

# The Experience of Adoptive Parents in Adoption Reunion Relationships: A Qualitative Study

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The issues experienced by adoptive parents when faced with an adult child's searching or reunion relationship with his or her birth family, how adoptive parents place themselves within this process, and the factors that influence their experience at this time were explored in a qualitative study of 21 adoptive parents. Themes derived from semistructured interviews are discussed, and implications for clinical practice and future research are suggested.

Attitudes toward adoption have varied in line with changing views on other social issues, namely, family composition, sexuality, fertility, and reproduction. In the 1960s and early 1970s, when adoption rates were at their highest in Australia, adoption was seen as a solution to perceived problems. It helped young mothers to deal with the shame of having a child they were too young or poor (or both) to look after and provided a family for couples struggling with childlessness and the desire to parent (Robinson, 2000). The adoption practices of the time ensured privacy and anonymity in the belief that this would enable the individuals involved to get on with life.

As adoption peaked in Australia, research exploring longitudinal effects of adoption was beginning to surface. Several studies observed that adopted children and adolescents were overrepresented in clinical populations (Jaffee & Fanshel, 1970; Raynor, 1980; Schechter, 1960) and that mental health issues were emerging for mothers who had relinquished their baby (Winkler & van Keppel, 1984). As these effects became more widely known and debated, the moral, social, and psychological value of adoption was questioned. The rights of adopted people to know their genealogical background and the rights of birth mothers were recognized and fought for. This awareness raising informed legislative changes that made it legally possible for both adult adoptees<sup>1</sup> and birth parents to obtain identifying information about either

party and to initiate contact with the other. These legislative changes banished anonymity for all involved in an adoption. Potential complications arose for birth parents who had not disclosed their earlier pregnancy and relinquishment to their current partner or immediate family, for adoptees who were not aware that they were adopted, and for adoptive parents who had trusted assurances of privacy.

The most significant and important effect of the revised act has been to facilitate search and contact between birth parents and adoptees. The literature has been unanimous in its support for search and contact as a means of addressing needs long expressed by both birth mothers and adopted people (Anderson, 1989; Howe & Feast, 2000; Winkler, Brown, van Keppel, & Blanchard, 1988). However, very little work has explored the experience of adoptive parents facing their adult child's reunion with a birth parent. Although many clinicians and adoption workers have commented on adoptive parents and their place and observed experience in reunions and although their contribution to the reunion process has been noted (e.g., Affleck & Steed, 2001), they have been underrepresented in formal research in this area. That is, any discussion of adoption reunion is based on the experience of adoptees and birth mothers, with only occasional reference to adoptive parents.

## Motivation for Searching

The research is fairly consistent in its appraisal of adoptees' motivation to seek information and/or reunion with a birth parent. Adoptee motivation can be seen as falling broadly into themes of resolving ge-

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<sup>1</sup>This article uses the terms *adoptee* to refer to an adopted person of any age, *birth parent* to refer to biological parents, either mother or father, and *adoptive parents* for those who adopted a child.

neological bewilderment (Sants, 1964), accessing birth history, and using this information to sort through identity issues. Anderson (1989) challenged the belief that the desire to search reflects pathology or dissatisfaction and argued, using a model of personal growth, that searching acknowledges the influence of being adopted on an adoptee and enables him or her to move through a process of accessing information required to make sense of this and emerge with adoption issues resolved.

Although some adopted people never feel the need to seek information or make contact, there are also factors that prevent or postpone searching by adoptees, including fearing hurting the adoptive parents, feeling divided and disloyal, fearing an adverse reaction from the birth family, being concerned that contact may raise old wounds, and fearing the unknown (Anderson, 1989; Campbell, Silverman, & Patti, 1991; Sachdev, 1992; Strauss, 1994).

For birth mothers, the primary motivation in accessing information or participating in a reunion is to seek reassurance as to the adoptee's welfare and well-being. Silverman, Campbell, Patti, and Style (1988) concluded that birth mothers' motivation, whether they initiate the search or are sought by the adoptee, is directed toward establishing a relationship with their child, learning of their child's well-being, coming to a sense of resolution, letting the child know he or she was loved, and explaining relinquishment.

### The Reunion Process

Consistent with earlier work on adoptive families and adjustment, Affleck and Steed (2001) found that the degree of support from the adoptive family was important to adoptees negotiating their reunion relationship. Adoptees who felt that their adoptive family was supportive of reunion included their adoptive family in the reunion relationship. For example, they allowed their birth and adoptive families to meet and have some form of contact. Adoptees who felt that their adoptive family was not supportive felt compelled to withhold information about the reunion and ignore their adoptive parents' objections. These adoptees proceeded with the reunion at the risk of being estranged by their adoptive family. Alternatively, they described abandoning or limiting the reunion process to avoid conflict and protect their adoptive parents. These results largely concur with those of Howe and Feast (2000), who found that the majority of searching adoptees assessed their adoptive parents as being supportive of the decision to search and that those who chose not to tell their

parents had experienced adoption as a taboo subject in their family. The authors also argued that although the adoptees' intense interest in the birth parent may make the idea of reunion highly emotional for adoptive parents, reunion does not necessarily translate into a long-term filial relationship between the birth parent and the adopted person.

In an attempt to understand the process of reunion, Moran (1994) posited that the reunion relationship has four emotional stages, including paralysis, emotional eruption, mourning the various losses inherent in the adoption process, and, finally, resolution and self-acceptance. Although she limited her application of the model to adoptees in reunion, it is likely to relate both to birth parents and to adoptive parents.

In a similar attempt to understand the process of reunion, Modell (1997) explored how adoptees and birth parents make sense of one another in their life. She raised the notion of fictive and real kinship. In Western culture, biological kinship is seen as superior and real, whereas adoptive kinship is regarded as fictive. Thus, a primary task for ongoing reunion relationships is the negotiation of an appropriate kinship relationship and associated affective behaviors. It is likely that the kinship relationship defined by reunion participants will affect how adoptive parents, in turn, experience their role and place.

### The Present Study

As previously mentioned, this review of search and reunion research does not detail studies on adoptive parents because, if these studies have been done, they are not accessible in the usual literature. Adoptive parents are discussed only in terms of how they might support the search and reunion process for their child. Conversely, clinicians have recorded adoptive parents' experiences, noting that adoptive parents encounter a range of emotions when their adopted child begins to search for information or undertakes reunion. It is not surprising that adoptive parents often feel like the neglected party in the reunion process, with their feelings and needs left unacknowledged (Marburg, 1998; McColm, 1993). They express anxiety about losing their child and question whether their parent-child relationship will be compromised and can withstand the introduction of the birth parent (Brodzinsky, 1990; Mann, 1998, 2000; Silverman, Campbell, Patti, & Style, 1994). In addition, adoptive parents express concern that their parenting will be judged and their worthiness reassessed. They also articulate protective concerns for their child, ques-

tioning their child's readiness for and ability to cope with contact and wondering how their child's birth family will treat him or her. In addition, adoptees experience divided loyalties when embarking on a search and present concerns about the impact of the search on their adoptive parents (Perls & Markham, 2000).

Given these observations, the inclusion of adoptive parents as a research focus in examinations of adoption reunions is warranted. The whole area of adoption reunions would be better served by a broader grasp of the needs and experiences of all those affected by reunion relationships—including adoptive parents. Thus, the general aim of this research is to explore how adoptive parents experience their adult adopted children's involvement in a search and/or reunion process. More specifically, we seek to explore (a) the range of issues experienced by adoptive parents when faced with an adult child's searching or reunion relationship, (b) how adoptive parents place themselves within this process, and (c) factors that influence their experience at this time.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants included adoptive parents whose adopted children were at least 18 years of age and had participated in a reunion with at least one of their biological parents. Twenty-one adoptive parents, including one couple, participated in the study. Sixteen adoptive mothers and 5 adoptive fathers were involved. Their ages ranged from 50 years to 83 years, with an average age of 61 years.

Four adoptive parents had one adopted child, 13 had two adopted children, and 4 had three adopted children. Twenty-six of these adoptees had participated in an adoption reunion of some duration. Eighteen were involved in some form of ongoing contact with their birth parent. Six had had an initial face-to-face meeting with a birth parent and no further contact at the time of interview, and the birth parent of two adoptees had passed away following a period of some contact after an initial meeting. Seventeen reunions had been initiated by adult adoptees, and nine had been initiated by birth parents. Only one adoptee had participated in a reunion with both her birth parents. Adopted children ranged in age from 19 years to 51 years. Six overseas adoptions were represented.

Participants were recruited with the support of an adoption support agency based in Perth, Western Australia, which circulated information about the research to its national newsletter audience. This audience included other adoption support agencies, which, in turn, distributed the notice in their publications.

### *Materials and Procedure*

A semistructured interview schedule was used as a guide in conducting interviews of between 1- and 2-hr duration. The schedule included basic demographic items, focus items relating to how the search and reunion came to be known to the adoptive parent, whether searches were initiated by the adoptee or the birth parent, adoptive parents' involvement in searches, adoptive parents' role in searches and reunions, and how adoptive parents reacted to and experienced their child's searching and reunion. The schedule also included prompt items that were used as required to facilitate discussion of the original focus items.

Prospective participants were given written information about the study. Those interested in participating discussed the written information and any questions with the interviewer and completed a consent form. Interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis. Participants were asked to share how they experienced their adult adopted child's reunion with his or her birth parent. The interview schedule was used as required for prompting and maintaining focus. Any details that seemed particularly significant for participants were explored further. Each interview was recorded on audio cassette and transcribed verbatim. After transcription, each tape was erased. All interviewing and transcribing were completed by Gabrielle A. Petta.

### *Data Analysis*

Using the method detailed by J.A. Smith (1995) and used by Affleck and Steed (2001), we carried out theme analysis. We read the first transcript and studied it in detail several times. This resulted in two sets of annotation. One set noted any interesting or seemingly significant comments, summaries of possible connections, and early interpretations. The second set extended the first by identifying and naming emergent themes. As clusters of themes emerged, we identified major or core themes. We modified these clustered themes following rereading and further analysis.

We repeated this process with the next four transcripts. We compared and contrasted every cluster of themes to produce a distinct list of master themes. This primary phase of the analysis was carried out by Gabrielle A. Petta and verified by Lyndall G. Steed, who acted as an objective peer. Then we analyzed the remaining transcripts by coding these master themes beside the text. We also noted any previously unidentified instances. We gathered and explored the data for each master theme to arrive at a coherent and consistent concept. During this process there was frequent discussion between us, which ensured that the participants' material was presented as accurately as possible.

## Results

Data analysis revealed a number of themes covering a broad range of responses and issues for adoptive parents during a reunion process. Not all themes

applied to all participants, but there was agreement across the major themes identified. The results are presented and discussed according to these major themes: fear of losing their child, entitlement and role definition, revisiting infertility, responses to the birth mother, lack of recognition of needs, and awareness raising of adoption issues. We describe and discuss issues relating to each theme, then explore how the process of reunion seems to have unfolded for this group of adoptive parents and the factors that appear to influence their experience at this time.

### *Fear of Losing Their Child*

The most salient theme to emerge related to participants' fear that the adoptee's involvement in reunion would mark the end of their parent-child relationship with the adoptee. Participants feared that the adoptee would reappraise them as inadequate or no longer necessary given the presence of the birth mother. For some participants, this fear manifested itself as concern that the adoptee would be physically or emotionally taken by a birth relative. Although participants reported that this fear had always been present at some level, they all identified search and reunion as its most powerful triggers. As searching and/or reunion became imminent, participants were compelled to confront the "essential fact," as it was described by one participant, that their child was not really theirs, which thereby illustrates society's conditional acceptance of adoptive parenthood and its relegation to nonreal or fictive kinship (Modell, 1997). This experience was described by one participant:

It was a fear that was always there lurking in the background. The fear that I was never going to be the real mother, and then when J searched, well, it was confirmation of this fundamental fact. She is not blood of my blood, flesh of my flesh. I could never be her real mother. I am her mum. But I will never be the one who gave her the breath of life.

As with this adoptive mother, many other participants also commented that reunion marked the juncture at which their failings and inadequacies as parents would be revealed in the eyes of both the birth family and their adopted child. Many participants believed that a possible outcome of search and reunion was the adoptee's realization that the adoptive family was not as interesting, beautiful, wealthy, or good as the birth family. They feared that the adoptee might withdraw from the adoptive family.

Adoptive parents saw this withdrawal as different from being taken by a birth relative. Although par-

ticipants knew that the birth mother would not physically take the adoptee, there was a sense that birth relatives would actively entice the adoptee into believing that the birth family was the adoptee's real family. This closely parallels adoptive parents' experience early in adoption, when they feared that their child's "birth family or welfare authorities would come and take the baby away," as one participant said. This particular anxiety seemed more pronounced for participants when the search was initiated by the birth mother rather than the adoptee.

Some participants described a fundamental change in their relationship and grieving for what their parent-child relationship had been. Somehow the adoptee's searching signaled the "end of an era," as expressed by one mother: "When she started her searching, well, for me that marked the end of things. She was no longer the little girl who needed only me and her father; now she needed something else that we could never give her."

Despite feeling this way, this mother and the majority of participants did not express their fears and continued in their role of supporting the adoptee. As one participant stated, "We would celebrate her joy at each discovery, each new bit of information, and shared her excitement as she got closer to meeting her mother and brother, but at night I would cry and shake in fear and despair."

When participants did reveal their fear of losing their child, they expressed it as overt resentment and anger directed toward the search process or the birth family rather than overt antagonism toward the adoptee. This fear of losing their child seemed especially overwhelming for adoptive mothers. It is difficult to know whether this reflects a sense of disconnection by adoptive fathers or fathers' greater difficulty in articulating this loss or whether the fear of losing their child is simply not a primary experience for fathers. This difference may be explained by the fact that the fathers sampled in this study adopted during the 1950s and 1960s, when fertility issues and parenting concerns were seen as mainly women's business.

### *Entitlement, Identity as a Parent, and Role Definition*

Another key theme that seems to connect a number of other themes and experiences is identified here as entitlement (as described by J. Smith, 1997) or the adoptive parents' conviction of their right to parent their adopted child. Reunion prompted participants to question their worthiness and entitlement to have

ever parented the adoptee. They reported feeling that their merit as parents, their suitability, was not established and accepted with the completion of their formal assessment (as prospective adoptive parents). Rather, they felt that they were under close and constant scrutiny and that they had less room for error than nonadoptive parents. Many reported that adoptive parents somehow have to prove their worth and right to parent and that whereas biological parents have permission to be good enough, adoptive parents must be close to perfection. One adoptive mother described this concept as follows:

I felt very much like I was on the stand. She [the birth mother] was going to meet the baby she had given up. I was conscious of wanting her to be pleased with me, that I had done a good job with her baby. Somehow in my mind this became important, I needed her stamp of approval.

Participants expressed this struggle with entitlement in a number of ways, including feeling a sense of competition with birth parents; feeling threatened; feeling judged as a parent by others, that is, by both nonadoptive parents and the child's birth parents; and feeling the need to qualify the parent-child connection (e.g., "She is our child, she is, but there is always a part of her that is about her other mother"). The effect of this struggle was a thwarted sense of self-efficacy and competence as a parent and, as we have discussed, fear that the adoptive parents would lose their child.

In his commentary on adoptive parenting, J. Smith (1997) proposed that entitlement seems to be mediated by a number of factors, such as participants' resolution of infertility issues, including mourning the loss of their opportunity to raise their biological child; addressing how and whether adoption is the right option for the couple; acknowledgment of and preparation for how to deal with the differences between biological and adoptive parenthood; and dealing with societal views toward adoption and parenthood. As we noted in the introduction to this discussion, virtually all of these factors emerged as themes in the current study. Our data also suggest that it is probably more realistic to think of entitlement in terms of degrees rather than absolutes. Participants revealed the dual experience of knowing that the adoptee was in one sense their child and in another sense not. Many participants regularly qualified this position, seemingly for themselves as much as for others. For example, one participant stated, "I am her mum, I was there for everything, always will be, but I am not her mother and that will always be there

too." Such comments suggest that entitlement merges with adoptive parents' identity as a parent. Although entitlement can be seen as a preceding and a necessary factor for identity as a parent, search and reunion prompt a review of these issues.

Some parents expressed the notion of identity as a parent in terms of questions about role definition, given that there are no guidelines for how to practically and emotionally handle their child's participation in searching and contact with his or her birth parents. These participants added that within nonadoptive families there is probably nothing that comes close to calling into question core and fundamental ties the way that reunion does in adoptive families, as one adoptive father stated:

We have friends who tried to help, but I do not think they could really understand what the reunion was about for us. They would say, "Hey, come on, you have raised him from birth, he is your son, nothing will change that." But they did not have to accept that M has two sets of parents, while their kids only have one. So which dad was I, the real one or the other one? You see that is how people talk, "Oh he's looking for his real parents," well what does that make me and L?

As participants felt their parental identity and role being called into question, they expressed a sense of being exposed, of entering unknown territory, of feeling insecurity and inadequacy. Some participants described facing the challenge of renegotiating parental identity to accommodate the physical presence of the birth parent and acknowledged that identity as a parent is an evolving rather than a static phenomenon.

### *Revisiting Infertility*

For both adoptive fathers and mothers in this sample, the process of reunion rekindled grief around their infertility. Participants talked about the lack of opportunity to address the losses of infertility at the time prior to adoption. For many, the practices at the time made it a fait accompli that, following a period of not conceiving, a married couple adopted. One adoptive mother talked about her pain when her doctor confirmed a miscarriage and, in the same meeting, organized the adoption of her daughter. This 76-year-old woman recalled, "I never cried for that baby that was not inside me."

Like this mother, many participants talked about not having grieved for their never-to-be-born children. Social awareness and mores at the time did not allow discussion of issues such as childlessness. Par-

ticipants described needing to either turn solely to their partner or not acknowledge their pain at all. Furthermore, at the point of adopting a child, the need to mourn was seen as uncalled for, because the couple now had a child. This is not dissimilar to the experience of birth mothers at the time of relinquishment. In their overview of adoption in Australia, Marshall and McDonald (2001) also noted the parallels between the experience of relinquishing mothers and that of many adoptive parents. "While relinquishing mothers suffered in silence their pain and anguish, adoptive parents who had suffered through infertility . . . were also left to suffer silently the pain and humiliation of this loss" (p. 100).

It is interesting that, although reunion and contact consistently elicited participants' grief about their infertility, participants expressed guilt about dwelling on their sadness, given that a direct outcome of their infertility was their adopted child. Participants felt that to dwell on their losses could be seen as dissatisfaction with their child and family. In addition, because of their commitment to being emotionally available to their children, the majority of participants felt that although infertility issues were revisited, there was little opportunity to resolve them.

The rekindling of reproductive losses experienced by these participants is consistent with the earlier adoption literature, which cites infertility as a key issue for adoptive parents (Brebner, Sharp, & Stone, 1985; Brodzinsky, 1990; Janus, 1997; J. Smith, 1997); adoptive parents must be free of the impact of infertility to assume their identity as parents. However, more realistically, recent work acknowledges that adjusting to infertility is a lifelong process for adoptive parents (Spiers, 1997). Treating infertility as a life span issue recognizes that there may be different triggers that can reawaken experiences for adoptive parents—for example, an adoptive child's pregnancy and, as noted in this study, search and reunion.

### *Responses to the Birth Mother*

The majority of the current respondents found themselves reassessing their understanding of and feelings toward their child's birth parents and, in particular, the birth mother. Participants remembered experiencing a number of mixed feelings toward the birth mother at adoption, including a sense of gratitude and respect and the feeling that they were doing the right thing for the birth mother. However, as one adoptive mother put it,

I never for once considered how she felt losing her baby. She lost her little boy. I never thought of it like

that, and now that I do think of it like that I feel the deepest compassion for her, and I wish I could go back and hold that 16-year-old girl. She must have been terrified and so alone, and I just never thought of that.

Acknowledging the pain of the birth parent left some adoptive parents feeling they were responsible in some way. Adoptive parents found this a difficult experience, because they felt that there was no adequate way to address what occurred. Participants did not expect to feel this during reunion and found that the experience challenged their personal position and also broadened their social awareness. Somehow, at the interface of their greatest fear—losing their child and reconnecting with the pain of their lost child (the unborn biological child)—they connected with the birth mother.

A smaller number of participants found themselves unable to empathize at all with birth family members during and following reunion. For these participants, reunion reinforced their position that adoption was the best solution for all concerned and that there was no need to revisit the past. It is interesting that the 5 participants who expressed this view experienced reunions that were initiated by birth parents rather than adoptees. These adoptive parents expressed a great deal of resentment toward the initiating birth mother, as noted in this adoptive father's comment:

She had no right to come in and turn his world upside down. If she had any sense of what being a parent was about, she would have waited for him to come to her. But she was selfish, she pushed him beyond his limits; he was only just 18 and she ruined his final year of school.

### *Recognition of Needs and the Right to Feel*

Both adoptive mothers and fathers expressed the feeling that they needed to keep their reactions and experiences during their child's search and/or reunion guarded and private. Virtually all participants voiced their fear that the adoptee would become aware of their inner turmoil and that this was wrong. They saw reunion as a critical life stage for the adoptee that they believed required that they put their own needs and reactions second. However, clinical evidence and emerging research (Howe & Feast, 2000) reveal that adoptees are indeed sensitive to their adoptive parents' responses and that this, in turn, affects their own process during reunion.

Participants felt that adoption reunions were talked about as being in the domain of the two parties

involved in the direct reunion. For example, any media portrayals of reunions focus on birth family members and the adoptee. Adoptive parents felt divided in their responses to this, claiming to understand that this was indeed the case but also feeling somewhat resentful about the lack of consideration to their needs and their involvement in the life of the adoptee.

Several participants who had accessed counseling and support services during their child's reunion found that the experience contributed to their sense of isolation because the services focused totally on how best to support the adoptee. One adoptive mother who sought counseling prior to meeting birth family members recalled the sessions as giving her information about her daughter's and the birth mother's probable reactions and how critical it was for her "as the neutral party to remain solid."

### *Raising Awareness of Adoption Practices*

Many participants found themselves revisiting their "naive understanding of what adoption was and what being an adoptive family was going to be like" when they first adopted, as one adoptive father put it. As this participant suggested, many adoptive parents did not understand adoption as being anything other than a form of creating a family. Hence, at reunion, when faced with their fear of losing their child, their struggle with entitlement, and the reawakening of earlier losses, many adoptive parents experienced a sense of despair and confusion but also an emerging awareness that they were, in fact, part of something much bigger than they initially believed. That is, although reprocessing of certain adoption issues continued at a personal level, approximately two thirds of our sample also found themselves becoming more cognizant of the contextual factors surrounding adoption practice at the time of adoption and currently.

Some participants suggested that they were ill prepared, if at all, for the issues they faced as adoptive parents—namely, the issues that emerged as their children negotiated identity in late adolescence and participated in reunion. Robinson (2000), in her discussion of adoption and loss, stated that in more recent times, both birth and adoptive parents consider that they were "duped by a legislative system which guaranteed adoption would provide the answer to their problems but did not address the core psychological issues that adoption could not resolve and which it is now seen to have created" (p. 162). Certainly, this subgroup of participants would concur with this position.

In addition, participants found themselves questioning the messages about adoptive parents and the nature of adoption. As one mother expressed,

Suddenly I become a stealer of babies. I did not steal anyone's baby. I do not want to be and I do not deserve to be put in a position where I have to justify my relationship with my daughter. I did nothing wrong but to be cursed with infertility. I am not a bad person, and yet I am made to feel that wanting a child and loving her makes me a criminal.

In writing on adoption ethics, Jordan (1997) argued that social discourse on adoptive parenting and the sanctioning of one parent as true or real (i.e., the birth parent as the real, natural parent) creates a win or lose contest with significant emotional consequences for adoptees, their adoptive parents, and birth parents. As suggested by the mother in the previous quote, no one actually wins this contest. Rather, setting up either party as good or bad only maintains the pain.

Generally, however, the majority of participants found themselves becoming more aware of issues to do with relinquishment, the sociopolitical context in which it occurred, and the personal issues faced by birth parents. However, the effect of this burgeoning awareness and empathy was not always greater resolution or clarity. In fact, many participants reported greater confusion and dissonance in trying to make sense of their own responses to the reunion process. One participant described feeling "split." She explained that she had experienced a surge of fear and anxiety and strongly questioned her role, contribution, and worth as a mother. She had been forced to face issues she thought she had "finished with." Simultaneously, she found herself feeling compassion and empathy for birth families and facing their needs with the same interest with which she faced her own.

### *Process of Reunion for Adoptive Parents*

Most participants in this sample indicated that they expected that their adopted child would one day try to find information about his or her birth family and possibly seek contact. All but 2 participants agreed that searching and reunion were important processes for adoptees. When searching was instigated by the adoptee, the initial reaction for the majority of participants included numbness, apprehension, and a sense of needing to be poised for what was about to occur. In response, several parents simply assisted the adoptee with the search—that is, helping with research, finding documents, and accessing records.

Another group of adoptive parents immersed themselves in search and reunion literature in an attempt to “get a grip on what was about to happen,” as one participant put it. Some participants did both.

The purpose of activity at this stage seemed twofold. First, immersion in the process facilitated understanding of what the adoptee was going through and wanted to achieve from reunion. Second, it seemed important for adoptive parents to find a place for themselves in the search and reunion process. Doing something practical enabled them to feel helpful at a time when many felt quite despairing and helpless. It provided some context for discussing reunion issues with the adoptee. In addition, participants’ “busy-ness” at this early stage helped them keep a check on their emotions, as this mother described:

I was stunned, absolutely dumbfounded, when he started pulling out his papers and getting forms from the department. I spent a lot of time helping him fill in forms and lodge his application, and we talked a lot about it, but the period is fuzzy in my mind. I think I was in shock and just operating on autopilot.

As the search progressed, adoptive parents seemed to reach a point of becoming quite overwhelmed with their own emotional response. They were conscious of not showing this to the adoptees, believing that it was not appropriate to do so and that this would only burden them. However, participants reported that they believed that, at some level, the adoptees were aware of what was going on, that there were instances of parent and child becoming awkward around one another. One participant stated,

In the beginning he would tell us each little bit of news, but as it got closer to meeting her, he seemed to pull back, and he would start any conversation about her with, “You know you are my folks, don’t you? You do not need to worry about H.”

Such comments led adoptive parents to try to minimize their reaction and reassure their child that they “were cool with it,” in one parent’s words. They expressed guilt for creating the concern in their child but felt helpless to deal differently with the situation unfolding before them.

As adoptees’ searching proceeded to contact with their birth parents, participants’ fear that they were about to lose their child and that their parent–child relationship would change irrevocably escalated. The emotional process noted here for adoptive parents corresponds to Moran’s (1994) observation of adoptees’ emotional responses during reunion, encompassing paralysis, emotional eruption, and grieving. Im-

pending contact also heightened adoptive parents’ concerns for the adoptees’ welfare. In addition, contact also intensified adoptive parents’ sense of being in competition with the birth mother. This was especially so for adoptive parents who also met their child’s birth mother.

When reunion relationships proceeded relatively positively for the adoptee and the adoptive parents felt they were, in fact, maintaining, not losing, their connection with their child, adoptive parents seemed to move beyond fears of losing the child but continued with their struggles around entitlement. A feature at this time was the feeling that they needed to qualify their parental role to accommodate their child’s emerging relationship with his or her birth mother. This became a significant difficulty for adoptive parents, given that there is no model or guide for accommodating a second set of parents.

When reunion relationships created distress for the adoptee, adoptive parents articulated anger and resentment toward the birth parent. They blamed her for failing their child and, whereas they might have previously reflected increasing empathy toward birth mothers generally, they excluded the child’s own birth mother from this. Some participants used their child’s experience as evidence that perhaps all birth family members would be as disruptive.

The issue of ongoing contact was negotiated and experienced in relation to the quality of the reunion relationship, the impact on the adoptee, and the ongoing involvement and relationship between adoptive parent and adoptee. Even for those participants with the best scenarios—ongoing positive contact between the birth parent and adoptee and an ongoing positive relationship between the adoptive family and adoptee—many of the emotional responses and struggles discussed earlier continued.

The process observed in participants was somewhat different when birth mothers initiated the reunion process. In these instances, adoptive parents initially experienced shock, anger, and resentment toward the birth mother. They reported greater ambivalence and conflict about the utility of searching and reunion. These parents articulated anger over the timing of the search and felt out of control about what was happening. In addition, they reported greater concerns for their children’s welfare and capacity to handle the search than parents whose children initiated search and reunion. This tension, anger, and concern were a feature throughout the reunion process, regardless of outcome. These parents seemed to take longer to adjust in some way to their child’s reunion.

Several adoptive parents experienced significant qualitative shifts in their relationships with their child. These parents reported that their parent–child relationship was stronger and that, despite some ongoing troubles, parents seemed to feel more comfortable with their child’s reunion relationship. As would be expected, this was more so when relationships were seen as positive for the adoptee.

In discussing the effect of their experience of search and reunion on their marital relationship, a number of participants noted that their relationship was strengthened by the process of coming together to deal with issues that were emerging. Other participants described being chastised by their partner because of their involvement in and encouragement of the search. This seemed more prevalent when participants described differing awareness of adoption issues between themselves and their partner, differing emotional connection between one parent and the searching adoptee, or disproportionate motivation to adopt. These participants described feeling isolated and under pressure to withhold their responses.

### *Factors Influencing Reunion Experiences for Adoptive Parents*

*Adoptee- versus birth mother-initiated searches.* Differences were observed in participants’ experience of resentment toward the birth mother and sense of control depending on who initiated the search. Adoptee-initiated searches generally did not shock adoptive parents and were seen as being in the control of the adoptee and adoptive family. In these instances, searching was seen as an internal need for the adoptee and was regarded as very important. When searches were initiated by the birth mother, they were regarded as external and imposed.

*Intercountry versus local adoptions.* Only a small number of overseas adoptions are represented in this sample. Of this group, only one can be considered an intercountry adoption. The other five overseas adoptions were British adoptions in which the families then migrated to Perth. For the true intercountry adoption (the child was adopted from Vietnam), issues of culture and the need to face the sociopolitical context that led to the adoptee’s abandonment were salient. Although these issues had been discussed in the adoptive family, the reality of the adoptee traveling back to Vietnam seemed to intensify a number of feelings for the adoptive mother, namely her concerns for her child’s welfare, her fear of losing the child, and her sense of being out of control. Similar experiences were also noted for

two of the British adoptions when adoptees traveled back to Britain to meet birth relatives.

*Participation in counseling.* Some degree of participation in counseling or support groups and/or reading adoption literature seemed to help adoptive parents create a framework in which to understand the reunion process. However, participants did not find that either counseling and support or reading popular adoption literature fully identified or dealt with their needs. Although the process of developing a different understanding of adoption and a broader appreciation of the issues involved was seen as beneficial and helpful overall, there was little available that addressed adoptive parents’ common experiences during search and reunion.

*Adoptees’ motivation and expectations and the timing of the search.* It seems that when the adoptee searched at a time of high personal distress and expressed high expectations for contact as an outcome of his or her search, the adoptive parent found the reunion experience more distressing and felt more helpless. One mother, who did not accept the adoptee’s need for reunion, expressed a great deal of anger with and concern for her daughter. Primarily, she felt that reunions had been “set up as the answer to all of her problems. It [the reunion] was a disaster, and she was left in more of a mess than she began with.”

In this instance, the adoptive mother felt that her daughter’s adoption had been cast as a cause for difficulties she was having at the time she embarked on the reunion. The mother felt her daughter was not emotionally ready for the reunion, a concern voiced by several participants. These parents continued to offer practical support for the reunion and withheld their hesitations; they experienced concerns for their child’s mental health, risk of self-harm, and estrangement.

*Outcome of the search and reunion relationship.* Reunion outcomes did not alter adoptive parents’ fear of losing their child, their struggle with entitlement and identity, or their reprocessing of adoption issues. The best predictor of how adoptive parents resolved some of their experiences around the reunion was linked to the reunion outcome being what the adoptee wanted. That is, regardless of whether the adoptee maintained contact with the birth parent, adoptive parents resolved their concerns and emotional dilemmas more readily if the reunion outcome matched their child’s expectations.

Some participants did state that they were relieved when contact did not continue but that this soon shifted to concern for the adoptee and his or her unmet or frustrated hopes. When adoptees felt dis-

satisfied with the reunion or adoptive parents observed the adoptee struggling with the process, the parents expressed feelings of helplessness. Many parents reported feeling like they were “stuck on the sidelines watching my kid get pummeled on the oval,” as one parent put it. When a reunion relationship did continue, participants reported ongoing minithreats to their sense of self as the adoptee’s parent but that this eased as the relationship between birth parent and adoptee seemed to define itself and the adoptee’s life returned to normal.

*Adoptive parents’ relationship with their child.* The adoptive parents’ relationship with their child seems to be an important determinant of their experiences during reunion. Parents who reported an open and positive relationship with their children seemed to resolve their reunion experiences more readily and with a more intact sense of self. These parents found it easier to create a role for themselves in the reunion process and seemed more convinced and trusting of their fundamental connection to their child. These relationships were characterized by ongoing openness about adoption issues, and for several participants this enabled reunion to be seen, as one participant expressed it, “as just another thing we had to deal with.”

*Life span developments.* Another important factor affecting adoptive parents’ experiences following initial contact and during ongoing reunion relationships related to the impact of other life span issues. Following the initial search and reunion, adoptive parents found themselves having to create some sort of space for the adoptee’s new relationship. It was during this time that many participants found themselves feeling more settled—that is, their fears of losing the child had been allayed somewhat.

As significant events emerged in the life of the adoptee, such as marriage or pregnancy, the implications at a practical level of accommodating the birth parent emerged. Adoptive parents described having made cognitive space for the inclusion of the birth parents in their child’s life during the earlier stages of the reunion process but noted that they then had to face practical tasks, such as considering how to include birth family members in graduations and wedding parties and negotiating grandparent roles. This often sparked some of the earlier experiences of being threatened by the birth parents’ increasing presence in the extended family network and the difficulty of negotiating a role that suited the adoptee and the birth parent and also felt comfortable for the adoptive family. Modell’s (1997) work on roles in reunion relationships clarified the need for birth par-

ent and adoptee to negotiate the most appropriate kinship model on which to develop their relationship. The current findings suggest that the need to develop an appropriate kinship model or role is relevant to adoptive parents as they renegotiate and qualify aspects of their identity as parents, their parent–child relationship and, where relevant, their relationship with the adoptees’ birth family.

## Discussion

Before summarizing the results, we note several limitations of the study. The current sample is restricted both in number and in composition, in that adoptive fathers and intercountry adoptions are underrepresented. In addition, a number of participants had been actively involved in adoption counseling. Many were referred by other respondents who had found the process of sharing their story cathartic and validating. It is possible that the study captured the interest of a group of parents who had reached a point of resolution about their child’s reunion.

This study cannot be seen as fully describing the experiences of adoptive parents involved in intercountry reunion. Although it seems plausible to expect that intercountry adoption reunions elicit similar responses from adoptive parents, it is probable that there are distinct experiences for these parents. Given that the majority of current adoptions in this state are intercountry, it would be helpful for researchers to explore the reunion experiences of those involved in such adoptions.

A further limitation relates to matching adoptees’ experience with that of their adoptive parents. In the current study, adoptees’ responses and actions were presented as seen through the eyes of their adoptive parents. Although this is an important part of adoptive parents’ experiences during reunion—to try to make sense of and respond to the adoptee—the conclusions drawn by parents cannot be assumed to represent the adoptees’ actual experience. A three-way study exploring a given reunion from the point of view of birth parent, adoptee, and adoptive parents would also add significantly to our understanding of this experience.

Despite these limitations, the qualitative design and theme analysis applied in this exploratory study produced results that can be regarded as a valid base for clinical and research recommendations. Although several themes were identified and discussed, they are best considered as interactive and connected elements rather than discrete themes that exist independently.

The major finding of this study is that adoptive parents experience very real and significant psychological responses as their adopted child engages in searching and a reunion relationship. With regard to the range of issues experienced by adoptive parents during an adoptee's search and reunion, the fear of losing the child seems primary and underpins other themes, such as entitlement and identity as a parent. This fear of loss—of the child, of the parental role, of value and identity—and the fear of being cast as less than the birth parent were experienced as overwhelming by every participant in the sample. This is likely to reflect the fact that there are no frameworks for negotiating reunions and that reunions make present the formerly absent birth parent (this cannot be said of current adoption practice but was the case for this sample).

It follows that adoptive parents struggle with entitlement during this search and reunion process. Participants' questioning of their right to claim parental status unreservedly reflects the social discourse that positions birth parents as natural or real parents. In the face of this, it is difficult to create an alternative view of parenting that is regarded as equally natural and real. The effects for adoptive parents included doubting themselves, not trusting their parent-child relationship, feeling threatened and in competition with the birth parent, and reexamining early adoption-related issues.

The principal adoption-related issues to be revisited were infertility and the loss of a biological child, which many of these adoptive parents had not mourned. Participants revisited fertility issues regardless of whether they felt they had resolved them prior to adoption. This response is consistent with current clinical commentary, which maintains that a couple's childlessness is likely to be a life span issue revisited as triggers such as reunion emerge.

Adoptive parents observed that the reunion process often prompted an awareness raising of adoption-related issues and practices. Participants described becoming aware of contextual factors for adoption practice both recently and at the time they adopted. They noted greater personal empathy for birth parents and struggled to accommodate their reworked understanding of adoption issues with their own personal story and how they made sense of reunion.

### *Clinical Implications*

The current findings have implications for both clinical intervention with adoptive parents facing reunion and psychoeducational initiatives with pre-adoptive and early adoptive parents. Support services

would do well to engage with adoptive parents beyond what is suggested in terms of how to respond to and support adoptees and birth parents. That is, adoptive parents need to be engaged as clients in their own right and be provided with opportunities to express and deal with their own emerging experiences.

It would be useful to explore coping strategies that facilitate adoptive parents' resolution of their struggles with entitlement and identity as a parent. This is likely to require both cognitive restructuring and strategies to encourage emotional release. Clinical attention to adoptive parents' development of a framework that reduces the sense of competition with the birth parent seems relevant and helpful for all parties. Birth and adoptive parents have distinct roles and positions in the life of the adoptee, and an exploration and clarification of those roles would be helpful.

In terms of the reemergence of fertility issues, it may be appropriate to reconceptualize infertility as a life span issue. This may effectively give adoptive parents permission to explore their grief around infertility. This seems especially important for parents who adopted 20 or 30 years ago, when the pain of infertility was less likely to have been acknowledged socially or professionally. Current work in the area of infertility and childlessness does treat infertility as a life span issue (Spiers, 1997); hence, a younger cohort of adoptive parents might not find this such a salient issue.

It would also be useful for clinicians and other adoption workers to promote adoptive parents' awareness of search and reunion, their significance to adoptees and birth parents, and the noted impact of reunion for all three parties. Perhaps agencies that are involved in searches could invite adoptive parents to seminars in which these issues are discussed. In addition, although prospective adoptive parents may not need to consider reunion for many years, it would be helpful if the salient issues were flagged early in the parents' preparation.

### *Conclusions*

Popular and professional views on the subject of adoptive parents, their place in reunions, and the worth of their experiences range between denying the existence of any experience for adoptive parents and positioning this experience as outside the domain of reunions. To counter this attitude, this study's objective was to explore how adoptive parents made sense of and experienced their adopted children's reunion. The current findings suggest that there are clear psy-

chological processes and emotional responses for adoptive parents as their children proceed with search and reunion. Adoptive parents are confronted with enormous challenges regardless of the outcome or how they feel about their child's right to have contact with the birth family.

Although the body of research examining adoption reunions generally is limited, the inclusion of adoptive parents has been almost nonexistent. Further studies exploring all aspects of searching and adoption reunions and including all parties are to be encouraged. It is only as we understand the experiences of all members of the adoption triangle that we will be able to provide the support that they need.

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