

Adoptees in Reunion:  
The Psychological Integration of Adoption,  
Motivations for Reunion, and the Reunion Relationship

By  
Susan Rogers, (BA Degree in Psychology).

Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Honours in Psychology

Swinburne University Hawthorn

Supervisor: Dr. Roger Cook

Date submitted: 30/10/08

Word Count: 11491

## Table of Contents

Title Page	i
Table of Contents	ii
Declaration	iii
Acknowledgement	v
Personal Statement	vi
Abstract	x
Chapter 1	
Introduction	1
<i>History of Adoption in Australia</i>	1
<i>Definition of Terms Used in the study</i>	3
<i>Review of the Literature</i>	4
<i>Why are there adoptees who appear to show no difference from non-adoptees?</i>	10
<i>Search and Reunion</i>	13
<i>The Aims of the Study</i>	16
Chapter 2	
Method	18
<i>Table 1, Current age, age when adopted, and age told of adoption</i>	20
<i>Table 2, Participants' Contact with their Birth Mothers</i>	22
Chapter 3	
Secrecy, Inner Mental Representations of the Birth Mothers, and the Psychological Integration of Adoption	24
<i>Secrecy and Difficulties Integrating Adoption</i>	28

<i>Developing Inner Mental Representations of the Birth Mothers</i>	31
<i>Discussion of Secrecy, Inner Mental Representations of the Birth Mothers, and the Psychological Integration of Adoption</i>	33
Chapter 4	
Motivations for searching	35
<i>Discussion of Motivations for Searching</i>	51
Chapter 5	
The Reunion Relationship and Deeper Motivations for Searching	52
<i>The Roles Adopted in Reunion</i>	52
<i>Discussion of Roles Adopted in Reunion</i>	55
<i>Deeper Motivations for Reunion</i>	56
<i>The Importance of Reunion Relationships for Adoptees</i>	64
<i>Discussion of the Reunion Relationships and Deeper Motivations for Searching</i>	69
Chapter 6	
Conclusions	71
<i>Limitations of the Study</i>	75
<i>Implications and Recommendations of the Study</i>	76
References	79
Appendix A	85
Advertisement for the Study	
Appendix B	86
Interview Protocol	

## Declaration

I declare that this report does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree in any University, College of Advanced Education, or other educational institution, and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text. I further declare that the ethical principles and procedures specified in the Faculty of Life and Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee document have been adhered to in the preparation of this report.

Name:

Signed:

Date:

## Acknowledgement

I would like to thank my supervisor Associate Professor Roger Cook for his patience, commitment, and guidance in relation to conducting a qualitative, phenomenological study. I would also like to thank all the participants who made this study possible. They gave not only their time and energy, but revealed their personal lives, and I felt privileged to have heard their stories. I thank them for sharing their inner selves, and revealing so much to me for the purposes of this research.

## Personal Statement

My personal experience of adoption has differed vastly from what other people's views of adoption have commonly seemed to be. In my first year of psychology training, the class was introduced to a study that found that adoptees are affected by adoption during adolescence when they are grappling with identity issues and after that the issues 'disappear.' As an adopted adult in reunion, this study seemed completely removed from my own experience and also the experiences of the life stories I had heard from other adoptees at support groups. Like me, they were juggling their profound fantasies and expectations with the reality of a mother that they never knew. They were navigating two families, and at times were confused and overwhelmed by the feelings of intense loss that emerged.

After rarely talking about or hearing about adoption when I was growing up, in the last 10 years I have noticed the topic has been sometimes broadcast on national radio and television. Whilst the majority of the portrayals were a superficial, 'fantasy based,' promotion of adoption, some of the segments on non-commercial channels were very informative and echoed the stories I had seen, heard, and experienced personally. One segment particularly revealed how difficult it was for adult adoptees to talk of adoption initially. Although I was told of my adoption as a young child, apart from that I lived completely 'as if I was born to' my adoptive parents. This changed when my birth mother found me when I was 18 years old and I experienced an enormous emotional shock. For me, reunion was about

integrating the emotional aspects of adoption and loss that had never been addressed. I was even surprised myself at how on-going and overwhelming these feelings were. Basically it takes a life-time to integrate the feelings and negotiate the relationship with the person to whom I was connected to at birth but whom I never met again until late adolescence. There are also other family members who are part of my on-going process in the navigation of belonging. During the most intense phases of this emotional experience in the 1990's and 2000's, there was very minimal understanding of these issues from people generally as well as in the counselling profession.

Much of what is believed about adoption seems to be based on the fantasy that adoptees are "better off," adoptees "adopted at birth are 'no different' than non-adoptees throughout life and wouldn't feel loss," and that adoptees "told of adoption at a young age won't be affected," or "not all adoptees are affected." These statements are largely why I never told anyone I was adopted. Rather than listening to how I thought or felt about adoption, I felt blocked by these statements. If I presented anything to the contrary I felt that people thought I was just strange and neurotic. I felt judged, dismissed, unacceptable, and invalidated; I struggled often unsuccessfully to maintain my own reality and felt that I was crazy. The invalidation has added to the trauma of the experience that has unfolded in adulthood. Similarly I met adoptees from an older generation who in the 1980's were involved in lobbying to change the law that would enable adoptees to access their records and therefore be able to search for their

birth parents. They said that they had experienced much social resistance to this and were viewed as mal-adjusted and part of a vocal minority.

However, in the two decades since the laws changed, thousands of adoptees have searched and this is now more commonly considered to be normal.

The other part of my experience that has been incongruent with social views is that I had always believed that I was unwanted and was confused when my birth mother said that I was rejecting her and seemed to need to reclaim me. When volunteering at Vanish (a post adoption support organisation) I encountered birth mothers who had been subject to extreme pressures to relinquish their babies and had suffered a life-time of grief as a result. In addition, they had been told that their babies would be “better off,” they should “forget and move on” and had not received social recognition for their loss and struggled to integrate it.

When reviewing the literature, it was obvious to me that interpretations of findings have often been narrowly considered and reflects social views and biases. In my experience T.V shows report shallow accounts of adoption reunion is like, I have never seen a segment on “down the track issues.” What happens years after the first meeting? Viewers are left to imagine a happy ending, but for most, it is only the beginning of a long journey!

Many changes have taken place in the last 20 years; the opening of adoption records and the decline in ‘white’ baby adoptions. Yet many people still live with the legacy of the previous practices and prejudices that characterised adoption along with the current societal myths and fantasies,

the dreams that adoption was supposed to fulfill. I am motivated to conduct this study on adoption with the intention being to allow adoptees themselves to express the meanings of their own individual experiences. I also wish to explore aspects of adoption in more depth than they have been previously. I believe that it is in the confrontation and exploration of our own stories, and the integration of what they mean into our lives, that we are able to be authentic, compassionate, present for other people, and to be freed to live life to the full.

## Abstract

The study aimed to explore adult adoptees' integration of their adoptions over the lifespan. It utilised retrospective reports of adoptees' childhood experiences of secrecy pertaining to adoption and the impact of this on integrating being adopted. It explored the initial motivations for searching for birth parents according to Anderson's (1989) model. It also investigated the relationship roles adopted in reunion, and whether deeper motivations for searching emerged when adoptees described what their reunion relationship meant to them. Twelve participants were recruited; nine from an advertisement in the newsletter of Vanish (an adoption search and support organisation), and three were referred by a participant; all grew up in the closed adoption system. The participants were interviewed about their adoption narratives and the study utilised a qualitative, phenomenological methodology. The study revealed that, typically, although told of their adoption as children, thereafter the adoptees were bound by secrecy and this affected their ability to integrate the full meaning of their adoptions. More aware and meaningful connection to their adoption experience emerged in adulthood when they underwent the process of search and reunion. The need for medical information, and identity consolidation, were the most commonly reported motivations for seeking reunion, and were a valuable aspect of reunion. However, ultimately, the most important aspects of reunion for the adoptee participants were the relational bonds and connection to their birth mothers (and other family members) as well as a sense of belonging within a genetic continuum..







## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### *History of Adoption In Australia*

The practice of adoption has existed both before and since biblical times. It has varied widely according to culture and historical era. Within Australia, Western Australia was the first state to introduce adoption legislation in 1896 (Vanish, 2008). The adoption records were sealed by law in the 1920's and 1930's in response to the view that adoptive families should be regarded as no different from biological families (Schechter & Bertocci, 1990). Since the 1920's, over 250,000 people have been adopted in Australia. In Victoria, adoption legislation was enacted in 1928, where a new birth certificate protected the child from the stigma of illegitimacy. The changing of both surnames and given names become part of the legislation, and adopted children were to be 'as if born to' their adoptive families (Vanish, 2008).

After the Second World War, society viewed adoption as an appropriate way of creating families for infertile couples. While social rhetoric upheld the child's needs as being paramount, adoption became an industry and "A service for married couples and a cost saving exercise for the state" (Cole, 2008, p. 18). The number of adoptions occurring in Australia peaked in 1971-72, with nearly 10,000 occurring that year. Most young, unmarried mothers were encouraged to relinquish their babies, and few, if any alternatives were presented to them (Cole, 2008). The New South Wales government enquiry into past adoption practices has found that illegal coercion tactics were utilised at times to make mothers

relinquish their babies (Berryman, 1998). Cole refers to the period that was characterised by an incredibly high number of adoptions as, the emergence of a 'white stolen generation.'

Despite the more liberal changes in social attitudes towards illegitimacy, adoptees met with societal resistance when they lobbied for open access to adoption records in order to be able to locate their birth families. "Despite the development of 'best interest of the child' doctrines....Legislative process and courtroom practice have continued to gravitate towards best interest of the parent solutions" (Brodzinsky & Schechter,1990). However, eventually the Victorian Adoption Act 1984 marked a significant change in adoption. The act enabled adoptees and birthparents to obtain identifying information about each other that would make reunions a possibility. In American, adoptees born into the closed system still do not have access to information in almost all states, Lifton, (1993). The number of adoptions occurring in Australia has fallen dramatically since the late 1970's. Permanent care is now the usual practice for placement of children outside their families, except in relation to special needs adoptions and intercountry adoptions, which have increased (Kelly, 2000).

Despite the fact that there are very few newborn babies currently surrendered for adoption within Australia, research on adoptees is important. There are still thousands of people living with the legacy of the secrecy of the closed system, as well as the effects of adoption-separation generally. The issues that have resulted are intergenerational (Jacobs, 2005, and Lifton, 1993). In addition, there is still

advocacy for adoption to be promoted as an alternative to abortion, rarely is an argument presented for keeping the child (Jacobs, 2005).

Children born as a result of donor insemination and some of the new reproductive technologies are now facing similar issues to those created by adoption in the past (Jacobs, 2005). These issues include secrecy, disconnection from biological origins, genealogical bewilderment, and disenfranchised grief (Rose, 2001). Findings from research on adoptees could give guidance to the likely areas of support and research that would benefit donor-conceived people who, “Serve as examples wherein a product-oriented society sacrifices vital aspects of human psychology, many of which are directly relevant to the adopted person” (Schechter & Bertocci, 1990, p. 89).

#### *Definition of Terms Used in the Study*

Most of the terminology that will be used in this study is common to adoption literature. Some words may have a slightly different meaning than that which is commonly associated with the particular word. For example, in this study the term ‘reunion relationship’ will refer to the relationships that become established between an adoptee and his or her birth mother or birth father (and other birth family members) after they have met for the first time. The term ‘birth mother’ refers to a mother who relinquished her child for adoption. In this study the term birth mother is utilised as a way to distinguish her from the adoptive mother. The use of this term is not intended to relegate the meaning of mother to just the physical process of the birth but rather is indicative of blood ties.

The term ‘closed adoption,’ means that virtually no information is available to the adoptee about the birth parents, contact is expected not to occur between the adoptee and their birth parents (even in adulthood for the adoptee), the adoption record cannot be legally obtained thereby making it virtually impossible for the adoptee and his or her birth relatives to locate each other (unless one has information from another source).

### *Review of the Literature*

For decades, adoption has been shrouded in shame and secrecy (Lifton, 1994, and Verrier, 1993) and this may explain why there are a limited number of studies on adoptees in Australia as well as generally. “Surprisingly, psychology has been less active in the field of adoption” (Zamostnoy, O’Brein, Baden, & Wiley 2003, p.1). According to Freundlich (2002) the research on adoption typically reflects two different perspectives, the perspectives of researchers who promote adoption, and the view of those who are concerned with the disproportionate prevalence of adoptees in mental health services. Overall, nothing absolute and conclusive has been agreed upon overall in the research on adoptees, shedding doubt as to how objective and scientific efforts have been in the exploration of adoption, which has been upheld to be ‘in the best interests of the child.’ In response to most findings, there appears to be contradictory findings, the only certainty being that many studies have been methodologically flawed. In this chapter I will review psychological research on adoptees.

It appears that the first writings about adoptees were by psychoanalytic orientated psychiatrists such as Clothier in 1943. Clothier warned of attachment issues being imminent for adoptees. Predominantly, current psychoanalytic orientations have focused on adoptees' attempts at resolution of grief caused by the experience of separation from their birth mothers, birth mother fantasies, identification with two mothers, the impact of secrecy and invalidation, and psychological defences such as denial and splitting (Lifton, 1994, and Verrier, 1993).

Fischer, (2001) referred to earlier psychoanalytic literature as “too negative” and not supported by research. Whilst psychoanalytic findings have at times been opposed (primarily by researchers who promote adoption), they have held steadfast over the past 65 years, the current theories and observations echoing the original ones. In 1943, Clothier stated that the severing of the early primitive relationship between mother and baby was at the core of what is peculiar to the psychology of the adopted child. She claimed that the effects lie so deeply buried in the personality that they could not be evaluated with the knowledge that was available. The psychoanalytic based observations have not been incorporated into adoption literature again until quite recently. An example of this is Verrier's (1993) application of Winnicott's theory of the continuation of the mother/baby bond from pregnancy to the postpartum period. Verrier stated that the relevance of these theories and findings are denied when applied to adoption, and similarly Delaney (2000) referred to this as the ‘decontextualisation of adoption.’ Verrier proposed that separating a baby from its mother causes a “primal narcissistic

wound.” According to Miller-Havens (1990), the affective residue of this is experienced throughout life by adoptees. Armstrong (2000) who was the manager of the Post Adoption Resource Centre in Sydney, stated that although the theory of the ‘primal wound’ is difficult to empirically support, many adoptees find it a helpful way to make sense of their feelings and experiences.

However, in contrast, Feeney, (2005), and Leon, (2002) proposed that the issues of attachment and loss are associated with the intellectual knowledge of the experience of relinquishment rather than with the actual experience of relinquishment (Feeney, 2005, and Leon, 2002). Verrier (1993) differentiated between ‘bonding’ (a continuum from prenatal to post natal life) and ‘attachment’ (that develops later and relies on the recognition of the mother as a separate person). Verrier stated that, removal of babies from their mothers early, before they have recognised that they are separate from their mothers, is actually the worst time to remove them and can result in traumatic stress reactions that can be experienced throughout life.

Feeney (2005) argued that since attachment is developed later in infancy, babies are unlikely to be attached to their mothers before relinquishment and therefore do not experience a trauma when separated, “Verrier’s.... suggestion that the separation of infant and mother inflicts a permanent wound on the child is contentious, and some researchers have argued that the losses associated with adoption are socially constructed. That is, deep-seated beliefs in the importance of kinship cause us to view child relinquishment in terms of rejection” (Feeney, p. 44). However, in her study Feeney actually did not elicit responses about loss

from the adoptee participants and instead she applied explanations of loss using Leon's (2002) social constructionist theory. This is a typical example of recurrent methodological problems in adoption research.

Leon theorised that adoptees' loss was most likely based on being denied access to information in a culture that prizes knowledge of genetic continuity. However, whilst this is acknowledged, many adoption researchers view adoption loss in a much more profound way, whereby the secrecy component of adoption is seen to compound the trauma of a lived separation (Anderson, 1989; Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, 1992; Cubito & Brandon, 2000; Deeg, 2002, Jones, 1997, Lifton, 1978, 1994; Miller-Haven, 1990; Morran 1994; and Verrier, 1994; 2004).

However, whilst mothers are generally considered to be primarily important in society, this social construct most likely does not extend to explaining adoptees' loss because adoptees have an adoptive mother and this is expected to compensate for the loss of the birth mother. "Adoption has not been viewed as a separation from the birth mother or something that needs to be grieved" (Anderson, 1989).

In relation to research on adoptees, there have been many contradictory findings (Zamostny, O'Brien, Baden, & Wiley, 2003). Adoptees have been found to be overrepresented in special education populations (Brodinsky & Steiger, 2002), mental health services, and been found to have had more substance abuse and personality disorders than non-adoptees (Cubito & Brandon, 2000; Jones, 1997; and Verrier, 1993; 2003). Many other authors have also found similar overrepresentations of adoptees in mental health services. These findings have been challenged as containing methodological problems that make it difficult to

determine to what degree this applies to people adopted close to birth and people who were adopted later. However, adoptees adopted close to birth have also been found to have adjustment problems (Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, 1992). In addition, in some instances, the over-representation of adoptees in mental health treatment services may be explained by the lack of understanding that professionals have of adoption issues. Adoptees may be labelled as pathological when in fact they may be exhibiting normal reactions in proportion to the experience of adoption (Zamostny et al.) in a social climate that doesn't recognise their affective reactions as valid (Axness, 2004; Lifton, 1993; and Robinson, 2000; 2004).

When trying to make sense of the inconsistencies in research, it may be helpful to recognise that there is not an accepted universal definition of 'adjustment' in research on adoptees. In addition, the variables used to define and measure adjustment have depended on the researchers perspectives and social views at the time the study was conducted e.g. adoptees who searched for their birth parents used to be viewed as 'mal-adjusted' whereas searching is now considered 'normal' (Brodzinsky, Schechter & Henig, 1992; Lifton, 1994; and Schechter & Bertocci, 1990). In addition, an overwhelming number of adoption studies have focused on the adoptive parents' perceptions of adoptees' adjustment (Zamostny, O'Brein, Baden, & Wiley, 2003). These have neglected the voice of adoptees and are most likely unreliable and subjective. The study by Borders, Black, and Pasley (1998) relied on parental reports of adopted children and found no-difference between the adjustment of adoptees and non-adoptees as measured by their

behaviours. They claimed that research that finds 'deficiencies in adoption' is biased.

Other factors that have contributed to the inconsistent findings of various studies on adoptees are: social attitudes and their influence on the interpretations of research outcomes and choice of utilised methodologies (Sachdev, 1992); the historical context (Triseliotis, 1973); the research paradigm being qualitative or quantitative (Sachdev, 1992); level of advocacy, and concerns about the researchers personal biases (Freundlich, 2002); also, social resistance to acknowledging that adoptive families differ from biological families (Kirk, 1964) and the interpretations of the outcomes of many studies on adoptees' adjustment appear to reflect this wish. In contrast, according to the psychoanalytic researchers Rosenberg and Horner (1991), "The task for the adoptee is to accept his or her biological roots as being as real as his or her adoptive upbringing" (p.71). This is most likely difficult to do within a system based on secrecy that has denied adoptees access to information about their birth families.

Overall, research on adoptees' adjustment has related to the psychosocial differences from non-adoptees. More recently there appears to be more acceptance that some differences are in fact normal and to be expected. According to Verrier, (1993), adoptees who are labelled as 'acting out' or 'mal-adjusted' are usually displaying normal behaviour to an 'abnormal event,' i.e. they have been separated from their birth mothers and birth families and then expected to pretend that nothing ever happened and to be 'as if born to' their adoptive parents.

Similarly, according to Brodzinsky, Schechter, and Henig, (1992) many behavioural problems in adopted children are related to feelings of loss and grief.

There does appear to be a growing consensus that there are some differences between adoptees and non-adoptees (Zamostny, O'Brein, Baden, & Wiley, 2003). Sharma, Mc Gue, and Benson, (1998) found that adoptees are only slightly but significantly different or 'less well-adjusted' than non-adoptees. Passmore (2007) examined this type of finding more closely and found that adoptees are not a homogenous group. She discovered that the adoptee sample could be further divided into a subset of adoptees that are very 'affected' and a larger group of adoptees who are 'not affected.' This appears to be a resting place in the literature, however, according to Passmore (2007), what is needed is an exploration of 'within-group variables' such as; 'Why did some adoptees appear to show 'no difference' and what could account for this finding?'

*Why are there adoptees who appear to show no difference from non-adoptees?*

It has been concluded that adoption is stressful for a subset of adoptees (Passmore, 2007, and Zamostny, O'Brien, Baden, & Wiley, 2007). It could also be that individual adoptees differ in their responses over time as they reconstruct their experience of adoption and attempt to resolve and integrate issues such as loss (Penny, Borders, and Portnoy, 2007). Penny, Borders, & Portnoy, found that adoptees move through a series of sequential phases in relation to their adoptions, over their life span.

A small number of studies have explored the psychological defences used by adoptees to block, or deny adoption issues, in particular psychological splitting, the need to 'fit in' and belong in the adoptive family, and the tendency to be inauthentic as a result of this (Lifton, 1994, and Verrier, 1993). This was also found to be a common coping strategy by Brodzinsky, Schechter, and Henig, (1992). In addition, Penny, Borders, and Portnoy, (2007) found the tendency for adoptees to deny the impact of adoption because of the need to express gratitude to their adoptive parents.

According to Verrier, whilst adoptees in earlier decades were not told of their adoptions, the change to the practice of telling in the 1960's was not very different because telling was characterised by telling the adoptee of their adoption once and then never mentioning it again, Verrier called this 'telling is not really telling.' Although well meaning, commonly the adoptees were told that they were 'special and chosen,' their feelings and concerns about relinquishment were ignored, and the adoption expected to compensate for it (Lifton, 1994, Jones, 1997, and Verrier, 1993). Lifton (1994) and Verrier (1993) reported that adoptees may seem well-adjusted and are often able to function well but this does not mean that they are 'unaffected.'

Applying the findings of Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, (1992), Lifton (1994), Penny, Borders, & Portnoy, (2007), and Verrier (1993), inconsistencies in research could be explained by adoptees' psychological defences and a lack of psychological integration of adoption issues, which are both either overtly or

subtly encouraged in a climate of secrecy. Also, developmental and psychoanalytic theorists view adoption as a life-long process and subject to change over the life-span (Brodinsky, Schechter, & Henig, 1992, and Lifton, 1993).

A very small number of developmental studies have explored adoptees over the life-span and found that the level of adoptees' adjustment and feelings of loss and grief changes over time. According to Brodinsky, Schechter, & Henig, (1992), some adoptees as children, often feel disturbing pain, loss and grief, whilst others don't. They noted that a mental representation may need to be developed in order to cue the grief, and therefore the tendency to exhibit grief may depend to some extent on when this inner mental representation is developed. The findings of Lifton, (1994) and Miller-Havens (1990) were consistent with those of Brodzinsky, et al. Miller-Havens noted that concrete information, usually obtained by searching, may allow a connection to the birth mothers as 'real' and also the elaboration of mental representations.

Cubito and Brandon (2000) found that adult adoptees who were searching were more distressed than non-searchers and they were not sure whether to conclude that the search itself was stressful or whether there are underlying factors that make it stressful. Penny, Borders, & Portnoy (2007) found that the major differences between adoptees and non-adoptees occurred amongst those who had searched for their birth parents. Penny et al. found that searching allowed adoptees' to reconstruct of the meaning of adoption, consistent with theories of grief resolution.

By examining the changes and integration of adoption over adoptees' life-spans, Penny, Borders, & Portnoy (2007) examined 'within groups variables,' that is, how adoptees differed from each other. They found adoptees' integration of adoption usually consisted of five different phases over their life span. Their childhoods typically were characterised by denial, they then moved through various sequential stages of affective intensity as they integrated their adoption, sought reunion, and ultimately could reach a stage of peace and acceptance. They found that adoptees differed on psychosocial measures at the different reconstruction phases both in comparison to each other and to non-adoptees. Interestingly, those at the 'denial' phase and the 'at peace' phase rated most positively overall.

#### *Search and Reunion*

Penny, Borders, & Portnoy (2007) ended their study with the question "Must birthparents be found for the search to have an impact on the reconstruction process? Or does the search itself allow adoptees to explore their issues with adoption and reconstruct what adoption means in their own lives?" Anderson (1989) made an interesting observation, whilst not suggesting that a reunion shouldn't take place, he emphasised the significance of psychological growth as being more important than what was actually found from searching.

Anderson (1989) understood motivations for searching within the context of socially acceptable motivations and also as influenced by media portrayals of reunions. His theory, that incorporated a broader range of psychological

perspectives, provided more meaningful, and more comprehensive perspectives as compared to most prior research. Anderson categorised adoptees' motives for searching into three broad categories, 'search as adventure' (the adoptee hopes to continue the birth relationship where they left off and capture what remains), 'the medical model' (the adoptee searches for medical information and identity), and the 'psychological trauma model' (adoption causes a psychological trauma as a result of the experience of separation, and the reunion is the attempt to heal the wound, resolve grief, and to psychologically grow). These categories were based on his 20 years experience as a psychiatrist working with adoptees and from attending search groups over a long period of time as an adoptee himself.

What adoption means to adoptees can most readily be seen in the reasons for why they search and in particular what emerges as important and meaningful to them in their reunions. Earlier studies on adoptees searching for their birth histories appear to be tainted with the adoption related stigma of their time. Some authors have stated that adoptees who search have had more experiences of deprivation in the adoptive home and are less happy than non-searchers (Triseliotis, 1973). More recently this has been found to not be the case, adoptees search for reasons that are common to most humans, and searching is largely thought to relate to identity issues (Anderson, 1989, and Brodzinsky, Schechter & Henig, 1992). Often adoptees state they are searching for medical history because this is the most socially acceptable reason (Anderson, 1988). This could reinforce the superficial nature of much research. Deeper aspects are more difficult to empirically uncover, although, a small number of studies have explored

empowerment and autonomy, (Lifton, 1993), deeper reasons pertaining to genetic similarity, connection and belonging (Sachdev, 1992), psychological growth (Anderson, 1989), grief resolution, and achieving peace (Penny, Borders, & Portnoy, 2007).

According to Sachdev (1992), most studies on searching have been methodologically flawed; narrow in scope, and have reduced responses to 'single indicators' e.g. "successful" vs. "unsuccessful." These have missed the deeper meanings that searching usually has for adoptees (especially studies utilising quantitative methodologies). As far as is known only two studies have asked adoptee participants to ascribe their own meanings to the terms commonly utilised in quantitative studies. These were by Sachdev (1992) and Miller-Havens (1991), and these authors found that much deeper meanings emerged from commonly utilised terminology. Sachdev found that in addition to a search for identity as proposed by much research, adoptees searched for reasons related to connection and belonging, "Behind the overlay of informational need lay the emotional pain, hurt, and frustration of the loss of the years" (p.56). However he did not explore these deeper aspects extensively.

Foulstone, Feeney, & Passmore (2006) explored how adoptees defined their reunion relationships, and they found that adoptees mostly defined them as 'a relative in general but not a mother-child in particular.' They also used the terms 'friendship' and 'acquaintance,' although these latter terms seem to contrast with Sachdev's finding of a deeper connection in the reunion relationship.

### *The Aims of the Study*

Broadly this study aimed to explore the process of psychological integration of adoption, progression of adoptees' responses to being adopted, and the psychological integration of their birth mothers who were forbidden to them in the closed adoption system but whom they eventually located. This was done by examining retrospective reports of adoptees' experiences from childhood through into adulthood, and reunion with their birth mothers. The study began with the adoptees' reports of childhood experiences of any discussion of adoption, their development of inner mental representations of their birth mothers, motivations for searching, and reunion experiences; the roles adopted in reunion and then whether deeper motivations were evident from their reports of what was important in reunion. The study also explored the developmental perspectives where, unlike most previous research, findings were characterised by an exploration of the adoptees' life-span and the psychological changes that occurred in relation to the issues of adoption. Studies by Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig (1992) and Penny, Borders, & Portnoy (2007) are based on similar conceptualisations.

### *Specific research aims*

1) To explore the extent to which the adoptees experienced secrecy as in Verrier's (1993) theory of 'telling is not really telling;' and whether this secrecy affected the integration of the psychological experience of adoption.

- 2) To discover whether the adoptees usually had an inner mental representation of their birth mother as a real person and if not whether one emerged, and if so, what prompted it to emerge.
- 3) To examine Anderson's (1989) classifications of motivations for searching and to determine whether these categories applied to the participants.
- 4) To explore what role definitions adoptees ascribed to the reunion relationship and whether these reflected the findings of Foulstone and Feeney's (2005).
- 5) To explore possible differences between what adoptees stated was a motive for searching and what became important after they met their birth mothers

## Chapter 2

### Method

#### *Methodology*

The present study utilised a qualitative phenomenological approach in order to obtain the descriptions, explore the meanings, and capture the essences of the participants' experiences. In this study, a meaningful understanding and generaliseability arose as themes emerged and the participants echoed one another with both the universality as well as uniqueness of their experience. The qualitative paradigm captures a more complete picture of lived experience (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and allows the researcher to make some generalisations, of what something is like from an 'insider's' perspective (Leedy, & Ormrod, 2001). In phenomenological research, the meanings and essences of phenomenon are derived, not presupposed or assumed (Moustakas, 1994).

#### *Participants*

Twelve adoptee participants were recruited for the study; there were four males and eight females. Eight were members of Vanish, the government funded search and support organisation in Victoria, and three were made aware of the study by one of the participants. The members of Vanish responded to an advertisement for participants placed in the Vanish newsletter, (see appendix A) requesting adoptees who had searched for their birth mothers. Their ages ranged from 39 years to 66 years. Their ages at the time of their adoption ranged from 5 days to 18 months, the majority of adoptee participants were adopted within less than a month of

their birth; all had a period of time between relinquishment and adoption when they were cared for in the hospital setting by hospital staff.

Most participants were told of their adoption when they were young and most had no recall of being told for this reason. Three of the older adoptees in the study were not told of their adoptions as children, two found out from others in adolescence, and one found out from her step-mother when she was 17years old. Participants' ages at the time of their adoptions and the ages they were told of their adoptions can be seen in table 1.

*Table 1.**Current age, age when adopted, and age told of adoption.*

Name	Age at Adoption	Current Age	Age Told of Adoption
Rodney	6 weeks	50	3.5 years
Gary	18 months	61	6 years
Anna	10 days	42	No recall
Caroline	1 month	56	No recall
Valerie	10 days	47	6 years
Fiona	12 days	44	No recall
Susan	6 days	66	17 years
Belinda	6 weeks	42	No recall
Veronica	3-4 months	64	Not told
Laura	2 months	62	Not told
Richard	2 weeks	42	No recall
Peter	5 days	39	No recall

All participants grew up in the closed adoption system without information about their birth mothers. Adoption records with identifying information about their birth mothers became available in 1984 and all participants have met their birth mothers, except one whose birth mother had refused to meet him, however he had met his birth father. Only one participant had just one meeting with her birth mother. The duration of the reunion relationships from the time of the first meeting to the present ranged from 2 years to 28 years. Four of the adoptees' birth mothers had ceased contact, one very early in the reunion, the other two withdrew some years later. Of the adoptee participants, 50% had no current contact with their birth mothers and the other 50% had on-going contact. The reported length of the reunion relationship, type of contact, length of the relationship, and frequency of contact between the adoptee and their birth mothers can be seen in table 2.

Table 2

*Participants' Contact with their birth mothers*

---

Name	Length of Reunion Relationship	Contact
------	--------------------------------	---------

---

Rodney	A couple of meetings	Birthmother ceased contact
Gary	Several years	2 visits, 6 letters, 6 phone calls annually
Anna	2 years	Monthly visit, 3 phone calls
Caroline	20 years	Yearly visit interstate, monthly phone call
Valerie	11 years then ceased	No contact over last 10 years
Fiona	A couple of years	Birthmother ceased contact
Susan	Several years	Birthmother ceased contact
Belinda	Ten years	Frequent phone calls and visits
Veronica	Met on one occasion	Birthmother ceased contact,
Laura	28 years	Monthly phone calls, lives interstate
Richard	One meeting with birth father	Birthmother refused meeting, met birth father
Peter	18 years	Yearly visit interstate, weekly emails, monthly phone calls

---

### *Materials*

The adoptee participants were interviewed using semi-structured questions devised by the author to prompt the participants' narratives of their adoption experience from childhood to the present. Questions were open ended and they were encouraged to tell their own stories and to speak about anything that was deemed important to them. They were also asked specific questions that related to being told of adoption and discussion of adoption in childhood, if they wondered about their birth mothers as children, the search process, how the reunion relationship proceeded and how they would define the roles adopted in reunion. The interview protocol is included in appendix B.

### *Procedure*

Interviews were usually conducted at the Swinburne Psychology Clinic. A few participants were not able to travel there so the interviewer met with them in their own homes. The interviews were mostly between 1-2 hours duration, and they were recorded on tape as well as on an MP3 player, after which they were transcribed verbatim and then summarised. The transcript summaries were coded according to thematic units.

The results of the present study are presented over the next four chapters, at the end of each chapter I have summarised the findings and how they apply to prior research. Following this is a conclusion chapter where I have drawn conclusions about the results overall.

## Chapter 3

Secrecy, Development of the Inner Representations of the Birth mothers,  
and, Psychological Integration of Adoption

As mentioned previously, adopted children were to be 'as if born to' their adoptive families, and this appeared to be particularly characteristic of the closed adoption system (Vanish, 2008). In the 1960's in the U.S.A. there was the advised practice for adoptive parents to tell the child of their adoption (Kirk, 1964). Australia took up this advice later in the 1960's. However, usually after the telling, no further discussion about adoption occurred (Verrier, 1993) and this was the case for adoptees in the present study. Verrier (1993) refers to this type of secrecy as, "Telling is not really telling" (p. 9). As found in the retrospective reports of the adoptees participants' childhoods, the adoptees did not talk about their adoption and typically did not psychologically integrate their adoption. Gary was told when he was six but hadn't understood what it meant.

Gary said,

*"I was told when I was around five or six that I was adopted. I accepted it with equanimity. The reason that was, was because I didn't understand what the word meant... I was told when I was young and because I took it so calmly they thought I was o.k. but in fact I hadn't understood what it meant... It's interesting that they told me and then it's not mentioned again for 10 years until my sister was*

*told..... “We’ve told him, so that’s fine, we’ve got that out of the way” (Trans. p. 3)*

When telling, parents typically framed the adoption in a positive way and told the adoptees that they were special and/ or chosen. Rodney had felt angry as a child because he wasn’t supported to psychologically deal with his adoption.

Rodney said,

*“I was a fairly happy kid, but I was definitely aware that I was adopted. I even remember being kind of proud of it in some ways, I think that’s obviously something that my parents were told to push, something to be proud of that I was hand picked, the psychology of the time was to push that on the adoptee... I think by the end of primary school it was rearing as something that hadn’t been sufficiently dealt with or processed and it couldn’t ever be... So I guess by then some anger signs were showing” (Trans. p.1)*

Belinda said,

*“They tried to make it a nice story and a special story, and I guess that, now, at 43, I think I don’t know that I wanted to be special. You sort of want to fit in and be normal. That’s what I sort of look at now..... Being special is not really, really, you know, that good” (Trans. p. 2).*

Typically the adoptees worried that speaking of adoption would result in another rejection, might hurt their adoptive parents, and make them

seem ungrateful or disloyal. These fears appeared to have contributed to their tendency to collude with the secrecy surrounding their adoption. Susan had been involved in lobbying to get the records opened in the early 1980's. As a child as well as an adult, Susan experienced societal resistance to her 'need to know.' Expressing this need evoked the label of being 'ungrateful.'

Susan said,

*"I think the pressure to be grateful is enormous, it's huge, and it's often unacknowledged.... and I think maybe that's why this person wrote this letter to The Age. You know, 'I'm grateful, I'm wonderful and I'm perfectly happy. There are adopted people like me that are perfectly fine. What's wrong with you?' As if there was something wrong with us for wanting to know who we were. That's the implication that there is something wrong with us for wanting to know who we are....' How dare you not be grateful for what these people have done, how dare you not be grateful.' You know they want us to be, they want us to fit their fantasy... And it's very, very difficult to speak out against that, its very, very difficult"* (Trans. p 3).

Belinda said,

*"I didn't discuss adoption within the family.... I would have felt disloyal....I would just bottle that up. I would never, I don't recall ever talking to my Mum. Like one time I was in the bedroom crying, I*

*think I was 6 or 7 or 8, um...and I never ever voiced to Mum or Dad that that's what I would have been upset about... my Mum and Dad are really.... good people, so, I think I had a sense of, ' I need to be grateful here.'* (Trans. p. 16).

Peter had a happy upbringing overall, however as a child he feared that he might be rejected again if he were to bring up the shameful subject of adoption.

Peter said,

*"It would have been the fear of being given up again, you know.... if you ask too much then these people may not want you, therefore, you know, it's best to be silent and, you know, be happy in that environment sort of thing... I remember very vividly as a child having nightmares about being taken away again...The nightmares lasted for about five years and began when I was five... There was always this, well these parents can give you up. It's happened once. Why can't it happen again? So it was just something, whilst I knew, it was always something that umm, uh, I didn't discuss, I felt ashamed of"* (Trans. p.1).

Instead of integrating adoption, it appeared that many adoptees had to use psychological defences such as blocking and splitting off part of themselves in order to deal with the aspects of themselves that they felt were unacceptable and threatening to their place in the family.

Veronica said,

*“My Father told me to “shut up about it”... I was left to attend to my own thoughts and feelings and I had to do a lot of blocking and I think I’ve always had to do a lot of blocking. But there was nowhere else to go. There was no relief, no support, no understanding (Trans. p.14).*

*I think that’s the biggest thing, being accepted, that I’m acceptable. I go through life worrying that I’m not acceptable. It’s just what adoption does. I go through life feeling that I’m unacceptable” (Trans. p. 23).*

Peter said,

*“I don’t think I felt for any moment that it was, whilst I knew the knowledge, it wasn’t something that was necessarily discussed, or I felt comfortable questioning with regard to it...You put it away in a little box and put it in the back of your mind and you try not to open up the box. That’s the way I dealt with it for many years” (Trans. p.1).*

#### *Secrecy and Difficulties Integrating adoption*

Mostly, the adoptee participants put their adoption related thoughts and feelings aside by blocking them until they had their own independent lives. For some this was a conscious process, others reported that adoption was never an issue.

However, of these, some reported that they had not been aware of the feelings that were hidden under the surface until much later in life. A minority of the adoptee participants seemed to have not emotionally integrated adoption for most of their adult lives. Before reunion they had appeared to identify themselves entirely with

their adoptive families, and were prompted to search unexpectedly by external events.

Gary had identified with his adoptive parents so much that, in hindsight, he realised that he had believed himself to be genetically related to them.

Gary said,

*“I lived my life as if my adoptive parents were my real parents. For example, I would see similarities with my adoptive father and think I’m like that because he’s like that. This was not just in relation to learnt things, it was genetic type things too, and it was with everything... So, I suppose that’s denial, which might be the word for it. I refuse to believe that I’m not their real child... I was emotionally disconnected from the meaning of adoption, it was some intellectual idea that I didn’t really grasp the meaning of.... I think the attitude of the closed system has filtered through, and if you think that that’s going to be a success, I would be a success story” (Trans. p. 3).*

As a child Caroline had been unaware of the impact her adoption had on her, the deeper feelings emerged from her ‘subconscious’ later on.

Caroline said,

*“It was never something that ate at me but it must have been in my subconscious.... I guess it was a*

*family secret and I didn't understand the implication of that... There wasn't anyone that I could discuss adoption with when I was growing up" (Trans. p.6).*

Gary realised that he had identified completely with his adoptive family and ignored the importance of his birth family as a result of the familial and societal attitude that adoptive families are 'no different' from biological families.

Gary said,

*"It reminds me of my situation exactly. Some adoptees don't search because they don't realise at an emotional level that there's another human person out there that might be connected to them. That they've swallowed the lie that they're the real child of these parents they are living with. And inside they umm, accept that" (Trans. p. 12).*

#### *Developing Inner Mental Representations of the Birth mothers*

Typically, for much of their lives before search and reunion, none of the adoptee participants seemed connected to the fact that their birth mothers were actually 'real.'

Gary said,

*"I had never thought that my mother was a real person. I had never thought that she might have feelings that she might want to find her given away child. .... I lived my life as if my adoptive parents were my real parents....I hadn't thought of her as a person. If I'd thought she was a living*

*human being, perhaps I would have thought, gee I'd better find her. But it never occurred to me that she was real"*  
(Trans. p. 3).

Obtaining concrete information seemed to enable them to develop an inner mental representation of their birth mothers as 'real' and a connection to what this meant.

Caroline said,

*"And seeing her signature, that was the just the most mind blowing thing, she became real at that moment.... I think maybe before that she was just like this myth, that was the story of my life, but I had no connection to it"* (Trans. p. 12).

Richard said,

*"I then had facts and figures and it made it more real whereas before it was just that they were out there in the ether.... Here in front of me were names and dates and where they lived... They became real people as it were. It wasn't just something that happened when I was born, they were real, they are alive, you can contact them if you want to"* (Trans. p.3).

Belinda said,

*"I'd just felt absolutely no connection what-so-ever. Then it was... sort of making it real... that, yes, I do have to think about that...and that is the true story about me"* (Trans. p.6).

It wasn't until she attended an interview to get her adoption records and heard a birth mother's story that Caroline's unconscious feelings surfaced perhaps triggered by the new development and elaboration of an inner mental representation.

Caroline said,

*"It was a day that I let my emotions come to the surface that I didn't know were buried"* (Trans. p 4).

*Discussion of Secrecy, Development of the Inner Representations of the Birth mothers, and, Psychological Integration of Adoption*

The findings supported Verrier's (1993) theory that 'telling is not really telling.' Apart from the few older adoptees in the study who were not told of their adoption by their parents, typically the adoptive parents told the adoptees of their adoption and then never mentioned it again. Either the topic of adoption was disallowed in the adoptive families or the adoptee participants felt uncomfortable broaching the subject.

Consistent with the findings of Jones, (1997), Lifton, (1994) and Verrier, (1993), many adoptive parents framed adoption positively and told their children they were 'special and 'chosen.' Although well meaning, the relinquishment experience was ignored and it seemed that the adoptive relationship was expected to completely compensate for it. Many of the adoptees seemed to have utilised psychological defences such as denial and splitting in order to cope with adoption, and this was consistent with

the findings of Axness, (2002); Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, (1992), Lifton, (1994), and Verrier, (1993). It was also consistent with the findings of Penny, Borders, & Portnoy's (2007), 'denial/ no awareness' phase where adoptees' childhoods were characterised by denial of adoption issues and maintenance of gratitude to their adoptive parents.

Similarly, according to Kirk (1964), Lifton, (1994) and Verrier, (1993), adoptees who show 'no difference' from non-adopted people and have identified with only their adoptive parents have been thought to be 'well-adjusted' or "successful" adoptions. The present study found that telling of the adoption and then closing off discussion about it did not enable its' psychological integration. This sheds doubt on the concepts of 'adjustment' that commonly have characterised much prior research. The present study found that expecting adoptees to be 'no-different' from non-adoptees resulted in them splitting off part of themselves, feeling unacceptable as people, fearing that rejection would be the consequence for authenticity, and repressing their emotions.

The adoptees' formations of inner mental representations of the birth mothers as 'real' typically did not occur until they obtained concrete information. It appeared to mark the beginning of a significant process for the adoptees; it gave a new meaning to their experience and integration of adoption. In accordance with the findings of Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, (1992), Lifton, (1993) and Miller-Havens (1990), the establishment and elaboration of mental representations could have cued the feelings of

loss and grief for those who found this emerged when they obtained information. The feelings of loss were typically more evident during discussion about reunion (explored later in this study). Various reasons were stated for seeking a reunion and this will be explored in the next chapter.

## Chapter 4

### Motivations for searching

According to Lifton (1978) “We cannot speak of reunions as successful or unsuccessful. Every search is successful in that adoptees are given a feeling of being grounded in the human condition, of becoming autonomous people in control of their own lives (p. 74).” This quote by Lifton parallels Anderson’s (1989) view that it is not so much what adoptees find from searching that is important, but rather that they underwent the process of searching from which emerged psychological growth and autonomy.

He viewed adoptees articulations about search as tainted with views common to society. Anderson suggested that adoptees’ motivations for searching fall into three broad categories, of which adoptees are usually not consciously aware. These categories are the ‘search as adventure’ model, the search as therapy models: ‘medical model,’ and the ‘psychological trauma model.’ He stated that adoptees probably subscribe to all the models but usually one predominates. Typically the participants in the present study did fall into these categories and in this chapter I will explore Anderson’s categories in sequential order and as they apply to the participants in the present study.

According to the ‘search as adventure’ model some adoptees had a naive wish for experience rather than for personal growth. The wish was to pick up where the adoptees left off and to capture what remained, the media most commonly portrays this, and it is probably held in part by all adoptees. However, the separation cannot be erased, and it has remained as an impediment to living a

future together (Anderson's 1989). In the present study, for the adoptees,' sensitivity to abandonment and rejection, and for the birth mothers,' reminders of the adoptees' birth father (particularly if the circumstances were very complicated or involved rape), as well as the painful secrets of the adoption, typically had to be acknowledged at some point in the reunion. For some it was too difficult and this was why the reunion relationship ended.

Susan said,

*“So now she doesn't want to know me.... Because she's very bitter and because she's never forgiven my birth father and because I understand that I am the personification of all that pain for her, through no fault of my own and I might remind her of him. It's very sad for her that she's so bitter. I went to counselling and the therapist said “Don't let her demonise you, this is her stuff. Don't let her demonise you!”... So to demonise someone like that gives them far more power than they should have anyway. I don't have that power, she's given me that power to be this awful person. That upset her so much, so I can't do anything about that, that's her stuff” (Trans. p. 10).*

Rodney said,

*“She was even reluctant to look me in the eye.... I understood that for her to look at me was to be looking at the biggest loss in her life. The biggest,*

*stupidest, decision the biggest pain, it was hard. And it was hard to be that; it was hard to be the thing that was reflecting that. So I didn't want to be around her either, so it went both ways. Because my uncle has had none of that pain and guilt, it was easy to be around him"* (Trans. p. 10).

Fiona said,

*"So about two years ago she broke off contact and can't tell the truth. Her parents told her it was part of her life to put in a box and never talk about and I guess that's where she's gone and umm, you know..... "Oh but you know she's dealt with the rape," I got told, and "she's all, you know, at peace with those sorts of things".... And I said, "I don't care what she says." You know, she couldn't look at me for the first ahh, umm (crying) (Trans. p 6).... You know in all the movies on t.v. they get the reunion sorted out in 2 hours and I haven't sorted it out in years"* (Trans. p.25).

The 'search as adventure' model was how Gary and Veronica approached their reunions. Veronica's initial meeting with her birth mother, Sarah, was a fun time out drinking with no overt reminders about the past.

Veronica said,

*"We just both wanted to talk about fun things..... I met her at a hotel and just got 'smashed' together. There was no*

*tears, nothing, nothing like that. It was a very comfortable sort of meeting, it was just fun” (Trans p 9).*

Ultimately, continuing the relationship as though no separation had occurred could not be maintained in Veronica’s reunion. Veronica’s birth mother was at times rejecting of her and this hurt Veronica.

Veronica said,

*“My birth mother was jealous of the attention my birth father gave me... And I was like a bit of a younger version of her, at the time, in my early 20’s. So, there was, yeah, she felt resentful towards me, and I, I found that really hurtful, because I felt she should have cared about me more than just looking at me as somebody to resent (Trans. p 17)... So she was very cold in a lot of ways, very cold and that sort of made me feel a bit that I never want to get close to her... She used to say funny things. In front of my father I’ll never forget her saying at dinner, “Oh I tried to have you aborted.... had my legs up in the stirrups and it was going to cost me 60 pounds, and I could only raise 50” .... It was almost like she was apologising because she couldn’t get the other ten pounds... (Trans. p. 12). Easily disposed of when not wanted, I suppose. That’s how I felt” (Trans. p. 18).*

Initially reunion was ‘the answer’ for Veronica and it ‘fixed’ her feeling of not belonging. However when things changed she seemed to feel that life was almost not worth living.

*“ I can honestly say, umm, I’m not, you know, I’m not going to be sad, I think, to leave this world, I don’t want to leave early. But because it’s been a torture.... Cause in the magazines and papers it’s like, “Oh it’s wonderful, they’ve found, they’ve found their family. Everyone lives happily ever after.” Bullshit. That’s when the problems happen and I think there are a big number of people that suffer a lot of problems after the meeting and it’s all gone wrong” (Trans. p 27).*

Gary picked up life with his birth family as though he had always been there,

Gary said,

*“So, now I’ve got a new family. New brothers and sisters, that accept me as their brother, and so, ok, well that’s the way it is, let’s get on with it. Let’s go and visit my family for Christmas, send cards, do all those sorts of things. If they are in town, drop in, you know. So I sort of picked up as if I had always been there” (Trans. p 5).*

Most of the adoptee participants ascribed to the ‘medical’ model, they reported that they were motivated to search in order to obtain medical information, some also stated deeper reasons pertaining to similarities, and identity.

Gary was motivated to find out his medical history,

*“The other reason for finding my mother was umm, it would be nice to have a bit of medical*

*background. For example, what did my father die of? Am I at risk of this heart disease? Or that cancer? If you know of your genetic background you have something to work with. So it's worth knowing* " (Trans. p. 11).

Richard hadn't ever given much thought to being adopted. He said that it had "Never been an issue" (Trans. p.1). In his early 20's his adoptive mother unexpectedly gave him information about his birth parents. He eventually searched, and he expressed that he was motivated by wanting to know his family history, medical information and wanted to feel part of a genetic continuum.

Richard said,

*"I just wanted a background. I have always felt like I was the beginning. There's nothing behind me cos I' didn't know my parents, didn't know where they came from, didn't know anything about them. So I'm number one and it starts from there and moves forward.... Also my adoptive parents are really into family trees and stuff and for many years they were tracing their whole heritage.... While that's very interesting its not my family history so that was another reason for sorting out my own past"* (Trans. p 1).

Susan was searching for a genetic similarity, identity, and genetic connection.

Susan said,

*“Because I did feel like an alien. I mean, you feel like there’s a brick wall behind you. You want to know who your family are, you want to know what ethnic group you come from, you want to know if there is another artist in the family. You want to know whose body shape you’ve got; there are so many things you want to know”* (Trans. p. 9).

By referring to his need to know more than just medical history, Peter was perhaps alluding to a search for something that would help him make sense of his adoption.

Peter said,

*“Everything from you know, the natural questions of medical identity, so you know, was there any family history of whatever... Umm, you know, it wasn’t just about that, but that’s one aspect of it. You just want to find out about who and how and when and why. All those natural questions, or natural for me”* (Trans. p.4).

In her early 40’s Anna was interested in finding out her medical history to help explain her daughter’s medical problems,

*“My daughter has a congenital disability, which means that she was born with it. So I wanted to know if these things were in, in the family”* (Trans. p. 5).

Rodney described at length a struggle to consolidate his identity. When asked what motivated him to search, he replied,

*“Oh a volatile personality, it always seemed to be subliminally my reactions were based on not feeling heard or accepted or listened to. I think I was hoping to reaffirm that I was who I thought I was..... At 20 I had the persona of a successful rock musician I didn't believe it for one minute, it was just an act. I didn't have a belief system. I thought this is a pretty fun role, I'll play this for a while. And that's how I approached life, this is an interesting role, but I don't believe in myself. So I was looking for something to confirm little parts of me. I didn't expect anything would confirm all of me. I always had that edging self-doubt... I was certainly hoping to confirm directions and traits and they were confirmed” (Trans. p. 9).*

According to Anderson (1989) the categories of the ‘medical’ model, and the ‘psychological trauma’ model were both forms of search as therapy. According to Anderson, the medical (deficiency) model has appeared to be the most common view of search as therapy. Whilst acknowledging that medical information is important, he stated that in almost all medical decisions, the value of the family medical history is insignificant when compared to the personal medical history. In the ‘medical’ model view, adoptees have been seen as suffering from a deficiency of something that exists outside themselves that, if it can be obtained (through search and reunion), will bring about a resolution and cure the adoptees problems.

The most significant elements that have been implicit in this view are that adoptees: 1) need to take something into themselves; (2) this something is external; (3) the process is relatively passive; and (4) resolution is complete (i.e., cure).

Although, Rodney was initially motivated by the ‘medical’ model i.e. search for identity, belonging and connection, contact with his birth mother did not last long. The few meetings with her were actually the beginning of a long, painful journey of emotional recovery. He attributed his chronic physical illness as related to blocked emotions and frustrations he had with not being able to process his adoption separation when he was younger, and also to feeling, misplaced, different and unacceptable.

Rodney said,

*“I’ve also got a thyroid condition, it’s to do with battling emotions. The physical has been blocked up with what I’ve wanted to say all my life, and the liver is the anger for not feeling accepted for who I am, very interesting manifestation”* (Trans. p. 1).

After reunion, Rodney was dealing with the psychological wounds and had begun a journey of psychological growth. Andersons’ (1989) third model was the ‘psychological trauma’ model that resembled Verrier’s theory of the ‘primal wound.’ Inherent in this theory is life long ramifications of the severing of the mother/baby bond as well as the impact of the period of time between adoption and relinquishment, (when

the adoptees were in an institutional hospital setting for days, weeks, or months and cared for by various staff) (Verrier, 1993). This is claimed to result in attachment problems and a traumatic stress and grief reaction experienced by the baby, the residue of which can be experienced throughout life by adoptees (Miller-Havens, 1990, Lifton, 1994, and Verrier). Interestingly, although the adoptee participants were not asked about the impact of the 'primal wound,' almost half of them spoke of the significant emotional impact they felt the original separation from their birth mothers has had on them. What Valerie said was a particularly poignant example of how her early separation from her birth mother has impacted on her.

*“What happens is that our bond is broken with the mother..., I was left in the nursery for 10 days, probably fed when the nurses had time... And through my whole life, I have felt that I am still in that cradle, that I’m still waiting for the bond.....It’s nature to, to be with the mother, not just ripped, you just can’t be in a womb for nine months, yanked away, be put into another family and say well right, pretend that nothing’s happened.... If nature had intended that there would be no problems with wanting to find our natural parents... I’ve never ever felt easy about relationships or getting close to people, So, those first few weeks are so vital for that baby, so that baby feels secure, that baby” (Trans. p. 25-26).*

Laura said she was a healthy baby until she was separated from her birth mother and that people don't understand the significance of that early bond.

Laura said,

*“I was with my birth mother for the first 12 days of my life and she breast fed me, and I think without a shadow of a doubt there was a very real bond between us... I was placed in the hospital nursery, and that was the separation on that 12<sup>th</sup> day of my life. Um as it happened, I then spent the next six weeks of my life in the nursery. I started to not thrive, and lose weight and there was a reasonable amount of concern that I might die..... Removing me from the breast and from her, I started to deteriorate.... Not that anyone would have associated that with the separation, people didn't want to face it, they would have just thought that I was a failure to thrive baby for other reasons”*  
(Trans. p.1)

Susan mentioned that she has read Verrier's (1993) book *The Primal Wound* and spoke of her experiential connection to it and that it had helped relieve her desperate need for validation.

*“I was abandoned by the most important person in my life. How would that feel to a baby?... Utterly terrifying. And totally traumatising and this awful, and I've been there now because sometimes you get*

*triggers and that is the most, awful abandonment... My therapist once said "Draw it for me." so I drew the night sky, black with stars, and this child floating in this dark universe, totally alone. That's the picture I came up with, and that's pretty bloody terrifying. When you get to that place, those around you find it very hard to deal with because you are in such pain.... And I think the fact that she's called it the 'primal wound' is spot on, 'primal' means utterly overwhelming and utterly deep, and profound and that's what we feel.... No-one acknowledges it, and holds you, its awful. Its awful, it makes it much worse" (Trans.p.15)*

Peter found that he had deal with his feelings related to his relinquishment in order for his reunion to proceed beyond a superficial level.

*"One (logistics) is very easy to umm, give complete context to and say, you know, I understand and you know I have no issue with it. The other is so hard to get your head around and understand the emotional side to it... getting so deep into the emotional trauma of, ending up and saying, and you know, pushing back and almost rejecting them by saying you know, 'How do you give up a little baby? – I mean you can't do that... And they're some of the feelings that I had" (Trans. p 24).*

According to Anderson, "The adoptees have experienced a problem in the nature of a 'traumatic neurosis' or a post traumatic stress disorder,' a trauma

presumably caused by dislocation and transplantation of the adoptees from their biological family to their adoptive family” (p. 629). Adoptees who ascribe to the ‘psychological trauma model’ do so in order to find their inner selves and confront their pasts.

What Laura said was a salient example of Anderson’s (1989) ‘psychological trauma model’ with the goal of search being to psychologically grow. Laura approached searching in a global way, not only looking for a specific connection, or to fulfill what was missing, but also wanting to make sense of her whole life narrative.

When asked what motivated her to search, she replied,

*“Everything, not having a sense of a personal, needing to have a whole life story, I mean it was as simple as that. Having given birth, having acknowledged for the first time when I had my own children, the importance of biological connection... I mean just the enormity of going through a pregnancy, giving birth, breast feeding, what that all meant, it was just huge stuff in terms of saying that I need to know this information about myself.... It was instinctive, just the need to know. I couldn’t even break it down into this reason or that reason. It was just everything. I just needed answers. Everyone’s life story is an autobiography whether they are adopted or not. I think the best way to describe it, for me, is that when you are adopted its like chapter one is ripped out, I had to fill in*

*chapter one to make all the other chapters make sense” (Trans. p. 9).*

Laura’s search was so fundamental to her that she was willing to risk the societal attitudes towards searchers in the 1970’s, searching was an extremely turbulent time for her and she had minimal social support.

When asked about what her fears were she replied,

*“I would be condemned by people if they found out what I had done and regard me as abnormal or mal-adjusted. Back in the 70’s one of the responses to adoptees who expressed a need to know was that they were psychologically unstable, and that there was something fundamentally wrong with them. I had to think about how I was going to wear that, um, I was fearful of rejection from my birth parents, that’s a very real fear.... A lot of adopted people, when they set out searching they feel that they are out being bashed against waves, and they feel like they’re floundering, and when you meet someone to give you some comfort and support and understanding, its like you’ve been thrown a life-line” (Trans. p. 3).*

For Caroline, searching was about claiming the lost aspects of herself.

*“I remember thinking, this is the most profound experience of my life, apart from having children, but in some ways it was even more profound,*

*because this is me. It was a part of me that was obviously lost” (Trans. p. 13)*

Caroline wanted to face up to the reality of where she had come no matter what she found. When asked what the most beneficial thing about reunion was, she replied,

*“Oh, I think just in finding myself, yeah, and being able to acknowledge myself for who I am and find my own power. So I’ve really grown. Since I’ve met my mother I’ve really grown.... And I think that baggage of being there and having to be this person that wasn’t good enough, and had to do whatever everyone else did... The growth of me as a person and the reunion coincide. Taking those steps to find those, actually say I’m going to find her now... And it was that point and one day I got to see myself why I resisted doing it, cause I did have the information for a few years, four years before I did anything, was I got to that point to realise that if I don’t look I can’t be hurt. If I never find her I can live in this fantasy, you know, and once I got that in sight, well that’s silly” (Trans. p.6).*

Peter said that psychological growth was the most important way to reach a deeper level in the reunion relationship.

*“I don’t think that you get to this point in time without having umm, just cruising along. You don’t, you’ve got to*

*do some work, and you've got to have a look at yourself and umm, see things in context I think, I have done that over the years, and mum.... A lot of people, umm, umm, profess to have good relationships with their natural mothers, which is fantastic, but they're still very superficial and, they don't really get to that next level, and it's a hard level to get to" (Trans. p.10).*

Belinda was not expecting that anything external to herself could be a cure for her feeling of "differentness" as a result of her adoption separation.

.

*"I think that feeling of being different is just there, because it doesn't change the fact that you were adopted. That you were relinquished, you know like no matter what the reasons were"(Trans. p. 9).*

Some adoptees reported that traumatic feelings came and went repeatedly over their life span. Their stories were characterised by deep feelings pertaining to separation and the increase in their awareness of how adoption had affected them. They were not only looking for medical information, genetic connection, and belonging, but more globally for a way to make sense of their lives overall and to work through their feelings and a willingness to confront the complex nature of the reunion relationships.

### *Discussion of Motivations for Searching*

The present study supported Andersons' (1989) theory that adoptees can be grouped according to their ascribed models of motivations of search; as 'adventure' and 'as therapy,' and that they mostly ascribe to more than one model but one is usually predominant. The 'search as adventure' model where the wish was to recapture the relationship as though there hadn't been a separation. This type of motivation did not translate well into practice because the realities from the past could not be avoided forever. The reunion was ultimately a reminder of the past for both the adoptees and the birth mothers.

Most adoptees ascribed to the 'medical model' of search as therapy and stated they were searching for medical history. Some were also searching for identity, similarity, and genetic connection. In this view they hoped that something external would provide a 'cure.' This model required minimal psychological change and happiness was reliant on finding favourable information and welcoming from birth relatives.

Whilst many adoptees reported experiencing psychological trauma, in terms of motivations for searching only a few initially indicated psychological growth as their primary motivation for searching. In this view any search is 'successful' because it is not what is found by searching that is viewed as important, but rather that they underwent the process of searching, from which emerged psychological growth and acceptance that resolution would not be complete. In this view the adoptees need to 'get something out, rather than to take something in.'

## Chapter 5

### The Reunion Relationship and deeper motivations for searching

#### *Roles Adopted in Reunion*

In this chapter I will explore how the adoptee participants defined their reunion relationship roles, and I will also explore deeper motivations for reunion. These deeper motivations were revealed in the descriptions of the reunion scenarios and what emerged as important after they had entered the reunion relationship.

I asked the participants what kind of roles they had with their birth mothers in their reunion relationship e.g. whether they were friends, acquaintances, or whether it was a mother and daughter type relationship? The relationships were described in a variety of ways. Laura said that no word exists to accurately define it and Susan said that she had her own word “intimate strangers.”

Laura said,

*“I’d say its, I don’t think it even fits in any of those categories. I think its just unique, just not like any other relationship you have in your life, its not like the relationship I had with my adoptive mother, its not like the one I had with any of my friends its just what it is, its just this unique relationship. It defies any sort of description beyond that” (Trans. p.11).*

Susan said,

*“Intimate strangers’ is the term I use. Cos she is a stranger and so is my father... But when they’re not there and you’re not there and then suddenly years later you come together, you don’t know each other.... Its tough stuff to negotiate, it really is...There’s no template... Like what do you wear? I was panicking, what was I going to wear when you meet your mother for the first time?... You are flying by the seat of your pants!” (Trans. p.11).*

Susan and Anna pointed out that there is no defined or socially expected model or template of behaviour for the unique circumstances of this type of relationship.

Anna liked it when the relationship resembled the mother-child type model but wanted to maintain loyalty to her adoptive mother.

Anna said,

*“Well it’s kind of hard to know how you think it’s gonna go because there’s no model for what happens when you meet your birth mother... She hasn’t been there in my childhood, but I still have very strong emotions about her, you know. There’s certainly, as I said a very special bond there, umm, and, I kind of almost like it when she occasionally bosses me around (laugh), cause I sort of think well that’s more the mother-daughter thing than the friend thing.... I sort of feel that I want to call Betty something more special, than Betty, but I’ve never, I don’t feel like I can call her ‘mum’, because I want ‘mum’ to be reserved for mum” (Trans. p. 28).*

Both Veronica and her birth mother did not want a mother- child model and she had also stated that she didn't want to get close to her birth mother because her birth mother sometimes was resentful of her.

Veronica said,

*“Well, after she met me, after six months it was fine – we were great friends, great, we sort of became great friends, and umm, err, I don't know... It was like sisters that's how I would describe it, she was like a sister, not a mother, and that suited me fine. I didn't want her to be like my adoptive mother, and she didn't want to be like my adoptive Mother, and that suited me, cause phew, that took the heat out of the pressure, yeah”* (Trans. p. 11).

Due to the past history, Fiona thought it would be an oversimplification to use the term 'friendship' for the reunion.

*“It's just going to be like girlfriends going away for a weekend together.’ And I remember saying to my aunt that we need to talk to Emma because that's not what it's going to be like and to think that's what it's going to be like, will probably be ... an over-simplification ”* (Trans. p. 5).

Gary had reported searching because other people thought he should and he was interested to know his medical information. However, some years after

meeting his birth mother he spoke of wanting to share in the caring role for her as she became elderly because he regarded her as his ‘mum.’

*“Well we’ll have to do our share and have her down for a few months, or a year or two, or whatever it takes and then she can go and stay with someone else, cause it’s part of the family duty. But I don’t feel like, put upon. I think it’s just something that you do for your mother.....So, you wouldn’t do that for a stranger, you know. It’s something you do for your mum” (Trans. p 17).*

Peter has worked hard establishing deep ties with his birth mother and his birth family for about 20 years. He said that he has a mother-son relationship.

Peter said,

*“Yes, it’s a mother-son relationship, certainly. But we are friends. As we got older, there was definitely a mother son relationship. I feel that. It’s not like we’re only friends. I’m one of a number of children and because I have brother and sister relationships with my siblings that mum has, I’m just one of the children and hence my relationship with my mother is a mother- child relationship” (Trans. p.11).*

#### *Discussion of the Roles Adopted in Reunion*

Some adoptee participants noted that no word existed to define the roles taken on in reunion and there was no template to follow in order to determine how one

is expected to behave in a relationship of this nature. The present study overlapped with the findings of Foulstone, Feeney, & Passmore (2006) who noted that the most common definition of the reunion relationship was as 'a relative in general but not mother-child in particular.' Although this was not directly stated it appeared to characterise the lack of adequate terminology available for the participants who typically had felt more for their birth mothers than 'friendship' but who had grown up with another mother. However, unlike the findings of Foulstone, Feeney, & Passmore, some participants defined their reunion relationship as a 'mother-child relationship' and none used the term 'acquaintance.' Overall, the relationships appeared to comprise a special bond.

#### *Deeper Motivations for Reunion*

In the previous chapter motivations for reunion were explored and it was revealed that the most commonly cited reasons for searching pertained to medical information and identity. In order to ascertain whether deeper motivations existed (other than psychological growth), I explored what was important to the adoptees about their reunions and their relationships with their birth mothers; deeper reasons for searching and previously unrecognised motivations were revealed. These included a search for genetic continuity and belonging based on genetic similarity. Interestingly, in contrast to what many of them had stated as initial motivations for searching, the relationship with their birth mothers and birth families seemed to be most important to them, along with a sense of belonging in the context of these relationships.

It is understandable that some adoptees reported predominantly to search for information, because for some, until they met their birth mothers they did not realise how strong the similarities and connection to her was. If their birth mothers would not meet them or discontinued the relationship they established connections with other family members. Richard's birth mother wouldn't meet him however he met his birth father as part of his initially stated search for family history.

Richard said,

*“Not knowing my family tree I found very frustrating; I was annoyed with him for not knowing it. My whole point was where did I come from, where in the world, where have the families come from which I think gives people a sense of identity, a sense of belonging, for me its not about getting to personally know the family, I don't want to be part of their lives as such but, to have a sense of where the family has come from. To feel part of the family but not be the family or with them. Just to be in the time line and not stuck out here and now its all starting from me but that there is stuff behind me”*  
(Trans. p.3).

Richard hadn't realised that he would feel a deeper connection to his birth father when he met him. He wasn't prepared for the genetic similarities that they shared.

*“ I was going to meet him that evening and I sat at the bar early, wondering if people were him. I went up and saw him and I thought “Jesus, spitting image of me but 20 years later or whatever. Um, so I hadn’t thought, I knew about the resemblance but I had no idea just how strong the physical attributes, the character and things like that would be until I saw him. It was a bit hesitant in that sort of stuff” (Trans. p.2).*

Gary had remained emotionally disconnected from his adoption experience; he seemed to emotionally distance himself and viewed searching as it as an intellectual exercise,

*“So it was an interesting intellectual exercise, the umm, the chase if you like, so I was quite fascinated by that, but without thinking what would she look like?” (Trans. p. 12).*

Before reunion, Gary had been “in denial” about being adopted. He thought of his adoptive mother as his real and only mother.

*“I never got the real meaning of it until I met my mother. As I say, I never thought of her as being a person. As even existing... I suppose that’s denial, that might be the word for it. I refuse to believe that I’m not their real child... Well I met mum (birth mother) 16 years ago. And then I also noticed*

*physical similarities and ways of talking and doing things and I thought, golly, she is my real mum “*  
(Trans. p 5).

Belinda was found by her birth mother as a teenager and had never thought about searching. In reunion she slowly started to feel a deeper connection to her birth mother especially as she noticed the genetic similarities.

Belinda said

*“We are very alike, like I look and friends of mine that have known me for a long time that have met her, say I am very alike in looks... So I certainly see, oh my God that’s what I’m going to be looking like when I’m in my 60’s and mannerisms.... There’s not a great deal of difference in what we believe in or think. We are really compatible... So its been a really positive, really positive thing.... Um, you know, the genetic side of it, really able to connect that up, you know, definitely, and yer,, to sort of see there is a lot of genetics from her to me and there’s still stuff that comes out and I think I do carry a lot of her things... I sit and it’s like a mirror sometimes”* (Trans. p. 7).

For other adoptees the wish for connection and similarity was more conscious from the beginning. Susan had stated that she had wanted to know “Who my kin are” (Trans. p. 7). In reunion, although it didn’t work

out with her birth mother, it meant a lot to Susan that she was similar to her birth father, half- sisters and cousins; she felt a sense of belonging and an acceptance of who she was.

*“She (half-sister) walked in and I thought it was my double and we just looked at each other and laughed, it was fantastic. That’s been a real big bonus for me, and temperamentally we just click, and I did with my father.... Cos its within families you know, because I feel very comfortable with those woman” (Trans. p. 10)... And that’s something I always feel...the eternal vigilance thing, being the chameleon and how do I behave in this situation and what behaviour is required of me now... But with these people I feel so much at home, it’s very interesting” (Trans. p. 10).*

Susan described a feeling of relief in the connectedness she felt when she was able to see herself physically and temperamentally reflected.

*“Like my grandmother, like my father when I met him, he said “I had doubts about you until I saw you and you just reminded me of my mother.” And I’ve seen a photo of her and she’s got the same um, she didn’t have wrinkles, she had folds and I’m getting them now. I’ve got a photo, a close up of my grandma.... I’m going to age the same way that she did.... I had a photograph of a family reunion and*

*you could see bits of me right through the photograph” (Trans. p.11).*

Fiona was thrilled about the similarities between her and her birth mother,

*“Umm, when I first wrote... I also did a list of, I don't know, some 10 irrelevant things about me – you know, favourite colour, favourite flower, favourite food, favourite music... and Emma sent one back and they were almost identical” (Trans. p 15)... I think when I met my aunt, she said “ I'd cry if you were exactly like Emma, but you're not”. And I've gone, “Oh, Ok.” And she said, “But actually the more I look at you” and I was waving my hands, and she grabbed them, and said “Oh my God, that's Emma's arm, you know that's Emma's skin.... Umm, but when we finally fessed up to who I was to my cousin, she said “I knew six months ago who you were.” She said, “You look like her and you talk like her and you say things just like aunty Emma” (Trans. p. 16).*

Veronica struggled with her birth mother's ambivalence towards her. She felt connected to her birth parents because of their shared birth history and genetics, but she wished that she didn't.

*“ She was a very cold in a lot of ways, very cold and that sort of made me feel a bit that I never want to get close to her, so I really didn't, I suppose I didn't, because she just, that was sort of different to*

*me... I belong here, but you don't really want me, so why should I want you, but then again you've all got each other as blood family, so then, I'm on my own if I can't be accepted by you. So it's a real tug of war, and you go through that your whole life, because I don't particularly want to have to feel wanted to any of them, or connected to any of them, but because of being born to them, I am. But if I could not be born to them, then I would have chosen to be my adopted parents child, but it doesn't work that way" (Trans. p. 9).*

Like many of the other adoptees' Veronica had always felt different, unacceptable for who she was and disconnected. Veronica's reunion with her birth siblings seemed to bring to the surface deep seated insecurities about not feeling connected anywhere. She thought this deep need for connection and belonging was part of the inherent nature of being adopted, disconnected from her birth mother, as well as the dynamics in her adoptive family.

*"It was just more than I could handle. It was sort of like I just froze and I haven't been able to unclench since. You know, it was just too, I can remember getting off the plane, and I thought, 'They'll think I've got Parkinson's disease,' I was just shaking so much, I couldn't stop shaking"*  
(Trans. p. 25)

Rodney's birth mother met him once but would not keep in contact after that. Rodney's reunion seemed to consolidate his identity; he struggled all his life with feeling different and not affirmed for his artistic talent and interest. Although it seemed fleeting, reunion was the first time that he ever felt a connection to anyone.

*“I felt respected for my own philosophies because they gelled with hers (birth mother) because of what she said would resonate with the passions and tastes of my uncles, I got that sense of acceptance of my philosophies and tastes. I certainly gained that”*  
(Trans. p. 8).

Peter was searching for the missing pieces of his identity. In addition he was searching for a sense of emotional connection and belonging with genetic relatives who were more likely to be similar to him than would non-genetic/adoptive relatives.

Peter said,

*“I'm very much like mum (birth mother) and I'm very much like some of my brothers in the way we think and deal with things.... Certainly my experience was finally finding people a little bit like yourself rather than your adoptive family who were all very nice, but they weren't like you. They didn't think like you. Umm, they were all very different.... Well it helps you cement your own identity. You go through, as an adopted person you go through life, umm, having your adopted identity... So there is so much more to*

*what I perceive to be my identity, than, you know, just my adopted family and just growing up... My parents were lovely people, but, we didn't connect on an emotional level, ever, and don't now... It's all very superficial, because, you know, they are just on a different wave length, completely to me" (Trans. p.10).*

Peter had worked hard over two decades to be just like anyone else in his birth family; he had managed to successfully negotiate having two families despite growing up 'as if born to' one and being separated from the other for 19 years.

#### *The Importance of Reunion Relationships for Adoptees*

In addition to needing medical information and consolidating their identities, deeper reasons for searching had emerged that were related to similarity in the context of genetic continuity and belonging. Similar to the findings of Sachdev (1992) and Lifton (1994), the present study found that many adoptees initially presented their motivation for searching as needing information but if one scratched the surface, underneath were complex layers of the human needs related to belonging, connection/disconnection, loss, and genetic bewilderment and the need to feel part of a genetic continuum.

The gathering of birth history information related to a deeper need for connection. In addition to this, the present study extended on past research and found that the relational aspect of the reunion was ultimately the most important aspect. This was revealed in the reunion narratives as the adoptee participants mostly described a search for emotional connection with their birth mothers, the

profound importance of the bonds in these relationships, the feelings of loss that were inherent in the relationships as a result of separation, or the devastating effects of feeling disconnected or having the birth mothers cease contact with them. Other birth family members were also deemed profoundly important, however those relationships were not reported to be as emotionally fraught as the relationships with the birth mothers for whom the adoptees had sought out first. Their relationships and relational belonging and connectedness were emphasised as most important as the adoptees spoke of what the reunions meant to them.

Fiona's birth mother had ceased contact with her two years ago after being in reunion with her for one and a half years. Fiona's birth mother had been 'pack raped' and this was how Fiona was conceived. Although this was painful to know, the impact her conception could have on her acceptance in the family seemed more important to her than the information of the rape itself. Fiona searched for her birth mother and initially spoke to her birth aunty. Fiona feared that she would be rejected again because of the way she was conceived.

*“Cause I was waiting for you to tell me to fuck off really.  
Umm, you know, in that that wouldn't have surprised me.  
It must happen to lots of people, but the uniqueness of my  
conception umm, it wouldn't have helped (Trans. p 4).*

Whilst the rape seemed to impact on her sense of self, this seemed intensified by being rejected by her birth mother. For Fiona, her

conception by rape ultimately meant disconnection from her birth mother and her birth family.

*“And (teary) I’m not an evil child.... People say it’s her loss but it’s not, it’s everybody’s (emotional).”* (Trans. p. 24)

For some of the adoptee participants, reunion was important for them in order to be able to come to terms with the separation that had occurred so early in their lives. Some had experienced on-going intense feelings that they attributed to this separation, even those that had reported having wonderful adoptive parents. Peter had not initially been aware of this but reported that it became an important emotionally traumatic aspect to work through in his reunion relationship.

Laura had been conscious that the wounds of separation needed resolving even before beginning her search, this was particularly salient when she had her own babies. Laura was disappointed that her birth mother did not look like her and could not emotionally connect with her as she acutely felt the need to resolve the experience of abandonment she had had early in her life.

Laura said,

*“I appreciated because I had become a mother myself, how powerful that connection is between mother and child, pregnancy, birth, attachment, breast feeding. Even though it had been so brief I knew how powerful it was. And it seemed incongruence that I was meeting her as an adult, but I was trying to reconnect with her after having that relationship severed so early in my life. It was, you know, a huge challenge trying to make sense of all that”* (Trans. p.8).

For some adoptees, the reunion relationship ultimately meant dealing with loss that had been previously denied. Anna seemed to struggle to accept her own and other adoptees' expressions of loss. Early on in the interview Anna expressed that adoption had never been an issue and she seemed proud that she “Never had any emotional baggage,” “Was not an adopted waif,” and “I wore adoption as a badge of honour” (Trans. p.2). Anna seemed to perceive being emotionally overwhelmed by adoption issues as not “normal” behaviour. Anna reported that she had never wanted to search because she did not want to hurt her adoptive parents and she had eventually searched for medical information to help explain her daughter's physical problems. However, an hour into the interview, when talking about the reunion and the birth mother that she now thought of every day, and wanted to call ‘mum,’ she asked if I could turn the tape off as she wept. Although she'd had a positive adoption and reunion, there was a loss there and the reunion brought the loss full circle to be dealt with. This loss appeared to have

been previously been split off from her awareness and she struggled in the present to accept its existence, she only seemed to want to feel how she had been told to feel by her parents “adoption is joyful.”

Anna said,

*“I don’t know why I’m crying. I guess it’s an emotional subject, umm, yeah, it’s still affects me though, even though it’s good. It’s still... touched a raw nerve... that just talking about it is an emotional issue....because you are asking me specific questions about it, it’s just sort of just delving deeper ” (Trans. p. 17)*

Anna’s relationship with her birth mother was very important to her and they had a special bond.

*“Like the day we met each other, I wasn’t meeting a person that I’d met on the internet and chatted to for the last three months, and then “Hello how are you?” sort of thing, it was straight into the, “You are a very special part of me,” and I think that was for both of us. Umm, and just the hugs she gives me and the way she gives me a big pat on the back when she hugs me.... I would say she’s very important to me. And, but then, you know, I don’t want, I don’t want to tarnish the memory of my mother, who is still alive, but not able to communicate, umm, by you know (crying)” (Trans p. 14)*

*Discussion of the reunion Relationships and Deeper Motivations for Searching*

Overall, many of the adoptees initially reported that they were looking for medical information, identity, and some mentioned similarity. When talking about the reunion, none of the participants mentioned medical information. Factual information seemed to have less relevance for what the reunion ultimately meant to them than did the connections they had with their birth mothers and other birth family members. Exploration of their reunion experiences revealed that whilst reunion did help consolidate their identities, the search for identity also appeared to pertain to a concept of the self as part of a genetic family. The search for similarity pertained to a search for genetic connection and belonging and this was consistent with Sachdev's (1992) finding.

In addition the present study found that the relational connection was of primary importance as evidenced by being the focus of the stories and associated with their feelings of loss. Some adoptees had felt no connection to their birth mothers before meeting, however in reunion they discovered they felt a deep bond. Some adoptees had initially reported that they were searching for information. In the face of painful information, it was the way this information impacted on the relationship with the birth mother that seemed to be of salience and to have the greatest emotional impact. For many adoptees, feelings of loss emerged after meeting their birth mothers whether there was a good connection or not.

For those whose birth mothers had ceased contact, psychological integration of adoption meant also incorporating a second rejection, they

now had a mental representation of what was lost, some expressed grief and health problems and it appeared to be an on-going journey that was difficult to resolve. Others had similar difficulties within reunion relationships characterised by ambivalence and emotional disconnection within the relationship. Some had positive and at times challenging on-going relationships. Both parties to the reunion had to integrate their past experiences with their present. In addition, by meeting birth family members, they had increased integration of their adoption experience. It seemed that psychological growth, although at times painful, was inevitable from their search and reunion experiences and as part of achieving autonomy in their lives.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusions

The findings of the present study indicated that integrating adoption is a life-long process for adoptees. Similar to the conceptualisations of Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, (1992), and Penny, Borders, & Portnoy, (2007), the present study found that the adoptees moved through a series of stages. Most had been told of their adoption as children, however typically it was not mentioned again and the adoptees lived completely 'as if born to' their adoptive parents. Especially in childhood, their adoptions were characterised by secrecy and shame, there was no information available about their birth mothers, and they did not feel that they could ask about their origins.

Typically the adoptees did not have inner representations of their birth mothers as 'real' before obtaining concrete information and traces of their existence, such as a name or signature. Some did not seem to connect to the concept of their birth mothers as real until they met. The most likely explanation for this was the lack of information made available about their birth mothers in the closed adoption system, the secrecy surrounding their adoption, the need to be grateful to their adoptive parents, and shame associated with thinking or feeling anything in relation to their adoption and/ or birth mothers. The adoptees typically had grown up 'as if born to' their adoptive parents and many learnt to split off the part of themselves that was connected to their experience of adoption, while a few identified completely with their adoptive parents even into mid-life.

In addition to explaining the absence of inner mental representations of the birth mothers, the pervasive experience of secrecy and shame may also explain the superficial nature of the motivations for searching that were initially stated. Rather than specifically relating to the development of a relationship with their birth mothers, mostly the motivations for searching pertained more to the adoptees' own selves (identity and medical information) and a few stated broader but non-relational needs (similarity and genetic continuity). This made sense in the context of secrecy, the encouragement to identify with only the adoptive parents and to be 'no different' from non-adoptees. However, in reunion, the relationships and bonds with the birth mothers (whom many termed 'mum') were typically the most important aspects. Loss and sensitivity to rejection often surfacing as they connected to their birth mothers as 'real.'

Typically, adoption became integrated during search and reunion to varying degrees. A few adoptees had begun to integrate the meaning of their adoption before reunion and these adoptees were more likely to initially state reasons congruent with Anderson's (1989) 'psychological trauma' model. They were motivated to psychologically grow, and seemed compelled to 'face up to' rather than 'make up for' their adoption separation. They also tended to have experienced painful emotions and feelings pertaining to the loss of their birth mothers before reunion.

Other adoptees were completely surprised by the bonds they felt with their birth mothers in the reunions. Many also experienced considerable feelings of loss that became apparent in reunion, for some, this was triggered when the relationship

did not proceed as they had hoped or when their birth mothers ceased contact. For others, the feelings of loss surfaced even when the relationship went well. These feelings were perhaps triggered by the development of a full mental representation and the surfacing of intense emotions that had been previously repressed. This explanation matches that proposed by Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, (1992).

Although not asked, almost half of the adoptee participants experienced traumatic feelings that they attributed to resulting from the experience of separation from their birth mothers as babies. This indicated that Verrier's (1993) theory of the 'primal wound' was a relevant way for them to explain their intense feelings of abandonment, disconnection, grief and loss. It also was consistent with Miller-Havens (1990) findings that after the trauma of the original separation there can be a residue of affect that can be experienced later in life.

Also, inherent in the reunion experiences was the ability for the adoptees to consolidate their identities and many found this highly valuable. Irrespective of the ability to form positive or lasting connections with birth family members, most had at least some experience of similarity (some were astounded at the similarities), and this helped them gain a more solid sense of themselves. For most, the experience of being genetically mirrored, and also of seeing how they would most likely be as they got older was salient, and also the experience of being part of a genetic continuum and a sense of some type of belonging on that continuum.

There was the calibration of complex relationships, and the negotiations of belonging between two families, one of which there was no social template or model to follow. Also often the adoptees had to come to terms with secrecy, as for many, their existence had been kept secret and some birth mothers expected the adoptees to remain secret from their birth families. They also had to bear being the object that reflected their birth mothers pain; this pertained to the relinquishment and the past history between their birth mother and birth father. These issues had the most impact when they affected the relationship between the adoptees and their birth mothers.

In reunion, despite initially stated motivations for searching, many adoptees experienced psychological growth by way of integrating what having two mothers and two families meant to them as well as experiencing feelings of loss. Many, at times also experienced feelings along a continuum of trauma sometimes brought on by the reunion scenarios or by reunion itself. In the process of reunion, all the adoptees achieved autonomy and had achieved the task of psychological adjustment proposed by Rosenberg and Horner (1991), to realise that their birth families were just as real as their adoptive families. This paradigm contrasted with the overall trend in research that has proposed that adoptees who show 'no-difference' from non-adoptees and seem 'as if born to' their adoptive parents are 'well-adjusted' and 'successful.'

Interestingly, for the most part, those who had long, on-going relationships with their birth mothers dealt with loss and traumatic feelings and increased their self-awareness as characterised by Anderson's (1989) 'psychological trauma' model.

They seemed generally more at peace, most likely due to their acceptance that, as stated by Anderson, resolution would not be complete and that reunion comprises an active psychological growth process over a very long period of time, the goal being 'to get something out rather than to take something in.'

It could be concluded that, typically, the reunions resulted in psychological growth, integration of adoption and having two mothers (and two families). Despite the more superficial motivations initially stated for searching, in reunion the relational bonds with the birth mothers, as well as connection to birth relatives was the most important aspects for the adoptees. The reunion also provided the consolidation of identity and some type of sense of genetic belonging. Typically, the search process, and reunion (irrespective of the reunion outcome), also resulted in the integration of previously buried feelings of loss. In addition, the present study found that the actual original experience of the separation of the adoptees from their birth mothers was something that was meaningful to some of them in explaining their feelings of loss, trauma, abandonment, and difficulties connecting to other people.

#### *Limitations of the Study*

There was some sampling bias in the present study because nine out of the twelve participants were members of Vanish (a search and support group) and this indicated that they had required some level of support with either the process of searching and/or reunion. However, the sampling bias was largely overcome by the variety of experiences within the adoptee sample. Some reported very positive

experiences of adoption and reunion, some reported negative experiences, and most reported a mixture of positive, and negative or challenging experiences regarding their adoptions and their reunions.

### *Implications and Recommendations of the Study*

Based on the findings of the present study, recommendations for working with adoptees have been made. Rather than adhering to the framework that only a subset of adoptees are 'affected,' it may be more beneficial to adopt the framework that adoptees can be placed along a continuum of integration, with those grappling with loss and intense feelings taking an important step towards integration, autonomy and psychological growth. Those seemingly 'unaffected' may have come to terms with adoption, however without at least searching and developing inner mental representations of their birth mothers, this is unlikely to have occurred on an emotional level.

Validation and normalising, rather than pathologising or minimising from psychologists, will be more helpful for adoptees grappling with intense feelings, as would using strategies that can help them to cope with the pain and to learn to self-soothe. Although exciting, beginning a reunion (as well as later in reunion) can be an emotionally intense time when previously repressed losses may especially be apparent. Reassurance of the normality of these emotions, and validating and understanding the importance of the birth mother and the conflicts in loyalties that may emerge as a result of having two mothers would be helpful. Adopted clients may need support navigating a relationship that has no socially

defined template in which to follow. In addition, it may be very effective to work on issues within the transference and therapeutic relationship such as attachment, trust, connection, fears of abandonment and rejection, and acceptance for revealing and discovering the 'true self.'

The findings have parallel implications for also understanding donor-conceived people. As mentioned at the beginning of this study, similar issues have been found to have emerged for donor conceived people. Information about the issues for adopted people and donor-conceived people could be made available to help support donor conceived people who are searching for their biological parent(s). Outcomes of research on the relational loss in offspring with no knowledge of their biological parents could be conducted and made available for gamete donors and recipients so that they can make more informed choices about producing offspring that are likely to be confronted with these issues. Informing couples using fertility treatments involving a donor, as well as adoption, will help prepare them for what they may encounter, understand that searching pertains to universal human needs and is not a rejection of them, they may also be able to offer emotional support if from the outset they are aware of the issues their children face.

In addition, given that many participants in the present study attributed their traumatic feelings and difficulties connecting to people to the actual experience of separation from their birth mothers, this should be given consideration in the practice of surrogacy. Research pertaining to stress in infants separated from their birth mothers, and the reports of adults who were separated needs to be conducted

and made available. This was not an aim of the present study but it emerged as a factor, future research on adoptees also could enable the exploration of this in more depth in order to add understanding in the field of adoption as well as in other fertility practices such as surrogacy.

## References

- Anderson, R. (1988). Why adoptees search: Motives and more. *Child Welfare Journal, LXVII*, 17-19.
- Anderson, R. (1989). The nature of adoptee search: Adventure, cure, or growth? *Child Welfare Journal, 68*, 623-632.
- Armstrong, S. (2000). *Loss issues in adoption*. New South Wales: Post Adoption Resource Centre.
- Axness, M. W. (1998). Affirming the adoptees reality: A way to intimacy.  
[http://www.naturalchild.com/guest/marcy\\_axness.html](http://www.naturalchild.com/guest/marcy_axness.html)
- Berryman, S. (1998). Submission to the parliamentary enquiry into adoption practices 1950-1998. New South Wales: Post Adoption Resource Centre
- Borders, L., Black, L., & Paisley, K. (1998). Are adopted children and their parents at greater risk for negative outcomes? *Family Relations, 47*, 237-241
- Brodinsky, D.M., Schechter, M.D., & Henig, R.M. (1992). *Being adopted: The lifelong search for self*. New York, Anchor Books.

Brodinsky, D.M., & Steiger, C. (2001). Prevalence of adoptees among special education populations. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 484-489

Cole, C. (2008). *Releasing the past: Mothers' stories of their stolen babies*. Sydney. Sasko Veljanov.

Clothier, F. (1943). The psychology of the adopted child, *Mental Hygiene* 27, 222-226.

Cubito, D.S., & Brandon, K.O. (2000) Psychological adjustment in adult adoptees: Assessment of distress, depression, and anger. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 70, 403-413.

Deeg, C. (2002). Issues of psychoanalytic technique with adoptees. *Journal of Social Distress and Homelessness*. 11, 2

Delaney, D. (2000). *Adoption: Identifying barriers to change*. The 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Adoption Conference. Australia.

Leedy, P.D., & Ormrod, J.E. (2001). *Practical research: Planning and design* (7<sup>th</sup> ed.). Merrill Prentice-Hall: Upper Saddle River.

- Leon, I. (2002). Adoption losses: Naturally occurring or socially constructed?  
*Child Development, 73*, 652-663
- Lifton, B.J. (1978). *Lost and found the adoption experience*. The Dial Press, New York.
- Lifton, B.J. (1994). *Journey of the adopted self*. New York, Basic Books
- Lincoln, Y.S., & Cuba, C.A. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage
- Feeney, J. (2005). Attachment and perceived rejection: Findings from hurt feelings and the adoption experience. *E-Journal of Applied Psychology: Social Section, 1*, 41-49
- Fisher, S.M. (2001). Discussion of Siegel and Siegel's "adoption and the enduring fantasy of an idealized other". *Progress in Self-Psychology, 17*, 149-156.
- Foulstone, A.R., Feeney, J., & Passmore, N.L. (2006). *Adoptees' relationship experiences post-reunion: Exploring the effects of interactions with biological relatives*. Proceedings of the APS Psychology of Relationships Interest Group 6<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference, 49-55

- Freundlich, M. (2002). Adoption research: An assessment of empirical contributions to the advancement of adoption practice. *Journal of Social Distress and Homelessness, 11*, 143-162.
- Jacobs, W. (2003). *Supporting people separated by adoption*. Paper presented at the 1<sup>st</sup> Conference on Mental Health of Persons Affected by Family Separation. Melbourne. Australia.
- Jones, A. (1997), Issues relevant to therapy with adoptees, *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, and Training, 34*, 64-68.
- Kelley, S. (2000). *Family futures: Issues in research and policy* 7th Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference.
- Kirk, D., (1964). *Shared fate: A theory of adoption and mental health*. New York, The Free Press of Glencoe.
- Miller-Havens, S. (1990). Grief and the birth origin fantasies of adopted women. In D. Klass (Ed.). *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*. Taylor and Francis.

- Passmore, N. (2007). *Helping adults who were adopted as children*. Keynote presented at Adoption Connections Training Institute: One World Neighbourhood 3<sup>rd</sup> International Conference on Post Adoption Services.
- Penny, J.L., Borders, D., & Portnoy, F. (2007). Reconstruction of adoption issues: delineation of five phases among adult adoptees. *Journal of Counselling and Development*, 85, 30-42.
- Robinson, E. (2000). *Adoption and loss, the hidden grief*. Clova Publications. South Australia Robinson
- Robinson, E. (2004). *Adoption and recovery, solving the mystery of reunion*. Clova Publications. South Australia
- Rose, J (2001). *Ethics and donor conception: From a 'bundle of joy' to a person of sorrow*. Unpublished Honours Thesis, University of Queensland
- Rosenberg, E.B., & Horner, T.M. (1991). Birthparent romances and identity formation in adopted children. *American Orthopsychiatric Association*. 61, 70-77.
- Sachdev, P. (1992). Adoption reunion and after: A study of the search process and experience of adoptees. *Child Welfare; Vol 71, Issue 1*, 53-68

- Sharma, A.R., Mc Gue, M.K., & Benson, P.L. (1998). The psychological adjustment of United States adopted adolescents and their nonadopted siblings. *Child Development, 69*, 791-802.
- Schechter, M.D., & Bertocci (1990). The meaning of the search. In D. Brodzinsky & M. Schechter (Ed.). *The Psychology of Adoption*. New York. Oxford University Press.
- Triseliotis, J., (1973), *In search of origins*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Zamostny, K., O'Brien, K., Baden, A. & Wiley. (2003). The practice of adoption: History, trends, and social context. *The Counselling Psychologist, 31,6*, 651-678
- Vanish. (2008), *History of adoption*. Retrieved September 10<sup>th</sup> 2008, from [www.vanish.org.au](http://www.vanish.org.au)
- Verrier, N. (1993). *The primal wound: Understanding the adopted child*. Baltimore: Gateway Press.
- Verrier, N. (2003). *Coming home to self: The adopted child grows up*. Baltimore: Gateway Press.

## Appendix A

### **STUDY ON ADOPTEES AND REUNION: SEEKING ADULT ADOPTEES WHO HAVE SEARCHED FOR THEIR NATURAL MOTHERS**

A 4th year psychology student seeks participants for a study.

The participants need to be adult adopted people who have searched for their natural mothers.

There is a limited amount of research in Victoria and Australia on reunion. The study will examine “down the track issues” and contribute to knowledge about the complexities and psychology of adoption and the meaning of reunion for adoptees. The study will involve a private, confidential interview of about an hour in which you will have the opportunity to tell your adoption story. The focus will be on discussion about what you may have wondered about growing up as an adopted person, and also about the reunion process and what its’ meaning has been for you on different levels.

The interviews will be conducted at Swinburne Psychology Clinic in Hawthorn, preferably during June and July.

For more information you can contact Sue Rogers 0407871184

## Appendix B

### Interview Protocol

I would like to raw a Genogramme of your adoptive and biological families

1 Tell me your adoption story

2 Do you know the approximate waiting period between being relinquished and being taken home by your adoptive mother?

3 Why did your adoptive parents decide to adopt a baby?

2 At what age were you told of your adoption? Do you recall the conversation about it at the time? What was said?

3 What was your reaction to being told?

5 When you were growing up, if you felt that you wanted to discuss anything about your adoption, whom could you discuss it with?

6 When you were growing up how important was it to know that you were adopted? How did this knowledge and experience affect the way you felt growing up?

#### *Motivations for search and reunion*

\*1 What sorts of things motivated you to search for your natural mother?

2How did you go about searching and how long did it take?

3 Was there anything in particular happening in your life that contributed to you going ahead with the search when you did?

4 What did you hope to gain by the reunion with your natural mother?

5 Did you have initial fears when you were deciding to search? What were the fears?

#### *Fantasies before reunion*

1 What is your earliest memory of wondering or imagining something about your natural mother? What did you imagine or think about in relation to her?

2 Did anything trigger the thoughts and images that you had about her?

3 Have you felt any feelings along with the thoughts and images about her?

4 Have the thoughts and images about your natural mother changed over time or have they remained stable? In what way, (if they have changed?)

5 In the days before the reunion what were your thoughts and feelings? What did you think your natural mother would be like?

*Whether expectations were met or unmet and the response to this*

1 Tell me about the first meeting with your natural mother. What happened? Who was there? How was it organized?

2 How did subsequent meetings compare to the first meeting?

3 Was your natural mother the way you expected she would be as a person for example her interests, values, talents, looks?

4 In what way has she been similar and different to you?

5 Has her behaviour towards you been what you thought it would be, and in what way?

6 Is there currently anything that you wish was different about your natural mother?

7 During the reunion process did you become aware of emotional needs that you had in relation to your natural mother? If yes, what were they?

8 In what way has the relationship progressed or not progressed as you thought it would?

\*9 What has it been like for you to meet the real person as opposed to what you had imagined?

\*10 If things went differently to how you hoped, what effect has it has on you? In what way have you managed this?

\*11 What has been the most beneficial thing about the reunion for you?

\*12 Has there been anything detrimental about the reunion for you? If so, what has this been?

*Feelings*

1 What kinds of thoughts and emotions have you experienced about your natural mother since meeting her?

\*2 In what way have feelings and emotions impacted on your life since reunion? How have you coped with these?

3 Have you experienced different feelings after reunion as compared to before?

4 Have emotions associated with your adoption-separation been constant over the course of your life? Do they come and go, or have they varied and have they changed over time?

\*5 Would you say that the emotions have been more intense or less intense after reunion as compared to before reunion?

6 Did you experience any adoption related loss when you were a child, if so how was this shown?

*Belonging in reunion*

1 What has it been like having two mothers?

2 In relation to your natural mother, describe the kind of role that you both take on in the relationship, for example, are you friends, acquaintances, or is it a mother and daughter/ son type relationship?

3 Is it difficult to navigate between two families? How do you manage it?

4 Now that you have contact with two mothers/ families, how have you managed special holidays like x-mas, birthdays e.t.c?

5 Has your sense of belonging to a family changed since reunion?

6 Has your relationship with your natural mother affected or impacted on your relationship with your adoptive mother?

*Psychological defences*

1 Are you aware of any time in your life when you were blocking your feelings and issues about adoption? If so, in what way did you do this?

2 Why do you think some adoptees don't search?

*Support*

1 Have you had any supports available to you since meeting your natural mother? If so, who have you been able to discuss it with and in what way have they been helpful?

2 How easy or difficult is it to discuss your adoption and reunion issues with your adoptive parents?