but may be more sophisticated of appearances and expectations with home visits by investigators. Economic considerations aside, the middle class may choose to emphasise a religious piety, a certain grooming of self and house, and a peculiar verbal diplomacy, all of which is designed to facilitate approval. The culture of the working class, perhaps, may be less attuned to these sorts of behavioural and verbal niceties. In any event, house visits by outsiders who can affect an applicant's chances with adopting a child are hardly unthreatening experiences. Professional social workers are usually sensitised to this class bias in the course of their education, but many of those who work in the field of adoption are not trained (Darling, 1974); as a result, they may be less aware of these nuances of social class.

The last factor to be discussed from the data on adopters refers to the proportion of annual adoptions which are second or subsequent adoptions in the same family. Table 11 lists these percentages for all years provided, from 1957 through 1981. If repetition of behaviour is construed as a kind of popularity, especially with regard to complex applications and a host of regulations, then the proportion of second and subsequent adoptions may be interpreted as a measure of success and satisfaction on the part of the adoptive couples.

Table 11: *Annual adoptions, as second or subsequent adoptions, 1953-1981 (in percentages)*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Proportion of all adoptions</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Proportion of all adoptions</i>
1953	—	1968	32.9
1954	—	1969	35.7
1955	—	1970	35.1
1956	—	1971	36.0
1957	10.8	1972	25.6
1958	17.6	1973	38.0
1959	20.0	1974	37.1
1960	16.8	1975	36.7
1961	23.4	1976	36.1
1962	24.6	1977	38.7
1963	29.6	1978	35.3
1964	23.5	1979	38.1
1965	28.8	1980	33.6
1966	29.7	1981	33.8
1967	32.3	<i>Total</i>	31.7

Source: Annual Report of An Bord Uchtála (Adoption Board), 1953-1981.
 Figures for the earliest years, 1953 through 1956, are not provided.

What is particularly impressive about the pattern of legal adoption in Ireland is the rather steady and continued increase in this repetitive behaviour over the period. From a low of 11 per cent of all adoptions in 1957, the proportion of second and subsequent adoptions has tripled by 1981. This becomes an important variable, not only as a measure of apparent satisfaction for adoptive parents, but also as a methodological element of a dichotomy; comparative analysis on adopters and adoptees must focus on the similarities and differences

between parents who adopt just once, and those who adopt more often. Future research can tell us considerably more about the meaning of these differences, in adoption behaviour generally, and in more specific analysis of adoption success. Finally, this increase in adoption repeaters may also be indicative of the administration process, for this could be a suggestion that increasingly only the "most eligible" candidates are going forward, from societies and agencies to the Adoption Board. The pattern may point to a sort of gate-keeping ritual at work, encouraging "dead certs" and discouraging "rejects" or those prospective adopters who apply as novices for the first time. More information on the process itself is provided in the next section.

On the Process of Adoption

The final section of this summary of data from the *Reports* deals with two aspects of the adoption procedure: the agency of adoption placement, and the numbers of applications and rejections of prospective adopters. The first set of information is contained in Table 12, which lists the available breakdown on adoption placement by each year.

The agency categories are shown as Adoption Societies, Relatives, Health Boards, Third Parties, and Others. From 1953 through 1972, the *Reports* only classified Societies, Relatives, and Others, with the latter a miscellaneous repository. It is difficult to know exactly who or what is included in "Others"; the proportions in the first 10 years or more of adoption practice in this category are too high to warrant unspecificity. One suspects that they include many Third Party placements, the involvement of individual doctors, solicitors, clergy, friends, or even financial agents, who assist in adoption arrangements. Third Party adoptions are invariably controversial, because of their common anonymity, lack of expertise, emotional or financial drains, and greater risks.

Adoption Societies, as shown in Table 12, perform the greater number of adoptions; more than three out of every four adoptions ordered in Ireland were arranged through the registered Societies. It becomes all the more important then to question the structure and processes of these agencies, how they function, and with what results. A beginning was made with the studies of Good (1970), Darling (1974), and the Protestant Adoption Society (1977), but it would be particularly valuable to have some organisational analysis of these societies and some comparative data on their work.

Table 12: Agency of adoption placement, 1953-1981 (in percentages)

Year	Adoption Societies	Relatives	Health Boards	Third Parties	Others	Total
1953	50.4	19.4	—	—	30.2	100.0
1954	67.0	7.7	—	—	25.3	100.0
1955	60.8	9.4	—	—	29.8	100.0
1956	65.7	11.3	—	—	23.0	100.0
1957	65.2	6.2	—	—	28.6	100.0
1958	67.4	11.5	—	—	21.1	100.0
1959	69.7	10.0	—	—	20.3	100.0
1960	76.8	9.7	—	—	13.5	100.0
1961	80.3	11.1	—	—	8.6	100.0
1962	77.0	8.7	—	—	14.3	100.0
1963	79.0	6.8	—	—	14.2	100.0
1964	77.2	6.3	—	—	16.5	100.0
1965	77.4	5.4	—	—	17.2	100.0
1966	77.7	10.4	—	—	11.9	100.0
1967	77.9	7.6	—	—	14.5	100.0
1968	78.6	8.8	—	—	12.6	100.0
1969	84.3	6.5	—	—	9.2	100.0
1970	83.0	5.3	—	—	11.7	100.0
1971	84.9	4.8	—	—	10.3	100.0
1972	82.8	9.5	—	—	7.7	100.0
1973	83.7	9.0	5.8	1.5	0.0	100.0
1974	81.4	9.1	7.2	2.3	0.0	100.0
1975	80.7	8.7	8.5	2.1	0.0	100.0
1976	82.0	9.0	8.2	0.8	0.0	100.0
1977	83.2	9.2	7.0	0.3	0.3	100.0
1978	87.0	—	4.3	—	8.7	100.0
1979	85.5	—	4.3	—	10.2	100.0
1980	83.2	—	6.9	—	9.9	100.0
1981	79.9	—	6.7	—	13.4	100.0
Total	78.8	—	—	—	21.2	100.0

Source: Annual Report of An Bord Uchtála (Adoption Board), 1953-1981.

The category "Others" may include adoption placements by Relatives, Health Boards, and Third Parties, for those years where data are not provided.

Governmental Health Boards in different regions of the country have so far provided only a small proportion of all adoption placements, but these may be expected to continue inasmuch as the agency involves related health

practitioners and social workers, all closely involved with family and child care. The category of Relatives includes all kinship-connected adoptions and placements, and refers mainly to those adoptions by the grandparents of the child as well as to all ultimate adoptions by the natal mother upon her subsequent marriage.

The last table in this section refers to the procedures of An Bord Uchtála itself. The *Reports* of the Board provide very little information on the submitted applications by prospective adopters and the Board's acceptance or rejection of them. Each year, the Board publishes in its annual *Report* the number of such applications, the number of rejections, and the number of Adoption Orders. Because of overlap and the constraints of time, in some years there may be more Adoption Orders given than actual applications, and so it is difficult to examine these two in tandem. The figures for the whole period from 1953 through 1981, however, show a sum of 32,932 submitted applications, and a total of 29,365 actual adoptions, as given in Table 1. Thus, for the 29 years since the introduction of legal adoption, there have been as many as 3,567 applications which have not succeeded.

We have no information on the nature of these unfulfilled applications, but Table 13 does list the figures on Board rejections. Over the years, there have been relatively few of these: a total of 500 rejections for the whole period, with considerably more in the early years of legal adoption, and with very few in the most recent years. A summary would yield the following results out of 32,932 submitted applications: 29,365 completed Adoption Orders; 3,067 applications withdrawn, for different and unknown reasons; and 500 applications rejected.

The *Reports* do summarise some of the reasons for rejected applications, and these relate often to various statutory grounds, based on the law at the time. The applicants or the child may be ineligible for reasons of age, of religion, or of state residence. The prospective adopters may be rejected for different reasons of marital status. The child may be defined as of legitimate birth, and not an orphan, and therefore ineligible for adoption. The declining number of rejections in recent years may be due to more sophisticated applicants, as noted above, who have already investigated their legal qualifications, or who have already gone through the mill. Declining rejections may also be due, as suggested, to gate-keeping mechanisms which pre-select those who do apply. There are some, if few, rejections in the *Reports* which are vaguely expressed in terms of "unsuitability" of the applicants, but with no specific reasons or grounds offered.

Table 13: *Adoption applications and board rejections, 1953-1981 (absolute figures and percentages)*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Submitted applications</i>	<i>Rejections</i>	<i>(N)</i>
1953	1,520	1.7	(26)
1954	1,150	2.8	(32)
1955	987	9.1	(90)
1956	467	7.7	(36)
1957	685	5.7	(39)
1958	558	5.4	(30)
1959	601	4.8	(29)
1960	620	2.4	(15)
1961	730	3.8	(28)
1962	757	2.5	(19)
1963	902	1.4	(13)
1964	1,062	0.8	(8)
1965	1,360	0.7	(9)
1966	1,257	2.7	(34)
1967	1,298	0.2	(2)
1968	1,395	0.1	(2)
1969	1,463	0.3	(4)
1970	1,333	3.3	(44)
1971	1,258	0.6	(7)
1972	1,334	1.0	(13)
1973	1,501	0.7	(10)
1974	1,690	0.2	(4)
1975	1,426	0.1	(1)
1976	1,277	0.2	(3)
1977	1,296	0.0	(0)
1978	1,228	0.0	(0)
1979	1,234	0.0	(0)
1980	1,354	0.1	(1)
1981	1,189	0.1	(1)
<i>Total</i>	<i>32,932</i>	<i>1.5</i>	<i>(500)</i>

Source: Annual Report of An Bord Uchtála (Adoption Board), 1953-1981.

In general, critics of the *status quo* have pointed out that the laws on adoption in Ireland are hedged in with many regulations and constraints, all relating to a host of factors which affect many Irish citizens. The constraints, at times, seem

to reflect more concern with the state, the society, the natal mother, and other interests, than with the welfare of the child. The discrepancy between law and social practice, as discussed at length by Goldstein, Freud and Solnit (1973) in their powerful argument for continuity and permanence in child care, is nowhere better viewed than in the field of adoption. As the most important phenomenon of child placement, adoption requires flexibility. The minority report of the recently published study by the Task Force on Child Care Services (1980, pp. 311-339) summarises many of the constraints which inhibit flexibility, and ultimately, the alternative solution of adoption. It is the universality of adoption which should be recognised and facilitated by modern law and social practice. Success and failure in adoption often hang in the balance of these constraints, and the concluding chapter will attempt a sociological explanation of why this is so.

PART 5: ON THE SOCIOLOGY OF ADOPTION

One great handicap to this task of recalling has been the fact of being an orphan. The chain of recollection — the collective memory of a family — has been broken. It is our parents, normally, who not only teach us our family history but who set us straight on our own childhood recollections, telling us that *this* cannot have happened the way we think it did and that *that*, on the other hand, did occur, just as we remember it, in such and such a manner . . .

— Mary McCarthy

The child who is born into his family is like a board that's nailed down from the start. But the adopted child, him the parents have to nail down, otherwise he is like a loose board in mid-air.

—an eleven-year-old
adopted boy, quoted
by H. David Kirk

The overview of adoption in Ireland that has been presented in this study is, to be sure, introductory and suggestive. It is merely a beginning. But from a strictly sociological point of view, the study of adoption in any contemporary society is itself a new and underdeveloped phenomenon. There are two areas of neglect that make this clear: the idea of adoption as a social force which broadens the meaning of family and kinship; and the social consequences of adoption with their variations in terms of adoption success and adoption failure. It is this more basic sociological approach which will inform this final section of the study, and will connect back to those more conceptual aspects of adoption which were raised in the first chapter, centered around the values of continuity and permanence.

Success and Failure in Adoption

The lack of sociological conceptualisation in the field of adoption has been discussed and documented.²² The question of success and failure is more difficult to manage, not only because of the longitudinal necessity in tracing the biographies of adoptees, but also because of the many problems inherent in the meanings of "success" and "failure." In the literature to date, success has been defined largely in terms of the standard achievements in everyday life, while failure has been defined chiefly in terms of different kinds of deviance. The success of adoptees then is described as a kind of *public* behaviour, that which is linked more to the community at hand. Criteria usually refer to the overt, visible performance of the adoptee in the school system, his involvement with neighbours, his behaviour at work, his efforts in community activities, the nature of his religious participations, and generally all the measures of the success of an individual going through maturation, engaging in interpersonal behaviour, and meeting the requirements of civility and citizenship.²³

²². The Canadian H. David Kirk has been foremost in thinking more theoretically and sociologically about the idea of adoption, as well as in pointing out the possibilities and needs in research. See his different contributions (Kirk, 1964; Kirk, 1981; and Hemphill, McDaniel and Kirk, 1981). Existing literature, with its predominant emphases in social work, psychiatry, and child development, is summarised in two bibliographies (Pringle, 1967; and Jacka, 1973). Historical and anthropological studies offer valuable comparative insight on adoption in different cultures and at different times. See, for example, Goody, 1969; Carroll, 1970; Brady, 1976; Wolf and Huang, 1980.

²³. A review of the bibliographic literature (Pringle, 1967; and Jacka, 1973) will summarise the little available research on success and failure in adoption, and will reflect the *public* nature of these questions. Other possible criteria and definitions of success, as more *private* behaviour, are still less common. The more conventional standards of such private spheres are typically limited to statements of "satisfaction" or "happiness" with the adoptee's experiences with the adoptive family, or the statements of such satisfaction as made by the adoptive family itself. See the discussion on these issues in Tizard (1978).

Often too, the literature on this question defines "failure" as the opposite, by implication, of "success." If conformity means success, then deviance means failure. The adoptee shows signs of failure, if he or she has poor physical or mental health, scores low on intelligence or achievement tests, is judged unsociable with friendships and other social circles, drops out of school, develops a delinquent or criminal record, or later, experiences marital instability, separation, divorce, or other family breakdowns. For some, failure is also inferred from the adoptee's curiosity about his or her natal mother and father. This may be taken to mean sometimes a dissatisfaction with one's adoptive family, despite the many valid psychological and sociological needs that can be involved. Success, in all these accounts, is simply the absence of any or all of these "social problems". Viewed together, success and failure are defined as public manifestations of the adoptee's social adjustment. The emphasis here is placed on the adoptee-in-society, and this perspective tends to ignore the dynamics of adoption as a kinship force, to overlook the meaning of the family, what it is and what it does.²⁴

There is, alternatively, another way of looking at the sociology of "success" and "failure", one that emphasises more *private* conditions of life than public ones. The two may well be linked, in the life of any adoptee, but the private world seems to be a more direct and conceptual reflection of what is going on in the experiences of adopted children. It becomes necessary then to define success and failure, not primarily in terms of the conventional criteria of deviance and conformity, but in terms of the adoptee's fundamental bonds and attachments with family and community. This approach should clarify the different conditions of belonging which are probably antecedent to social definitions of success and failure, and should throw more conceptual light on the meaning of adoption itself.

The history of fosterage and adoption in ancient Ireland, as outlined briefly above, hints at some of these possibilities. The idea of private and subjective attachments leads to more public expressions, but the beginnings lie with the unseen, covert socialisation of the adoptee in the context of a home, in relations with the adoptive family and extended kin, and in the meshing of loyalties that define a family: its ethos, its attitudes, its behaviour, its myths, and even its history and its future. The shape of these loyalties and networks differs from

²⁴ The overall emphasis has typically been placed on the adoptee-in-society, and the perspective tends to ignore the dynamics of adoption as a kinship force, and to overlook the meaning of the family, of what it is and of what it does.

ancient times to the present era, and from rural to urban locations, but the idea remains a constant. Sociologically abstract formulation may lead to another expression of success and failure in adoption.

A Typology of Attachments

The mystique of adoption persists because of the fears of the outsider by the family, the group, and the community, and these fears relate to the unknown origins of those who are adopted and the uncertainty of relationships and of past associations. It is the ambiguity of the past and the present, Lifton (1975; 1979) argues, that is responsible for so much of the mystery and drama which surround the whole subject of adoption. From the perspective of the individual, a sociological model of adoption can be introduced which examines the degree of certainty of the fundamental cultural and social belonging in the adoptee's existence. The greater the clarity of such belonging, it can be hypothesised, the less the mystique of adoption, and the more successful the values of permanence and continuity in the adoptee's life.²⁵

The family and the immediate community are viewed here as social entities with their own distinctiveness. While all families and all communities share many sociological characteristics, making it possible to speak of the idea of "the family" or "the community," there remains an individuality to each such entity. The individuality of each family or community lies within its culture and its structure. All persisting social organisations — from the broad level of society down to the smaller scales of community, social group, ethnic circle, and family — are characterised by the development of a distinctive *culture*. that is, the evolution of its own history, world-view, values, symbols, language, words and meanings. In brief, every family or community is marked by the existence of its own variations in culture and style of life. The degree of elaboration of this culture will vary, depending on the size of the community or family, its mobility, its isolation, its interaction, and many other factors. But the sociological assumption here is fundamental, and it refers to a basic sharing of cultural traits and information. All families and communities then are distinctive, because each possesses its own sense of a "collective past" with a

²⁵ The particular framework which is used here is borrowed from the author's previous work on rootedness and social change (Abramson, 1976). In the former approach, the model was described in the context of ethnicity. Here it will be adapted to the context of the family and community of which the adoptee is a member.

corresponding history, and all the stories, legends, symbols, personae, and ethos of the familial or communal past. This past shapes the culture, and includes what Mary McCarthy calls "the chain of recollection."

Similarly, the family and community are conceptualised as social organisations with their own distinctive *structure* as well, that is, an arrangement of bonds, relationships, networks, and associations. Just as the substance of any family or community is characterised by its own particular culture and historical symbols, so is it also framed by a unique structure of relationships to transmit the culture. The social meaning of these singular cultures and structures provides different pasts and different existences for each family and community. Further, there are inevitable blends of "culture" and "structure", as there are at all levels of social organisation; the one cannot exist without the other. Familial and communal culture requires the structure to absorb and convey an ethos and a socialisation of values, just as familial and communal structure requires symbols to give it meaning.²⁶

The stories about one's grandparents, about mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, cousins, and other family members, are recounted enough to take on a "mythology" of their own, in the family context. Past and present relationships evolve into status of culture. They are the sources of values and symbols, for they illustrate lessons, they serve as a basis of morality, they *mean* something. Similarly, cultural dispositions influence the family or community structure, as sentiments of liking and disliking affect the stories we hear and the relationships we have. The fusion of culture and structure operates constantly and for all levels of social behaviour.

Analytically and theoretically, it is possible to separate the two concepts of culture and structure, despite their fusion, because the results are familiar to us. The adaptation of these ideas, and their different conditions for a given individual, are summarised in Figure 2. The graphic representation suggests four distinctive sociocultural forms, according to the certainty or ambiguity of one's attachments to a specific cultural ethos and a specific structural network. The most familiar and prevalent condition is identified as a kind of *traditionalism*: a clarity of ties to both a culture and a structure, a particular

²⁶. Many sociological and anthropological studies interpret the concepts of culture and structure in this manner. A major and theoretical reference to the thrust of this argument has been Gordon (1964). A useful anthropological illustration of these meanings of culture and structure is Epstein (1978). Comparable social psychological insights for this approach, from the viewpoint of the individual, are found in Strauss (1977). As with the author's own previous work (Abramson, 1976), there are some minor changes in terminology.

world of historical symbols and its corresponding set of primary relationships. This describes the basis of most families and communities, regardless of the connotations of "traditional" or "modern" social systems. These certainties provide the meaning of sociological identity for most individuals. That which is taken for granted by most people includes their history and moral code, their way of life and values, their social circles and bonds, their friendships and close relationships. In short, these comprise their attachments to culture and structure.

Figure 2: Sociocultural Conditions of Adoptee Status

		Historical Symbols and Culture of Family	
		Certainty	Ambiguity
Primary Relationships and Structure of Family	Certainty	Sociocultural Traditionalism	Sociocultural Conversion
	Ambiguity	Sociocultural Exile	Sociocultural Isolation

The alternative conditions in Figure 2 point to the variations on this theme. The second type, designated as *conversion*, is defined as a certainty of primary relationships but an ambiguity of historical belonging. Unlike the traditionalist, who is attached to both cultural and structural entities with equal meaning, the convert represents that individual whose existence has changed. The present network of primary bonds does not correspond to the cultural ethos of this individual's past. What is clear for the convert is the structure he or she is now a part of, and the reciprocated bonds and ties of that structure. What is not always clear is the convert's implicit understanding of and integration into the new community ethos. It is the classic dilemma of the newcomer, who represents a kind of "odd man in" with regard to the new (for him) community.

The polar opposite of conversion is described as *exile*, that sociocultural condition wherein the individual retains a certainty of historical culture from past experiences, but lacks any kind of clear, ongoing structure in his present life. As with the "odd man out" of any exilic situation, this condition portrays the dilemma of the outsider whose identity stems from an earlier experience,

and one that is different from the present in which the exile finds himself. Clarity for the exile is based on the past, and the past is limited to memory and recall, with no reinforcement from any relationships or social circles. While the convert belongs but cannot recall, the exile recalls and does not belong.

The fourth and last condition of this typology is termed *isolation*, for its extreme state of detachment from both cultural and structural systems. The isolate, unlike the other three types, is characterised by the more severe deprivation; there has never been, nor is there in the present situation, any ongoing and meaningful membership in a collective past of family or community, nor to any network of primary relationships that reflect either old or new ethos. Sociological isolation then is the antithesis of the broader meaning of traditionalism, the isolation that results from neither recalling nor belonging. One lives in this form of existence by sheer will, unconstrained by history, by sentiment, by cultural values, and by structural membership. In twentieth century fiction and philosophy, the isolate approximates the classic outsider of existentialist thought.

Because of the central importance of socialisation — the systematic integration of an individual into a cultural and structural world — in the life of any child, there are several variations to be found in the sociology of adoption. The acquisition of new kinship ties, as in the definition of adoption employed in this study, finds its basic sociological meaning in the deployment of cultural values and structural attachments. Adoption may be said to represent the most singular form of child care and child placement, because the experience can generate all these different conditions of location and dislocation. The following pages will describe these variations, in the specific context of adoption.

Adoption as Continuity

The adoptee-as-traditionalist represents the fullest promise of adoption as permanence and continuity in the life of a homeless child. The adoption of an infant, as a prevailing hope in the thought of most adoptive parents, means the acquisition of a son or daughter. It also signifies the elimination of vicissitude and upheaval in the child's experience, the efforts for the removal of stigma, and abrogation of the "negative identity" that Erikson (1968) has described and which is so much a part of the status of the illegitimate.

In more positive terms, adoption can be the enhancement of traditionalism, the cultural fulfillment of Mary McCarthy's sense of collective memory. It can

be the nailing down of loose boards, as in the words of a young adoptee, to an integrated structure and culture, and the development of a mutualism and a shared fate (Kirk, 1964). These are the sociological dimensions of the provision of stability in an adoptee's existence, as they are in the socialisation of any child within the world of the family and the larger community. Given the universality and long history of adoption, the possibilities for traditionalism are not unexpected.

The hypothesis of successful adoption is conventionally described in terms of various measures of the adoptee's deportment, educational attainment, occupational stability, future marital happiness, as well as the lack of a criminal record and the absence of physical and mental illness. As important as these measures are, they can be construed as somewhat misleading, inasmuch as they may not be directly associated with the presumed "cause" of adoption itself. The hypothesis of successful adoption may have a more fundamental basis with the theme of continuity: the established linkages of the adoptee with the familial culture and structure in which he or she was raised.

Despite the variations of modern legal adoption, fosterage, and *de facto* adoption, the hypothesis of success rests with the ongoing and reciprocated socialisation of the child into the new kinship and its ethos and associations. On a theoretical basis, the form of adoption or fosterage does not need to matter. The major presumption is reciprocated inclusion of the adopted child in the life of the adoptive family. The adoptee contributes to and receives from the familial history and culture: he or she is named for a member of the adoptive family, is made a part of the legends and stories of the kinship, and is urged to follow in the footsteps of some respected member of the family, and likewise is urged not to follow in others. In other words, the adoptee is treated, in these respects, no differently than one who is born to the adoptive parents.

The words *no differently* require some explanation. There is, to be sure, a "difference" stated in the acknowledgement of adoption, and in the counselled advice offered to adoptive parents in modern practice today. There is certainly a fact of any family history that differentiates, among those children without memories of other homes, the child who belongs to the kin group by birth and the child who belongs by adoption. Over and above this difference, however, the emphasis in viewing the adoptee-as-traditionalist lies in the fact of belonging, of sharing, of reciprocating. The means of traditionalism do not matter; the particular acquisition of kinship, whether by birth or by adoption, does not determine the resultant affinity. Long-time friendships, of no blood relationship, may often acquire the outlines and designations of fictive kin: the

cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and members of the immediate family (with or without quotation marks around their familial roles), sharing the advantages and responsibilities of family life without blood ties. There is no insurmountable problem in confronting this difference. Indeed, as Kirk (1964) and others have argued, the solidarity and mutualism are often enhanced when the difference is acknowledged. The familial culture is not a static entity; it adapts, and grows, and changes.

Furthermore, the adoptee is not only centrally placed to absorb the values and special language and history of the family and community, but is integrated in terms of primary relationships in the relevant structure. The essence of the primary relationship is found in the elements of emotion and affect, and the fact that such networks are not a means to an end (as the more instrumental secondary relationships are), but are ends in themselves. The major difference between adopted children and foster children, in modern practice in Western societies, lies in this concept; short-term foster children may be viewed more instrumentally, as a means to some specific end, while adopted children are more likely to be seen in terms of primary relationships, in a sense, as continuities. Exceptions to each of these probabilities lie at the bottom of some of the legal and social problems in fosterage and adoption.

The adoptee-as-traditionalist is in the position of reciprocating emotional feelings and attachments within the larger network of the immediate family, the extended relations, the close friendships, and the links to the outside community. The extent to which the adoptee is a meaningful part of this integrated whole of family culture and structure determines the success of the adoption itself.²⁷ We can hypothesise success when the adopted child is construed as a traditionalist in these terms. Adoption, however, does not always lead to this kind of continuity. Other possibilities may intrude, with variations of success and failure.

Adoption as Discontinuity

Adoption can also take place with older children, above the ages of infants, and this fact produces the familiar problem of reconciling the adoptee's past with the present. As a common interpretation of discontinuity, this variation may be illustrative of the adoptee-as-convert condition. The older child, when

²⁷. The "success" of adoption, as a means of both recalling and belonging for the adopted child, is nowhere better illustrated than in Hugh Leonard's autobiography, recreating a Dublin childhood. See Leonard (1979).

first adopted into a home and family, can normally remember a past. If the changes in the present situation yield successful relationships, and the child is integrated into the familial structure of the adoptive home, the adoptee may be said to have converted to the new life. The theme of this change for the adoptee is really one of metamorphosis, for the identity will be based on the structure of the new existence. The cultural and structural past, though remembered, is no longer a source of any gratification. This can be true, whether the past was successful socialisation or whether it was not.

The emphasis of life for the adoptee-as-convert is on the satisfaction of contemporary relationships. The cultural past, as well as the cultural present, are likely to be ambiguous and confused in their uncertainty, but as with all converts the social identity stems now from the reciprocated associations within the new life experience. It is in this sense that the convert belongs but does not recall, for recalling has little bearing on the present. This particular condition is likely to be marked by a dissonance between the past and the present. It is this dissonance that creates a kind of marginality and discontinuity for the convert. The conversion dissonance may take one of two general forms: a movement out of an unsuccessful early socialisation to a successful adoption, or a transition from a successful socialisation of early life to the successful stage of later adoption.

In the first case, the adoptee may be said to have experienced little by way of historical family culture and of meaningful primary relationships. For example, he or she may have been brought up in the early years in an orphanage or some other residential centre, with no meaningful and lasting associations. And perhaps too, the same effects could have developed in the context of a private family or home, characterised by neglect and child abuse. In the second instance, the adoptee may have had a relatively successful socialisation in a family, one which provided foundations for both cultural and structural development. The possibility of some family tragedy, which left the child homeless, could have paved the way for adoption.

While there are inevitable differences between these two situations, the transition to adoptee status is bound to be difficult, and equally so for both cases. Kadushin (1970) discusses many of these difficulties, but he also raises some of the factors which can facilitate a successful adoption for older children, and these relate essentially to the primary group associations which are the foundation for the condition of conversion.

Other, less familiar, forms of discontinuity for the adopted child come to light in the angles of the model used here. The adoptee-as-exile would

represent the condition of the child, adopted when older, whose past cannot be reconciled with the present because the past is sustaining and the present is not. Exile is that condition of individual memory without a structure, of recalling but not belonging. In adoption, it would apply to the older child, who is wrenched away by events from a meaningful family culture and structure, and whose current adoption does not provide any kind of primary supports or close associations. In this situation, the adoptee is unable to make any sense of the culture of the family or community of which he is now supposedly a part, is unable to reciprocate the bonds and relationships of this family and community, and withdraws into the memory of past symbols.

The theme of this condition of exile in adoption is one of separation, and it is often the hallmark of the adoption of older children of different ethnic backgrounds, whose past culture and structure are based on a different race, religion, language, or nationality. Just as importantly, however, exile can and does take place within the boundaries of the same ethnicity, for the borders of family and community culture are just as critical, if not more so, to the experiences of a young child, as the larger parameters of ethnicity and nation.

Perhaps we can hypothesise that it is among these adoptees-as-exiles that the myth of return is strongest, and this may be because there are no successful networks of emotive relationships to bind the older child to the present time. The newly discussed emphasis on origins, and the debate over the disclosure of sealed files in law and social work, may relate importantly to this particular condition (Triseliotis, 1973; Lifton, 1975, 1979; Sorosky, Baran and Pannor, 1978). As far as we know, in the still undeveloped sociology of adoption, the age of the child when adopted is not clearly identified as a variable in these newer studies of those who seek fuller information on their pre-adoptive pasts.

The final discussion relates to the sociocultural condition of isolation, and this represents the most extreme kind of marginality for adoptees. It is this type where the hypothesis of failure in adoption is most salient, and where the fear that underlies part of the adoption mystique is most concentrated. The ambiguity of *both* familial symbols and familial relationships defines a theme of apartness, a portrait of the most severe kind of detachment. This condition then is not a loss of identity, but more accurately a lack of identity, for there has been little provided to the child from the very beginnings of life, neither for recalling nor for belonging.

Adoptees-as-isolates are not an important sociological problem because of their great frequency. Indeed, there may be relatively few, if inferences from the literature on adoption are indicative. More to the point, isolation is

sociologically important because it is deviant to the human condition. It is critical because it is a deviance that happens to be the most alienating, and because it provides us with insight into the normative expectations of social existence. As with all studies of opposites, the examination of the one illuminates the other. Research into the ambiguity of cultural symbols and structural bonds can reinforce our understanding of the certainty and meaning of these kinds of attachments, in the most taken-for-granted situations.

Isolation, as defined, can result from two kinds of adoption experience. The first may happen to the adoptee who is placed for adoption as an infant, and whose adoption, for whatever reasons, is not successful; the child is poorly socialised into the family and the surrounding community. Despite the legality of the adoption process itself, the real social environment may never integrate the child, and the stigma of the outsider and the changeling may never disappear. It is even conceivable that the stigma is manipulated within the boundaries of the family and among close friends and relatives. Under these conditions, it is hardly surprising that the child grows with little connection to what is around him, and with little basis for a social identity.

The second transition which may result in isolation stems, and this is probably more frequent, from the placement of the older child into the adoptive home. This contrasts well with one of the theoretical possibilities for the development of conversion, as noted above. The adoptee-as-convert may have had an early experience of poor socialisation, with inadequate bonding to the symbols and associations of home and community. The convert, however, moves with adoption from this unsatisfactory level of integration to a much improved one, and the present situation can supply the structure required. The isolate, in contrast, will experience a lack of integration at both periods, in the early stages of socialisation as well as in the later adoptive environment. Early uncertainty is reinforced by later uncertainty. The adoptee-as-isolate is never given sufficient opportunity to develop cultural and structural meaning. The vicissitudes of his or her life overwhelm normal development.

To summarise, the different hypothetical situations are presented in Figure 3, by each of the four sociocultural conditions of adoptee status, and according to each of three important variables: the age of placement of the adoptee, whether as an infant or as an older child; the state of present sociocultural integration, viewed as strong or weak; and the experience of former socialisation, prior to the present adoption, and perceived as strong or weak. The presentation suggests not only that these conditions are exclusive of each other, according to the factors given, and that they represent quite distinctive adoption experiences

Figure 3: . *Adoptee status, by age at placement and sociocultural integration*

Sociocultural conditions of adoptee status	Age at placement	Present sociocultural integration	Former sociocultural integration
Traditionalism	Infant	Strong	n/a
Conversion	Older child	Strong	Strong
	Older child	Strong	Weak
Exile	Older child	Weak	Strong
Isolation	Infant	Weak	n/a
	older child	Weak	Weak

and outcomes, but also that they are exhaustive of the theoretical and empirical possibilities in adoption experience. To the extent that this is true, the model may be useful in its description and clarification of the various avenues and transitions that adoption can take.

The Cultural Metrics of Adoption

A major interest in this section, and in fact of the larger project, has been the question of success and failure in adoption. Most research to date has attempted to examine this question rather narrowly, with empirical measures based on such social indicators as criminality and legal deviance, delinquency, educational ambition, and occupational training. Some studies have examined the success and failure of adoption in less empirical terms that deal with theories of mental health and social psychological identity.²⁸

The ideas of "success" and "failure", however, may go beyond the conventional social indicators and the more adventuresome psychological ones. Such ideas have their foundation in the more radical dimensions of human existence. The entire field of child placement deals with the formation of human beings in society, and the phenomenon of modern adoption, that which some have termed a "legal fiction", is the only practice in this area to include all the possibilities of continuity and discontinuity outlined and discussed above.

²⁸. See, for example, the work of Kirk (1964), Stone (1969), and Walsh (1980). To illustrate, Lifton (1975) argues that the adoptee's search for origins should not, necessarily, be viewed as an indicator of adoption failure, at least not by itself. Interest in one's past, whether adopted or not, can also be a reflection of ambition.

If we define and understand adoption success as human continuity, then the relevance of historical symbols, family culture, primary relationships, and family structure, becomes obvious. These concepts are the links between the individual, the group, and the larger society. In his efforts to relate larger and smaller scales of research, Anselm Strauss examines the meaning of individual identity and human continuity, and concludes that "personal identity is meshed with group identity, which itself rests upon an historical past" (Strauss, 1959, p. 173). Although the subject of adoption is not treated in this discussion, it is clear that it falls neatly into place in the emphasis accorded the connection of the individual with the group (e.g., family, community, structure) and with the historical past (e.g., symbols, ethos, culture).

Human continuity is taken for granted in the greater part of social research. The focus on adoption reminds us that we cannot take so much for granted. This is one of the reasons that the adoption mystique persists over the centuries: adoption projects its own forms of continuity and discontinuity, and reminds us of the fragile nature of the social order of existence. Adoption makes very clear the issues of group membership, of history, of dislocation, of the future, of cultural form, and of group structure. With its own dynamics and cultural metrics, adoption is a reflection of the larger society.

If adoption success is continuity, on the scale of the family and the small community, then adoption success goes beyond identity-formation and permanence to the social and cultural dimensions of ascent (as opposed to descent), of bridging (as opposed to detachment), and of sequence (as opposed to episodic dislocation). The idea of adoption tends to clarify these cultural metrics of time, space, and succession. If child placement in the form of failure is the discontinuity of isolation, then the cultural metrics of time, space, and succession, are frozen and bear no further meaning. There is no collective memory; there are merely loose boards.

Betty Jean Lifton describes adoption as "a metaphor for the human condition, sending us forth on that mythic quest that will prove we are bonded to the world, and to each other — and in the process, reveal to us who we are" (Lifton, 1979, p. 273). The adoption experience is an amalgam of the meaning of culture, structure, and identity, in the lives of those involved. The study of adoption can inform us not only of the mystique and promise of this form of child care, but it can do more, for it can enlighten us as to the meaning of the foundations of community and society.

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