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THE TIES THAT BIND
An exploratory study into the relationships in open
adoption

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I have come to discover that adoption impacts on many people. It seems everyone I speak to has a story to share of their experience be it directly or indirectly. There are two conflicting emotions often fought to the fore. Pain and Joy. There are many narratives behind these emotions. I feel blessed that I was able to hear a portion of these

Mā te Atua me te wāhi ngaro tātou e tiaki e manaaki.

ABSTRACT

After 30 years of using closed stranger adoption practices, a societal shift in adoption protocols has evolved where open adoption has become the preferred adoption practice. One of the implications to come from open adoption is a new type of parental relationship where there is the possibility of two parental bodies (birth parent and adopted parent) being involved in an adopted child's life.

This differs from the socially constructed 'norm' of a family unit, where the parent – child relationship is dyadic. Because this newly evolved triadic relationship is not strongly role-modelled in society, a new set of rules and norms has needed to be constructed by the adoption triad as they negotiate and define their family unit.

This qualitative research employed a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experience of those involved in an open adoption. Three adoptive parents, three birthparents and three adoptees were interviewed with the purpose of exploring the dynamics in their open adoption relationships.

Through these interviews the research reveals insights into how triadic relationships of the participants are maintained, highlighting the rewards and challenges of this type of family relationship.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This research is driven by the desire to explore the experiences of those in triadic¹ adoption relationships and explores the triadic relationships involved in an open style adoption in Aotearoa New Zealand. Open adoption is defined by Ryburn (1994, p. 3) as “the planned and conscious maintenance of links between those who are adopted and their original family networks.” This form of adoption differs from that which is often referred to as closed or confidential adoption in which there is neither contact with, nor information shared with the birth family.

The primary aim of this research was to explore how each part of the open adoption triangle adapts to the adoption status of their family and how the relationships are developed and maintained. The secondary objectives that enable me to explore this research aim look at exploring the notion of family and parenthood; how those who are adopted integrate their biological and adoptive families; and the participant’s perceptions of the role of the social worker. In order to achieve this, a phenomenological approach was adopted. Phenomenology is a research method used to explore the lived experience of the research participants.

This chapter will cover the following:

- My Story, highlighting the researchers own interest in the study of adoption
- Social Construction of Family
- Thesis Outline
- Language of adoption
- Current Adoption Practices
- Significance of the Research.

¹ Triadic is a term that refers to the three way relationship involved in adoption namely the adoptee, parents and birthparents.

1.2 My Story

My own interest in adoptions developed when, as a teenager, I discovered that I had an older brother whom had been adopted out before I was born. He had been adopted under the “closed adoption” system so there was no allowable contact with him until he turned 19. More latterly, as adults, we have developed a sibling-like relationship, however I feel a sense of loss in that I could have had a relationship with him throughout my younger years had he been able to be adopted under an open adoption system.

This quite personal experience sparked a deep-seated interest in the subject of adoptions and I cherished the opportunity to work as a social worker in the Adoptions section of Child, Youth and Family. My role there was twofold. One was with the Adult Adoption Information Section where I was handling enquiries and facilitating reunifications. The other role was to facilitate current adoptions, working with both the birth mothers and the adoptive applicants (those wishing to adopt a child). Most of my work involved working with the adoptive applicants.

What had the greatest influence on me was witnessing the depths of feelings of turmoil in many of these applicants in open adoption situations. My sense was that a closed adoption would have been less painful and a preferred option, as the applicants would have a child that was ‘exclusively’ theirs. Some expressed hesitation, but felt they had to go along with an open adoption in order to be selected by a birth mother. Some of the concerns raised were around parenting roles, the confusion for the child, and the feeling that ongoing contact would remind them that the child was not “theirs”. While I found these quite natural responses, I became curious as to how, or indeed whether, these concerns were ever resolved over time.

Equally I became curious about the role of the birthparents in open adoption and how the experience is for them. If the argument for open adoption is that having a closed adoption was too distressing and often traumatic for birthmothers, did having an open adoption minimise that distress and trauma? What of those who had been adopted? How did they integrate their biological and adoptive status?

I realised that the practice of adoption challenges perceptions and ideologies about what constitutes a family, moreover, what constitutes parenthood? How is parenthood socially

constructed? Is it defined by blood-ties or is parenthood deemed by the law? In the case of open adoption, all of these constructs are at the forefront.

1.3 Social Construction of Family

Crotty (1998) stated “Social construction emphasises the hold our culture has on us: it shapes the way we see things (even the way we feel things!) and gives us a different view of the world” (p. 58). Furthermore, triadic relationships frustrate the social construction of family in that it acknowledges that the family is not the “typical” family. There are now two parental relationships: the legal parents and the biological parents.

Within the conceptual social construction of family, there is an assumed notion of children being the possession of the parents (Giddens, 1997). The terminology used in the Adoption Act (1955) reflects this notion where it stipulates that once an adoption order has been made:

The adopted child shall be deemed to become the adoptive child of the adoptive parent, and the adoptive parent shall be deemed to become the parent of the child, as if the child had been born to that parent in lawful wedlock

Moreover it goes on to declare that “the adopted child shall be deemed to cease to be the child of his existing parents” (p. 23).

One of the main criticisms about closed style adoptions is that there is ongoing distress for the birth mother after placing the child for adoption (Townsend, 2003). Does this suggest that there is also a biological ‘ownership’ that does not go away once the child is adopted? How then might this manifest in an adoption arrangement where there is contact between the birth mother and her child?

Exploration of these questions formed the basis of this thesis study.

1.4 Thesis Outline

This thesis is presented in eight chapters.

Chapter One introduces the scope of the research by providing a rationale for the research, documents its focus, and introduces the reader to background information which is the scaffold of information used in later chapters

Chapter Two outlines the existing literature from other researchers relevant to this study, namely issues impacting on open adoption from the view of the adoptive parents, birthparents and adoptee; and defining family.

In Chapter Three the research methodology and processes are outlined. The use of phenomenology as a methodological approach is discussed and justified and the research participants introduced.

Chapters Four, Five and Six presents the data shared from interviews with adoptive parents, birthparents and adoptees; the focus is on their experiences and their interpretations of what it is like being in an adoption situation. The outline of these chapters is guided by themes explored during semi-structured interviews.

Chapter Seven explores and integrates the data from previous chapters to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the factors impacting on relationships involved in open adoption.

In the final chapter, Chapter Eight, the study provides a summary of key findings and conclusions are drawn, including insights for professionals working in the field of adoptions.

1.5 The language of adoption

In contemplating the terminology to be used in this thesis, I have been strongly guided by the Positive Adoption Language (PAL) movement (Johnston, 2004). PAL offers terms to name those involved in the adoption triangle and also seeks to reframe traditionally terms often used in adoption.²

I have struggled to find a suitable phrase to refer to the couple that adopted the child. In the eyes of the law (and the child) they are the “parents” and to refer to them as the ‘adoptive parents’ might seem to minimise their role. However, most academic literature

² For example the term “gave a child up for adoption” is reframed to “relinquished a child”.

and PAL have a strong preference to use the term ‘adoptive parent’ to differentiate from the birthparent(s) and in order to be consistent with the dominant adoption literature, I choose to use the term ‘adoptive parent’ in this study.

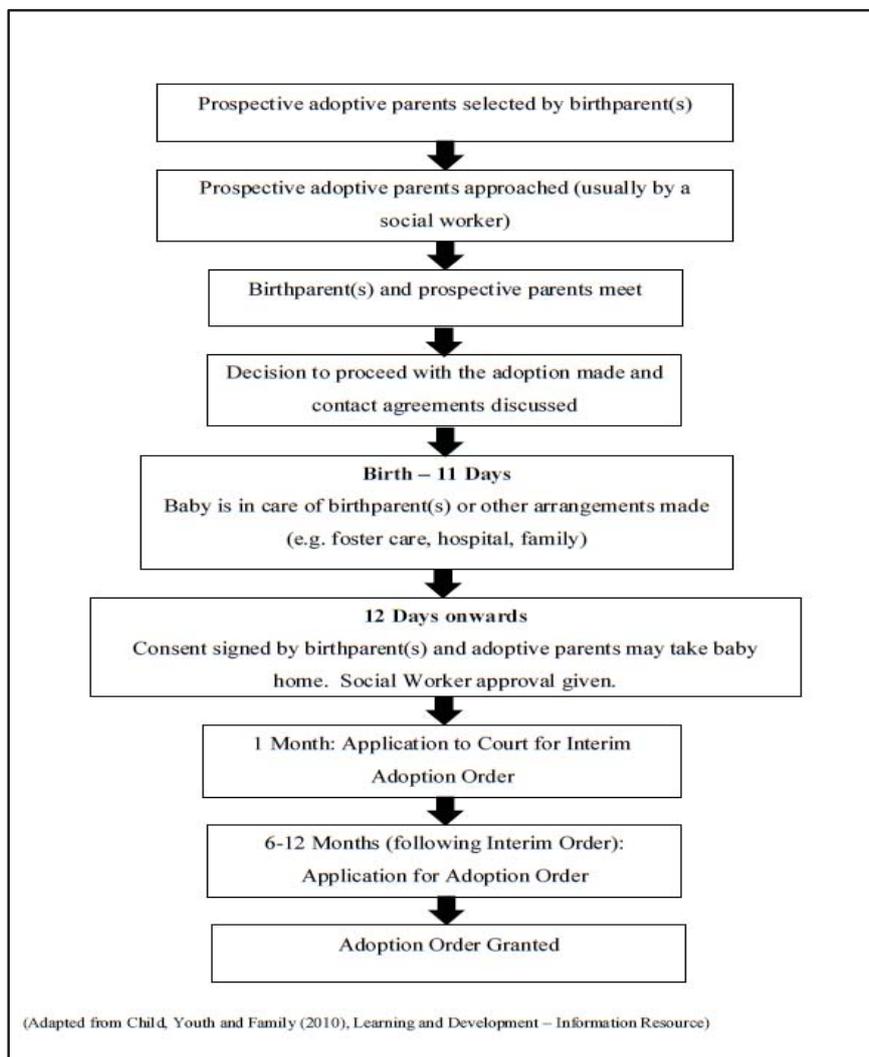
In published literature there are also many terms for the parents who relinquished the child; natural parents, real parents, birth parents. The terms ‘natural and real’ in some way imply that the parents (who adopted the child) are not natural or real and this sends a confusing message. Because of this, I have chosen the term ‘birthparents’ to be used.

Throughout the course of this research, the term ‘birthmother and birthparent’ will be used interchangeably. Again ‘birthmother’ is used predominantly in literature about adoption due to a perceived lack of involvement from the birthfather in many cases. For most of the adoptions discussed in this research involvement from the birthfather also reflects this, in that involvement has been primarily with the birthmother. However, there is a birthfather actively involved in this study and out of respect to his involvement, the term ‘birthparent’ will be used unless information is specifically relevant to the ‘birthmother’.

1.6 Current Adoption Process

The history of adoption practice and some of the historical issues surrounding those practices in New Zealand will be discussed in the subsequent chapter. At this point it would be useful to provide a brief overview of the current adoption process as elements of this is referred to by the participants (namely the parents and birthparents).

New Zealand Adoption Process³



1.7 Significance of the research

Since the introduction of open adoption practice globally in the 1980's there has been a considerable volume of writing that has emerged, however there has been no recent research done in Aotearoa New Zealand that explores the nature of, and people's experience of, triadic relationships of open adoption. In particular there is no local study that gives attention to the voice of adopted children in open adoption.

³ This process refers to the steps taken if the adoption is facilitated through Child, Youth and Family. Prior to the first step outlined here, the prospective adoptive parents would have previously meet with a social worker, attended a two day workshop and completed a profile book that is shown to birthparent(s)

Fowler (1995) and Hoddle (1998), both showed that the role of the social worker plays a significant part towards feelings and anxieties experienced by the adoptive parent and birth mothers surrounding open adoption. They state that by developing a deeper understanding of the dynamics and complexities of triadic relationships, social workers in the field of adoption may be able to communicate this more effectively with birth mothers and prospective adoption applicants. An important outcome of this current research might be the opportunity to alter and hopefully enrich the current training programmes that are offered to social workers and upgrade information supplied to adoptive applicants by adoption social workers.

1.8 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the foundation and rationale for this study and has revealed the researcher's personal involvement with adoption. The structure for the thesis has also been presented. The next chapter will be a review of literature that is pertinent to this study.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

"There are a hundred different varieties of grape-from white to black, sweet to sour, from small to large. But if you press a hundred bunches of grapes of different varieties, the juice is always wine. And it's the juice that counts-in everything." (Minuchin, 1971, p. 16)

2.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces a large volume and diverse range of literature pertinent to this study on adoption. What was evident in the search for literature is the lack of recent literature on open adoption in Aotearoa New Zealand.

In order to source literature a number of search engines were used either on-line or through the Massey University library site; the sites used were Google Scholar, Scopus, and Science Web. These particular sites were used partially because of their availability through Massey University and because they have been identified as being quite substantial databases for literature across a range of disciplines. While searching these sites key words such as "triadic relationships" "open adoption" "family" "social identity" were used to locate relevant literature.

It was difficult to locate literature that specifically related to "how" triadic relationships in open adoption are maintained. In phenomenological research, the purpose of the literature review is to give the researcher a notion of what to explore (Moustakas, 1994). With this in mind, this review of literature focussed on questioning what the impacts and implications of an open adoption are for each part of the adoption triad, and what contributes to and/or hinders a successful relationship in open adoption family groups.

Triseliotis, Shireman and Hundleby (1997) refer to the term open adoption as an umbrella term that covers a range of openness in adoption and stresses that openness is not the same as access. The phrase 'open adoption' ranges in meaning from the sharing of information through to ongoing contact between the birthparent and child (Avery, 1998;

Neil, 2009; Townsend, 2003). Interpretation of openness depends on the parties' attitude towards openness. Apparent openness in adoption may in fact be closed if the adopters feel resentful or forced and openness in adoption may in fact be more about attitude rather than practicalities (Triseliotis et al. 1997).

This chapter is broken into four sections. The history of adoption in Aotearoa New Zealand and the evolution of the adoption story to current adoption practices will be explored. This sets the scene of the struggles and concerns raised about closed adoptions that led to open adoption practices.

Next there is a focus on the implications of open adoption. Definitions of family and parenthood will be explored with intent to examine how adoption fits with these definitions as well as a review of literature that focuses on each section of the adoption triad. This is followed by an overview of triadic relationships and concludes with looking at some of the practice implications for practitioners.

One theme that became apparent in the literature is that the adoption experience has different key issues from each side of the adoption triangle. These differing perspectives will be examined, followed by a consideration of the nature of triadic relationship and contact in open adoption. This chapter will conclude by reviewing what can be highlighted from the literature as important areas for consideration by practitioners working in the field of adoption.

2.2 History of Adoption in Aotearoa New Zealand

Open adoption is not a modern concept, our global history is rich with accounts of adoption practices that date back as far as biblical times. Furthermore, open adoption is not a new practice in New Zealand where it has a rich history and indeed has come full circle. In early colonial days prior to the first adoption legislation, the New Zealand settlers practiced informal adoptions that were based on sharing of information and contact with the birthmother (Griffith, 1997). It was not uncommon during these times for the birthmother to live with the 'adoptive' parents or for the child to continue to carry the surname of their birthparent (Griffith, 1997; Gillard-Glass & England, 2002).

The first Adoption Act in New Zealand was passed in 1881. One of the aims of this act was to encourage people to take responsibility for abandoned or orphaned children, thereby relieving the State of this responsibility (Gillard-Glass & England, 2002; Rockel & Ryburn, 1988). There were no sanctions under this legislation to conceal the identity of the parties involved and common practice was for the adoptee to retain their birth surname hyphenated with their adoptive family surname (Griffith, 2000). It was not uncommon during this time for prospective adoptive couples to take in the unwed pregnant mother until the child was born (Gillard-Glass & England, 2002).

There was a shift towards the end of the 1940's that saw the introduction of confidential adoptions. There were three fundamental reasons why this change occurred: to protect the child from the stigma of illegitimacy; to avert the social disapproval attached to pre-marital sex and bearing an illegitimate child; and to protect couples who could not bear children from the shame and embarrassment of infertility (Fowler, 1995; Gillard-Glass & England, 2002; Ryburn, 1994).

The new Adoption Act of 1955 reflected changes in attitudes and social values of this era. Under this legislation, birth parents were not able to access information about the child they relinquished; likewise, information was not made available about the birth parents to the adoptive parents and their child.

The underlying essence of the legislative change was based on the ideology of the "clean break theory". This theory maintains that a clean break would allow birth mothers to resume their lives and the adoption placement would be secure by protecting the adoptive parents from any possible intrusion from the birth mother (Rockel & Ryburn, 1988; Fowler, 1995).

During this post war period, the focus of the adoptions was on the new family relationships that were being created; however minimal attention was given to the long-term effects on the relationships that were being destroyed (Griffith, 1997).

A call for change to adoption practices came from adoptees and birth mothers who were dissatisfied with the process. The voice of the birth mothers contradicted the beliefs behind the 'clean break theory'. Birth mothers were speaking out about the pain they experienced and asserted that the child they placed for adoption was never forgotten. Many experienced stress over the 'not knowing' where their child was or how their child

was faring. Because of the secrecy that enshrouded the adoption, the grieving process was complex. Grieving could not be done publicly; in fact many were not given permission to grieve; it was expected that life would resume as normal (Griffith, 1997).

Adult adoptees began speaking out about their experiences, mainly around the uncertainty, sadness and anger that developed by not being able to access information about their origins and identity (Fowler, 1995).

Through the unsatisfied voices that were shared by those who experienced closed adoption the Adult Adoption Information Act (1985) was introduced (Gillard-Glass & England, 2002). This allowed adoptees and birth parents alike to access information about their child or parent, and opened the way for contact. Adoption practices also shifted from confidential adoption towards open adoption; however the Adoption Act (1955) has not reflected this change in practice highlighting the tension between legislation and practice.

It should be noted that in Aotearoa's own history, a form of open adoption (whangai) has been long practiced by Maori. Whangai⁴ within Maori society is defined by McRae and Nikora (2006) as being "the customary practice in which a child is raised by kin members other than their birth parents" (p. 1). The whangai child grows up knowing who their parents are, and in many cases are able to either move back to their parents or around other members in the whanau group (McRae & Nikora, 2006).

2.3 Implications of open adoption

As commented on in the Introduction Chapter, open adoption challenges notions of the 'traditional family'. At this point it would be beneficial to consider the implications of open adoption on the definitions of family and on each member of the adoption triangle including the stigma associated with adoption

⁴Despite Aotearoa New Zealand's own indigenous history of a form of open adoption, I chose not to include Maori experiences of whangai in this research. There remains much debate about the role of Pakeha involved in Maori research. Historically, research about Maori has tended to objectify and portray Maori negatively. Cram (1997) speaks about a shift in regards to research pertaining to Maori. She refers to a move away from doing research *on* Maori to doing research *for* Maori.

2.3.1 Definitions of family and parenthood

Adoption, in its attempt to construct a family can also frustrate the definition of family, more specifically the definition of parenthood. The literature identified is consistent in recognising that the definition of family is not necessarily confined to blood relationships, although as identified in Collins, Jordon and Coleman (2012, p. 24), “generally people think of the traditional family when referring to the nuclear family. Static definitions of the family have been limited to members related by blood (i.e. biological parents and children or legally sanctioned marriages)”. This definition however limits the changing nature of families in our society today to include (but not limited to) blended families, sole parent families, same sex couples, foster families and of course adopted families.

Common definitions of family generally tend to refer to a biological or legal relationship (CYF, 1989; Statistics NZ, 2006). The definition offered by the Vanier Institute of the Family (as cited in Collins, Jordon & Coleman, 2012, p. 26) encapsulates these aspects when they define family as;

Any combination of two or more persons who are bound together over time by ties of mutual consent, birth and/or adoption or placement and who, together, assume responsibilities for variant combinations of some of the following:

- Physical maintenance and care of group members.
- Addition of new members through procreation or adoption.
- Socialisation of children
- Social control of members
- Production, consumption, distribution of goods and services, and
- Affective nurturance – love.

In this sense, families are a social unit that are unified by blood; in addition to this families can be created through marriage, fostering and adoption. Sociological definitions of family also accept this definition but also refer to families as a social unit where an individual gains a sense of belonging and is socialised according to culture, beliefs and values (Matthewman, West-Newman & Curtis, 2013; Shaw, 2007). The current research explores the relationships in open adoption. One question that arises is how or indeed whether the adoptee’s birth family fit into the family. Are they acknowledged or

identified as family? According to the definitions that identify family through blood links, the birth family would fit this definition. In the case of ongoing contact, the birth parent is also included in the social unit of the family.

As discussed in Chapter One, the practice of adoption challenges perceptions and ideologies about what constitutes a family and how parenthood is socially constructed. Is it defined by blood-ties, is it defined by the roles taken, or is parenthood defined by the law? In open adoption where relationships continue, blood ties, social roles and legal relationships are all relevant.

While the literature consistently accepts legal relationships such as adoption and fostering as legitimate family types, the dominant social conceptualisation of family is a relationship that is bound by biological relationships⁵ and these biological relationships may be given greater priority over ‘social’ relationships (Golberg, Kinkler & Hines, 2011). This ideology contributes to the stigmatisation often felt by those in the adoption triangle.

2.3.2 *Stigma*

Miall (1987) in a study of stigma surrounding adoptive parents in America, reports that a number of adoptive mothers in particular felt that others saw their parenthood status as being less meaningful and their experiences less valid or authentic because of the missing biological connection. Others reported fears that their adopted child would not be accepted by the extended family as a legitimate family member.

Johnston (1996) writes of the preference for biological children and how medical advancement in reproductive technologies and the lengths that people go to in order to conceive emphasise this preference. The choice to adopt a child usually comes after a couple has been unsuccessful in conceiving children. Johnston argues that this inadvertently contributes to the stigma of adoption being a “second choice and second rate” parenting option (p. 9). In contrast Kline, Karel and Chatterjee (2006) highlight that this perception may not always be the case and draws attention to the positive media that adoption has been receiving due to high profile celebrities choosing to adopt. Kline,

⁵ Excluding marriage

Karel and Chatterjee (2006) further suggest that these cases may contribute to an acceptance of adoption.

Originally literature was sought that looked at the effect of adoption stigma on the adopted child and how this impacts on identity. What became apparent is that the stigmatisation of adoption impacts on each part of the triad in terms of their own identity. The stigma associated with the adoptive parents and birthparents has been discussed in previous sections of this chapter. The third part of the adoption triangle is the adoptee and despite changes in adoption practices it is suggested that the adoptee still faces challenges surrounding stigma. Smalls (2013) study posits that the adoptee may experience labelling and stereotyping because of their adoption status and claims that the effect of this stigma is under-estimated and under researched.

2.3.3 Adoptee

Local studies by Iwanek (1987) and Dominick (1988) were conducted in New Zealand shortly after the introduction of the change to adoption practices in 1985 (where open adoption was introduced as the preferred option), and had a strong focus on the adult's perspective of the open adoption. Because of the age of the adopted children at the time of the study it was difficult to capture their voices. Therefore, the discussion of risk for the adopted child is based on adult perception.

Chapman, Dorner, Silber and Winterberg (1987b, p. 4) identify that it is the adoptive children that have the most difficult tasks out of all members of the adoption triad, as they are the ones that need to be able to integrate both their "biological history with their adoption status". Part of being able to do this is in the two questions commonly arising for adoptees: "Who do I look like, and why was I given away?" (Gritter, 1997, p. 60). Open adoption readily gives the adoptee answers to these questions, and this eliminates some of the stress and anxiety that was found to be significant in those adopted under confidential adoption systems (Berry, 1991; Browning, 2006; Townsend, 2003).

One concern raised about open adoption is how will it impact on the adoptee's formation of identity (Kraft, Palombo, Woods, Mitchell & Schmidt, 1985) This argument is

contentious amongst authors and researchers of open adoption⁶ and Erikson's theory of identity formulation is commonly referenced. Erikson maintained that a person's identity is both historically and socially constructed (Fowler, 1995; Ryburn, 1994). In an open style adoption the adoptee, having access to the birth parent, allows for history to be shared including the circumstances and reasons for the adoption. If this information is available from an early age, there is more likelihood of acceptance and ownership of the life story of the adoptee, therefore enabling formation of their own constructed identity (Chapman et al. 1987a; Gillard-Glass & England, 2002; Gritter, 1997; Ryburn, 1994).

Schwartz (2012) contributes further to this by suggesting that a child's development and identity formation is influenced through both biological and interpersonal factors. One challenge facing adopted persons is to integrate their biological history with their adoption status thus creating their identity. Many indigenous cultures have traditionally (and currently) practiced a form of open adoption and are able to create and be open about their 'dual identity' (Smith & Logan, 2004). The notion of whangai where children are placed within their own family group⁷ is an example of this. Mead (1997) writes that it is important for Maori to know their whakapapa (genealogy), as this knowledge of who they are and where they come from, forms their identity.

Research conducted by Browning (2006) in New Zealand on post-reunion relationships (in the case of confidential adoptions), highlights the tension often felt by the adoptee in accommodating two mothers (adoptive mother and birth mother). However to date literature that shows how this may impact upon an adoptee in an open adoption has not been able to be located. Some subjective non-case specific literature (Chapman et al, 1987b; Ryburn, 1994), suggests that if relationships are maintained from the beginning of the adoption, the fear and tension of accommodating may be reduced. This stance however is disputed by Schwartz (2006, p. 78) who argues that contact with biological family can be "confusing and intrusive" particularly if the child is adopted as a new-born and has formed attachment with the adoptive parents.

The introduction of open adoption practice also raised concern about the impact the birth mother might make upon the attachment between the child and the adoptive parents. This

⁶ For example Ryburn (1994) and Fowler (1995).

⁷ Family group meaning extending family – hapu, iwi

has been widely disputed with some literature maintaining that a child is able to form attachments to multiple people. Ryburn (1994) argues that this view is an adult-centred approach, applying adult thinking to a child's situation. Gritter (1997) and Gillard-Glass and England (2002) explore this further and state that professionals and parents often under-estimate the ability of children to make sense of their family situation; they argue that children are likely to be able to understand the facts and the nature of the relationships around them.

2.3.4 *Birthmother/Birthparent*

Kraft et al. (1985) opine that the birthmother is unable to emotionally let go of her child and still considers the child to be hers, while Berry (1991) warns that a birthmother may form an unhealthy emotional reliance upon the adoptive parents and the child. This would suggest that despite a 'legal' relinquishing of the child, there still remains a sense of 'biological ownership' from the birth mother. Chapman et al. (1986) suggests that the grief felt by the birthmother is not just about the loss of the child, but also the loss of the parenting role. Gritter (1997) builds on this by emphasising that one challenge facing the birth parent is to show a genuine interest in the child's life without appearing to be parental.

As mentioned earlier, one of the main messages coming from birthmothers involved in closed adoptions is the ongoing grief endured. There is some divergence of opinion amongst commentators about how grief impacts upon the birthmother under open adoption. Cushman, Kalmuss and Namerow (1997) found that out of the birthmothers they interviewed, 84% experienced little or no grief and felt relief and at peace from being actively involved in the process of where their child was placed. McRoy (1988), Berry (1991), Gritter (1997) and Kraft et al. (1985) all acknowledge the inner conflict that can occur for birthparents in having contact with the adoptive family. While there may be relief and reassurance in seeing how the child is being raised, contact may still be distressing for the birth mother raising feelings of guilt, pain and grief (Berry, 1991; Kraft et al, 1985; McRoy, 1988; Gillard-Glass & England, 2002; Chapman et al, 1986). Gillard-Glass and England (2002) state that maintaining contact with the adoptive family will be

difficult if this grief for the birthmother is greater than they anticipated. It was however noted by these authors that this grief usually lessens as time progresses.

2.3.5 *Adoptive Parents*

Grief also presents as a reoccurring theme amongst the literature in regard to the adoptive parents. The grief for this part of the adoption triad is usually associated with infertility which is among the main reasons why couples choose to adopt (Chapman et al, 1987a; Gillard-Glass & England, 2002; Gritter, 1997; McRoy, 1988; Ryburn, 1994). Many adoptive parents interviewed felt that the grief, and experience of loss through not being able to have their own children, helped develop greater empathy for the loss experienced by both the adoptee and the birth parent (Chapman et al, 1987a; Gillard-Glass & England, 2002; McRoy, 1988). This grief and loss may not manifest until later in the adoption process. Triselotis et al (1997) argues that when the feelings of grief and loss do arise, that it is identified and addressed in order to maintain healthy relationships.

Studies conducted by Siegel (1993), McRoy et al. (1988) and Gross (1993) all showed high levels of satisfaction with open adoption arrangements among the adoptive parents interviewed. They demonstrate that the main benefit for the adoptive parents is having first hand, accurate information about the birth parents that could be shared with their child. McRoy et al. (1988) and Gross (1993) also found that having contact with the birth parent lessened fear and anxiety that their child will be abducted by the birth parent, and adoptive parents felt comforted that the birth parent could know where their child was and how he or she was coping with their life.

Some of the issues raised by adoptive parents about contact with the birthparent focused around the bonding with the child, the relationships with the birthmother and insecurities as their role as a parent. Siegal (1993), McRoy et al, (1988) and Fowler (1995) all found that the adoptive parents involved in their studies reported feeling insecure and lacking in confidence in their parenting roles when the birth mother was present. Siegal (1993) cited a case where the adoptive parent felt that having contact with the birth parent affected her ability to bond with the child as it reinforced the feelings about the child not being hers. Also, Fowler (1995) reported similar experiences, especially in the early stages of the adoption where the adoptive parents felt stress, were lacking in confidence and were

experiencing anxiety about coping with the pain of the birthmother. Siegal (1993) and McRoy's (1998) research found that despite these feelings, none of the participants in their study felt that open adoption was a mistake and further they revealed that these feelings usually decreased over time. The participants of these studies also stated that they experienced ongoing comfort in the relationships, however they highlight some difficulties and fears were still experienced.

Kirk's (1964) research expands on the internal dilemmas felt by adoptive parents. This research was conducted in the 1960s when adoption practices were primarily closed adoptions, however the dilemmas Kirk presents still seem to be relevant to adoptive couples today. Kirk (1964) identified four dilemmas:

First, enchantment versus disenchantment – the acknowledgment that the adoptive parents have a legal and social status that is different and distinguished from the birth parents. Second, Integration versus differentiation – the extent to which an adoptive parent acknowledges the adoption status by incorporating it into everyday life. Next, ignorance versus knowledge - whether adoptive parents acquire or share information about child's background or chose to forget or bury the information. Finally, reproductive morals versus principle of respect for individual personality – the ability to explain to their child the reason for their adoption without portraying negative judgments about the birth parents.

These four points raised by Kirk (1964) highlight the dilemma faced between accepting that, while adoption seeks to create the idea of a 'nuclear family', there is still difference and the role this acknowledgment and acceptance contributes to a successful open adoption

Research conducted by Raynor (1980) showed a level of dissatisfaction from adoptee's when a negative view of the birth parents was held and shared by the adoptive parents. This may lead to the adoptee feeling like their parents do not accept where they are from, therefore not accepting them.

2.4 Triadic Relationships

The nature of the relationships within the adoption triad is core to the effectiveness of the adoption. Gritter (1997) and Grotevant (2000) both compare the adoption triadic relationship to that of a marriage. Gritter (1997) writes that the best gift a child can receive is an effective marriage that has a foundation of respect, trust and communication. One of the most effective ways of ensuring that this relationship works is in establishing and maintaining boundaries. Paramount to this is clear communication, negotiating comfort zones for all parties involved, and a commitment to making the relationship work (Gritter, 1997; Mullender, 1991; Neil & Howe, 2004).

Neil and Howe (2004) stress the importance of communication in open adoption. They maintain that factual information should be shared with the child about their family history. They acknowledge that this is not always easy in cases where the child's conception is a result of rape or incest.

Studies completed by Raynor⁸ (1980) also identify the importance of communication. Raynor's research showed that adopted children reported a higher satisfaction rate of their adoption where they felt comfortable to ask questions about their birth family. This correlated with the ability of the adoptive parents to openly and honestly talk about the adoption.

It was emphasised in the literature that having a clear contract about contact and communication is the most effective way of ensuring boundaries are maintained (Dominick, 1988; Grotevant, 2000; Gritter, 1997; Iwanek, 1987; Mullender, 1991; Neil & Howe, 2004). These contracts could be written agreements that are discussed prior to the placement of the child (Duxbury, 2007; Etter, 2003). Ryburn (1994) suggests that these contracts need to be negotiated continually as the triadic relationship evolves. Interestingly, much of the research indicated that contact between the triadic parties decreased over time (Ryburn, 1994). The New Zealand Adoption Act (1955) as it is currently written still protects the principle of secrecy. Because open adoption arrangements are based on the "good will" of all parties involved, they are not legally

⁸ Participants in Raynor's (1980) study were adult adoptees who were adopted under closed adoptions.

binding and contact can be broken at any time, adding to feelings of uncertainty and grief (Iwanek, 1987; Fowler, 1995).

Kraft et al. (1985) acknowledge that it is difficult to conceptualise a triadic relationship in open adoption as there are no cultural patterns or modelling of open adoption relationships that can be followed and each family has to create a new model of how their relationship will work. As well as negotiations surrounding contact and boundaries, the role and name of the birthmother plays a part in this. In Fowler's research (1995), 43.6% of the birth mothers were seen as either a god-parent or a special friend, followed by 41% who were seen as a member of the extended family. Kraft et al also (1985) write about the roles or titles taken by the birthmother, including roles as god-mother, aunt, babysitter or sister. This again triggers the question: if renaming the relationship is not as simple as it seems, does the birthmother feel that she can fit into these new roles that have been created for her?

2.5 Implications for practitioner

So what of the practitioners that work in the area of adoptions and need to respond to the needs of the adoptive parents, birthparents and adoptees? Do these practitioners need to have a specialised skill set and knowledge? Rosenberg claims that while there are factors that are unique to each sector of the adoption triangle there are also common themes of "loss and anger, attachment and separation, and identities that involve paradoxical qualities" (1992, p. 146). Rosenberg warns that practitioners working with adoption need to have an understanding of these clinical issues. O'Shaughnessy (1994) legitimises this with his view that the practitioners have not seemed to have taken on board the feedback of adoption practices from the 1970s – 80s.⁹

Currently in New Zealand adoption rates are significantly lower and it is not uncommon for adoption social workers to be working with foster placements and permanency placements¹⁰. This practice has evolved as rates of adoption have decreased. More

⁹ From a personal perspective, working in the adoptions sector of Child, Youth and Family, I did not feel that I had a full understanding of these clinical issues. The role became very case management and no training was offered to work with these issues.

¹⁰ Foster placements and permanency placements are generally sought after for children who have been abused and/or neglected. While the child may be removed from the care of the parents (either temporarily or permanently), the child does not cease to be their child as is the case in adoption.

recently the training and information sessions that were offered to prospective adoptive parents is now combined with the training for foster parents with a greater emphasis being placed on the needs of children who have been removed from the care of their parents and placed into foster care.

2.6 Conclusion

There is a substantial amount of literature on open adoption but only a small amount is based on empirical research. One factor that became evident while reviewing the literature was that there is a dearth of current published research from New Zealand as shown in observing the published dates from local material used. It is widely acknowledged in the literature that New Zealand ‘paved the way’ in terms of open adoption practice, however much of the local research on open adoption was in response to the change in adoption practices.

Mentioned regularly in the literature is that no two adoptions are alike. While there are adoption-kinships that will form good relationships, open adoption may not necessarily result in good outcomes for everyone (Gillard-Glass & England, 2002).

Due to the complexities and relationships involved, open adoption may always have problematic elements, however the dominant view from the literature is that is the form of adoption that causes less harm to the members in the adoption triangle than the closed adoption practice (Ryburn, 1994; Gritter, 1997, Siegal, 1985). Perhaps quite a poignant statement comes from Siegal (1993) who states that the “true test of open adoption will come when adoptees who have been raised in confidential adoptions and various forms of open adoption can compare stories” (p. 21). Again this highlights the need to have the perspective of the adoptees reflected in the research.

This chapter has reviewed literature that investigated the history of adoption in New Zealand and the change of legislation that saw the closing of accessible information in adoptions. The implications of open adoption on the definitions of family and parenthood were examined as well as the implications on each member of the adoption triangle; including issues of stigma and grief. Finally consideration was given to the implications for the practitioners that work in the area of adoptions with the counsel to be aware of the specific needs and issues pertaining to adoptive families.

This study is to explore the dynamics in relationships in open adoption. The review of literature has provided a framework on which this exploratory research is based. It has shown the scope of the factors and issues pertaining to adoptive parents, birth parents and adoptees and introduced concepts and further raised questions that form the base of this thesis. The following chapter introduces the reader to the methodology of phenomenology adopted to conduct this study and outlines the research method utilised.

3. METHODOLOGY

A Constructionist Research Method: Phenomenology

3.1 Introduction

The overall goal and objectives of the thesis were outlined in Chapter One as follows:

To examine the experiences of those in open adoption relationships by exploring how each part of the open adoption triangle adapts to the adoption status of their family and how relationships are developed and maintained.

With the above in mind this chapter sets out the research methods used in the process of data collection and analysis. There are four sections.

First, the theoretical perspectives that underpin the research methods are discussed.

Second, the research design is outlined, including interviewing, the interview schedule, ethical considerations, participant selection and recruitment, and a profile of the participants.

Third, data collection procedures are described, including interviewing.

Finally, the process of data organisation and analysis are discussed, including issues in qualitative analysis and description of procedures

The primary goal of this research is to study the “lived-experience” of those involved in open adoption. To achieve this, semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine participants. This chapter presents the methods used in the research. The chapter is organized into four sections.

3.2 Methodology

This research is based on constructionist ontology (Constructionism). Constructionism maintains that there are multiple undiscovered social realities that exist and which are not discovered; rather they are constructed (Crotty, 1998; Koch, 1999). Crotty (1998: p. 43) concludes that we are designers and constructors of the meanings we place on our experiences and states that “meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting”.

With this in mind, to achieve the objectives of the study, this research aims to explore the participants’ realities of their constructed family, when their experience of family differs from the dominant socially-constructed view of family relationships. As discussed in Chapter Two, differences between the legal definitions of family and the dominant societal view of family have been identified in academic literature. The legal definition of family acknowledges both biological and legal status. While legal and social definition includes those who have been adopted as family, there is still the question as to whether there is more substance given to those who have biological ties.

For this research the intention was not to establish claims of success or failure in open adoption relationships, rather to try and capture the experiences of those involved in open adoption and explore the nature of the dynamics in their open adoption relationships. Phenomenology is one qualitative research method that offers the mechanism to capture these voices.

Phenomenology as a research method developed from the philosophical theories of German philosopher, Edmond Husserl¹¹. Husserl challenged the dominant scientific approach to research and maintained that a person’s experience is a valid source of knowledge.

As the name suggests, phenomenology is concerned with the study of phenomena. In this research, the phenomena will be the experience of open adoption and relationships of those within a triadic framework. The main premise of phenomenology is to understand and record the meaning of a person’s ‘lived-experience’ (Barker, Pistrang & Elliott, 1994). This ‘lived-experience’, as it appears to the participant’s consciousness, is defined

¹¹ Born 1859 – Died 1938

as ‘truth’ in phenomenological terms, “regardless of whether [its] underlying existence is proved real or their nature understood” (Barker, Pistrang & Elliott, 1994: p. 74).

Bridgman (2002, p.59) explains the three main assumptions influencing phenomenology:

- That perceived meaning is more important than so-called reality.
- That understanding is regarded as being the true end of science.
- That multiple, differing perspectives are equally valid and of interest for study.

To this end, the research looks to understand each individual’s perceptions and experiences of the open adoption relationships. Themes that arise from these conversations will be extrapolated in the data analysis process.

Since the emergence of Husserl’s philosophical writings, many other scholars have built on his ideas and further developed the concept of phenomenology (Creswell, 2000). While the common element in phenomenology is that of understanding the ‘lived-experience’, there is considerable divergence in philosophical arguments in relation to this. This has created a number of different theoretical and practical approaches to phenomenological research within the human sciences¹² (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

Describing phenomenological research, Keen (1975, p.41) maintains that “unlike other [qualitative and quantitative] methodologies, phenomenology cannot be reduced to a cookbook set of instructions. It is more an approach based on attitude, an investigative posture with a certain set of goals”. Because of this, it may be hazardous to the research for a researcher to apply its methods *carte blanche*. Creswell (2000) suggests that the phenomenological approach developed by Amedeo Giorgi¹³ is an approach best employed by the novice researcher. Giorgi was instrumental in developing a systemised method for phenomenological research that is empirically based (Wertz et al., 2011). Giorgi’s approach to phenomenology was here chosen as a research method partly because it has a systematic style and partly because its primary focus is the description of the participants ‘lived-experience’ and less on the researcher’s interpretations as is the case in other phenomenological approaches (see Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 2000).

¹² For example Hermeneutic Phenomenology; Interpretive Phenomenology

¹³ Empirical Transcendental Phenomenology or Psychological Phenomenology

Exploring the description of the participants 'lived-experience' of relationships in open adoption is the key focus of this research project.

In describing phenomenological research, Moustakas (1994) recognised that the research question "grows out of an intense interest in a particular problem or topic" (p. 104). Earlier in this research I revealed my own experience of adoption. From a positivist perspective, concerns would be raised about researcher objectivity in this case. Phenomenological research counteracts this concern by using a concept referred to as bracketing. Bracketing requires the researcher to acknowledge and explore their own experience, explanations, theories and preconceived thoughts about the research question, and then put this aside. Dermet (2002) explains bracketing by comparing it to that of being part of a jury. Just as a juror is expected to put aside any preconceived judgements about the trial, so too is the phenomenological researcher. Bracketing is an important function of phenomenological research and is emphasised throughout the research process (Crotty, 1998). Creswell (2000) posits that bracketing needs to occur so that "everything is perceived freshly as if for the first time" (p. 34). He also admits that unless the researcher acknowledges their own preconceived assumptions objectivity can be difficult to achieve. How bracketing was applied in this research will be discussed in the next section.

O'Leary (2010) writes that one of the values of phenomenology is that it provides the opportunity for a rich description of a person's experience. She then posits the question, "how much more insightful could initiatives or problem resolution strategies be if we had this level of understanding?" (p. 122). This is a question central to the purpose of this research. Are there lessons that can be learnt and/or myths that can be dispelled from hearing and recording the experiences of those involved in open adoption? And might these improve the way adoptions are viewed and handled in Aotearoa New Zealand? The material and experiences of the participants seeks to contribute to answering these questions.

3.3 Research Design

For this research it was planned to document the experiences of those involved in open adoption triads; those people being adoptive parents, adopted children and birth parents.

As it would not be possible (or realistic) to speak to a large population it was decided to interview at least three participants from each section of the triad (total of nine interviews) and discuss their open adoption experience and how the relationships were maintained. The participants were not from the same triadic group rather representatives of the different adoption groupings.

One of the benefits in interviewing those from each part of the adoption triangle is that it allows for a form of triangulation to occur in the data. In this case, triangulation is occurring through reporting of the experience for three differing perspectives (Arksey & Knight, 1999; Bloor, 1997; Holloway, 1997). Groenwald (2004: p. 11) showed that data triangulation in this sense can be used to “contrast the data and validate the data if it yields similar findings”. This then relies on a rich pool of material from the research interviews to provide enough data to contrast and validate. Boyd (2001) and Creswell (1988) both recommend in-depth interviews with between two-ten participants as being sufficient in phenomenological studies as this allows for a range and depth of information to be shared.

3.3.1 Participant Selection

Two approaches were used to recruit participants for this research. Firstly a ‘snowball sampling’ approach was employed, by asking colleagues¹⁴ for recommendations of people who may fit the criteria of the research project. Davidson and Tolich (2003) describe snowball sampling as an effective approach when it is difficult to locate members of a particular population, which is the case with adoption.

A number of participants in this research did recruit (or attempt to recruit) within their own networks. Because of time restrictions this approach was adapted such that recommendations from those who may have had some involvement with adoption (but were not research participants) could be included.

Firstly, participants were sought through the researchers own networks. In cases where this occurred, the researcher did not approach the participant directly rather the peer initiated first contact with an invitation to contact the researcher for further information.

¹⁴ Colleagues were approached at this point due to their wide range of networks

This was the method for four of the participants, two of whom requested that the researcher make contact with them.

The second approach was to advertise for participants; contact was made via email to the New Zealand Open Adoption Network (OPAN) and to the Adoption Option Trust. There was no success in recruiting from these sources.

A press release in a local Hawkes Bay newspaper, and a radio interview profiling the intended research was completed. This resulted in a number of people making contact and resulted in two participants taking part in the research.

A social media site (Facebook) played a role in participant recruitment. An advertisement was placed on the EIT Facebook page. From there, people were able to 'share' this advertisement with their own networks. This resulted in the recruitment of one participant.

Out of the nine participants (some of whom were participant groups)¹⁵, three made contact either as a response to advertising or through hearing about the intended research through other channels. The remaining six participants were initially approached by either another participant, or via personal networks (refer table 1).

¹⁵ Two of the interviews consisted of couples.

Table 1: Recruitment of Participants

Participant ID	Networks	Radio	Newspaper	Social Media
AP 1	✓			
AP 2	✓			
AP 3	✓			
BM 1	✓			
BM 2				✓
BF 1		✓		
A 1	✓			
A 2			✓	
A 3	✓			

3.3.2 Data Collection

Data was collected in semi-structured, face-to-face, in-depth interviews. The interviews took from one to two hours and were audio recorded. Each of the interviews took place in a mutually agreed location, which for eight of the participants was in their own home the other place in a hotel room.

Semi-structured interviewing is an effective method of exploring people's experiences (Flick, 2006). It is a somewhat flexible approach in that, while general research questions may be pre-formulated, there is an open framework available where the researcher is able to explore other factors that may arise (Schensul, Schensul & Le Compte, 1999). Creef (2002) emphasises that semi-structured interviews are especially suitable when the research issue is controversial and personal. While it can be argued that the issue of openness in adoption is controversial, it is none-the-less personal for those involved.

The primary purpose for choosing this approach was based on the awareness that there are gaps, as shown above, in knowledge and understanding of this topic; one aim of this study to address this void.

In phenomenology, the focus of the interview is to explore ‘what it feels like’ to experience a phenomenon. This cannot be effectively done through a structured interview. However, where there is the flexibility to further reflect upon and explore the meaning behind what is being said, a richer fuller account can be produced. The semi-structured interview not only provides this flexibility it also provides a less intrusive approach than a structured questionnaire which encourages reciprocal communication enabling easier discussion of more sensitive topics. It also allows for deeper responses on the part of the participant. Because the questioning tends to be open-ended, there is the opportunity to obtain both answers and the reasoning behind those answers (Creef, 2002).

3.3.3 Data Explication

In phenomenological research the term ‘data explication’ has supplanted the term ‘data analysis’. Groenewald (2004) warns that due to the nature of what ‘analysis’ implies, there is a risk of losing or diluting the authenticity of the phenomenon being examined. He states “the term usually means a ‘breaking into parts’ and therefore often means a loss of the whole phenomenon. Giorgi avoids this danger by using the term “explication”, which means an investigation of the constituents of a phenomenon while always keeping the context of the whole” (p. 300).

Hycner (1985) developed a five phase process of data explication for phenomenological research. The five phases are:

- 1. Bracketing and phenomenological reduction.*

Phenomenological reduction refers to a “deliberate and purposeful opening by the researcher to the phenomenon in its own right with its own meaning” (Groenewald, 2004, p. 18). This requires the researcher, to bracket his or her own pre-suppositions and experiences of adoption and avoid allowing one’s own interpretations from dominating the unique experience of the participants. Stewart and Mickunas (1990) advise that the researcher’s own pre-suppositions remain suspended until such time that it can be anchored on a more certain foundation. Hammersley (2000) and Groenewald (2000) argue

that those engaged in phenomenological research do so on the belief that the researcher cannot detach from their own knowledge and/or experiences and nor should they pretend to. But the responsibility of the researcher is to ensure that this does not cloud or influence the experiences of the participants.

In Chapter One, the researchers own experience of adoption was disclosed. For this study, bracketing meant the researcher refrained from comparing the experiences heard to her own experience and monitored her own thoughts and presumptions.

2. *Delineating units of meaning.*

This stage of data analysis requires the use of a certain amount of judgement (whilst holding an awareness of one's own subjective judgements) to extrapolate statements made in the interviews that appear to "illuminate" the phenomenon of the open adoption experience. There are a number of factors to consider in doing this; the literal meaning of what was stated, taking notice of reoccurrence of statements, and paying attention to non-verbal cues (Moustakas, 1994). This reveals any information that appears redundant and such data can be eliminated.

Hycner (1999) recommends the researcher listen to the digital recordings repeatedly to become familiar with the interview. By doing this one is able to achieve familiarity with the data and enables the researcher to become attuned to the nuances of the interviews. For this study the researcher listened to each recording no less than three times. As the researcher was also the transcriber, this allowed for her to become quite familiar with the data recordings. Following Hycner's (1985) recommendation each word, sentence and paragraph was examined by the researcher and meaning attached (refer table 2.)¹⁶

¹⁶ While this example is taken from interviews conducted for the purpose of this thesis, the style and layout follows that found in Hycner, R. (1985). *Some guidelines for the phenomenological analysis of interview data.* Human Studies 8:279 -303.

<i>Table 2.</i> Units of general meaning	
Umm yeah ¹ pretty difficult – yeah it was. ² There were a few other things going on like [family member] died in that week as well, around that time. ³ And so it was kind of like a real like pretty emotionally distraught sort of period. But yeah, ⁴ we as mother and father ended up going to their house one evening, just the two of us and [baby] and ⁵ leaving him then – or giving him over to them – yeah which was – I mean, I think it was a – ⁶ I know personally <i>I</i> managed – well ⁷ I felt I kept things together – so that things could proceed. ⁸ But I can't say I kept it together much longer after that point. ⁹ It's sort of like I held it together – so that other people didn't necessarily have to, ¹⁰ but it kind of felt like somebody had to.	¹ It was a difficult time ² Family member had also died that week ³ Was an emotionally distraught period ⁴ Birthparents went to adoptive parent's house with the baby. ⁵ Left the child there – gave him over to them ⁶ He personally managed (emphasised) ⁷ Felt he kept it together in order for things to proceed ⁸ Didn't keep it together much longer after that point. ⁹ He held it together so other people didn't have to. ¹⁰ Felt that somebody had to.

From there, each unit of general meaning is examined against the research question to ascertain whether the participant's response addresses or "illuminates" the research question (p. 284). Any statements that are identified as not being relevant to the phenomenon or research question are eliminated at this stage (refer table 2.) Any statements about which the researcher feels there may be ambiguity are marked with a question mark (such as in number four in Table 3.)¹⁷

¹⁷ While the examples used in this chapter are based on a specific part of the transcript, the actual transcripts went through this process in the context of the whole interview.

<i>Table 3.</i> Units of relevant meaning.
¹ It was a difficult time
³ Was an emotionally distraught period
²⁴ Birthparents went to adoptive parent's house with the baby.
⁵ Left the child there – gave him over to them
⁶ He personally managed (emphasised)
⁷ Felt he kept it together in order for things to proceed
⁸ Didn't keep it together much longer after that point.
⁹ He held it together so other people didn't have to.
¹⁰ Felt that somebody had to.

3. *Clustering of units of meaning to form themes.*

By examining the units drawn from the comments, themes can be identified by grouping together units of meaning (Moustakas, 1994). In this study the units of general meaning were examined and the statements that were relevant were extrapolated. From there, these were grouped into general themes. In keeping with the example given (tables 1 and 2), the main theme identified here is 'grief and loss experienced'.

Groenewald (2004) claims that using computer software for data analysis is not appropriate for phenomenological research because it is not an "algorithmic process" (p. 20). With this in mind, themes and units were grouped manually first by pen and paper and then summarised into a table on a Word document.

4. *Summarising each interview, validating it and where necessary modifying it.*

A summary of the interview that incorporates the themes was returned to the participants for a "validity check" to ensure that information and essence of the interview had been captured correctly. If necessary, modifications will be made. Each of the participants received a copy of their interview transcripts which they were able to make changes on.

5. *Extracting general and unique themes from all the interviews and making a composite summary.*

In this phase of the data analysis, the researcher is looking for both common themes, and individual variations amongst the interviews. As Groenewald states "the unique or

minority voices are important counterparts to bring out regarding the phenomenon researched” (2004, p. 21).

3.4 Ethical Research

Prior to beginning the participant recruitment, an application for ethics approval was submitted and approved through the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (MUHEC).¹⁸ The full application to MUHEC is attached as appendix 1. At this point reference is made to the principled ethical concerns arising from the research proposal.

3.4.1 Access to participants

One criteria that is essential for the research is that participants had to have had experienced the phenomena of being in an open adoption relationship. As this study explores the nature of open adoption relationships, it is important that there is a form of regular contact occurring between the birth mother and the adoptive family. The parameters around the contact are that it occurs/occurred a minimum of six monthly and involves person to person contact such as visits, or direct dialogue via phone calls.

3.4.2 Informed Consent

Before commencing the interviewing process, the participants were given an Information Sheet (appendix II) which outlined the research project, including the parameters of the interview process. It was explained to the participants that the interviews would be recorded and that they could ask for the interview to stop at any time. By the signing of the Consent Form prior to the interview each participant declared that they agreed to the interviews being recorded and understood that the recordings would be returned to them on request following the research study.

¹⁸ HEC: Southern B Application 12/36

3.4.3 *Confidentiality*

In order to protect confidentiality of each participant, the research did not involve participants from the same family group except for when the participants were a married couple as was the case for two of the adoptive parents interviewed.

Any identifiable information was omitted from the study and for confidentiality purposes participants were given identifiers such as BP1, AP1, A1. The rationale behind the use of identifiers rather than a pseudonym is because the adoption community is a fairly small population and this eliminates the risk of accidentally selecting a pseudonym that may match an actual person's identity within the community.

Data were stored on the researcher's personal computer. A digital voice recorder (which does not use a tape) was used. The recording was transferred to a computer for purpose of transcribing. This computer was password protected as were any other copies of the data stored elsewhere for security reasons.

Participants were sent a copy of their interview transcripts with the right to either change or withdraw any information they do not wish to be used as part of the study and a completed copy of this study was offered to the participants in digital form.

3.4.4 *Potential Harm to Participants*

Adoption can be quite a sensitive subject and the literature suggests that issues of grief and loss greatly impact on all those involved on the adoption triangle. Because of the nature of the research, participants are invited to relive their conscious experience of the phenomena. There is the remote potential this may trigger painful experiences or highlight unresolved grief.

Prior to the interviews, the participants were advised that they could decline to answer any questions, and if they found the questions too uncomfortable or distressful the interview could be stopped. The interview questions were designed to focus mostly on

the open adoption experience, however there were questions pertaining to background information that had the potential to cause some emotional upheaval. The participant was asked his or her preference as regards possible interruption or termination. The necessary skills were available to contain the immediate situation and deal with the feelings and emotions that might arise because of the author's own background in social work. However awareness of the role of the interviewer as a researcher not that of a therapeutic practitioner in the interview situation and the boundaries that exist in that role were thought paramount.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter has described phenomenology as the research methodology used to guide this project as well as the methods used to conduct the research and analyse the data. The following chapter will begin the data explicitation process beginning with the adoptive parents.

4. THE ADOPTIVE PARENTS

4.1 Introduction

The next three chapters summarise thematically the semi-structured interviews with the adoptive parents, birthparents and adoptees (in that order). The order of presentation is chronological, the adoptive parents and birthparents journey began before the child was born and this journey for the most part was done independently of the other. It was with the birth of the child and the subsequent adoption process that the ongoing relationship between the triad was established. The chapters pertaining to the adoptive parents and the birthparents will follow the theme of (1) Pre-Adoption; (2) Adoption Process and (3) Reflections.

The focus of this chapter is on the views of the adoptive parent's research participants regarding their lived experience of the relationships in their open adoption. This chapter will be broken into the three areas mentioned above.

The adoptive parents interviewed will be identified as either AP1, AP2, AP3.

4.2 Pre-Adoption

4.2.1 Definition of Family

For each of the couples interviewed, at least one, (if not both) of the couple had a broad definition or experience of family that made it easy to accept alternative forms of family.

One parent described her family of origin as a “*functional dysfunctional family*” where her own parents were divorced and remarried thereby extending the family unit. Another couple defined their family as ‘quite different’ before they adopted their child:

I think our family is modern ... we have a broad definition of family ... we have a lot of friends who we consider family ... so I think our family is organic and it needs to be flexible but I like that it's definitely different...

Most of [wife] family is in [city]. My extended family's all in [country] and when you're in that sort of situation you make a new plan ... so your friends become your family ... it's a really good ideal that neither of us are welded to the idea of a traditional family. We were never going to have that anyway but luckily before we adopted that wasn't something that I ever felt was the only way of being a family. (AP1)

[We] had talked about adoption prior to getting married and prior to finding out we were having fertility issues ... blended families was something we were keen to embrace and I guess we thought that it would come after having our own natural children. (AP2)

4.2.2 Decision to Adopt

Not being able to conceive naturally was the main motivator for adoption in all of the couples interviewed. All three couples had tried having their own biological children first through going through IVF treatments¹⁹ before exploring adoption as an option:

We sort of sat down and talked about it adoption and about what was important to us. Was it important to us to have a child with our genes or was it important to us to be parents, and decided it was important to us to be parents so adoption seemed like a really great option... (AP1)

We selected adoption after pursuing A LOT of different things ... pregnancy and miscarriage. We then did IVF which we did several times. (AP3)

¹⁹ One couple reported trying IVF for approximately one and a half years

This particular couple explored overseas adoption²⁰ before considering local adoption as they were unsure of success in being able to adopt a child in New Zealand:

Because we had done the whole overseas adoption thing, we decided to put our name in the New Zealand list. However our illusions of getting a child in New Zealand ... we were told we would probably NEVER get a child via adoption...(AP3)

4.2.3 Perceptions of open adoption

For two of the couples, it was the adoptive fathers²¹ (AF) who had most reservations about the adoption being open. One AF expressed his initial preference for an overseas adoption as it meant “*that there wasn’t likely to be another family interfering*”. He went on to state:

I was very worried initially about open adoption here because I didn’t like the fact of the thought of going off to work and [mother] being at home with the baby and having the [birth] family interfering ... yeah I took a little bit longer to come round to the concept that open adoption could work and would work. (AF3)

Another AF comments:

I think certainly when I went to the CYFS adoption seminars, I think as most people, you walk in thinking ‘I support closed adoption, I think it’s a good idea. But I’m going to go along with open adoption because that’s the way we’re going to be seen’. (AF1)

For both of these fathers, the catalyst for change came from information that was presented at the information seminars delivered by CYF. For one adoptive father, hearing the experience of someone whose adoption was closed, had quite an impact on his perception of open adoption:

²⁰ This involves going through a process of applying to adopt a child from another country

²¹ One adoptive father was not available for the interview so unable to comment on his perception

I think one of the things that swayed me was talking to a person that had been adopted and he said that even though it was a closed adoption, he knew [he was adopted]. No one had told him, but he knew he was different ... There was another adopted person under closed adoption who just said "I knew right from the start". I had always thought that if no-one had told you, how would you know? But it was something that they knew wasn't kosher or wasn't quite right. So I sort of came round to thinking that open adoption could work. (AF3)

Another father also spoke about his experience of the CYF seminars and the impact on his perception of open adoption:

Certainly when I went to the CYFs adoption seminars, I think as most people, you walk in thinking 'I support closed adoption, I think it's a really good idea but I'm going to go along with open adoption because that's the way we are going to be seen' and whatnot. And actually after a couple of days you just walk out going 'yeah, open [adoption] is very good' [laughs], you're not just paying lip service ... your minds totally changed. (AF1)

Again, for this father it was the experiences of others and case studies presented at the seminars that had the powerful impact on him:

Just the stories, you hear a lot of case studies of how [adoption] happened for people and how it's come about and seeing the agony in some cases ... so the CYFs seminars were certainly very good in that regard. (AF1)

All the adoptive mothers interviewed communicated how their preference from the beginning was for the adoption to be open and their wish for the birthparents to be involved in their children's lives:

You have to be at a certain stage in your head, that you are not just replacing a baby you can't have ... If you come into adoption at the wrong level, you haven't come to terms with the fact that you can't have a child of your own, then you view open adoption as threatening. Whereas we were at a level where to me it was like I wanted them to be involved and I wanted to know more about the history of the birthparents because that was important to me. (AP3)

I come from a big family and we always had cousins or someone staying with us so a big family was what I had in mind and it didn't really matter how that family came [or was] created ... maybe it is because I am Maori and I am used to living in a big communal family and whangai is normal ... (AP2)

This adoptive parent quoted above goes on to explain that going into the adoption process they were not particularly aware of the different forms of adoption (meaning open or closed) and shared their willingness to be adaptable to whatever shape the adoption takes:

Until we went to those [CYF] workshops, we didn't really know what closed or open or closed adoption meant, and we were totally open to either idea. We were completely like 'well if it's closed adoption for whatever reason, then we would accept that as well.' (AP2)

One of the mothers quoted above spoke about having to come to terms with the grief of not being able to conceive their own children and how important that is in the adoption process. These sentiments were echoed among all parents interviewed and they especially emphasised how going through the CYF process assisted them in dealing with and working through the reality and grief of infertility:

Prior to the IVF track we did the 1,2,3 stages of the workshops for adopting in New Zealand so we kind of put our heads into that space before we went down the IVF path. We started the IVF process and we did four rounds without any success and experienced the ups and downs of that; the hope, the dreams all that kind of thing come crashing down every time. I guess some of that was sort of resolved through the adoption workshops because you are pretty much confronted with why you are here and what it is that you want to do, and it's kind of making those real realisations that was a family what we wanted and was it coming through the traditional way? No it wasn't. So we had to deal with a lot of that kind of stuff as we went through the adoption process. (AP3)

The importance of the adoptive parent's profiles that are seen by the birthparent(s), was raised as a significant part of the preparation process and is crucial in the adoption process. Aspects such as being honest, the ability to sell themselves and the knowledge

and skill in constructing the profile were highlighted as important qualities needed in compiling their profiles:

You put a profile in and you know that has to be really honest because in that first meeting with her [birthmother], if we were different to how we had portrayed ourselves it was all going to just fall over right from the start. (AP3)

[We] spent a lot of time trying to [complete our portfolio] ... you know, you feel like you've sort of ... well you are advertising yourselves!! ... and so you feel like suddenly you need to be this sort of PR company marketing yourself and that was quite an interesting process you know, how do we write this profile and what do we put in it and what do we leave out? We were quite happy with our profile ... we really put ourselves into it. (AP1)

One adoptive parent interviewed spoke further about the process of compiling their profiles and the role this had in reconciling their own infertility issues:

So we put our profile in and looking back I realise that we put a lot of time and effort into that profile and I think that was the best thing we could have ever done [to] really process ourselves to bits and really start to break open all those sorts of issues that we had to deal with in terms of infertility and loss of hope, grief, not having your dreams fulfilled and so that was another process in itself, just putting together the profile. (AP2)

4.2.4 Pre-Adoption Anxiety

Each of the adoptive parents spoke about the anxiety felt after submitting their profiles and the waiting that followed. As highlighted earlier, all parents mentioned that they were under no illusion that their chances of being able to adopt were not high, yet this was not a deterrent for going through the adoption process and having that hope that they will be successful. Because there is no definite timeframe or even guarantee of success, the waiting period feels very long once the profile has been submitted:

.. and then you sort of wait for the phone to ring (laughs) and that didn't happen for [a long time] ... I guess in my knowledge of it since then I realise we were very

lucky because we adopted [child] about 14 months later which is fast in the big scheme of things, but it didn't feel fast ... and by that time I guess we'd been on the road of trying to have a child for so many years then. But it felt like forever. (AP1)

Because of the low expectation of being successful in the adoption pool, the other two couples moved on to other avenues; one began the process of looking at adopting from overseas and were about to leave to look at orphanages in Russia when they were informed that they were the preferred parents for one birthmother. Another adoptive mother states:

We put [the profile] in and you know, we had been told on average, I mean they could never ever give us any idea but on average it would be sort of around two years before anything would happen and I was [studying] so we went in and kind of really, to be honest, put it on the back burner and kind of got on with life and four weeks later we got the phone call. (AP2)

4.3 Adoption Process

4.3.1 Getting the "phone call"

Usually when a woman gets pregnant she has nine months to prepare for the birth and arrival of a child. There is much emotional and physical preparation and processing over this time. Because of the unpredictable nature of adoption, a couple adopting a child does not necessarily get this time to prepare. As all couples mentioned earlier, when entering the adoption pool they were all made aware that there was minimal chance of success so none of the couples had a nursery established in the off chance or hope that they were chosen to be parents. Getting the "phone call" was a pivotal moment for each of the couples as this phone call could be the call that changes their future and their family forever.

These calls occurred in different ways for each couple. One couple reported that they didn't adopt through 'normal channels' and in the end the adoption was not facilitated through CYF (despite their efforts to do so) rather via another professional who had a client that was pregnant and wanting to adopt out the child. A friend of the couple was

talking to this professional and the process began to be facilitated before the couple were even aware of the situation²².

One mother spoke about submitting their profile and then “*getting on with life and four weeks later we got the phone call.*” She goes on to express:

We got the phone call that a six pound baby had been born that day ... and that the birthmother had chosen us ... so we were a mum and dad from that day onward. They needed us to go into the office and basically decide whether this was what we wanted and that [baby] was ours. So of course it was a pretty sleepless night that night kind of going ‘WOAH’. We were absolutely blown away that 1) it had happened so soon, 2) that someone would even choose us and 3) that our entire life from that moment onwards was going to be completely different, and we just couldn’t wait! (AP2)

Another couple had a difficult choice to make as they were in the process of pursuing an international adoption when they got “*the call*”:

(AF) We then got a phone call that day, we didn’t know that we had actually been chosen [for an adoption] in New Zealand. And so we got a phone call from Social Welfare²³ to say “look you’ve been chosen, this is really irregular but you would lose your spot for Russia ... would you be prepared to do that and stay in New Zealand [and] maybe meet the birthmother?”

(AM) We could have lost both. We were thinking we could not go to Russia and not get a baby ... but then she might change her mind so we would end up with nothing. So it was a HUGE decision. (AP3)

Following the phone call is a period of waiting and anxiety for the couples as even though they have been selected there are no guarantees that the adoption will go ahead as there is a period of 12 days before the legal papers of the adoption can be signed by the birth parent(s). During this cooling-off time, the birthparents are able to change their mind

²² Because this was considered a private adoption from CYF there were some complications which will be discussed in a later section.

²³ Now known as CYF

about whether they proceed with the adoption. For the couple who did not have CYF involved in the adoption process, they were told that the birthmother had changed her mind about the adoption:

(AM)[Birthmother] had [child] and there was the normal process of [child] going to the foster carer for the cool of period and the [foster parents] turned up at the hospital and [birthmother] didn't like them and so she said "I'm taking him home". So the social worker who had been very peripherally involved rang up and said "it's off"

(AF) "The whole things off.. she had changed her mind and taken the baby home". We were devastated for just like two or three days ..

(AM) ... and just confused about what had happened ... and we knew that it had happened but you know we sort of hadn't had any indication that she was changing her mind or anything like that so we were just gutted and then in the end I rang the [professional] who had been the contact the whole way along between the families and said ... "what happened? I just kind of want to know" and he said "Oh no I haven't even been told that the baby's been born. Look I'll make a few phone calls and find out what's going on" and then he [rang back and] said "Oh no she is still intending to adopt to you, she just didn't like the caregiver..."

(AF) They are just bypassing the foster parents..

(AM) ...and they were just keeping [child] at home till [child] comes to you" ... it was quite a rollercoaster really. It was really a hard time obviously because we ended up getting [child] but it was horrific in terms of the emotions, the up and downs were pretty extreme really. (AP1)

It was over Christmas so we weren't able to get any of the papers signed ... so anyway it ended up being 17 days in total. A very emotional, frightful, scary, amazingly overwhelming ... every emotion possible time for us, for everyone. (AP2)

This same adoptive parent also reported about the stress of waiting after the phone call. She shared the following experience when going through the process of adopting their second child:

So we had ten days of terror and fright, fear and worry about whether it was all going to happen. The birthmother hasn't signed the papers and we couldn't do

anything, we weren't allowed to go and visit him or anything like that until she had signed off and we had to wait ten days. [There were] lots and lots of tears, lots of crying, lots of feeling very grateful and then like, it's so close but it's so far. (AP2)

Adding to this anxiety is meeting the birthparent(s) for the first time before the papers are signed. This is a chance for all parties to meet and begin the relationship forming process. It is also when, from the adoptive parent's perspective, the birthparents may change their mind about them and the adoption. The parents were asked about these first meetings and their feelings surrounding them.

AP1 (who had previously been told by a CYF social worker that the birthmother had changed her mind) were advised that the birthmother wanted to meet them and wanted them to meet the baby. For them this was a good opportunity to start forming a relationship and create common understanding with the birthparents and extended family:

We started visiting [child] then. On that day we found out they said "do you want to come around" so we were in the car in like two minutes flat and drove around there. We visited him every day after that until he came here ... it was amazing. And a good time really I think for both sides ... in terms of understanding each other and forming some connections and bonds and being in each other's homes helped to know where we were each coming from ... recognising the similarities and the differences, because we are quite different families really so I think it was quite an important time to learn about each other. It was still a bit nerve racking because we still had that fear that [birthmother] would change her mind. (AP1)

(AF) We met [birthmother] and we met her mother and got on like a house on fire. (AM) We got on really well, well WE thought we did. We weren't sure at first. We were thinking 'I wonder what she thinks of us' ... we were thinking the same. 'Well she seems nice, but it seems weird'. They are like these strangers but she is going to give her baby to you. I mean it's bizarre ... in a weird sort of way, but we sort of connected. (AP3)

As mentioned earlier, there is a period before the adoption papers can be signed. During this time, the birthparents are able to change their mind if they still want to proceed with the adoption. This fact weighed heavily on the adoptive parents as it prolonged the uncertainty felt since submitting their profiles. Some birthparents choose to look after their baby during this “holding” time which can add another dimension of anxiety for the adoptive parent:

(AM) And you feel terrible really because you're thinking all these crazy things like us thinking "oh I hope he's not [a good baby] because it'll be too easy and ...

(AF) She'll like him too much ...

(AM) And she'll want to keep him, and she won't want to, you know ... I mean isn't that terrible ...

(AF) ... but the fact that she had taken him home meant that the statistical chances of her deciding to keep him were far greater ... but in the end I think what it had meant to her [taking the baby home] was, she got a pretty good crash course in how life was going to be like. (AP1)

Paradoxically, some of the adoptive parents came from these first interactions feeling more secure about the adoption proceedings (not negating that there was some fear still present). This security came from being able to hear some of the birthparents story and circumstances surrounding the adoption:

(AF) She was very strong, she was young but very strong ... and was able to tell us why she wanted to adopt [child] and why she picked us from the profiles and we realised that she wasn't going to be a person that was going to change her mind.

(AM) We hoped.

(AF) She was set on that path.

(AM) It was still worrying. (AP3)

This couple adopted two more children and had similar experiences with the birthmothers of their next two children:

It was nice in a way because we knew then we liked them. [They] had a similar value system to ours we felt and it made it easy and we were quite happy to have it as open as possible and that's how it was with [birthmother]. (AP3)

She's a very strong, strong young ... and she is always about [child], everything was about [child's] wellbeing and it was always a huge thing for her. (AP1)

Oh we were just shaking to bits really that she would kind of go "ooh you're a fraud ... you're nothing like your profile" (laughs) or some crazy thing like that .. so we went in [to the hospital] and honestly she sort of sat up in the bed and went "HIII" and put her arms out to us and gave us big hugs and said "oh it's just so nice to meet you ... do you want to see my scars" [from caesarean birth] and lifts up her top. Just truly, truly a teenager and the emotions of opening our entire life up to a new world probably to a degree she didn't even realise the impact on us. She was like "oh well this is cool, you can have this baby" ... so we got to know her a lot better (laughs) in that first meeting and so it just put us at ease straightaway. (AP2).

She made it very clear to us that she wanted better for this child. She did not want this child to be brought up by her mother ... all she wanted was a child to be absolutely loved, surrounded by love, those were her words, "I just want my baby to be surrounded by love and to be in a happy home and to have a mum and dad". (AP2)

There is also the realisation in these initial meetings that this would be the beginning of a lifelong connection or relationship. These people are about to be bonded all through a shared interest in their child:

It's a weird sort of feeling initially ... it's hard to describe really, it's an unusual feeling. Like this person is now going to be involved with our family for the rest of our lives. So it's HUGE. It is MASSIVE ... (AP3)

It was just, at that moment in time, it was just the four parents and the baby and it was a really sacred special moment because it was just 'wow' you know, here we are, for the future of this human being. It [the baby] is dependent on us four. And it was incredibly special. (AP2)

Mixed with the turbulent emotion of meeting the birthparents for the first time is the intense emotion of seeing their child for the first time:

...tremendously emotional time for the birth family and for us. It was like 'oh my gosh' you know, even just meeting this brand new baby and I was like, 'I don't know if I want them to see her' you know, it was amazing how you become so attached to this baby you have never laid eyes on her before. (A1)

4.3.2 *Negotiating the Contact*

For the parents it was important for them to express to the birthparents their willingness and desire to have them involved in their child's life:

So the agreement was, and we were adamant that she understood this, was that our home was her home and if she wanted to make contact with us she could make contact with us at any time ... we gave her our phone numbers and things like that and she was like 'yes, yes, yes ...' and then life kind of, I don't know, life changed for her. (AP2)

Well we just said from the moment that the babies were born they were welcome to come anytime they liked, anytime day or night, ring us, come around, so we just said the door was always open. And we have always committed to that. And I said if you don't come and visit I will track you down and make you come visit, so I want you to come and visit. I want the children to know who you are ... I didn't want the crisis later on because they hadn't met their birthparent. (AP3)

The term "Contact Contract" is one that raises itself regularly in adoption literature and these contracts have the flexibility to be as loose or as tight as is agreed by the parties involved. The previous couples had a somewhat laissez faire approach to the agreement whereas the third couple wanted to specify other conditions in their agreement:

We didn't really think so hard about that at the time or know really what to put in it so we said that we were open to any frequency of contact as long as they rang us first and sort of organised a time ... there was no limit to contact in that ... we agreed to do three monthly photos. (AP1)

There are some differences in opinion between this couple as to what would be the appropriate amount of contact between their child and the birthparents. One parent felt that every three months was too much and that perhaps now (with the child being older), photos once a year would suffice. This parent goes onto to express:

I think it's a fine line now between letting them [birthparent] get on their lives and not harassing [them], and between their need to get to know [child]. (AP1)

The frequency of contact has differed with all the couples and the frequency has changed throughout the span of the child's life. Each triad has had to come to an arrangement that works best for their particular situation:

...we have had a birthmother say to us that 'I'm not coming for the first six weeks because I want you to bond with [the child], to other people coming in the first week, but it's not been a problem, and the more open it is. I just felt like we were given a gift and I wanted them, if they felt the need to, to see if [the child] were safe ... Because they were probably thinking at home "Oh my God, have I done the right thing? Is he happy? ... All those things that must be racing through their minds. (AP3)

When asked if the contact had been constant throughout the relationship each of the couples reported that over time the contact had decreased:

Initially we saw them quite a lot. Then we saw them on birthdays and Christmas. As they got older and gone travelling and got married and had kids of their own, or one of them is not in the country so it's diminished. So yes it has, definitely as they have gotten older it has waned quite a lot ... so yeah, times change and their ages go on, but they always usually make contact around birthdays and/or Christmas or if they are in the country. (AP3)

4.3.3 Advising the children

Each of the couples interviewed reflected that they have always told their children about their adoption from an early age and that this was normalised in their family. None of the

couples identified a moment when their children were first told, adoption was just something that was always talked about:

(AF) Well right from the start they had 'tummy mummies' ... and we would talk and discuss their tummy mummies so they pretty much sort of knew, like it was never an issue because it was just ... it seemed normal ...

(AM) ... so when they come [to visit] I would say 'Oh well your tummy mummy is coming today' and then they would go and ask why they were in someone else's tummy so I would explain 'well I couldn't have a baby and you know that I was so lucky to be given you' and going into not too much detail, but they grew up right from the start, right from the point they could understand... (AP3)

4.4 Reflections

4.4.1 Birthparent role in the family

The adoptive parents were asked to describe to what extent the birthparents are integrated into the family. Each of the adoptive parents interviewed identified the special role the birthparent plays in their life. It is difficult to quantify or name the relationship or the significance of the birthparent where it is not part of the normal construction of family. To appease this terms such as 'godmother' 'sister' 'aunt' are used but does seem to portray the depth of the relationship:

Like their godmother's come to see them, or some special person has come to see them, like an Aunt ... I don't see them as 'oh that's your birthmother'. I just think of them as a special person, not just a friend of the family, but a special friend of the family. Like a godparent really, but a special person that is part of their lives... (AP2)

*AF: I guess in some ways it would be like having a godmother ... that sort of thing.
AM: well she's an extension of the family ... there is that sense of it being kind of very organic and um ... a bit of an uncertain place I think ... because there's always a sense of change and evolution and growth and potential for it to either be kind of close or further apart ... so there's uncertainty to the roll.*

AF: but certainly ... you have that sense of ... an essential part to us [and] of our life because of her place in [child's] life as well. (AP1)

They [birthparents] were old enough to be our kids! They were just so young in our minds and here they were, [they] just created this baby ... it was like having teenage brother and sisters and in fact that is what our relationship has been like with [the birthmother]. She's been our little sister really. She's become very much a part of our family. (AP2)

It might be easy to image the parents feeling threatened by having the birthparents involved in their child's life. This perception was not evident in the couples interviewed:

... I don't think 'Oh my God it's their birthmother coming and they going to suddenly think "Oh my God you suck as a mother, I want her back' sort of thing" ... I just sort of think of her as um we just sort of think of her as friends of the family and more the merrier really. (AP2)

4.4.2 Bonding and attachment

In the Literature Chapter the question of how attachment can occur between the child and the adoptive parents when there is involvement with the birthparent is discussed. One of the widely disputed concerns from some authors is that having contact with the birthparent can disrupt attachment with the adoptive parent. For the adoptive parents interviewed, none felt that attachment with their child had been hindered because of contact and drew attention to the day to day roles of being a parent that build the attachment bonds:

Because they come for a few hours, you know. They are not getting up to that child, feeding that child, putting that child to bed, bathing that child, looking after it when it's sick, making its birthday cakes. It's nurturing that creates a bond. (AP3)

4.4.3 *Relationship between adoptive parents and birthparent.*

It is perhaps axiomatic to state that communication is the key to success in any relationship. Communication was highlighted as an important factor in the relationships with the birthparents, along with the knowledge that everyone had a shared interest in the wellbeing of the child:

I think we were lucky with the people we connected with because they were similar and they wanted the best for baby too. So if [we] got someone who was unsure of themselves, or we felt threatened by them it might have been a whole different ball game. (AP2)

It all comes down to your attitude and having that open door policy. We honestly, and I can truthfully say that we have not ever had an argument about the children nor have they ever interfered in anyway. We would discuss things with them. I can't think of anything to be honest where we have felt challenged or frustrated or anything. (AP3)

Relationships are built not only with the birthparents but also with their family, which again extends the family network. Two of the couples interviewed reported that they probably had more to do and, to some extent, more in common with their child's biological grandparent, mostly in part due to being closer in age. Out of the six children adopted by the three couples interviewed, four of the biological grandparents had either wanted to or offered to look after the child rather than having the child adopted out:

We've actually probably related to the birthmothers mothers and fathers probably as well more almost because they are sort of closer to our age group so we have got to know not just the birthmother and/or father but we have got to know the grandparents. (AP3)

Each of the parents interviewed expressed their gratitude to the birthparents as they had been given a gift that they were unable to achieve themselves:

They have given us the gift that we could never give ourselves. (AP2)

One adoptive parent feels that maintaining that relationship and ongoing contact is also an active way of showing that gratitude:

There's a feeling of a responsibility you know. There's a feeling of it being an ongoing way of expressing our gratitude. I think that is a very important part of it ... it's not a gift that you're given that's over you know ... its forever so that's an important part of the relationship as well. (AP1)

4.4.4 Challenges of open adoption

The parents were asked what they felt the challenges were of having an open adoption. One couple could not identify any aspect by which they felt challenged. Despite it being an open adoption they were not without challenges and shared scenarios in which one of their children had struggled with his/her adoption status. For one particular child however there was much discussion as to whether this was due to the child's personality or because of the particular nature of the adoption. What the adoptive parents of this particular child did identify in being asked about the challenges in open adoption, was not so much the challenges but more the attributes that made the open adoptions less challenging for their family:

(AM) ... I don't know whether it was because we are laid back and it's our attitude. I just always thought, 'well why would there be an issue'. Because they all very much wanted the best ...

(AF) They all wanted it to work.

(AM) They wanted it to work and we wanted it to work ...

(AF) We felt too that we had been open and honest with the family so you could actually say what you thought, it didn't matter so much you know. So you didn't feel as if there was any hidden agendas anywhere, so we just weren't challenged by it. (AP3)

Because the term 'open adoption' is one that is based on good will and is not reflected in the current legislation one couple expressed that 'knowing' is a challenge whilst also highlighting a possible deficit in the support from adoption social workers:

(AF) You're so unsure of what you should be doing. How much contact there should be, what's normal, what's abnormal? How are they seeing this? How's [child] seeing this? ... You're trying to feel your way into it and you're not quite sure about where anything is or where you should draw a line, if any...

(AM) Yeah there's a sense of no rules

(AF) You don't know how much of that contact is going to be ... but yeah there are no rules, and are you doing everything right for [child]? Are you doing everything as best you can for the birthparents? Are you badgering the birthparents? Are they at the point where they are so upset about seeing him that you need to tone it down and have less contact?...

(AF) Because certainly you don't get any guidance from CYFs ... or an adoption agency or whatever. (AP1)

4.4.5 Benefits of Open Adoption

Despite some of the challenges raised, the overwhelming consensus from each of the research participants is that the benefits outweigh the challenges. Aspects such as knowledge of their child's background, knowing medical history and being able to have questions answered were raised as benefits:

(AF) Certain things crop up and you need the background. Like [child] for example, at six weeks old had [medical condition] and she had to have an operation and we were able to find out that her birthmother had [had one].

(AM) ..., and then her (birthmother) next child born had [same medical condition] and [we were able to share information]. (AP3)

One of this couples' other adopted child also had a genetic medical condition. Through being able to find out the medical history they knew that the child would eventually outgrow the condition just as the birthmother had. Further knowing their child's cultural history was deemed important:

Just knowing it's important for them to know these sorts of things as it is for us to know those things because culturally, you want to encourage that as much as

possible if they have an interest in that or whatever, so knowing the background history. (AP3)

All parents noted that one of the rewards of having an open adoption was so their child had access to answers about where they came from:

At certain times, we have had one say “why did she adopt me out ... didn’t she love me or didn’t she like me or didn’t she this or that” and I said “of course not, but you can ask her why she did it”. That’s the beauty of open adoption. I don’t have to answer those curvy questions [and] they can ask them (AP3)

(AF) I think most of the contact that we’ve had so far has been the benefit of the birthparents and think that’s perfectly normal. That’s kind of the aim of it. I think later on in life for [child] is when the benefits are going to show for him. Even if it came to the worst and today was the last day we had contact with the birth parents we would be able to say to him “Do you remember [name] that used to come and visit? That’s [your birthmother]” ... we will be able to say to him “Well no, this is how it is” ... it’ll just be easier to explain.

(AM) It makes his life make sense ...

(AF) ... We just have this wealth of information and of course it’s a wealth of information about him and who he is and his family and his other grandparents.

(AP1)

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has covered the areas of pre-adoption, where the anxieties and depth of feeling were explored, the adoption process and reflections on the adoption experience from the perspective of the adoptive parents. The proceeding chapter will follow this same format, but from the perspective of the birth parent.

5. THE BIRTHPARENT

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will continue in the data explicitation process with the focus being on the birthparent. Three birthparents were interviewed. This was made up of two birthmothers and one birthfather. It is difficult to be gender neutral here given representation of both birth mothers and father.

The children relinquished by the birth parents vary in age from adult to teenager to primary school age. Open adoption practices have evolved somewhat over the years and this is also reflected in the openness and experiences of the birthparents.

This chapter follows the same format as the previous chapter and is broken into the following sections:

- 1) Pre-Adoption, where the reasons for chosen adoption are discussed and what knowledge the birthparents had of open adoption at this stage.
- 2) The Adoption Process. In this section the participants reflect on the process of selecting the adoptive parents and the handover of their child to them. Contact with the adoptive family and their child is discussed followed by some reflections of the relationship with the adoptive family and factors that contribute to making the relationship work.
- 3) Reflections. The voice of the birthfather is quite rare in adoption literature and his experience differs from that of the birthmother. In this section, these areas of difference are highlighted. The birthparents reflection of the challenges of open adoption are discussed followed by the benefits.

5.2 Pre-Adoption

5.2.1 Why adoption was chosen and knowledge about open adoption?

In the day and age of options when it comes to unplanned pregnancies, termination of the pregnancy was not an option for any of the birth parents interviewed.

I sort of researched the adoption side of things and I could have quite easily done everything on my own. Because I was brought up in a single parent family I knew what it was like as a child to grow up and not have everything you wanted and to see my mum struggling and being distressed because she couldn't give us the things she wanted us to have so dearly. So I just stared thinking down those thoughts of what he deserved in life. I could have gone with a termination but I thought 'No', he deserves something better. (BM2)

At that stage I had already kind of worked out that I didn't really want an abortion. I didn't want to live with that. And then it was 'well, what do we do now?' ... I ALWAYS said I didn't want to get married just because I was pregnant ... and I did have a future ahead of me. I was academic and all the rest. And I didn't have a lot of life skills either. I didn't really know how to go out and look after myself and a child. So we talked about it and we prayed about it ... (BM1)

Well [we were] essentially too far along for any kind of termination and stuff like that. Even given the opportunity we probably wouldn't have gone through with that either just because of I guess our own personal sort of beliefs ... so we decided that the pregnancy would be followed through and then we started looking at options. (BF1)

Once the decision was made that termination was not an option, the birth parents then go through the process of exploring other options, namely adoption.

... It was at the time where open adoptions were just starting to happen ... and as soon as I read that I thought there's no way I am going to do a closed adoption ... it came to a point where I said 'if it's a closed adoption or not, it's not. I'll keep the baby. I won't do a closed adoption' ... I didn't want to pretend like it had never happened. (BM1)

When asked to expand on the statement 'I'll keep the baby, I won't do a closed adoption' the participant goes on to say:

For me it was this is my child and I want the best for her, and I wasn't going to pretend that it had never happened. And I also wanted for her to have her history ... I was thinking about her. I wanted her to have a really good family and the best family. It wasn't about getting rid of this baby and letting me move on with my own

life. So it's like well I've got all those best interest at the heart, I obviously still want to be a part of that. (BM1)

Abortion was not an option for any of the birthparents interviewed because of their own values or beliefs. All three the birthparents were very clear in their preference for the adoption to be open and all had researched about open adoption, with each stating that if the adoption could not be open, then they would have kept the child themselves:

It was a fundamental thing. Our intentions were giving the best for this child ... in our opinion, having us involved was the best option ... it was that option or keep the child and somehow try and work something out between us ... we knew that would be more than problematic (BF1)

...I thought there's no way I am going to do a closed adoption and I said at the time 'if it's a closed adoption or not ... it's not. I'll keep the baby. I won't do a closed adoption (BM1)

There was no way that I was not going to be in that child's life ... in whatever form. Closed adoption was never [an option]. If it was going to be closed, I don't think I could have done it. (BM2)

There was an overwhelmingly strong message from the birthparents that their decision to adopt their child was a decision they made in the best interests of their child:

Obviously for me my world wasn't in the best place. If it was in the best place I wouldn't have even contemplated or even entertained the thought of adoption, but all I could do at that time was give him my love which is heaps and everything but just... I just couldn't do it to him, I couldn't rip him off. That's the way I looked at it anyway. (BM2)

I think I had the attitude, well essentially I was the adult in the relationship and I would do anything for my kids so I was going to do what I thought was best for her and that was giving her two parents and a stable family and the best opportunities. (BM1)

5.3 Adoption Process

5.3.1 Selection of adoptive parents

Once the birthparents have made a decision to relinquish their child for adoption, they then have the responsibility of selecting the people they want to raise their child. The weight of this decision is quite significant for the birthparents.

For the birthparents the relationship began even prior to meeting the couple that they would entrust their children to. For them it began in the selection process.

Having something in common with the future parents of their child was one aspect that was raised as important for one birthparent who had gone through their church networks to find parents. They recall meeting one potential couple that illustrated this:

*I had **nothing** in common with them ... I just thought 'no, no, no, no! ... if these are the right parents, God's going to have to write it in flaming letters across the universe, because NO WAY are they getting my child!... The only thing we would have in common is the baby, I had nothing in common with them (BM1)*

This particular birthparent did have a preference of what they wanted in parents, which was a version of a couple that was already known to the family.

BM2 also found her 'parents' through Church networks where her mother's Pastor knew of a couple who were unable to conceive children and facilitated a process where they could meet. This birthmother describes having an immediate connection with the parents:

They were SO cool. Absolutely divine, I wanted to adopt her, she was honestly sooo cool. There was no pressure or anything like that, it was just really natural and just easy which is what I wanted because I had this big criteria of what I wanted to have happen and I wasn't budging from that... I wanted him to go to a Christian family for a start. I wanted them to let me be, not involved, but I wanted to have updates, photos, letters ... not constant but the ability to know how he was doing and I wanted him to know about me from day one so he didn't have any of these ... I didn't want him to feel like he was rejected at all. (BM2)

The third birthparent interviewed went through the process with CYF. Initially they were only shown profiles of couples within the geographical area where they lived and could not find a couple suitable. The birthparent took it upon themselves to travel to other areas

and met a social worker in that office who showed some profiles. One of the factors that stood out about the couple eventually chosen is that they had already adopted a child and it was an open adoption, so the birthparent felt it was a proven track record. There were however some concerns about the gatekeeping done by the social workers:

*... And in the way that they [CYF] deal with the profiles ... it seemed **extremely** regionalised. And so we would go there and they would say “oh and these are the [local] people” and we would have a look through and would think “well ok there is nothing much there” ... there was this kind of reservation of them sourcing profiles from other regional areas [where] **they** would select what **they** thought and **they** would get a sample of the profiles and bring them (BF1)*

5.3.2 Handover to adoptive parents

There is a moment amongst all the legality that the birthparent signs away any rights to their child and relinquishes their child to the new parents. The enormity of that feeling is hard to comprehend. There was a sense of numbness from one birthmother relaying this moment:

I gave him his last meal, changed him, put his little going out outfit on him. That was probably the really hard part, signing that paper and knowing that you’ve just signed away any rights to your child and there’s nothing you can do from that moment on... it’s not that you cease to exist, you cease to be the Mum and that for me was pretty hard ... I mean that’s the thing, when you sign those papers you’re a womb pretty much. I mean that’s pretty cold but that’s what it is in black and white terms. I’m always going to be tummy mummy, because I’ll make it that way [laughs]. (BM2)

Each of the birthparents shared having a ceremony or handover of sorts when it came time to relinquish their child to the new parents:

They actually came and stayed here after she was born and we brought her home from the hospital and then they came here and we did kind of the ‘transferring from parent day’ which again was outside of the norm (BM1)

BM: I had a handing over ceremony for him. He actually came to the lawyers with me and I signed the papers and then we went back to my Mums place and had this little ceremony.

Researcher: So what was involved in the ceremony?

BM: Oh to me it was really important. I had a little handing over ceremony outfit that I had bought him and they all came back to Mums and I had her Pastor [read] a few scriptures that I still carry around in my purse... that meant a lot to me and it was just how I was entrusting him into their care and what I expected of them; how big a sacrifice I was making and just basically what I expected out of them and vice versa what they expected of me. (BM2)

It was kind of like a really pretty emotionally distraught sort of period. But yeah we as mother and father ended up going to their [adoptive parents] house one evening, just the two of us and [child] and leaving him then, or giving him over to them. (BF1)

The period of time following this handover is wrought with emotion. It is a dichotomy of emotion for the two different parent groups. On one end of the scale there is amazement and joy for the parents who have just adopted their child; as identified in the previous chapter, their wish for the ‘dream’ has been fulfilled. For the birthparents who have just relinquished their child, an act done out of love, the emotions were quite different and long-lasting:

When they left, probably for about 3-4 months after he went I was a bit of a cot case and stuff like that and my Mum had to get me out of this [state]. I made this like shrine and I would stay up HOURS at night just like watching all the videos and photos and all that and just basically TOURTURING myself and I think I HAD to go through that to get through the emotional side of it and just came to terms with my decision. (BM2)

For one birthmother, retelling this part of her story was too difficult; although unspoken one could observe the feeling and emotion still attached to this period. The birthfather interviewed empathises with the experiences of the birthmothers and the physical and

emotional impact of relinquishing a child carried for nine months, but he also pointed out that the child is still his child and was still an emotional time for him and states “*I would say that personally I was not in the best mental state*”. He also speaks about “holding it together” for the sake of other parties involved:

Personally I managed ... well I felt I kept things together so that things could proceed. But I can't say I kept it together much longer after that point. It's sort of like I held it together so that other people didn't necessarily have to. (BF1)

The birthparents were asked about their prior knowledge of open adoption. All three birthparents expressed that the adoption being open was a fundamental condition of the adoption with all three expressing that they would have kept their child had no contact been the case:

Our intentions were giving the best for this child but at the same time, in our opinion, having us involved was the best option ... We didn't want any sense of abandonment. It wasn't like we can't offer anything so we just need to [not have contact], like it wasn't black and white (BF1)

5.3.3 Contact

At some point around this time of ‘handover’ a contact agreement is negotiated. Each of the birthparents spoke about the non-legal nature of open adoption and the “good will” aspect of contact agreements. For the three participants, the ‘contact contracts’ were verbal, not recorded or signed.

Whether contact should be a legal contract is a debated topic amongst those involved in open adoption. Only one of the birth parents had a strong view of the legal status of open adoption and highlighted that “*you go through something that's called a legal process yet there seems to be very little legality to it all*”:

We discussed this, even when we adopted out, that should there be any law change then we would seek a retrospective agreement to the legality of [the] situation ... I'm an advocate for it ... even if it is informal and non-legally binding ... but there is an exchange of ideals that maybe can be updated over time or whatever, just

between the interested parties ... I think that having something on paper, it just kind of ... it does make things feel a bit more binding. (BF1)

It was also acknowledged that having a contact agreement that was more formal than the current “good will and hand-shakes” could pose problems.

For one birthparent the discussions around contact were based upon the adoptive couple’s existing adoption and that in a way set a precedent for this adoption:

There was never anything on paper. It was all good will and credentials I guess you could say. There was a lot of emotive talk in regards to transparency ... kind of all those sorts of thing that people say. I mean it was always this kind of forever sort of thing, that the contact would be on-going no matter the circumstances that may arise; there was no time period, there was no conditions ... it was kind of like ‘this is a family, this is a unit through thick and thin’ you know those sorts of things (BF1).

There was no formal agreement; just that it would be an open adoption. And that was just an agreement. As I said nothing was formalised, we just signed the full adoption papers. So [I] really was relying on their good will to make sure it would still happen the way we were envisaging it. So we didn’t actually write up any terms and conditions. (BM1).

Given the individual dynamics involved in different family units, it would not be surprising to hear the different levels of contact and involvement each birthparent had with their child. For one birthparent, the amount and type of contact is dependent primarily on location and whether they are in the same city or at times, country. One thing that was stressed was that contact in some form was consistent:

In the time I have been overseas I had sort of more like a Skype kind of relationship which he’s quite apt at so that’s fine. I mean it’s still a strangely tenuous kind of link ... whenever I have lived in [the same city] I probably see [child] on at least a three weekly basis ... at points [and presently] it has been weekly. (BF1)

There was some curiosity about how the birthparent feels during contact with the child they relinquished. One birthparent very honestly reflects that it wasn’t always easy and it

was an emotional time, but still stressed many times that those feelings were still better than not seeing her child at all:

Probably just a little bit anxious. Jealousy. I used to get a lot of jealousy and after I'd been there I'd get really upset because I couldn't take him with me and stuff like that ... prior to seeing him [I felt] excitement and just wanted to give him a hug and you know, going to be with him again. I mean I was always extremely proud, but I mean you go through all those really high and really lows but like I say I was lucky because of them. They helped me through all of that. (BM2)

5.3.4 Relationship with Adoptive Family

In order for the birthparent to have a relationship with their child there also needs to be a relationship with their child's family. With the participants, the extent they were integrated into their child's family differed from being quite involved through to being peripherally involved.

For one birthparent it was not the type of relationship envisaged or even really wanted. The birthparents own emotions were identified as the primary reason why the relationship didn't develop further:

I'd like to say yes [to contacting them if I had concerns] but no, not necessarily. Our relationship didn't develop that way, and as I said mainly because of the person I am. (BM1)

This birthparent did not feel as though she necessarily had a role within her child's adoptive family but rather her child was a part of her family:

I don't think I have been given a role within the family, they have their family and ... and I am her birthmother. I mean to start off with they did welcome me in but not as part of the family. It was to visit [child] and then go away again ... So it's not that I have become part of their family, it's that she has become a part of ours. (BM1)

One birthparent makes a profoundly simple statement that demonstrates the complexity of the relationship with their children and the role they see themselves playing:

*I am her mother ... but I'm not her mum.*²⁴(BM1)

This statement demonstrates the difference in relationship here. While the birthparent either conceived or gave birth to their child, they are not the parent. This birthmother in particular was cognizant of this and not wanting to step into that parental role while still having her relinquished child a part of the family:

... I can't jump in with my morals when I haven't been the one there doing them so I can say that, I am her mother but I am not her mum. She is my daughter, but she is not our children... So sometimes I'll use my and sometimes I'll use our. [Child] is our oldest daughter, our oldest child, but my oldest daughter is [child]. (BM1)

This then brings a uniqueness to the relationship that can be difficult to define and as this birthparent states:

so we just have a relationship, we don't define the relationship ... it's a unique relationship ... it's that little bit that comes where she can see herself in me and sometimes she has come to me and asked questions like "were you like this? Did you [do that?] you know, just getting that genetics side of things that comes out in your personality and yourself, and it's been quite cool. (BM1)

The other birthmother interviewed has a more involved relationship with her child's family and this is reflected in how she perceives her role in her child's life:

*I don't know! I am just there. I am a part of the furniture. I know I am special in the equation ... I am the provider of the most awesome present they could have. I provide friendship. I provide that maternal view [child is currently living with adoptive father] ... so I am just like part of that other parent sort of thing and the lucky thing for me is that [child] has stepped out of line quite massively on a few occasions and I am included in the discipline*²⁵(BM2)

²⁴ In the following chapter which presents the data from the Adoptee perspective, there is discussion about the term 'Mum' and the sacredness of this term from the adoptees perspective.

²⁵ In this occasion that was shared, the birthmother was involved because unknowingly to her the child had used her as a 'cover story'.

The birthfather interviewed surmises that his relationship with his child is one that has developed naturally:

It's been quite organic and quite natural. I definitely think there has been some bumps along the way, maybe where he has become more cognitive of the scenario and yeah it has been slightly more forced at times, having lived overseas ... (BF1)

When asked what role he personally felt he had (or would like to have), the response was “a fatherly one”. This did come with some trepidation and awareness of how this might be perceived by the child’s adoptive parents. The term ‘fatherly relationship’ was clarified by stating:

I mean maybe some of the clichés like boy playing football, “who’s going to be the coach of the team” who’s actually got time? Who can actually assist with that and these sorts of roles where I would be more than happy to participate in those sorts of things but it is not necessarily my decision ... but it’s kind of a question of the insecurities of others involved. (BF1)

For the birthfather there was also an aspect of letting the child know who you are and the feeling that this was also a parental responsibility:

I mean a parental role in exposing your child to who you are ... I don’t think that is a big sisterly or a big brotherly sibling kind of thing. I think it’s very much like umm if you want to have that kind of deeper sort of relationship with your child who you don’t have 100% contact with, then there is a distinct necessity to express who you are ... it’s definitely a role by which I engage. (BF1)

Given the connection the birthparent has with their child it would be understandable that there would be maternal/paternal feelings towards their child. A parent would feel natural and comfortable in displaying those feelings. For the birthparent those feelings do not go away, moreover, these ‘second-nature’ feelings and responses need to be contained in order to not undermine the role of their child’s adoptive parents:

We were talking one day on the phone and she said “oh guess what I’ve done?” and she said “oh you won’t like it” ... but she was busy doing the ‘I’m talking to my friend’ then suddenly remembered that I wouldn’t have liked [what she had done] ... I did want to do the maternal things because you know, as I said, I want

the best for her and I had to be very careful not to assume her mother's role as well ... and to not undermine or degrade that relationship with her ... I think that might have been a fear of her [adoptive] mother's at one point, but it's like no, that is that and I have to keep my one separate. (BM1)

5.3.5 What makes the relationships work?

During the course of the interview one birthparent commented on “biting of the tongue” situations where it is “for the greater good of the child” and expanded on this by saying “because there is so much on the line”. So what does help make the relationship work? One birthparent reflects that a part of it is the makeup of the people involved:

If you have dysfunctional people doing something dysfunctional it's going to be dysfunctional. So we were very fortunate that we had very functional people taking part in this situation. (BF1)

Another gave a formula of what they felt contributes to a successful relationship within the adoption triangle and in particular with the parents:

Openness, communication and trust is probably the biggest one. Trust that they are going to keep your feelings in mind as well and obviously trust that they are going to look after and nurture this child of yours... I'm probably one of the more lucky cases, but that's because I've made it that way. I've been very proactive all the way through ... (BM2)

5.4 Reflections

5.4.1 Birthfather Perspective

It would be impossible and unfair to not include the unique perspective of the birthfather. The birthfather's voice is not strong in wider literature and there is some uniqueness to their experience. This was particularly made manifest in the birthfathers experience of going through the adoption process.

The birthfather that was interviewed offered his perspective as a birthfather being involved. Despite him and his partner being separated, he had that sense that the social workers were not used to having both the birth mother and father involved and he felt like they were thinking that they should raise the child themselves. His experience also in some ways reflects the female dominant demographic of the social work profession:

everything seemed very geared to the ... female perspective and it wasn't until I came to [city] ... individually that there was this real sort of sense [from the social workers] of like 'shit, you're completely in this ... you're the one that's running around the countryside trying to assist in the decision making process' (BF1)

The birthfather also wonders if the situation between himself and the birthmother (being separated) was being projected by the social workers:

It added another layer to it and I think that the staff there sensed that or saw that and subconsciously imparted that feeling of 'you're actually not really doing much to help the situation' and it's like 'well okay, maybe I'm not, but at the same time this is my situation actually, it's not just [hers] ... if you want to divide us and deal with us in different ways or whatever that's fine' but it ... felt very um .. female orientated (BF1)

Having the birthfather involved seemed to be an anomaly for many of the professionals involved in this scenario:

...every step of the way, through CYFS ... through to lawyers and what not. It just felt like our case was extremely idiosyncratic or extreme [and] had abnormalities in it. Not necessarily in a negative sense ... people just didn't really ... we never really just turned up somewhere and people went 'Oh yeah, done this before' it was always like 'Ooooooh okay?' or 'Ooooooh right ... there's two of you' [tentative] (BF1)

It's just quite hard to walk into those kinds of environments, like even through the whole process, like I can't even name a male that I touched base with you know. Even family law people, them seem to be female. And I mean it is supporting the person most at risk in it, I guess the mother and the child to some degree and maybe

it works better like that ... but just quite a skewed kind of gender thing going on there. (BF1)

I think for a lot of men in these scenarios you feel pretty powerless and you are kind of at the mercy of your partner's decision in some way... like I am not sort of saying 'hey there should be some sort of support for men in regards to this stuff' but... It just seems that... Yeah.... (BF1)

5.4.2 Challenges of open adoption

The birthparents were asked what they felt the challenges for them were in having an open adoption. One of the challenges arising for the birthparents was expectations and when those expectations were not met:

Probably early on not having as much as I wanted [laughs] but it's because I didn't really want to give her up in the first place and I accept that we've just got to move on ... the actual visits have been great but just perhaps there hasn't been as many as I thought ... I wanted to see her more perhaps than they wanted me to see her ... There was this one time without really thinking, I brought a uni friend with me to meet her and they sort of freaked out because the guy lived not far from where they did. I was very open about [the adoption] and they were trying to grow a family, so again it was perhaps my expectations [were] a little unrealistic about what it would be like (BM1).

For another birthparent, the challenge wasn't so much in the ability to have contact with their child, but with differing expectations about reciprocity in initiating contact and also about contact with the wider family. There was a sense of disappointment that this was often viewed as a one sided agreement where they were the one pushing for or requesting contact "How many times can you make a phone call ... without feeling like you are imposing?", or that contact was being decided by the child.

I personally have always had as much access with my son as I have kind of pushed for I guess you should say, or requested? And I guess in those initial conversations that we had there was a certain openness and transparency to everything, but I

guess we never thought it would be such a one way thing, and to be honest it hasn't always been a one way thing the whole time, but it has been very much like 'well you make the effort and we're quite happy' but I would have thought through the discussions we had prior to the adoption or in the first years that things would be far more organic than they have been ... in that first year definitely there was a lot of give and take should we say, but [now] its very infrequent ... well there has been a basis of communication by which decision making ... it's kind of left up to [a child] to decide whether he wants the contact or not ... you know it's very much this kind of 'oh it's not our decision, it's up to him whether he wants to' which [big breath] umm ... can be problematic? I mean it hasn't been overly problematic to be honest, but at the same time, should four adults leave a decision up to a six year old? And is that really a kind of bailout option as to liability down the track? I mean is that an option kind of to say 'Oh the reason you didn't see [birthparent] was because you didn't want to because you were six years old and had the option of going to Burger King instead?' ... what are the circumstances around a six year old making a decision like that? So it's difficult to mediate things such as that.
(BF1)

For the remaining birthparent, the differing expectation wasn't with the amount of contact had with her child, but the family structure she wished her child to be raised in changed:

... But the sad thing that happened with us is that his adopted parents separated, they split. And it was like my world bottomed out. It was like everything I wanted to protect him from, which was a single parent family, that happened and I couldn't do anything about it. All I wanted to do was to go get him but I had no leg to stand on ... and they both remarried, but he got really confused for a little while because he had his tummy mummy, which is what he called me, his adoptive mum and then his new step mum ... and so he was thinking that his adoptive mums new husbands ex-wife was also his mother and stuff like that. So he had all these big things going on in his head and he was only [young]. (BM2)

For this birthparent, the impact of this was quite devastating as the exact environment she was wishing to avoid for her child, was now the reality. What is also highlighted here is the sense of powerlessness felt by the birthparent in wanting to protect her child.

Boundaries were also raised as a challenge, whether this being not overstepping them or translating those boundaries and relationships with other family members:

One of the challenges [for me] is because I have had to develop a friend relationship with [relinquished child] particularly when she started coming on the bus and stay when she was about 16 and I couldn't do the mother thing, I had to do the friend thing. I mean I had to be very careful not to do that with my daughter²⁶. I still had to maintain the mother/daughter relationship. And that actually has been quite a challenge ... (BM1)

I think the challenge for me personally was just walking away without him every time. And I think sometimes the challenge is not to overstep the boundary with them, just to make sure that ... not to be in their faces too much. I mean it still gets hard for me emotionally but the challenges are not being able to take him with me. (BM2)

Communication is a key factor to relationships and one birthparent felt that at times this was a challenge:

I guess the difficulties are really within the communication and whatnot... I guess it's just the management of the relationships ... (BF1)

One birthparent is also thinking of the future when her relinquished child begins her own family. What further complications might this mean?

We've still got challenges ahead of us and what are we going to do when her children come? How many grandparents are they going to have? That sort of thing. (BM1)

Despite these challenges, birthparents felt that having an open adoption was far more preferable than the alternatives:

²⁶ In reference to the daughter from subsequent marriage

It's had it challenges. I still think it's better to the alternatives. To have a gaping void in my life and not know where she was or what she was doing would have been really, really difficult ... It's allowed me to move on I guess. It's allowed us to be free with who we are ... (BM1)

5.4.3 Stigma/Perception

Adoption in itself comes attached with stigma and those involved are at times at the mercy of other people's perceptions and curiosity. Overall the birthparents interviewed have felt that this has mostly been positive. One birthparent felt that sharing his experience provided an opportunity to open up dialogue for others and reflected that this can be therapeutic in a way. Another birthparent echoed those sentiments in feeling the process of sharing her experience for this research was quite therapeutic for her.

While there was a general sense of curiosity from others, birthparents also felt a sense of judgement at times. Either for the decision to adopt or the perception that they are 'shirking responsibility':

My mother got some interesting comments along the line of ... "well if our daughter had had a baby, or course we would have kept it" but they would be very judgemental about the fact that I was adopting out ... (BM2)

Oh I guess it's that kind of idea of shirking responsibility. Like I guess that there's some kind of close minded people viewpoint of it whereas I would probably try and say that actually [I'm] trying to do things for the best interest of the child rather than divest yourself of responsibility ... while we are parents we definitely had a mind-set that we are doing this for ourselves as well so that life can go on and to try and make a go of that life ... there have been negative things sort of conveyed to us about the fact that we have been living overseas and so forth ... just like comments passed by people like "ooh well where are they this Christmas" and that sort of stuff and it's like "well [we] are actually sitting on the other end of the phone" you know, like we are still there whenever that phone call might come ... (BF1)

Given the relatively new and evolving adoption practices in New Zealand, the decision to be involved in their child's life was met with curiosity and 'raised eyebrows' especially among those more familiar with closed adoption practices:

Having everyone question you "why are you doing this?" and it's like "it's none of your business, it's my decision". I mean I would talk to them about it but you know bottom line was like "if you don't understand it I'm sorry, but it's not about me". It was never about me. (BM2)

Certainly my parents' generation found it quite hard but even some of my friends found it really strange that I had had a baby and I had adopted her out but still have contact with her ... there was a couple of guys in our group at the time that were just like "what do you mean you're still seeing this child? It's like you've had her, you've adopted her out ... but she's gone. Get over it!" (BM1)

5.4.4 Benefits of Open Adoption

For the birthparents, the benefits of an open adoption outweighed the challenges. The fact that they could still be a part of their child's life was the key point raised. Each birthparent expressed the love that they had for their child and that the decision to adopt them out was a decision made out of love. Given the love they have, it's only natural then they would want to be a part of their lives:

The fact that I still can be in his life. That's paramount to me. It has to be that way. (BM2)

Just that I still have her as a part of my life and as a part of my kids life. (BM1)

It is the fact that you haven't lost something. It's the sense that you still have a belonging and you still have this ongoing relationship that you have built from day one. (BF1)

Two of the birthparents also felt that having an open adoption brought with it a level of honesty and transparency:

There is a level of honesty within our family which perhaps there wouldn't have been otherwise ... That's a big thing for me, I didn't want lies or cover ups. (BM1)

... one of the greatest rewards is the fact of the honesty to one's self ... that there's no hiding something and the idea that there's a measure that is kind of greater than yourself ... I think the more transparency about stuff the better and I mean I personally can't see how its healthy not to know the facts... (BF1)

There was a reassurance and satisfaction also expressed in the birthparents seeing their own qualities in their child and also being able to share of themselves with their child:

In my experience anyway there is a certain reassurance for birth parents I think in seeing certain behavioural patterns come up that you might not like them in yourself but when you see them in your child it's like 'oh well, at least I can see a little bit of that stuff' you know what I mean? (BF1)

One birthparent ended with their sentiments of adoption which surmises the mantra of going through this for the good of the child:

Adoption is not a bad thing. There are so many people out there that can't have children for whatever reason and you are sacrificing yourself to make someone else's life complete. As hard as it is, but you've got to think, it's not about you. You have got to think about that child. Children need to be looked after, they need to be loved. They need to be cherished. (BM2)

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has expanded on the birthparents perspective of open adoption. The reasons for choosing adoption and their experience of the process was explored as well as their experience and feelings of having contact with their child and family. The next chapter will be the last in the data explicitation chapters and will focus on the third part of the adoption triangle, the adopted child.



6 . THE ADOPTEE

6.1 Introduction

This chapter is the final in the data explicitation process and focuses on the third and perhaps most primary aspect of the adoption triangle, the adopted person.

Three adopted people were interviewed for this study and they had varying degrees of openness throughout their adoptions. The participants ranged in age from 18 years to early 30's.

The eldest of the participants reported being one of the first open adoptions in New Zealand and there are some peculiarities to this situation that reflects on the openness of this particular adoption.

Two of the participants had openness in terms of the birthmother but no knowledge of their birthfathers until later in their lives.

The other participant was adopted into a single parent family (the mother being widowed prior to adopting). This again was an unusual situation and one that had attracted opposition from Social Welfare at the time. The birth family however fought to have the adoption approved. This participant grew up knowing both her birthmother and birthfather (and extended family) although involvement was mostly with her birthmother

This chapter will be presented under three main themes. Firstly, Construction of adoption including exploring how the adoptee defines family, knowing their adoption story, fit with family and identity.

The second part of this chapter focuses on the adoptees contact with their birthparents and wider birth family. This will also examine the nature of the contact, what role they feel the birthparents play and their relationship with the wider birth family.

To round of this chapter, the adoptees reflections about open adoption will be given.

6.2 Construction of Adoption

6.2.1 How the Adopted Person defines their Family

For the adopted person, they are the ones that have to make sense of the uniqueness of their situation and to an extent this becomes normalised as it is their reality. There does come a point however where the uniqueness of their situation is highlighted. This usually occurs once the child begins socialising and observes other children's family make up. This is reflected in the responses when the participants were asked how they would describe their family:

My family? Umm I suppose we're not a normal family anyway because mum raised us by herself... Yeah we were kind of a different family ... well it was all I have ever known so it was a normal family for me and then yeah and then I also had obviously my biological mother... I confuse so many people (laughter) (A1)

Umm...complicated? In a word. Like I have always said to people "I'm not going to tell you (laughs) because you're not going to get it' cause it's a long story...Like no matter how you go about it you can say my mum and dad sure, but then people will ask you a question ... like "oh did your brother live there?, oh no he lives with my birth mum" and then bang! There's all these questions that come with it ... "ohh so you know her? Ohh so where's your birth dad, ohh so why? Why did she keep your brother and not you" is the main one that people don't get...that's when stuff gets tricky (A2)

This participant described some frustration in having to explain her "normal everyday" situation to those confused by her family make up:

Well not wanting to explain it but they're expecting you to explain it like you just want to shrug your shoulders and be like 'my birth mum, I was adopted' and then all these other questions and you're like 'argh really?' (A2)

Another adoptee's simple explanation describes a complex situation, but also in so doing effectively shows how the adoption and the two (plus) families are naturally integrated into her reality.

I'm an only child and the oldest of four [children] (A3)

6.2.2 *Knowing the adoption story*

A similarity in all the participants that may not have been as common in those adopted under a closed adoption is knowing their adoption story. None of the participants can recall not knowing about being adopted, there was no moment of disclosure, rather adoption was a normal everyday discourse in the adoptee's lives:

I always knew. I don't remember being told I was adopted so I guess it's just something that...I don't know when I was told... (A2)

...I can't remember because I, like since before I remember, I remember ... knowing that I was adopted and that I was a bit different you know, like my family situation was a little bit different. (A1)

What I then remember, so by four [which is about the time of my earliest memories] I was quite comfortable I would say with the concept of adoption ... I remember being told that I was adopted from the word go, there was never any [big reveal], I don't even remember being sat down and told about this, it was just a word that was part of the vocabulary of our family. (A3)

Those who were adopted under the closed adoptions may have known from an early age that they were adopted, however information that may be omitted is the story or circumstances surrounding the adoption. This is information that is known to the participants under an open adoption although this information may be disclosed in parts as the adoptee matures:

I don't know, you know how like you've always kind of known the story and you don't know when you first heard it...so I suppose Mum probably didn't tell me that till I was a bit older but I don't actually remember her telling me that... (A1)

Probably when I was about 13 they told me why I was adopted.... She [birthmother] said it was one of the hardest things she ever had to do, like she left [city] because she said she couldn't see me growing up happily with another family

without her heart breaking knowing that she wasn't in my family. Yeah ...so that made me feel a bit better about it now that I am older. (A2)

For the participant A3 whose parents and birthmother were both independently told by the Social Worker that each party no longer wanted contact, there was for quite some time a void of knowledge about the first 10 days of her life. In fact her first statement was *"I've always begun [my story] with "I was adopted at 10 days old"*. It wasn't until later in her childhood that the mystery of "the first 10 days" was revealed and it was discovered that her birth family had looked after her during that time.

Each of the participants discussed in some detail their family discourse of their adoption circumstances including how and why their birthmother chose their parents and why their parents were looking to adopt a child.

What was evident in all these discoveries was the respect shown to the birth mothers' circumstances. This is also reflected in the stories told to the participants by their parents, as demonstrated in the following quote which shows the positive language of "we chose you" rather than "she didn't want you":

I think that because I was told from a young age that I was adopted there was always the two parts of the story. Mum and Dad obviously very much emphasised that 'we chose you and that we love you and that we really wanted you' kind of thing. But they never said anything that could be construed as negative about why I was given up. It was always just that she was young, she was too young and would have been a solo mother. (A3)

On a side note, it is interesting to pay attention here to the language of adoption and the narratives constructed within families. One of the participants pointed this out in particular:

Well...part of the dialogue that surrounded the adoption was 'you were chosen;' 'you were wanted, you were chosen;' it was all focused on that side of things as opposed to 'you were given up' [rather it was] 'we wanted you, we chose to have you'. The way it was phrased I always thought 'ok so they went into a room with a lot of baby cots and picked me' in my naive childhood, and then I found out that no,

the way it works is you know you get a phone call saying there is baby available [laughs] there's one baby available right now, are you ready? Do you want it? (A3)

The following demonstrates how these narratives are normalised and humanised into the adoptee's day to day life:

It [the adoption] wasn't ever like a big thing to the point where my sister and I, when we were kids used to wind each other up. My sister would say to me ... "your mother didn't want you and you're not Mum's real child" ... and I'd come back with "Mum chose me but she got stuck with you" (laughter) so like it really wasn't a big thing. (A1)

The adoptee A3 who had no involvement in her birthmother for the first few years of her adoption shared some "keepsakes" that she had that in a way helped with connecting with her birthmother and wider family:

When my birth mother first got out of the hospital she put together a care package for me which included this letter, a necklace and a bowl, a family heirloom bowl. ... the initial letter I got [from my birthmother], says that I've got the silver bowl, it's very old dating back to 19th century, it belonged to my great, great, grandmother on my grandmothers side so it has come down the women's line. And she states here "your grandmother thought of it for you as it gives you a small part of your natural background, on one side anyway" ... She refers to me as [name] throughout the letter because that's what she would have named me ... I initially was going to be christened [full name] and then when [adoptive] mum found out about the middle name and found out what my birth mother was going to call me, mum and dad put that name in as my second middle name. Yeah, pretty dam cool huh [laughs] (A3)

6.2.3 A Question of Fit

Thus far, the reader has had a sense of the two worlds the adopted person walks in and normalises. Each of the adoptees have used some version of the word "different" to

describe their family, their situation, their normal. This 'difference' is also highlighted within their everyday lives. What this also highlights however is their parents own willingness to accept the adoption scenario by recognising the birth parents. For the adoptees however, there was a sense of not quite fitting in their family and not quite fitting in their birth family:

People looking from the outside say that me and mum are closer but I always say Mum and [sibling] are closer because ...you know they think alike and I think it's just easier if you think the same sort of way whereas [birthmother] and I will never have a mother and daughter relationship but I can see how you know I think and talk and act like her and my [birth] sisters a lot more than I do with Mum and [sibling]. (A1)

OK, like I do ... like I look at Mum and [sibling] and they're so similar ... and in some ways I don't fit with them because they think alike, they act alike you know and stuff like that, whereas when I look at [birthmother], unfortunately we look a bit alike (laughs). She's got this big nose thing (laughter) and like you know some of the stuff even Mum would be like "oh you sound like [birthmother] sometimes" and the stuff I do. (A1)

But my mum says 'it's so weird, I look at you and your birth mother together and there are certain postures or ways that you act' and things that you would have thought would have been nurtures are actually coming across as natures. Small gestures and tilts of the head that you really would have thought would have been learned. And Mum has said to me 'no I just see you guys [me and my birthmother] in each other so much, it's kind of bizarre'. And so, it's a bit odd thinking that those things would have yeah evolved. That they should have been nurtures but they are actually natures. (A1)

So I don't think I would fit better with [birthmother] but I just think I'm a bit different to them [adoptive family]. (A1)

6.2.4 Identity

The term 'Adoption' and 'Identity' are often synonymous with each other. For many, the question of identity often lies in the "where do I come from". I am Naomi, I come from both Dutch and English bloodlines. Whereas this was not so much a focus with the adoptees.

One adoptee was still unsure about what formed her identity per se, but emphasises that the factors in her life that contribute to what makes her stronger are a part of that identity:

I am still finding out who I am. There's no 'what made me'... I know what [has] messed with me, and I know what has made me stronger ... I know what I have had to come to terms with. I know what's made me stronger. (A2)

Another adoptee when asked about identity:

I'm an adopted, only child and it rolls of the tongue in that order. That is part of my identity ... What is my actual identity and what groups do I belong to ... as an adoptee is a big part? Yeah it is, because it means I was quite different.

I'm an only child. I identify as an only child, I was brought up as an only child, I've got only child syndrome up the whazoo ... But I'm eldest of () cause my birthmother has (*) more and my birth father has (*) more. (A3)*

For one adoptee, claiming her identity as an adoptee meant embracing her adoption status. Earlier in this chapter one adoptee expressed her frustration at having to explain the situation, for another adoptee the novelty and difference was one that was embraced and helped form her identity:

A1: Well when I was a kid all my friends just thought it was really cool so I was like the cool kids (laughs) so no I didn't really think there was ...

Researcher: Why do you think though it was cool?

A1; I suppose because it was like I had two Mums and all these other sister's and I don't know it was just kind of cool you know

Researcher: so it was a bit different from the...

A1: Yeah and so like you know in class we used to do like who's got the oldest mother and who's got the youngest and I always had both so that was pretty cool (laughter) ... so yeah it was always just you know oh yeah that's cool you know yeah...I just thought it was pretty cool...and you know you always have the back up if you do something really dumb it's like genetics it's not my fault (more laughter)
(A1)

Through the course of discussing adoption and identity the issue of attachment came up. One participant wonders what the impact of not being looked after by her mother (in part) may have had a bonding to her mum:

It never occurred to me that [birthmother] would have looked after me or if I bonded with her rather than mum. I don't know if my and mum's relationship is any more volatile than most but it can be volatile, but at the same time I am the only one who allowed to go off about my [adoptive] mother. No one else! I will defend her to the teeth and I am her biggest fan as well. I really do think I can see all sorts of qualities in her that I don't think she can even see some of them herself. I'm her biggest fan and also when I am sick or heartbroken, I want my mummy (laughs)
(A3)

Similar sentiments were echoed by another participant who also wondered if her adoption status impacted on her relationship to her adoptive mother and she highlighted some of the differences she was aware of:

My mum, I didn't care, I didn't like her at all. We didn't get along. From the time I was about 12 I just started to hate her and that went on for years. Even now, we have serious issues getting along. ... And if you can't talk to your mum, who can you talk to? (A2)

6.3 Contact with Birthparents and wider birth family

6.3.1 Contact with the Birthparent

After explaining what the participants know about their adoption story, they were asked about the nature of the contact.

For two participants, contact had begun before they could remember and they don't remember not ever having their birthmother (in these cases) involved in their lives:

No ... I don't think there was a first meeting, like I think I have always known she was there and I have always known about [birthmother]. I have always known my brother but ... when they moved back when I was four there was a lot more to do with them. I remember there being birthday parties and hanging out and going to each other's houses and me having sleepovers there with my brother ... I remember all that. (A2)

Before she moved away ...I was a baby I don't really remember this...she used to come round and bring her friends round and stuff like that...from an age I can remember she was in [city] so she used to send me letters and presents for my birthday and Christmas and stuff and then when she moved back when I was [older] then you know we'd see her and the family ... but I don't remember her not being there (A1)

What these snippets also show is the transient nature of people. This is also reflected in similar feedback from the adoptive parents and birthparents. This was the case for these two participants.

A common form of contact in each of the adoptees during this time was communication through letters and photos. This was a process that was encouraged and facilitated by the parents and highlights the working triadic relationships. Participant A3 recalls her mother making her sit down and write a letter to her birthmother:

So once we got back in contact I remember being sat down at about age 7 and being told 'write to your birthmother' and mum had out everything. She had school reports, photos, certificates, this that and the other just all over the dining room table, they were just everywhere. And I remember actually being told (to write), a funny clear memory. Maybe at the time I thought that was a bit odd because I had always been told it was an open adoption (so sending off a lot of information now seemed odd.) (A3)

For this adoptee, not long after reconnecting with her birthmother, her birthmother moved overseas. This was another moment of loss for the participant:

And I got to meet them just before they left for (overseas), because of his job. That actually kind of sucked because it was losing her for a second time. I was glad I met her but it still kind of sucked... Contact after this event occurred by way of letters and visits when they were back in the country. We wrote some letters and they would come back every couple of years anyway. (A3)

Two of the participants recall feeling quite curious and mesmerised by their birth mothers over the period where they were living in different places:

I do remember when I was quite young ... sometimes video's would arrive (from birthmother overseas) ... and it was very much of my half (siblings) doing their thing, playing and whatever and all I thought is 'I just want to see my birthmother, I just want to see her in the shot' but she was behind the camera 99% of the time and I thought 'no I just want to see her' ... I spent a lot of time looking (at her) and she was just this object of curiosity, I thought to myself 'I just want to know who you are. Yeah, I don't know quite how else to describe it. (A3)

... when she first moved back and I was you know a bit older it was kind of weird seeing her after so long and it was like ... do I look like that?... I do remember looking at her and thinking mmmm it's now how I pictured her. (A1)

The above adoptee mentioned interaction feeling 'weird' after not seeing her birthmother after a period of time highlighting that interactions can be stilted and immediately organic or familiar. Another participant also spoke of the enduring nature of her relationship with her birthmother which also highlights that while there is a connection there is also a disconnection in terms of the relationship being less organic than that with her adoptive parents:

I think we used to be more awkward to be honest, but yeah, less and less as time passes and you know we talk about bringing your best manners and that kind of thing, yeah, but now it's a far more relaxed atmosphere – two adults interacting, not adult and child. I don't quite bowl home like the other [siblings] would. It's quite different when I go visit mum and dad, I bowl home and it's like 'well, this is

my home', whereas at my birthmother's place, not so much. Although I do remember when she brought the house after she moved back here, she did say to me 'this room is yours, it will always be yours' It never really felt like my room as such, but it was good knowing it was there, and she always said 'you can be here anytime you like, anytime'. (A3)

She used to live in (city) till I was about 9 or 10 and then when she moved up here ...I think I stayed with her once or twice but I always got homesick there and come home anyway ... then my half-sisters obviously came up and we used to actually babysit them so me and my sister would go and baby sit my half-sisters and stay the night there... (A1)

This provided an opportunity to explore the adoptees perception or experience of how their parents react to, and respond to the adoptee's interacting (or in this case, staying) with their birthparent:

... Even you know when I went and stayed with her at her house a few times Mum was always like "I was always happy for you to go and just hoping that you'd come back because you don't own a child" so... "if you wanted to go there and that's where you wanted to go I wasn't going to stop you but you know I was always hoping you wouldn't go" (laughter) fair enough ...yeah (A1)

It is difficult to ascertain whether the mothers comment here was tongue in cheek or an honest confession of their feelings. If it was the case this feeling did not appear to be projected onto the adoptee in fact the adoptees each reported a sense of comradery between their parents and birthparents:

A1:No. I don't believe there were any tensions whatsoever, because both parties really wanted this to happen for my sake [emphasis added], Mum and Dad have always been supportive of me having the fullest possible relationship I could with my birth family, the whole family.

Researcher: Did they ever say why?

A1: No... I don't think they specifically ever expressed to me their ethics behind that, they just always said that 'this is always what we intended and always what we wanted;' not a why (reason for) just the what... And Mum and Dad

have always got on fine with everybody, because when I was younger of course I couldn't drive myself to (town) and we get there and it was just like yeah they always seemed to get on fine with whoever was around.

No not between them, I don't, if anything it felt like sometimes they were ganging up on me. When I was like...yeah because I was like a naughty as teenager. I was like screw yous I hate all of yous like I hate you. I hated them. (A2)

The adoptees were able to share moments where the adoptive parents and birthparents interacted, whether it be during visits or celebrations and for one participant her birthmother lived with them for a period of time:

I remember times when they had been at my house, but being real frequent like you know. I mean for one stage they (birthmother and brother) lived with us... But they'll always ask them to come over and like I remember going there and my mum, even now, my mum comes to my little brother's birthdays and my mum comes to [my birthmother's] birthday. It was her 40th the other day, my birth mums, my old lady comes along with me. And same, like [birthmother] will come for my mum's birthday and will come over home... I mean they don't hang out, but definitely they have a good relationship, for me [emphasis added] (A2)

At my 21st both my Mum's got up and did a speech as well and they were like "we raised her together". [my birthmother was] like "yeah I baked her and she raised her" (laughter) (A1)

6.3.2 Role of the Birthparent

The term "Mum" is one that is attached to a specific role that person plays. It was very clear from each of the adoptees that there was a clear distinction between their 'Mum' and their birthmother. The maternal role of the birthmother is acknowledged, however there is a barrier to how far this can go. For the adoptee it is their adoptive mothers that are in the forefront when it comes to the maternal roles in their lives. This links to who the child forms attachment with in their early days. The role of the birthfather was not strongly relevant here as dominant involvement has been with the birthmothers:

Yeah I have got mum and dad, and my birth mother. We are very specific you know. The only times I have ever referred to my birthmother as mum is when I'm talking my siblings on that side of the family. Occasionally an aunt, [will say] 'oh your mum' and I'm like 'argh'... I'm not going to correct them but it's not, it grates on my ears. ... I'd never call my birthmother mum to her face. I just don't. (A3)

A: I think cause you know your mothers like a special role I don't think it so much the person that gave birth to you it's the person that raised you cause that's who you kind of connect with ... maybe. Not undervaluing [birthmother's] part but you know... I talk about her as [name] but then I confuse (people) by saying [birthmother] and Mum and people never know who I'm talking about...so when [birthmother] came into work one day I was like, "oh this is [name], she's my tummy mummy to qualify her as opposed to Mum. (A1)

Like I know that [birthmother] loves me and she loves my kids a little bit more than a friend, but she will never be my mum and if she tried, I actually think I would tell her where to stick it. I mean I let my adopted mum tell me off at times ... she's my mum, she's allowed. (A2)

The adoptee A2 spoke about her birthmother being more like friend. The other participants also distinguished the difference in relationships. One felt her birthmother was closer than a friend because she has a vested interest and described the relationship as being more like a sisterly one:

Yeah whereas I think [birthmother]... I suppose in some ways [was more] sisterly because you kind of don't really care what your siblings do as long as they're happy and I think she was more you know that way...yeah (A1)

The parental role was one that was clearly distinguished by the participants whereas other birth family members on the peripheral did not always have that clear separation. Birth siblings were referred to as brother or sister. Terms like Aunty, Uncle Grandma, and Grandpa were used when referring to members of the birth family. When this was pointed out to one adoptee she explained:

I think because maybe because my [birth] sisters, like we're kind of the same age kind of sort of get on and like...as you get older and you're not living at home and you're all kind of out on your own homes and like see your sister you might hang out with your sister and do stuff so they're kind of my sisters you know...whereas like my mum if I have a problem I'll call my mum it's like my mum whereas [birthmother] I don't see the same way you know. (A1)

None of the adoptees felt that their birthmothers took a parental role in them:

I think in some ways I kind of feel that she's ...like she's more accepting of me than Mum cause I think Mum's got, you know how your parents have standards for you and they want you to do this and be that, whereas I don't think (birthmother) got any of those expectations so... I don't think she had the parenting expectation kind of the same... (A1)

When asked to expand on what kind of role the adoptee's felt their birthmothers had, the adoptee's felt there was a definite distinction between a parental role and the role of their birthmother:

Um...not...certainly a parental role. (A1)

No, there's never been any reason for her to take it on, but she has never needed to parent, she has never tried to parent. ... It's kind of like having a friend you only catch up with you know a couple of times a year. But then she does have a vested interest as well. She care more about me, my career, my life than, than say, certainly that friends would. I mean friends are there to listen when you want to talk, but she'll often be more asking as well. (A3)

Much like the adoptive parents finding a term that portrays the role of the birthparent, the adoptees also draw on terms that denotes a familiarity and closeness but yet does not really capture the true essence of the birthparents role. This could be due to no such term for these relationships existing.

6.3.3 Adoptee relationship with wider birth family.

As alluded to earlier, in each of the adoptees interviewed not only had a relationship in their birthparent but also their wider birth family. Each spoke about their involvement and inclusion in family events and celebrations. For one participant in particular, these relationships are quite close (especially in birth cousins):

Way closer, way closer to my birth family cousins than to any cousins on mum and dad's side. Yeah. Way closer. Which is cool, because otherwise it really would be just me. (A3)

This adoptee recalls meeting her extended birth family for the first time and a comment made by a grandparent shows how she was viewed and embraced within the birth family:

Well one of the early things I remember when I first met her, I think, one of the earliest things she said to me was "you're number 4". There's so many of us we've got numbers and she said 'you're number 4, and I've always kept your number open for you ... even after we lost you we kept your number open for you' and then numbered on down after that, so yeah. So I'm cousin number 4. (A3)

Again much like the relationship in the birth parent, relationships in the extended family have evolved over time to a place where it feels more natural for the adoptee:

Not [natural] at first, but these days it's not weird at all. I'm lucky that [birth grandparents] are still with us and I actually popped down there. I've stayed there quite regularly whenever I am travelling down the county. I usually make it a 2 day trip down and stay there on the way down. So it's now, it's now a really open relationship as in I hang out with cousins sometimes. (A3)

It is interesting to note again the differences in sibling relationships and the impact that a shared history has on the relationship.

For the two adoptees that had more involvement with their 'birth' siblings from an early age, the term brother/sister was used quite naturally and they both speak of a sibling like

relationship, whereas the participant who was less involved felt the relationship with her siblings was a little more distant:

I'm not the sort of big sister on the same way that they're connected... I don't feel like it's an actual sibling relationship, again it's like they are really close cousins, not siblings. Because we didn't have the dinner time routine, the bedtime, the bath time and all that. To me that's what I think most makes siblings... (A3)

The adoptees were asked if they felt any obligation to their birth families at all. For two of the participants they did not report feelings of any specific obligations to their birth family outside keeping in contact:

I don't really feel like I have any like specific obligations like with family and like [birthmother] doesn't live here so I suppose I don't see her as so much ... (A1)

So I kind of see [siblings] and I kind of help them out more than [birth mother] just because I don't really see [birthmother] the same now... If [birthmother] comes over from [city] we nearly always catch up... (A1)

For one adoptee, this question was quite raw and upsetting. For her it brought up feelings of not feeling she is meeting expectations and raised feelings of grief and rejection, and also the different nature of her situations:

Yeah! It's a need to please almost. Like you feel like you have already wronged them, like they gave you away, you weren't good enough for them. And it's always been like that, like I almost want to cry now cause I feel that way and like, no matter what my [birth] brother does, and I see this, no matter what my brother does the whole family will stand behind him, fiercely. And I know that it's almost the same for me but it's not the same for me because...I'm not a part of that family but then I'm not really a part of... you know like, you never really fit on either side. But definitely it's that, it's that, that need to please them so they don't... I don't know if that's really what it is, but it almost does feel like that, like that need to make them happy ...cause disappointing them is like...the worse thing. And even, like it's still like that. And it shouldn't be like that because me and my birth mum are friends,

and we chill out like, she's like one of my mates, but she still is my mum like...yeah it's a weird one. (A2)

As a side note, while the adoptee A2 felt she was treated different by her birth family, another adoptee A3 felt their position in the adoptive family changed after biological children were born and the family now had their genetic line.

For A2 mentioned in the previous quote, there was a feeling of not being good enough. While on a cognitive level she could empathise and understand the circumstance of why she was adopted. There was an emotional aspect that was more difficult to reconcile:

Birth family, almost like I wasn't good enough, like why...it was like that 'why did you give me away'? Or if they got angry with me like instead of...I mean over something small, like they weren't angry but like even just a little bit pissed of then they would tell me off ... it was like the world had crashed down around me, like I couldn't handle that these people...even though it shouldn't have meant anything to me,, but you know it was a lot less...heartbreaking if my adopted parents had told me off and I love them to pieces, and I still do. But if [birthmother] or Nan told me off it was like the world had ended. (A2)

This fear of not being good enough can be linked to a fear of abandonment. A2 mentions being reprimanded by birth family being more devastating than when done so by her adoptive parents. With the adoptive parents there are secure attachments and a knowing that they will be there. There is a sense however that the adoptee feels that because the birth family “gave [me] up” once, they could do it again. A2 also felt the obligation to make the effort to maintain the relationship in a sense:

The obligation that I have to make that effort...to see them and that effort to remember things. Like I was a kid and I shouldn't have had to remember a lot of...important dates. My parents should have been remembering them for me but it was like, it was more like ... I shouldn't have to remind them that it's my birthday...but I felt like I should because otherwise they would be like oh why didn't

you say anything and it's like this is my freaking birthday and you pushed me out...you should know this (A2)

This not only shows A2's feeling to maintain the relationship but also the expectation around child and adult roles and responsibilities. When we are children we rely on adults to take the lead in certain situations. There is an expectation that adult family members will take responsibility for aspects such as remembering birthdays (in this case).

6.4 Reflections of Open Adoption

6.4.1 Challenges of Open Adoption

The participants were asked what they felt the challenges of open adoption (in their situations) were. Two of the participants identified issues surrounding abandonment as their primary challenge. One participant named it as abandonment:

Oh the abandonment issues that go along with adoption; as much as I say that in a silly tone of voice they are real, as are the difficulties around bonding with a different person. (A3)

Whereas the other adoptee did not name abandonment but spoke about behaviours and feelings associated with abandonment the most prominent being self-blaming:

It's not that other person [blames you], more like feeling like you did something wrong ... I'm (inaudible) like if I was a boy and she thought [sibling] could use a little guy mate and she wouldn't have to buy more clothes and wouldn't have to buy more toys, would she have kept me? If I you know hadn't have made her so sick (inaudible) would it have been easier on her? I don't know. (A2)

Like I said its stupid stuff like its irrational. Its stupid things you can't control. And I know that, but it doesn't stop them from going there. I know that afterwards but when you are thinking it it's not the same. (A2)

The third adoptee identified the main challenge for her was the worry about hurting her mother or sisters feelings when she interacts with her birth family:

The thing that I find [is I] never even considered ... how does Mum feel or [sibling] when I'm talking to [birthmother] or my sisters and stuff ... like obviously I don't mean to hurt mum but like if I give [birthmother] a hug and talk to her or go and stay with her ...you know like what's mum thinking? I know [sibling] feels a bit like I'm her sister when it's just us two and then if I'm talking about my other sisters I'm kind of like "oh I hope I'm not upsetting her? (A1)

6.4.2 Benefits of Open Adoption

All three participants were unanimous in their response to the benefits of open adoption and that was expanding their family and feeling of added security should anything happen. One participant also felt that the knowledge of what happened was a benefit:

I suppose you end up with two kind of families...but for me I've got like how many sisters...I've got 4,5 sisters ... and two brothers. I mean I hardly see my actual biological brother where as I see my half-sisters half-brother all the time so I suppose it's just you've kind of got more family and yeah even though [birthmother's] not my Mum I think if anything happened to Mum she would step into that role and be like a Mum to me... (A1)

Having this whole other family that I know are there and that I know, should anything go really wrong, I've got all of them too. For a while I believe my parents asked one of my birthmother's siblings and spouse to be the executors of my parents will so that I would have been dealing with somebody that I was comfortable with. And I think very briefly that, and I am not exactly sure about this but I do think for a while there that my birth mother was named as my legal guardian in the event of me becoming an orphan. That's probably quite radical. But having that second family...I think of them as my second family, not my first. My first family is mum and dad and their peoples, but you know, having the second family means that I've got ...it's a two way relationship I mean I've got their backs, certainly my half (siblings) if they need anything...not that they've ever asked for anything but if they did... (A3)

Um a chance to be close to my brother, that's always been good for me having a sibling. Um he's been more like a friend in a way, a lot of the ways that me and him both work are very similar, like almost mirrored like, even in the way we look we're similar, ...some of our personality traits are very similar without growing up in the same environment we are very much alike. Um yeah and that's crazy, but I wouldn't have known him, I wouldn't have known my little brothers you know. And I don't know my little brothers as well like we spend heaps of time together but it's hard because me and [brother] grew up knowing each other, and knowing that he was my brother. (A2)

And...at least with open adoption I knew that [birthmother] even though she gave me away I never felt like she gapped it...like she gave me away it was like she was always around. Like she obviously, even though she gave me away, as much as I hated to admit it, it was obvious that she still must have loved me and wanted to be in my life otherwise she wouldn't be in my life. (A2)

One participant had significant medical problems from an early age. For her another benefit was being able to access biological medical information:

At least you kind of know, so like when I got sick back then they must have looked into family background and stuff, but I saw a family geneticist again maybe two years ago and it was quite good to be able to say well I kind of know my mother and my mother's side, I kind of know this much from my dad's and stuff so that was quite useful (A1)

6.4.3 Feelings about Open Adoption

To conclude the interviews, the participants were asked to share any other comments or feelings about their adoption. There was a strong sense of gratitude to their birthmothers for what they had done. It was also recognised that them being relinquished from their birthmothers care was an act of love:

So I am grateful to her because I did have a very good upbringing, it wasn't the wealthiest but it certainly wasn't the poorest. I was ... what I thought would have been a fairly standard upbringing for the 80s and even the 90s. (A3)

I was like 'well at least she had me' at the end of the day no matter how fucked in the head I have been over the years because of it...it's either I'm here or I'm not... (A2)

Oh I am grateful, and I know...yeah I have never held any animosity whatsoever cause I've scored. I have got two great parents who are still together, the values systems I think are completely (compatible) ...I'm glad I got brought up with the values I did now. (A3)

Two of the participants also reflected on what their life may have been like had they not been adopted and both were grateful that they had been. They also acknowledged how difficult it must have been for their birthmother:

No. She was quite a negative person growing up, my brother spent a lot of time with my nan, he didn't have the easiest life ... So um, I know how hard things were for her with just [sibling], I can't imagine how hard they would have been with [sibling] and a small me. Would she have been better or worse? I am guessing not better. (A2)

[Birthmother had] said [relinquishing me for adoption] was the ultimate act of love], like she knew she could never give me the kind of life she wanted for me because she was too young and didn't have anything...but to give up a baby...wow... and I think like to me I look at [birthmother] and how the girls are raised and how they've tuned out and I think wow thank God Mum took me... (A2)

One adoptee also reflects on how hard an open adoption may have been on her own adoptive mother:

And it's like I can look at them and be like oh great that's who I'm going to look like...but I do think that maybe for adoptive parents it would be hard...Like I think Mum was pretty amazing how she did it like when I look at my daughter it's like

you know “your mine you’re not going to anyone else” its really yeah its awful but like for Mum to kind of be like you know if you go off to [birthmother] I’m not gonna keep you here that you know like wow and like I think if I adopted a kid I’d be like “Oh I don’t want them to meet their parents cause what if they like them better” you know... (A1)

All three participants expressed their own preference for their adoptions being open despite the issues they felt impacted them. Their preference still was for an open adoption:

I think open adoption is way better. I think it would be so hard when are you going to tell the kid that they’re adopted [in a closed adoption] and if you do you’re kind of telling your kid, well you’re not ours we don’t really know whose you are...and it just kind of it’s just more questions ... I think it’s just because of the way it was done for me and was just a nothing, you know its that’s just who it is, that’s your actual Mum that’s your actual Dad...you know it was kind of a nothing where as if it’s a closed adoption and you know maybe you tell the kid when they’re 10 well they still really don’t know anything it’s just you’ve told them we didn’t actually have you we don’t know where you came from. (A2)

I’m glad it was open rather than closed for so many reasons, I guess very much for having the circle of cousins, because [I’m] without siblings as well. Yeah. It’s just its really cool having that other family. (A3)

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter has provided the reader with insights from the adoptees. This group are the ones that are required to normalise a situation based on decisions made for them. For each of the adoptees interviewed, this was done from an early age as they grew up knowing their adoption story. These adoption narratives were a part of their everyday lives. This seemed to have helped the adoptees sense of identity and their adoption status formed a part of this. One common theme that arose was how the adoptee ‘fits’ with both their adoptive family and their birth family.

The adoptees all identified the significance of the role their birthmothers played and described a relationship that was difficult to name but all maintained that they did not feel that maternal connection. Each adoptee felt that having an open adoption was a positive experience and preferred over the thought of having a closed adoption. One positive that was identified in knowing their adoption story was also knowing the circumstances. This seemed to have created empathy towards both their birthmothers and their adoptive parents with respect and awe being verbalised.

This chapter has ended the data explicitation stage of the research by focusing on the final sector of the adoption triangle, the adoptee. The next chapter will pull together the themes emerging from the interviews with each part of the adoption triangle and will introduce a model of relationships in open adoption.

7. DISCUSSION

7.1 Introduction

The intention of this study was to explore how those involved in each part of the open adoption triangle adapt to the adoption status of their family, and how the relationships developed and were maintained. For additional clarification, secondary lines of investigation were created; these focussed on (a) notions of family and parenthood, (b) how the biological and adoptive families integrated during the experience, and, (c) perceptions of the role of the social worker.

The three preceding chapters have presented information from the adoptive parents, birthparents and the adoptees. This chapter establishes links between the literature and the data presented in relation to the key and secondary investigations.

This chapter is organised into six sections. (1) The first examines how the participants adapted to the adoption status of their families. This will be done through exploring the themes of grief and loss, acceptance of adoption status and perception and reality. (2) Second, how relationships are developed and maintained is investigated through the following themes: titles and names, boundaries and communication, trust and gratitude. (3) Thirdly, integrating biological and adoptive families. The following themes are addressed: definition of family, stigma, identity and fit with family. (4) Next, the implications for adoption practitioners are considered. (5) In the fifth section, the benefits of open adoption from the participants perspective are discussed, and, (6) finally the chapter concludes with some commentary regarding the terminology used in the Adoption Act 1955.

7.2 Adapting to the Adoption Status of the Family

Whilst exploring how those involved in open adoption adapt to the adoption status, three themes emerged: grief and loss, acceptance of the adoption status, and perception versus reality. Grief and loss is mentioned often in the adoption literature and while not

specifically raised in the interviews, it emerged as a part of the journey for all three groups. Part of the process of grief is acceptance and this was an important theme for the adoptive parents. The final theme is perception versus reality where the outcome that eventuated did not quite meet the desires, hopes and expectations of the participants arising from the challenge of the situation

7.2.1 Grief and Loss

The concept of grief and loss is one that was mentioned by each section of the adoption triad; because the grief and loss differs for each, they are addressed separately.

7.2.1.1 Adoptive Parent: One adoptive couple interviewed spoke of having realized the importance of the very moment when they saw that they had to consider whether the priority is to be parents or whether having a genetic line was more important. For each of the couples interviewed, the priority was to be a parent. Ryburn (1994) cites infertility as the primary reason for couples selecting adoption²⁷. This was the case for each couple interviewed for this study. Johnston (1996) puts forward the position that adoption is usually considered after couples have tried all other measures to conceive (such as IVF) and this was the case for each of the adoptive parents interviewed for this study. It was Johnston (1996) who suggested that adoption may come with a “second choice, second rate” parenting stigma. This attitude was not admitted as being felt by the adoptive parents interviewed. The fact that after adopting a child, none of the couple continued to pursue other measures to conceive demonstrates that this parenting need was met and was not viewed as being “second rate”; in fact two of the couples went on to adopt further children.

While the journey of undergoing IVF and other fertility treatments was not the focus of the interviews it was raised as an important part of the journey of adopting. Authors such as Kraft et al. (1985) write about the grief endured by the adoptive parents resulting from fertility issues, warning that the loss associated with infertility can complicate adoptive parenting. This view is supported by Silber and Speeding (1983) who argue that until adoptive parents can accept and come to terms with their loss through infertility, then a relationship with the adopted child cannot grow. One adoptive parent supported this and

²⁷ The literature in this case focuses on heterosexual couples and does not consider other groups wishing to be parents such as same sex couples or single people.

highlighted that it is important to come to terms with this grief before going through the adoption process. For two of the couples interviewed, it was the journey through the adoption process that supported them in working through the grief. The nature of the process (with steps such as: working with a social worker, preparing the profiles, and attending the seminars) required the couples to look at their motivation for selecting adoption and forced a better understanding of the grief and loss they had experienced. The process of acknowledging and accepting that adoption may be the only option to be a parent is an important step in overcoming the grief felt. One of the adoptive parents interviewed shared that the process of constructing their profile (that is shown to the birthparent) was a helpful tool in resolving the grief surrounding fertility issues. The process of compiling your life story into something visual is one that all the adoptive parents took seriously. This in itself was a powerful reflective process.

7.2.1.2 Birthparent: A review of the literature shows that most writers have found that the grief and loss felt are paramount for the birthparent. The grief felt and the loss experienced when relinquishing a child is immeasurable and continues to evoke emotion from the birthparent. According to Chapman et al. (1986) the birthmother²⁸ experiences loss on two levels: a loss of a child and the loss of the parenting role. While the shift from closed to open adoptions serves to reduce the grief and loss felt, it is in no way a panacea for the birthparent. Having an open adoption does not eliminate this grief and it is questionable as to whether it even minimises the grief at all. For some birthparents, grief revisits during and after each contact with their child as contact can serve as a reminder of what they have lost (McRoy et al. 1988). This does not mean that they would necessarily change the situation but highlights that having openness in adoption does not take the pain of grief and loss for birthparents out of the equation. For the participant birthparents the fact that they are still able to see their child, to witness that they are safe and to have the opportunity of a relationship with their child outweighs the painful feelings of grief and loss experienced.

7.2.1.3 Adoptee: One key motivation from the birthparents perspective in wanting an open adoption was that they did not want their child growing up feeling like they had been abandoned. They wanted their relinquished child to know that this was a decision

²⁸ Chapman et al (1986) study focused on the birthmothers experience and not that of the birthfather.

made out of love and concern for their wellbeing. Despite this intention, the feeling of abandonment was very strong in two of the adoptees interviewed. Two of the adoptees had elements of closed adoption or secrecy in their adoption circumstances. The adoptee that did not disclose any feelings of abandonment was the adoptee who had the most open adoption on the continuum.

7.2.2 Acceptance of adoption status

Sitting alongside this resolution and acceptance of grief surrounding infertility is also the issue of acceptance of their family's adoption status. For the adoptive parents involved in this study a high level of acceptance was evident and this resulted in an encouraging level of empathy for their children. Chapman et al. (1987a) contend that it is important for adoptive parents to be accepting of, and open about their child's adoptive status and in so doing are then able to be more empathic to the child as they go through the process of reconciling their family situation. Each of the adoptive parents was able to share experiences when one of their children had questions about, or got upset over their adoption status. Addressing these involved a two-fold approach: one was providing access to information, the other was showing the willingness to engage with the child in whatever caused the upset. This willingness (as opposed to avoidance or dismissiveness) is an act of empathy (Chapman et al., 1987a; McRoy, 1988).

One of the greatest benefits of open adoption from the adoptive parent's perspective is having access to knowledge of biological and/or medical history or simply being able to answer random questions from the adoptee from a standpoint of truth. Gritter (1997) speaks of two questions that arise for the adopted person, "who do I look like and why was I given away" (p. 60). These are questions that can be satisfied through open adoption. One adoptive father interviewed commented that while current contact between the birthmother and child may primarily benefit the birthmother it is acknowledged that the greater benefits for their child will show later in life when 'curly questions' may arise. The contact that is occurring now at a young age also helps the child form and normalise who their family is and who are the people involved in his/her life (Gritter, 1997; Chapman et al., 1987a). This then forms a part of their identity and is discussed later in this chapter.

7.2.3 Perception and Reality

The adoptive parents must reconcile their attitudes about open adoption with the reality they experience. Despite being open minded about what open adoption might look like and how this may manifest in their family situation, there are still invariably preconceptions about openness of adoption prior to the adoption itself. The interviews highlighted this situation especially for the adoptive fathers; with one adoptive father there was recollection of some trepidation about what openness in adoption would look like. He thought that his wife would be isolated, home alone and being bombarded by the birth family (where in reality it was quite the opposite). For each of the adoptive fathers interviewed the critical juncture was the CYF information seminars. The perceptions previously held were addressed at the CYF seminar, particularly the negative notions of open adoption. While no literature re perception versus reality was located there is literature emphasising the role of effective communication in adoption relationships (Raynor, 1980; Mullender, 1991; Neil & Howe, 1994). Effective communication can act as a buffer to minimise the impact of the failure in reality not meeting perception.

There is also another positive side to the perceptions held. This is the vision or ideal that a tight bond would be developed with the birthparents and there would be continual involvement. Ryburn (1994) discusses the changing nature of contact in adoption. Ryburn's study shows that contact with birthparents usually decreases over time, and this was also reported by the adoptive parents in this study. This decrease is often due to changes in the birthparents life circumstances such as travel, marriage and further children or having the knowledge and assurance that the relinquished child is safe and looked after. In order to accept this reality, adoptive parents need to show a level of understanding and empathy towards the birthparents and their changing lives and needs, whilst also having the needs of their child at the forefront. There are no guarantees of outcome and no surety of expectations being fulfilled in any situation. The results are varied because of the large number of variable factors (such as family make-up, individual circumstances) involved in shaping the outcomes

7.3 How relationships are developed and maintained

There are a myriad of factors that contribute to the development and maintenance of relationships. This section will focus specifically on four themes namely titles and names, boundaries and communication, the trust that develops where there is no legal requirement to maintain contact in open adoption, and gratitude.

7.3.1 Titles and Names

A common finding in studies completed by Siegal (1985), McRoy et al. (1988) and Fowler (1995) was that newly adoptive parent reported feeling insecure and lacking in confidence with their parenting role when the birthmother was present; Siegal (1985) went further raising the question of how this may impact on bonding and attachment. These feelings were not identified by the adoptive parents in this study with each citing that the primary source of bonding and attachment comes through day to day care. How the birthmother is viewed and integrated into the family unit may also contribute to eliminating these feelings of insecurity. One adoptive parent spoke of how they mentally formulated interaction. This was by not actively thinking “the birthmother is coming to visit”, rather speaking about how the birthmother is seen in different ways in the family. Terms such as “special friend of the family”, “our little sister”, “and godparent”, “aunty” were used by the adoptive parents to describe the role of the birthmother in their family. These terms are not used to downplay the importance of the birthmother but, rather, to highlight that from the view of the adoptive parents interviewed, she is seen as a part of the family. The terms and labels here are consistent with those identified in literature. Fowler’s study (1995) identified that 43.6% of birthmothers involved in the study were seen as a special friend of the family or a god parent with a further 41 % seen as an extended member of the family. Other roles given to the birthmother as highlighted in Kraft et al. (1985) included aunt or sister. While these roles and labels might describe how the birthparent is viewed in the family, there is a question of whether the birthparent feels that this is the role they take. This question was not engaged in this research.

In keeping with the theme of titles and names but considering it from another angle, in many of the adoption cases in this study, the birthparent was involved (or considered) when it came to naming the child. The birthparents are required to name the child upon

birth for the initial birth certificate²⁹. In some cases either the first name or the middle name was kept by the adoptive parent. One adoptive parent interviewed spoke of consulting the birthmother when naming the child and in one case using the birthmother's surname as a middle name. One adoptee also spoke of having her middle name as the name her birth mother had chosen. These examples may seem like small gestures but they all contribute to building the relationship between those in the adoption triangle by demonstrating involvement and acknowledgement of the birthmother from the outset.

7.3.2 Boundaries and Communication

Gritter (1997) warns of the challenges birthparents face in showing interest in their child's life without appearing to be parental. This need for and awareness of boundaries was raised by the birthparents in this study. This is a boundary each of the birthparents reported: awareness of and not wanting to overstep their role. This can be difficult when the birthparent still feels a natural inclination of being parental towards the child they relinquished so it is conscious awareness from the birthparents to not overstep this boundary. The adoptees in this study also brought up this issue; they did not feel that their birthparent took a parental role in their relationship, with one adoptee admitting that it possibly would not be well received as this was seen to be a role for their adoptive parent.

For the adoptees in this study, the language used, or more specifically the names used to identify relationships were a tool (whether this be subconsciously or not) in keeping the boundaries. Each of the adoptees used the term "Mum"³⁰. For the adoptee this was a term that held a sacred place for the woman who had raised, cared and nurtured them. This was also emphasised by one birthmother who stated "I am her mother, but I am not her Mum". What this birthmother is identifying is that she is her mother in the sense that

²⁹ After the adoption has been formalised through the court process a post-adoption birth certificate is issued reflecting the adoptive parent's information and the adoptee's new name.

³⁰ Because contact has been primarily with the birthmothers for all the adoptees the interviews focused in these relationships. A3 was adopted by a single mother and was not raised with an adoptive father. In talking about her birthfather she at times referred to him as "my father" as opposed to "my birthfather" whereas the differentiation was always made between her adoptive mother and birthmother.

she gave birth to the child and bought her into the world, whilst also recognising the deeper meaning of the title “Mum” belonged to the adoptive mother.

Interestingly the term “treading on toes” was one that was raised by both adoptive parents and birthparents. Adoption is suffused with emotion and each of the parental parties spoke of sensitivity to the role of the other. On the one hand the birthparents have an awareness of not wanting to be too intrusive whereas on the other hand the adoptive parents interviewed all expressed a desire and willingness to have more contact from the birthparents.

The success of any relationship often rides on the precision of communication involved; this was highlighted by the participants in this study. Some of the challenges of open adoption referred to by the participants were based on this issue. These arose from differing expectations of the parties and whether or not agreed courses of action were executed. Mullender (1991) pointed out the need for clear communication and being able to negotiate comfort zones and that these are paramount to supporting effective relationships. Further a commitment from the adoptive parents and the birth parents to making the relationship work (Neil & Howe, 2004) was also stressed. From the experiences of the participants, when these differences of expectations were explored via adequate communication there were changes in expectations, and this set the scene for change whether it be in attitude, perception or behaviour.

7.3.3 Trust

There is a certain amount of vulnerability experienced by the birthparents in the adoption situation. If the birthparent is not well integrated into the family unit, they are at risk of losing contact with their child should relationships sour. When asked about the challenges encountered, one birthmother highlighted that she was not having as much access as she would have liked. Out of the three birthparents involved in this study BM1 appeared to have the least involvement with the family of her relinquished child. BM1 informed that her own emotions were sometimes the barrier but also shared that she was asked by the adoptive mother on one occasion not to visit for a period. The concept of ‘goodwill and handshakes’ is one that was heard often in the interviews about the non-legality of the open adoption scenario. Because there is no legal mandate that dictates or

binds the nature and frequency of the contact, contact is essentially an informal agreement between the adoptive parents and the birthparents. Many of the participants spoke about having a 'contact contract' however these were not legally binding. Because of the unpredictability and changing nature of people's lives it is difficult to determine specific details in the contact contracts. For example, some of the details included in the contact contracts were around regular photos being sent and how contact may be arranged. In most cases the contracts were kept quite open. For instance one couple reported not having a contract, rather they chose to offer an open invitation to the birth family to have contact whenever they wanted.

The birthparents in this study displayed varying levels of tolerance about how much they would push to have contact with their relinquished child. While one did not feel that they could be overly assertive in this area, the other two were quite vocal in their need for contact whilst also having an awareness of not being too 'pushy'. Requesting contact or asserting one's own needs in the relationship can vary in intensity and can be reduced to two factors: firstly, the type of relationship with the adoptive parents and secondly, the individual personality of the birthparent. The birthparent who found herself more at ease and natural with the parents', also felt comfortable asserting themselves in the relationship. BM1, while not having the same level of ease in the relationship, was only able to do this through their own tenacity. Mullender (1991) and Neil and Howe (2004) again emphasise the importance of communication between the adoptive parents and birthparents to ensure that boundaries are identified and maintained.

7.3.4 Gratitude

The term "gratitude" was echoed strongly through each participant in the adoption triangle. Despite the pain, the difficulties and at times frustration, there is still an overwhelming feeling of gratitude and mutual respect between all parties. These feelings of gratitude can enable greater feelings of empathy towards each other. Watkins (2014) suggests that feelings of gratitude towards others aids in forming and bonding these relationships and can even increase trust in each other. In talking specifically about open adoption the sentiment of Watkins is echoed by Duxbury (2007) who talks of the shift in

relationships that comes from gratitude. Duxbury states that what begins as feelings of gratitude towards others in the adoption triangle can move to feelings of bonding and respect for each other. The adoptive parents were clearly grateful for the gift of a child that they had been given, and grateful to the birth parents for the decision they made. The adoptees also expressed gratitude to their birthmothers for their decision, and each understood the magnitude of that decision. There was a feeling of gratitude from the birthparents in still being able to be involved in their child's life.

7.4 Integrating biological and adoptive families

One task for the adoptee in particular is to integrate both their adoptive and biological families. While this is facilitated for them on some level in their younger years there is still a need for them to accommodate the two families. The adoptive parents and birth families also need to find ways of integrating or being integrated into the family. Four themes emerged that address this issue: defining family and parenthood, stigma, identity, and fit with family.

7.4.1 Defining family

How the participants define family contributes in the way in which the biological and adoptive family are integrated. While the birthparents in this study were not asked to define family, they all used familial terms in naming their relinquished child (that is each referred to "my son" or 'my daughter") and identifying them as a part of their family. The manner in which the adoptive parent and adoptees defined family tended to reflect the complexities of their family makeup and they included legal, biological and social relationships within their definitions. Collins, Jordon and Coleman (2012) highlight how definitions of family are often limited to biological and legal relationships and this approach does not seem to encapsulate the complexities of family highlighted by the participants of this study. One explanation for this is that the traditional nuclear family is still seen as the norm within society (Collins, Jordon & Coleman, 2012) however for the participants the traditional nuclear family was not within their frame of reference.

7.4.2 *Stigma*

Throughout their lifetimes adoptees in this study have been faced with the dilemma of integrating their biological roots with their adoption status. For each of the adoptees, adoption was part of their family dialogue and this meant that to some extent their adoption status was normalised. Each adoptee spoke of having to explain their family makeup to others outside the family (for example school friends and work colleagues). So while it was normal for them, curiosity from others highlighted differences. As highlighted in Chapter Two, Smalls (2013) affirms that the adoptee may experience stigma due to their adoption status and posits that the effect of this stigma is underestimated and under researched. The participants in this study did not use the term stigma however reported different times of having to explain their family situation and answer the questions that followed from others trying to understand.

7.4.3 *Identity*

Ryburn (1994) concludes that if information surrounding the adoption and circumstances around this adoption, is integrated from an early age then this is able to be accepted and enables the adopted person to form their identity. Each of the adoptees was asked about identity. From the interviews there was a direct correlation between sense of identity and openness in adoption. Participant A1, whose adoption was ‘most open’ in terms of contact with both birthparents and extended family from an early age, expressed more confidence in her identity. For this participant all questions she posed were answered from an early age and the answers she got could become incorporated into her identity formation. The other two participants struggled more with this aspect. Despite having open adoptions, elements of closed adoption practice were present.³¹ Both identified as having to ‘come to terms’ with different elements of their adoption status such as not knowing who their birthfathers were. The unknown factor was how much or to what extent gaps in knowledge via unanswered questions contributed to their turmoil or whether this was due to individual resilience and makeup. This highlights how open

³¹ One participant did know about birthfather until later in life. The other lost contact with birthmother (as discussed in previous chapter) and also did not know birthfather until an adult.

adoption is not necessarily a panacea that offers a 'fix' to the issues associated with closed adoption.

In a study of adolescent adoptees feelings about openness in adoption, Berge et al. (2006) identified three key aspects of identity formation in subjects: physical characteristics, personality characteristics and access to biological information. The adoptees interviewed in this current study all highlighted these three aspects as identified by Berge et al. All spoke about both physical and character similarities with their birthparents and how this was noticed by them and also their family. In identifying and explaining certain behaviours and physical attributes, the adoptee is able to make connections about them and this helps in moulding their identity.

Similarly, these biological or 'nature' connectedness was a point of satisfaction for the birthparents. There is a reward in seeing similarities' in their child whether they are physical or behavioural.

Despite all the adoptees being in an open adoption, there were still aspects of 'closed adoption' present³². This has meant that throughout the adoptees' lives there were elements of the 'unknown'. In the case of the adoptees interviewed this was around segments of their adoption story, information (or lack thereof) about the birthfather, or loss of contact with a birthparent for a period.

Each of the adoptees interviewed, shared about always knowing that they were adopted. This adoption status then forms and is integrated into their identity. Gritter (1997) maintains that accessing and accepting this information from an early age is an important part of positive identify-formation in adopted persons. Claiming their adoption status was embraced by two of the adoptees into being a part of their identity; "I am an adopted only child ... that is part of my identity" (A3), and for the other, the novelty of her adoption status was normalised into her identity.

How the adoptee integrates their adoption status into their identity also reflects how they define family. Each of the adoptees recognised and named the complexity involved in being in an open adoption. While the makeup of their family was understood in the realms

³² This was particularly the case in two of the adoptees although this facet of adoption was also apparent in nearly all the interviews (including parents and birthparents)

of their own family, once compared to their ‘non-adoption family’ peers, the complexity became apparent.

7.4.4 Fit with family

Each of the adoptees was able to identify differences in them from the family into which they had been adopted. Whether differences were physical attributes, or more intuitive factors such as behaviours, nuances or personality differences, these serve as a reminder of how the adoptee is ‘different’. This feeling of being different from their adoptive family does not necessarily mean that they found their ‘fit’ among the people with their birth family whom they shared these resemblances. As much as they may have been embraced by the wider birth family, they were still in a sense, outsiders. This is not to say they were ‘outcasts,’ as some of the adoptees reported a close relationship with extended family, but rather that there was the awareness that they were still ‘different’ because of their adoption status. This is tightly connected with identity formation but highlights the struggle the adopted person may face when formulating identity. The experiences and feelings expressed here by the adoptees demonstrate an awareness of ‘being different’; this supports Schwartz (2012) who suggested that development and identity is influenced by both interpersonal and biological factors.

7.5 Implications for Adoption Practitioners

The birthparents all spoke about the role of the social worker in their journey. Some of the key themes were around judgement, empathy, and knowledge of the practitioner weighed up against the enormity of the decision the birthparent has to make. While these are transferable skills in all aspects of social work, their role is not any less significant when working with adoption. Three main issues are discussed in this section: (1) the power of the practitioner; (2) the importance of maintaining the distinction between adoption and foster care; and (3) the need for training.

7.5.1 Role of the Social Worker

Mullender (1991) highlights the potential power held by the social worker working in adoptions. The social worker's attitude towards contact throughout the adoption may have ramifications for the adoption triad. Examples of this were represented in all angles of the adoption triangles explored in this study: the applicants relationship with the social worker improving their chance of selection or having their profiles presented to birthparents (AP1, p.43; AP2, p.43); the gatekeeping role of the social worker in selecting what profiles the birthparents get to see (BF1, p.62); or the social worker making decisions as to the openness of the adoption (A3, p.80).

7.5.2 Information Availability

The current adoption training seminars referred to by the applicants are also combined with information seminars for long term fostering of children who are under the care of the state. In an era where consolidation of services is preferential in order to minimise resources and cost, combining these two (adoption and long-term foster care) may appear to be a legitimate union; there are similarities between the children in this case. Both adoptees and children in long term foster care need loving stable environments where they can grow; both need to maintain a relationship with the children's family of origin. But there are also points of difference such as background and impact of abuse, and the question remains if these points of difference are given consideration in the information seminars. As was evident from each birthparent interviewed (and anecdotally from the adoptees) the relinquishment was an act of love and something that was chosen by the birthparents so their children could be raised in a way and in an environment that the birthparents felt they could not give at that time.

For children going into care, it is often the outcome after a period or act of abuse and/or neglect by a parent or caregiver. The well published effects of abuse and neglect on children mean that these children will have different needs (Greeson et al., 2011). The family of these children will generally be different than the families of the birthparent and contact may be complicated by the role of the state. Given the growing number of children going into care and the decrease in babies being available for adoption, there is a risk (and from one adoptive parents perspective, this was a reality) that the focus can be

primarily on the needs of the children going into long term care. Is there a risk then that those going through the adoption process are receiving the minimum information pertaining to issues surrounding open adoption?

7.5.3 Working in Adoptions

Working in adoptions is a specialised area where a high level of sensitivity and understanding of adoption dynamics is needed. It is important that social workers in this area receive specialised training that addresses the uniqueness of adoption (Rosenberg, 1992). Social workers are always in a position of power and adoptions is no exception: the gatekeeping role of the social worker and the influence of the social worker in the adoption process was discussed earlier. For those working in the field of adoption an awareness of the impact of practice and power is needed (Rosenberg, 1992).

7.6 Benefits of Open Adoption

Each of the data chapters concluded with a section labelled 'Reflections'. Much of the information, themes and challenges outlined in those sections have been integrated in this chapter under the research questions. What has not been explicitly addressed thus far are the benefits of an open adoption by those who experience it.

The benefits of open adoption as expressed by the participants in this study echo those outlined in the literature chapter³³. For the adoptees, who have the task of integrating and reconciling their adoption status, having access to another family, their birth-family, was seen as a benefit. Despite being adopted into families where they were the only child, two of the adoptees have siblings through their birthparents. This meant that they could experience sibling-like relationships. One adoptee gave feedback that it was a benefit in knowing the circumstances of her adoption and knowing that her birthmother was a constant in her life and that she was (and still is) loved by the person who relinquished her into another's care. The expression of such sentiments is only possible under an open adoption system.

³³ Gritter (1997); Browning (2006), Berry (1991), Townsend, (2003)

The adoptive parents appreciated having a wealth of information about their child's biological background (see AP3, p.57). AP3 and AP1 also spoke of the moments when the 'curly' questions such as "why was I adopted" came up and how the answers were there for them. One adoptive parent reflects that not only could she answer the questions, but the birthparent could answer the question directly or the child could ask questions of the birthparent directly. This was identified as a benefit by the adoptee, adoptive parent and birthparent. This amount of honesty and transparency was not available during the closed adoption era and it is this information that contributes to the adoptees identity and fill the gaps in their story.

7.7 The Adoption Act 1955

This section offers commentary of the Adoption Act 1955. The Adoption Act 1955 has often been on the agenda for change since the 1980's (Fowler, 1995; Griffith, 1997). The findings of this study support that there is a need for change: the act needs to be updated and modernised to take account of changes in family structure, language and relationships. The language and relationships experienced by the participants' shows that there are complexities and emotions involved that are not reflected in the wording of the Act. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the Act stipulates that once the adoption takes place then "the adopted child shall be deemed to cease to be the child of his existing parents (whether his natural parents or his adoptive parents under any previous adoption), and the existing parents of the adopted child shall be deemed to cease to be his parents" (Adoption Act, 1955, p. 22).

The experiences and emotions experienced, especially by the birthparents in this study, demonstrate that the "ceasing to be the child" or "ceasing to be the parent" is not that straightforward. While in a legal sense the distinction is clear and definable, the birthparents all expressed a parental concern for their relinquished child.

While each of the adoptees clearly identified the people who adopted them as their parents and who took that 'day to day' responsibility and all that involves, the connection to the birthparentsⁱ was also evident. Each of the adoptees acknowledged the role of their birthparents in their lives. The birthmothers were not just a family friend or someone who came to visit, there was a sense that it was deeper than that, something which could

not be easily verbalised. The adoptees were also aware of how significant they were to their birthmothers in particular and it was this awareness that added depth to their relationship.

Each of the birthparents interviewed still referred to the child they relinquished as either 'my son' or 'my daughter' so while the wording in the Act states that they "cease to be the parent", the relinquished child did not cease to be their child, at least not emotionally. So where does this leave the adoptive parent? It could be easy to envisage that by the birthparent defining the relationship with their relinquished child in this manner could be quite threatening to an adoptive parent however this was not evident in any of the interviews. Changes to the 1955 Act that identifies and acknowledges the continuing relationship between the adoptee and their birthparent are most desirable and clearly are needed.

7.8 Conclusion

In this chapter there has been discussion of the data collected from nine interviews conducted representing different relationships in open adoption. A relationship between the data and the literature was established and themes were identified. What becomes apparent amongst the themes is that there are overlaps which reflect the real nature of relationships in open adoption. While the focus of this research was on the relationships in open adoption, each participant brings a 'back catalogue' of their own experiences and perceptions into the relationship. These were often dominant in the narratives however it also becomes obvious that some themes transcended each group in the adoption triad. Grief and loss, the conscious and subconscious boundaries, communication and gratitude are themes identified through all three groups. The birthparents and adoptive parents both shared experiences relating to their own perception of relationships and how these may differ from the reality that plays out. Much of this is based around the nature of contact which is often changing depending on the evolving needs of those involved. This leads to a discussion on the non-binding nature of any contact agreements made at the time of adoption. The adoptee also has the task of integrating with two families and has to deal with the stigma of being an adopted person; this then forms a part of their identity.

Finally this chapter considered the roles of those professionals working in the area of adoption and emphasised ensuring that practitioners have the skills and knowledge to the

uniqueness of the needs of each part of the adoption triangle. Following this the current legislation that covers adoption practices in Aotearoa New Zealand was discussed, highlighting some of the challenges of the wording of the 1955 Act which was written when closed adoptions were the only form of practice.

The following chapter will discuss the findings of this research within the limitations of the framework of the methods employed. This work has opened the way for a plethora of future work which will be needed to allow us to better understand the subject matter, and ideas will be proffered as to the possible shape and direction of future work.

8. SOME CONCLUSIONS

8.1 Summary and Conclusions

This study set out to explore the dynamics of open adoption from the perspective of those involved in open adoption relationships, namely adoptive parents, birth parents and the adopted person. As a basis for exploring relationships in open adoption, the questions posed were: how does each part of the open adoption triangle adapt to the adoption status of their family? And, how are the relationships maintained? Secondary objectives included examining and exploring the concepts of family and parenthood; how are adoptive and biological families integrated?; and what are the perceptions of the role of the social worker? From the resultant findings the following six conclusions have been drawn.

First, there are clearly definable stages that the adoptive parents and birthparents go through in adapting to the adoption status of their family. First is acknowledgment of and reconciling with the grief and loss experienced, accepting their circumstances and coming to terms with the fact that the reality of what the adoptive parents and birthparents have experienced may not have matched their initial perceptions of what they dreamt an open adoption relationship should look like. For the adoptee, the process is different as this new family makeup becomes their normal.

Second, the adoptee especially has the task of accommodating and integrating both their adoptive and biological families. This is also required of the adoptive parents and to some extent of the birthparents. For the adoptee and the adoptive parents, the manner in which they define family and acknowledge the complexity of their family makeup assists in this process. How the biological and adoptive families are integrated, along with dealing with the sporadic experienced stigma of being adopted, all contribute to how the adoptee's identity is formulated.

Thirdly, despite the challenges faced and the feelings of grief and loss experienced, open adoption remains the preference of all the participants. The benefits of open adoption

from the stances of all those involved included having access to background information, being part of an extended family, and still being able to have a relationship with the relinquished child.

Fourthly, communicating of expectations, setting of firm boundaries and agreeing upon what form the adoption relationship might take, all aid in obtaining greater satisfaction in the adoption relationship. There is a level of trust required by all parties that this will occur, especially in a quasi-legal situation such as adoption where there are no legal mandates for contact to occur. A further contributing factor to the development and maintenance of relationships is the reciprocal gratitude felt from all within the adoption triangle. This gratitude evolves into deeper feelings of respect and bonding.

Fifthly, the participants spoke of the role of the social worker and the power and influence possessed by the social worker. Adoption is surrounded by its own complexities and it became clear that practitioners involved in adoption would benefit from specialised training. With the stream-lining of social services and combining of Adoption Services with Foster Care there is a real risk that the uniqueness of the needs and issues of those involved in adoption will be lost.

Finally, consideration needs to be given to the wording of the Adoption Act 1955. The current wording gives very clear cut outlines to a very complex relationship. While it encompasses the legal definition of family, no consideration is given to other definitions which include biological and social relationships. This then excludes the birth parents. In sharp contrast through open adoption birthparents have also made a decision and have a desire to remain involved despite having made a decision to give up their parental rights,

8.2 Limitations and Strengths of the Research

The sample size for this research was small and while themes were able to be explicated from the interviews, these may not reflect the wider adoption community.

It is acknowledged that adoption practices have evolved over the past 30 years. The adoptees in this research were all over the age of 18 years and were all adopted in a time where open adoption was relatively new therefore their experience may not reflect current

adoption practices. It would therefore be useful to revisit this study again to gain insight from adoptees whose adoptions have taken place in a time where open adoption was more a norm rather than a new practice.

The methods used in this study to gather the vital data from the participants proved were well suited to the subject and purpose of the enquiry. The recruitment and unreserved cooperation of the participants are positive reflections on the overall design and implementation of the research. From their responses it would appear that most of the participants displayed a high level of interest and a strong sense of purpose.

8.3 Future Research

The findings presented in this thesis have raised a number of issues that could form the basis of future research. Five of these issues are considered here, relating to: stigma of adoption; role of the birthparent; role and skill of the social worker; impact on children conceived through anonymous sperm donation.

Smalls (2006) maintains that the impact of stigma of adoption on the adoptee is underestimated and under researched. Those involved with adopted persons could benefit from knowing the extent this impact of this stigma. While the participants of this study report feeling frustrated at times in having to explain their family situation, the impact of this was not explored in this study.

Much attention is given to the role of the birthparent in the adoptive family with terms such as god-parent, aunty, sister and the like being widely used. The birthparents in this study however did not refer to their relinquished child as their god son or niece rather they used the terms 'my son' or 'my daughter'. Does this then suggest incongruence on how the adoptive parent and adoptee see the birth parents, and the role the birth parent feels they adopt? Or is this a convenient social convention to avoid stigma?

Each of the participants spoke about the role of the social worker and the influence and power the social worker held in their cases. There is scope to further investigate the role

of the social worker in adoption cases and the extent and impact of the power and influence they have.

It has been identified that social workers working in the area of adoption require a specialist set of skills that allow them to meet the unique factors surrounding adoption. Future research could examine the training adoption social workers receive for this field of practice and whether this effectively caters to the needs of those involved.

For each of the parents/couples interviewed, the primary reason for pursuing adoption was because the couples were unable to conceive a child naturally. Adoption rates may be decreasing, but the issue of infertility is not. One method utilised by some is being impregnated by an anonymous sperm donor. If this is done through a fertility clinic, the details of the sperm donor often remain secret. The Human Assisted Reproductive Technology Act (2004) seeks to eliminate some of this secrecy where donors need to supply medical history and personal information³⁴. This information is only able to be released to the donor offspring once they are 18 years. This is not too dissimilar to adoption practices prior to 1985. Will this bring about the same issues that adopted persons were encountering under a closed adoption system? Through this study and as is emphasised in academic literature, the issues of identity, “where do I come from” is one that is dominant in an adopted person narrative. For those children conceived through sperm donation, how important is the knowledge of where they have come from? Will the experiences and questions of those who have been adopted be echoed in these children? These are considerations for future research.

8.4 Concluding statement

This study sought to explore the relationships in open adoption. One thing that is clear through the study is that open adoption is not a panacea. There is still grief and pain, relationships can be fraught at times and questions can still remain unanswered. What was overwhelmingly clear however, is that for the participants, the benefits far

³⁴ Information such as name, address, ethnicity, height, eye and hair colour are collected as well as the donors reason for donating are collected by the provider.

outweighed the struggles: the birthparents were still able to have access to their relinquished child and have knowledge about their lives; the adoptive parents had access to information about their child and access to medical history was specifically identified; the adoptees also had access to their history but there were still elements of closed adoptions present where gaps remained. However each of the adoptees were grateful for the families they had and for the relationships they had with not just their birthparents, but with their wider birthfamily.

Despite possibly statistical limitations induced by the scope of this research, it appears likely that the current system administered by the 1955 Act is both outmoded and inappropriate in the 21st century. Further this research has drawn attention to the overwhelming benefits of open adoption to all parties to it, and this modus operandi should be locked into our social framework. This work has also shown urgent need to review a number of factors not the least of which is the training of professionals involved. Further, such studies are clearly necessary to add to our understanding of issues raised and means by which they are handled. This work is required sooner rather than later to ensure the mental health of the next generation of people drawn into the web of adoption.

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10. APPENDIX I: ETHICS APPROVAL



9 August 2012

Naomi Hesseling
7B Latham Street
NAPIER 4110

Dear Naomi

Re: HEC: Southern B Application – 12/36
The ties that bind: An exploratory study into the relationships in open adoption

Thank you for your letter dated 4 August 2012.

On behalf of the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B I am pleased to advise you that the ethics of your application are now approved. Approval is for three years. If this project has not been completed within three years from the date of this letter, reapproval must be requested.

If the nature, content, location, procedures or personnel of your approved application change, please advise the Secretary of the Committee.

Yours sincerely

Dr Nathan Matthews, Chair
Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B

cc Dr Michael Dale
School of Health & Social Services
PN371

Dr Martin Sullivan
School of Health & Social Services
PN371

Prof Steve LaGrow, HoS
School of Health & Social Services
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Massey University Human Ethics Committee
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11. APPENDIX II: INFORMATION SHEET

'The ties that bind' An exploratory study into the relationships in open adoption

INFORMATION SHEET

My name is Naomi Hesseling and I am conducting research as part of my Masters Degree in Social Work at Massey University, Palmerston North. As part of this research I am wishing to explore the dynamics involved in open adoption from the view of the different parties involved (ie adoptee, adoptive parents, birthparents). In particular I am interested in how the relationships are maintained between all those involved.

You are invited to take part in this research and share your experience of being involved in an open adoption from your perspective. Open adoption is defined as an adoption where there are links that are maintained between the adopted child and their parents, and the child's birth family.

For the purpose of this study I wish to interview three adoptees, three adoptive parents and three birthparents (a total of nine participants). Participants for the research are those who either responded to advertising or who have been referred to me by someone in my own networks. In order to protect confidentiality none of the participants will be from the same family group. Because the research is looking at how relationships are maintained within the adoption, one of the research criteria is that there is/was ongoing contact (at least once yearly) between the birthparent and family.

A number of steps will be taken in order to protect your confidentiality. Your real name will not be used and any identifying information (such as workplace, school etc) will be omitted. However, because the adoption community in New Zealand is relatively small, total confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

If you agree to take part in the research you will be asked to take part in an interview with myself that will be based on some general questions asking about your experience. It is envisaged that the interview will take from 1.5 – 2 hours at a time and venue that suits.

As part of the research you will be invited to relive some of your experiences pertaining to adoption. This may trigger painful experiences or highlight unresolved grief. Should you wish to speak to an adoptions counsellor to discuss any issues or concerns that arise as a result of participating in this research, a list of counsellors in your area will be provided.

With your permission the interviews will be audio recorded with these recordings then transcribed into written format. You will have the opportunity to review the written transcripts and make any changes you wish to your responses. The information gathered from the interview will be kept in a locked filing cabinet and any identifying information will be removed. At the completion of this study the audio recordings will be stored with my supervisor at Massey University for a period of five years after which it will then be destroyed. .

Once the study is completed, written up and examined a summary of the project findings will be sent to you either electronically or via post. A completed copy of the research project will also be available electronically.

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question;
- withdraw from the study prior to submitting of the first draft of the thesis in December 2012;
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher;
- be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.
- ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview.

Please feel free to contact either myself or my research supervisors, Dr. Michael Dale and Dr. Martin Sullivan, if you any questions about the research project on:

Naomi Hesseling
naomi.hesseling@gmail.com
06 8356768 or 0275762245

Dr. Michael Dale
M.P.Dale@massey.ac.nz
06 3505701 ext 2830

Dr. Martin Sullivan
M.J.Sullivan@massey.ac.nz
06 3505701 ext 2833

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application 12/36. If you have any concerns about the conduct of the research, please contact Dr Nathan Matthews, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 06 350 5799 x 8729, email humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz.

Thank you for your participation,

Naomi Hesseling

12. APPENDIX III: ADVERTISEMENT

Open Adoption Participants.

My name is Naomi Hesseling and I am conducting research on open adoption as part of gaining my Masters in Social Work degree with Massey University.

I would like to interview people who have either been adopted, have relinquished a child for adoption, or have adopted a child under an open adoption agreement (where contact is maintained). The interviews will take from 1.5 – 2 hours.

Please contact me on 0275762245 (phone or text) or email naomi.hesseling@gmail.com for further information.

13. APPENDIX IV: PRESS RELEASE

Adoptees' Help Sought by Researcher

Wednesday, 28 November 2012, 9:21 am
Press Release: Eastern Institute of Technology

Media Release

Adoptees' Help Sought by Researcher

EIT lecturer in social sciences Naomi Hesseling is looking for adult adoptees to help with her research into open adoption in New Zealand.

Undertaking a qualitative research project to complete her Master in Social Work degree through Massey University, Naomi is interviewing parents, birthmothers and adoptees.

Wanting to talk to at least three of each, she has reached her quota for parents and has interviewed one birthmother but is finding it difficult locating adoptees over the age of 18 who have been in an open adoption.

Naomi's interest in the topic was triggered by a family experience – she learned she had a brother some three years older when she was about 18 and her sister was around 15.

“It was a bit of a shock,” she recalls. “Growing up, I wished I had an older brother. I think I even said I felt had one but that he must have been adopted. I don't remember if my mother said anything to make me think that way.”

Meeting her brother and getting to know him has been a great experience – “it's almost like he has always been part of the family”. They flatted together for a time, and her sister has flatted with him too.

“He and my mother have a good understanding and relationship, and over time she has been able to express the grief she was not able to talk about before he came into our lives.”

Naomi completed her Bachelor of Applied Social Sciences in the Waikato and now teaches on the degree programme at EIT. She was “heading down the social work track” when, reflecting on what the experience had meant for her family, she became interested in the area of adoption.

“I had the opportunity to work as an adoptions social worker with Child Youth and Family. By that stage, closed adoption was already a thing of the past although the legislation didn’t reflect that and it still doesn’t.”

While the role of social workers calls for a certain amount of detachment in working with clients, Naomi says there is a difference between being empathetic and being detached.

“My own experience and working with adoptive applicants and birth mothers sparked my curiosity about how relationships play out in the long run. I am interested in hearing the experiences of all three in the adoption triangle.

“Having interviewed parents who have adopted and birth mothers, I’ve been moved by their stories. It’s been a real privilege actually.

“What is said in the literature and what I’ve found in interviews is that open adoption doesn’t necessarily take away all the pain and grief, but having access to the biological and medical history and knowing where the children come from are highlighted as benefits.

“However adoption is managed, it’s never really clean cut for those involved,” Naomi says.
