

# Relinquishment of Motherhood: Concept Analysis

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MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN on the subject of adoption but less on the actual relinquishment event itself. Even women who have relinquished a child often confuse the act of relinquishment and adoption. One is the act of giving up one's child and severing all rights as a parent. The latter is the act of obtaining a child and a set of parental rights—altogether a different process with two very distinct purposes. To use these interchangeably only promotes already conflicting views on adoption. That adoption is a life-long process and that detrimental effects from the relinquishment event itself last a life time are now recognized. Although more relinquishing mothers are beginning to have a say in the adoption process, it is still the act of relinquishment rather than adoption that is so painful.

Attributes of relinquishment of motherhood will be identified using the concept-analysis technique of Avant and Walker (1995). This concept will be examined in the context of surrendering a child for adoption, in view of preceding circumstances and consequences. Helping the relinquishing woman to come to a decision that she can live with and supporting her thereafter are crucial for effective grieving. While the father's perspective is certainly important, this paper will focus on the mother's viewpoint. Parallels between relinquishment and bereavement are important in facilitating the grieving process for relinquishing mothers. Further insight can be gained into less permanent relinquishment circumstances such as career or custody change.

## ANALYSIS OF CONCEPTS

### *Relinquishment defined*

The concept of relinquishment can be defined as 'to give up,' 'to concede,' 'to forfeit,' or 'to surrender' (Oxford, 1997). Synonyms for

relinquish are 'to waive,' 'to yield,' or 'to surrender' (Oxford, 1997). None of these implies passivity or complacency; rather, there is a suggestion of a prior struggle. Relinquishment suggests a severing, searing, or wrenching. A synonym found for relinquishment is 'to succumb,' which supports this notion of a prior struggle before one gives in to something overpowering. Another synonym ('abandon') means to leave without intending to return, to disown or discontinue (Oxford, 1997). Many women are encouraged to believe they are not 'abandoning' their children but 'giving them better lives' through adoption (Mandy, 1995). Oxford further defines relinquishment as 'to hand over,' 'to give into another's power or control,' especially under compulsion.

Relinquishment encompasses legal, judicial, and executive decisions (Goldstein, Freud, and Solnit, 1979). The extent of legal involvement includes the signing of relinquishment papers to concede parental rights. Relinquishment papers may be signed before birth or after, depending on the type of adoption. The court of social services may be responsible for the child until he or she is adopted or in some cases the child is placed in foster care (Schwab, 1998).

#### *Motherhood defined*

Motherhood is defined as the condition of 'a female parent' or 'one who shows 'motherly qualities' (Oxford, 1997). Webster defines a mother as 'a woman as she is related to her child' (Webster, 1988). Motherhood is also defined by its attributes: 'the capacity to love, to create, produce, to watch over, nourish, and protect' (Webster, 1988). Schaffer (1977) contends that motherhood is a complex pattern involving both interactive qualities with another and tasks associated with the role. John Bowlby emphasizes the attachment of motherhood that begins in pregnancy (Schaffer, 1977). It is acknowledged that even temporary separation between mother and child can produce distressing affects for both (Schaffer, 1977). The woman who relinquishes her child often follows similar patterns of separation anxiety that the child goes through: a period of distress, followed by despair and finally detachment (Schaffer, 1977).

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Several studies offer insight into the feelings of relinquishing mothers. Mander, (1995), Lauderdale and Boyle (1994), Miller and Roll (1985), and Fraser (1996) all emphasize better emotional outcomes for women who have had support during the grieving process as well as more openness in the adoption process. Fraser discusses the “conspiracy of silence” where babies were “snatched away” with little ceremony or “good-byes” as a big factor in lasting pain for relinquishing women (Fraser, 1996). Mander describes the grief process as similar to those of women who lose a child through death, using Kubler-Ross’s stages of grief (Mander, 1995). Miller and Roll (1985) studied relinquishing women who had lasting psychological problems due to unresolved grief and coined the term “Solomon’s mothers” to describe their unique features (Miller & Roll, 1985). Their deep emotional attachment to the child, even to the point of relinquishing them to a better life, is compared to that of the natural mother who is willing to give up her baby in order to save him in the Old Testament story of King Solomon (Miller & Roll, 1985). Fraser also stresses that the current term of “birth mother” falsely denotes only a physical attachment and not the emotional ties that most of these women seem to feel (Fraser, 1996).

## RELATED CONCEPT

Abandonment can be viewed as a drastic form of relinquishment, often stemming from psychological or financial desperation (Novello, 1988). The relinquishing event represents the ‘end of a former self’ even though the voluntary decision is thought to be associated with unresolved guilt and emotional difficulty that may last for years after the event (Hacker & Moore, 1992). This is especially true if there is little support following the abortion or if its effect is minimized.

The sense of loss following upon the death of a child can be compared to relinquishment. In a study by Talbot, findings show similarities of bereavement patterns for both (Talbot, 1996). Bereavement is defined as loss through death (Mander, 1995). Although

relinquishment represents a voluntary decision to part with a child, it is nonetheless attached to much pain. One difference seems to be the lack of support that relinquishing mothers receive compared to those of bereaved parents. Feelings often go unrecognized due to the social taboos associated with giving up a child (Silverman, 1984). This seems to be true, whether through abortion or adoption. A vicious cycle is set up of grief and guilt as the relinquishing mother is told to get on with her life and forget and the loss is minimized. The mother's denial and repression of the loss serves only to prolong the grief process (Deykin, Campbell, & Patti, 1984). The term 'shadow grief' is used to label this grief (Lauderdale & Boyle, 1994).

Parker discusses another type of loss for a mother through a bodily loss by way of hysterectomy, where her potential for motherhood is lost (Parker, 1986). Adverse reactions such as depression, anxiety, and sexual dysfunction were noted as persistent problems following hysterectomy (Parker, 1986).

#### EMPIRICAL REFERENTS

There is no definite tool to measure relinquishment of motherhood; however, there are suggested frameworks given in the literature to measure the grief process that a relinquishing mother goes through (Mander, 1995). One study used the Janis-Mann Model of decision making in order to follow the decision making process in relinquishment (Tennyson, 1994). A tool to assess readiness of a woman to make this decision would be helpful, and this decision making process seems appropriate. Since most relinquishment studies show the majority of women experiencing deep regret at having relinquished their babies, a tool like this would be beneficial.

Appendix 1 outlines the main critical attributes found in analyzing this concept as well as the circumstances that seem to proceed and follow this event. Five antecedent events were common in the relinquishment process: (1) becoming a mother, either through pregnancy, birth or adoption; even when a pregnancy was terminated, there was a period of time of being a mother, (2) attachment and bonding, at varying levels, (3) conflict, (4) external pressures (social and/or financial), and finally, (5)

wavering in the decision process. Common attributes of relinquishment seem to be: (1) the physical separation of the fetus or child from the mother, (2) adherence to the decision, (3) the voluntary nature of the decision, although this may or may not follow coercion; this differentiates the loss from one following death or a miscarriage, (4) conflict, especially if outside pressure, (5) painful, wrenching feelings, and (6) the final act of handing over the child to another. It is this latter attribute, the handing over, whether to an adoption agency or adoptive parent, that clearly makes this act different from abandonment or abortion. There is still a child and that child is legally placed with another agent; this is very different from abandonment or abortion. The child goes on while motherhood does not. Relinquishment is usually done with a great deal of conflict, especially if done under compulsion. Consequences of relinquishment are (1) the obvious loss of a child, (2) a resulting role change; she is no longer functioning as a mother, and (3) the inevitable grief process to follow.

#### CONCLUSION

The concept of relinquishment of motherhood and its critical attributes were identified. While similarities to the bereavement process were noted, the voluntary nature of relinquishment was emphasized. By using Avant and Walker's method of concept analysis (1995), we were able to look critically at this particular concept of relinquishment of motherhood. The relinquishment studies emphasized the grief that most women experienced, particularly when the adoption was kept secret, with little chance of support or mourning. Feelings of emptiness and loss were frequently cited, even years later by many women (Mander, 1995). It is recommended that society should provide a more realistic attitude toward adoption and that openness and honesty should replace secrecy (Sorosky, Baran, & Pannor 1976). Allowing birthparents more of a say in the adoption process as well as periodic updates on their child's welfare is recommended to reduce severe psychological problems (Sorosky, Baran, & Pannor, 1976). Anticipatory grief through early support and prenatal care as well as exploration of feelings and alternatives is important (Devaney & Lavery, 1980). Greater support during the prenatal, delivery

and postpartum period is recommended (Bond, Keen-Payne, Lucy, 1995). Providing this support, both before a decision is made and after a decision is made is crucial to the relinquishing mother's well being. Exploration of this concept as well as a realization that adoption is a life-long process is a step in the right direction.

#### SUMMARY

The concept of relinquishment of motherhood was examined using the framework of concept analysis of Avant and Walker (1995). Relinquishment was compared to that of bereavement as a related concept. Although its voluntary nature was differentiated, aspects of the grief process were similar. Other related situations, such as abortion and abandonment, were touched upon, as well as more temporary situations of motherhood relinquishment. Distinguishing between the terms adoption and relinquishment, as well as the distinct processes, will remind those working with relinquishing mothers of the loss involved. Allowing relinquishing mothers, more decisions may provide a positive step in the relinquishment process. A mother, who gives up her child but is not allowed to grieve, may grieve forever, living a life of regret. Recognizing that grieving over the loss of a baby is inevitable and providing support is important in its final resolution and acceptance.

#### Appendix 1: CONCEPT ANALYSIS: RELINQUISHMENT OF MOTHERHOOD

##### Antecedents

1. Becoming a mother:
  - A. Pregnancy
  - B. Birth
  - C. Adoption
2. Attachment & bonding – varying degrees
3. Conflict
4. External pressures (social, financial)

5. Decision process wavering

Defining Attributes

1. Physical separation of child from mother
2. Decision adhered
3. Voluntary – though may follow coercion
4. Conflict, especially if outside pressure
5. Painful, often wrenching separation
6. To hand over to another; to give another power or control

Consequences

1. Loss of child
2. Role change; no longer a mother
3. Grief process:
  - A. Unresolved:
    - unrecognized loss or unacknowledged
    - not allowed to grieve
    - *continued* feelings of guilt, shame, and regret
  - B. Resolved:
    - grieving recognized and encouraged
    - eventual acceptance of loss.

*For what profit comes to a (woman) from all the toil and anxiety of heart with which (she) has labored under the sun?*

*All (her) days sorrow and grief are (her) occupation;  
Even at night (her) mind is not at rest.*

*Ecclesiastes 1:2; 2:21-23*

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