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**SEARCH AND REUNION: THE EXPERIENCES OF
NEW ZEALAND ADULT ADOPTEES.**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
in Psychology at Massey University.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis concerns the experiences of adult adoptees in New Zealand who have instigated a search for and established contact with members of their birth families. A qualitative research method, specifically that of grounded theory, was used for the collection and analysis of data. Data was gathered through in depth interviews and a study of the existing literature on search and adoption reunions. The present study focuses on the reasons for and expectations regarding searching and the psychological process involved for adult adoptees who have searched and contacted members of their birth families. The findings of the present study indicate that adult adoptee's search for their birth families in response to a life long need for personal identity. The actual psychological process of search can be seen as a series of stages, incorporating elements of of adventure, cure and growth. Over time, the nature of the relationships established with birth relatives undergo changes and become less intense. Regardless of the current relationship with birth relatives, all the adoptees found that the process of search and reunion was beneficial and increased their sense of identity.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION.

The historical evidence from most ancient cultures shows that adoption was an accepted practice in some form. Mythology, history and religious doctrine all indicate that when a natural heir was unavailable to a family, adoption was seen as a method of providing continuity of a family line. The social order in ancient civilizations such as Rome and Babylonia relied heavily on the customs related to the worship of ancestors and the adoption of a child ensured that the needs of the society continued.

The fall of the Roman Empire heralded the end of this system of adoption as the social order was not strong enough to accommodate a system of inheritance which was based on anything but a blood relationship. Before the advent of new adoption laws, children were placed in the homes of merchants as servants, or in craftsmen's shops as apprentices. Rather than the child's needs being met by this arrangement, it was a system designed to cater for the demands of the adoptive families and the community. (Ehrlich, 1977, & Schwartz, 1984).

The first modern adoption laws appeared in Germanic law and in the Napoleonic Code. Adoption was reluctantly and slowly accepted throughout Europe and England and the prevailing belief was that adoption was a convenient " out " for the immoral mothers of these illegitimate children who had to be dissuaded from giving up their children in order to pay for their sins.

Adoption was also seen to threaten the continuity of family bloodlines and inheritance. In Victorian England, with orphanages filled with illegitimate children, of whom more died than survived, reformers aspired to provide the opportunity to give these children a new life with a new family. Such was the stigma of illegitimacy, children had to be given a new identity. So long as the child's origins were kept secret and it was made impossible for anyone to discover information about the child, the adopted child became acceptable to a society which viewed illegitimacy as a lifelong stigma. (Toynbee, 1985).

In the United States, adoption laws were introduced in 1846 and there was a strong relationship between adoption and indentured servitude due to the growing demand for cheap labour as the nation's settlements continued to expand to the west. The first adoption agencies were established by church related charities whose primary interest was in providing for their own members thereby making it almost impossible for people who were not members of these sects to adopt a child. Those children who did not fit the criteria of these agencies were put into foster homes or institutions. (Ehrlich, 1977, & Schwartz, 1984).

The relationship between indentureship and the exploitation of orphaned children in New Zealand led to the introduction of The Adoption of Children Act, (1881). The focus of the Act, was the welfare of the children, in that adopted children were given legal status and access to birth records was not limited. The Births and Deaths Registration Amendment Act, (1915), replaced the original details on the birth certificate with the new adoptive details apparently in an effort to safeguard the adoptee from the stigma of illegitimacy. The original birth certificate details were available to be inspected. In 1924, a further Births and Deaths Registration Amendment Act, while not restricting inspection of the

original birth certificate, made it more difficult to have access to and to obtain a copy. The following year, the 1925 Child Welfare Act decreed that when the final order was made, adopted children were required to take the surname of their adopted parents. The Births and Deaths Registration Amendment Act, (1951), restricted the inspection of the records to the discretion of the Registrar or Registrar General. The supply of copies of birth certificates was similarly restricted. The Adoption Act, (1955), effectively sealed adoption records in New Zealand by requiring "special grounds" and a Judge's or Magistrate's order to produce or inspect adoption records. Birth parents were now able to consent to the adoption of their child without knowing the identity of the adoptive parents. Two further Births and Deaths Registration Amendment Acts in 1961 and 1969 continued to tighten access to original birth certificates where released information would contravene the principles of the 1955 Adoption Act. (Howarth, 1988 & Rockel & Ryburn, 1988).

Confidentiality of adoption records had been both promoted and maintained by the belief that it maximises the interests and needs of all the parties to the adoption. It offered the birth mother an effective safeguard against the possible emotional trauma and the disruption of subsequently formed relationships that might result from the appearance of either the child she had surrendered or the adoptive parents. It also protected the adoptive parents from confrontation with the biological mother and the inherent risk of interference with the integration of the child into its new family. The assurance of anonymity decreased the birth mother's resistance to the idea of surrendering her child for adoption, thereby maintaining the supply of infants for childless couples. Sealed records were also viewed as helping adoptees to develop psychologically stable relationships with their adoptive parents and as safeguarding adoptees against the possible psychological distress that might result from a stigmatising or

embarrassing disclosure about their parents or about the circumstances of their birth.

Furthermore, sealing the adoption records served to reinforce the “as if” concept for the parties involved in the adoption. The adoptive parents, for instance, liked to believe that the child never had any other parents and belonged to them “as if” the child were of their own blood. The birth mother, (so it was believed), liked to pretend that she never had a child whom she relinquished. The adoptee identified with the adoptive parents as though they were his or her “real” parents. From antiquity, the concept of adoption has been embedded in the myth of rebirth of the child, and this illusion has been crucial for the childless couples to accept adoption as a non - biological means of acquiring parenthood.

The practice of sealing the records has also been premised on the conviction among social workers that blood ties are not crucial to human psychological well being, that a person can be grafted onto the family tree of others, and if transplanted early into desirable surroundings, can develop into a healthy individual. It is suggested that the assumptions are anchored in our culture, which accords greater value to the immediate blood kin, such as parents and children, and is less concerned with distant ancestors. (Lifton, 1979).

For many years, traditional adoptions have been handled secretly and as a result, the majority of adoptees grew up without any knowledge of their birth origins. Until 1986, adult adoptees in New Zealand did not have any access to files of information or records about their adoption. Once the adoption papers were signed, a child was cut off for ever from their birth parents and birth relatives who then lost all rights and any chance of ever seeing their child

again. The adoption order which is the only final and absolute utterance a court can make, was designed to separate the birth family and child and guaranteed that an adopted child's origins were kept secret forever.

In recent years, the issue of opening sealed adoption records has presented a formidable challenge to secrecy and anonymity, which have been the mainstay of adoption practice. In most countries, the court records and the child's original birth certificate are sealed after the adoption is decreed, preventing examination by all parties involved. Now the target of professional and public scrutiny, the issue was once a private and personal matter for the members of the adoption triangle -- the adoptee, the adoptive parents, and the birth parents.

Members of the adoption triad and other interested parties, have consistently brought to the attention of the professionals and policy-makers concerned with adoption, the issues surrounding adoption practices, in particular, the issues concerning birth mothers and the adoptees. Letters, gifts, messages and requests for photographs have been received by adoption agencies over the years from birth parents. Adoptees have also asked for information that their adopted parents have been either unable or perhaps unwilling to give to them. Adoptive parents have also offered news of their child in case a birth parent should wish to have it. (Rockel & Ryburn, 1988).

Birth parents and adopted people became progressively more persistent in making it known that their interests were being hindered by the secrecy surrounding adoption. Groups such as Adoption Support and Jigsaw grew throughout the country and precipitated much of the political action for law change.

The adoption activist groups see the sealed records as an affront to human dignity and to civil rights. They have questioned the falsification of birth certificates, which they see as a deception in the adoptive parent - child relationship, and have challenged the psychological validity of the "veil" between their past and present lives as symbolized in the practice of sealing the records. These measures, they contend, force adult adoptees to play the "adoption game" silently and to repress the pain of their quest to know their genetic roots (Lifton, 1979). According to the rules of the adoption game, adult adoptees must consider their birth parents at least symbolically, if not literally, dead or nonexistent and believe that their adoptive parents are their "real" parents. Theoretically, adoption has been associated with renewal in that the birth mother gives up her child and starts a new life and the adopted child is issued with a new birth certificate. The formal signing of the final papers and the receipt of the child is final. It has been assumed that the life prior to the completion of this process, has never occurred. Many adoptees see the legal system that promotes these fictional beliefs as a rejection of the biological process of their origins. (Ehrlich, 1977).

Where closed adoption does exist, some adult adoptees have accepted that adoption confidentiality can enable the development of stable parent - child relationships and preserve the adoptive family unit when adoptees are children. But the conditions justifying the protection of the adoptive family are no longer operative once the adoptees reach adulthood. Adult adoptees contend that as adults they do not need the same parental protection and control, and therefore the state's interest in protecting the adoptive parents' autonomy ceases to be compelling. (Sachdev, 1989).

Adoptees also argue that they were not a party to the adoption agreement and

therefore should not be made to suffer the consequences of their parents', (and the State's), decision to isolate them from their own birth history. They contend that opportunities provided by open adoption to learn about or seek contact with their birth parents should not alter the nature or intensity of the relationship with their adoptive parents and maintain that it is possible that this relationship can be strengthened once the adoptee has fulfilled this desire. (Sachdev, 1989).

Those professionals and policy makers involved in adoption in New Zealand began to listen to members of the adoption triangle and eventually the pressure of the public statements from the support groups was effective and the road to change began.

In 1978, and over the next three years, Jonathan Hunt, who was then a junior Member of Parliament in Opposition, attempted to introduce a Private Member's Bill to allow adopted adults and birth parents access to information about one another. In 1980, the Adult Adoption Information Bill was introduced to the House and this time he was successful in having it referred to the Statutes Revision Committee for study. Much to the surprise of the committee and to the Government, of the 86 separate submissions received, 95% were in favour of law change. As a result of many of the National Government's most influential members being intensely opposed to the Bill, it was repeatedly consigned to the bottom of the Order Paper, thus avoiding the necessary second reading for the remaining two years of the National Government's term in office.

As a Government Whip in the new Labour Government, Jonathan Hunt was unable to reintroduce the Bill, so this task was undertaken by Fran Wilde. It was again referred to a Select Committee, new submissions were called for and of those, 65% were in favour of the Bill, 16% opposed to it entirely and the

remaining 19% supported a compromise which had been proposed by Ian McLean. The McLean amendment proposed that information should be released only if the individuals concerned actually registered their wish for this to be done. The existing Jigsaw contact register relied upon this system and its limitations were evident to those who knew how hesitant people, and birth parents in particular, were to take such a step, even though contact with a son or daughter would be welcomed.

In 1986 the Adult Adoption Information Act was eventually passed, without the McLean amendment, and for the first time adult adoptees were given the legal right to know who they were. At the time, it was a change which was greeted with much opposition. Many adoptive parents protested that such a change would be unfair to them as they had raised these children as their own, but now the law allowed their children to desert them and seek out the birth parents who had once relinquished them. They maintained that the entire relationship between adoptive parents and their adopted children was threatened and that the strength of the adoptive relationship depended on the secrecy that the law provided regarding the adopted child's origins. Acknowledging that a child had origins other than the adoptive family seemed to the adoptive parents to belittle and undermine their role and to relegate them to the role of foster parents or glorified baby sitters. (Foster, 1979). In addition, the birth parents, (or other birth relatives), might haunt both the adoptee and the adoptive family. (Howart, 1988).

Many of those arguing against a change in the law maintained that this law would be unfair to birth mothers, many of whom might have kept their secret quiet for many years and who would now live in terror of being contacted by the now grown "child" they thought they had given up for ever. The law, protesters

complained, would be retrospective, yet birth mothers who had given up their babies had been guaranteed at the time that there would be no way to link them to their child: that their child would never find out who their birth mother was. Many birth mothers would have married and have new families who would be horrified to discover the existence of a previous, unknown child. This was predicted to have a devastating effect on families. (Howarth, 1988; Rockel & Ryburn, 1988).

The Adult Adoption Information Act (1985), concerns adopted adults and not adopted children and like all adults, adopted adults need to lead their own lives and make their own decisions and mistakes. Howarth, (1988). The literature on adoption and particularly that which is opposed to adoption reunions, constantly refers to the adoptee as the “ adopted child “ and the authors of such research appear unable to conceptualise that the adoptees who are searching have matured and are adults. (Foster, 1979; Zelinger, 1979; Toynbee, 1985; Humphrey & Humphrey, 1986).

It was also contended that discovery of genealogical facts could prove distressing or embarrassing to adoptees and that the opportunity to establish contact with birth relatives could disrupt the adoptees' identification with their adoptive families.

Key Provisions of the Act.

To adopted people over the age of 20 years, it gives the right to apply for a copy of their original birth certificate, to learn their identity prior to adoption, thus acquiring the names of the birth parents who registered their birth. Those adopted prior to 1 March 1986, must undergo counselling before they can receive their birth certificate.

To birth parents of adopted people over the age of 20 years, it gives the right to ask DSW to inform them of the identity of their adult son or daughter.

Adopted people and birth parents who are unwilling to have their identity revealed, have the right to place a veto on the release of identifying information about themselves from the official records.

Adopted people and birth parents may request the assistance of a Social Worker from DSW to contact the person they have traced as a result of the information they have received.

Adoptive parents of an adopted person under the age of 20 years who know the name and address of their child's birth parent/s, may ask DSW to assist them in discovering the birth parent/s wishes about disclosing information and the possibility of contact.

All members of the adoption triangle may ask DSW, (or the agency that arranged the adoption), to record up-to-date information about themselves on the adoption file, as well as their wishes about being contacted. If the file shows that the birth and adoptive parents of an adopted person under the age of 20 years want to establish contact, they will be put in touch with one another.

Medical information may be obtained from adoption records held by DSW where it is necessary to the well being of an adopted person.

Adoptions after 1 March 1986 are covered by slightly different provisions. For people adopted after that date, counselling is not compulsory prior to receiving their original birth certificate. Birth parents placing a child for

adoption after that date, will not have the right to veto the release of information about themselves, although adopted people will retain this right. (Rockel & Ryburn, 1988).

The phenomenon of searching raises many questions concerning the psychological development of adopted persons, in particular, their formation of a sense of identity. According to Erikson (1968), failure of the process of developing a sense of identity results in a state of identity confusion. In part, this sense of identity is established through identification with the parents, especially the parent of the same sex. For the adopted child, the process is complicated because they have the knowledge that an essential part of themselves has been cut off and remains on the other side of the adoption barrier. According to the literature, adoptees appear to be particularly susceptible to the development of identity confusion. These problems can be seen to lead to a sense of shame, embarrassment and lowered self-esteem.

The older adoptee is likely to be preoccupied with existential concerns and a feeling of isolation and alienation due to the break in the continuity of life through generations that the adoption itself represents. For many, the existing block to the past may create a feeling that there is a block to the future as well.

Adopted adults become invisible within the general population and little is known about their perspective on their own experience. They become visible only when something goes wrong and they enter a judicial or mental health system. Much of the knowledge of adoption comes from a clinical tradition of adoptees in therapy. This tradition has tended to present adoption as placing adoptees "at risk" for a wide range of general adjustment and identity disorders.

(Brinich & Brinich, 1982; Bohman, Cloninger, von - Knorring, & Sigvardsson, 1984; Wender, Kety, Rosenthal, Schulsinger, Ortmann & Lunde, 1986; Kety, 1987; Mattes & Fink,1990).

However, while the adult stage of adoption has not really been studied in depth, the adoptees quest for genealogical information or an encounter with a birth parent/ relative is a personal need which cannot be fully comprehended by a non adopted person. (Sorosky, Baran & Pannor, 1979).

An important factor in the literature on adult adoptees who have searched for birth relatives, has been the reasons for the search. Almost without exception, the studies to date have focused on factors external to the adult adoptee who feels a need to search, for example, a traumatic adoption revelation, lack of information about the birth families, strained adoptive family relations, the experiencing of stressful life events, medical information, the death of adoptive parent/s, pregnancy or the birth of their own child. Occasionally, these studies have included factors such as the adult adoptee's belief that having been adopted made them feel different and incomplete or that the adult adoptee has a poor self concept or has experienced personal adjustment difficulties. (Triseliotis, 1973; Sorosky, Baran & Pannor, 1974; Day & Leeding, .1980; Sachdev, 1984; Auth & Zaret, 1986).

The majority of these studies appear to have been written by social workers for social workers from a sociological rather than a psychological perspective and any attempt to investigate psychological processes have generally been limited to the adolescent adoptees' search for identity. While this is crucial to adult development, the literature has largely ignored the fact that adoption is a life long process. (Erikson, 1968; Horrocks & Weinberg, 1970).

Most of the studies on adoption and adoption reunions have originated from the United States of America, England and one major study from Scotland. In the United States of America, the laws vary from state to state and only three states permit adoptees to have access to identifying information on demand. A further seventeen states will release identifying information by court order.

From 1976, English adoptees have access to their original birth certificates once they reach the age of 18 years after at least one counselling session.

Scotland has always provided for adoptees to have access to their original birth certificate at the age of 17 years and counselling is an option available to adoptees.

New Zealand law now gives adoptees over the age of 20 years the right to their original birth certificate providing that a veto does not exist and that the adoptee attends one compulsory counselling session.

Little has been written about the experiences of New Zealand adoptees and one major study was completed in 1990 by Kennard who conducted an exploratory descriptive base line study of the experiences of New Zealand adoptees who have accessed their original birth certificates since the introduction of the Adult Adoption Act (1985). In conjunction with the Research Unit of the Department of Social Welfare, Kennard chose a mailed questionnaire as her means of data collection. The 97 questions asked, invited the study's participants to respond in a variety of ways. The question areas covered basic demographic information, adoptees' early feelings and knowledge about their adoptive status, whether adoptees had established

contact with birth relatives, how this contact was made, the kind of relationship established with birth relatives, the reaction of adoptive parents and the adoptees' views on the veto provisions in the Act, the adoptees opinions on counselling and the use of mediators. While providing comprehensive base line data on New Zealand adoptees, Kennard acknowledges that the questionnaire responses were more limiting than the responses gained through interviews.

At the time of Kennard's (1990) study, the Adult Adoption Act (1985), had been law for 3 to 4 years. The adoptees studied had had at the maximum, only 3 years to contact members of their birth families and the outcomes of adoption reunions studied were, at that time, short term outcomes.

The overall aim of the present study is to provide information about the experiences of adult adoptees in New Zealand who have searched for and established contact with members of their birth families. The present study differs from Kennard's, (1990) study. The Kennard, (1990) study provided quantitative descriptive base line data on the characteristics and experiences of adult adoptees who applied for their original birth certificate shortly after the introduction of the Adult Adoption Information Act, (1986). The present study involved the qualitative investigation of the search and reunion experiences of adult adoptees who have established contact with members of their birth families.

CHAPTER TWO

METHODOLOGY

RATIONALE.

Most studies on adoptees who search for birth relatives are largely impressionistic or discursive in nature and are based on small samples of volunteers. Usually the participants have been handpicked by social agencies, or have been studied from the perspective of caseworkers or adoptive parents. This study is different in that it examines the experiences of search and reunion from the perspective of the adoptee only. Further, the research has been conducted by an individual who five years ago, searched and established contact with a birth relative. As an undergraduate student studying psychology at the time, I reviewed the literature on search and reunion and found that I was not able to relate to the majority of the literature on adoption reunions. I did not feel that the literature captured the psychological process of search and reunion and that the existing research virtually ignored the fact that there was a psychological process for adoptees. The original idea for this study was conceived at that time.

At the time that I was conducting my own search and research on adoption reunions, I began to take more notice of other adoptees who were searching and establishing contact with birth relatives. From informal discussions with other adoptees, I acquired two assumptions about the process of search and

reunion. Firstly, that the articles and programmes reported and portrayed by the popular media of “ happy ever after “ endings was probably not realistic for the majority of reunited adoptees and birth families. The media generally reported on the actual reunion itself and / or the first few months after a reunion. Much of the existing research also investigates the first few months or the first year of the reunion experience. I was keen to develop this further and wanted to go on and see what actually happened over a longer period of time between adoptees and their birth families. Secondly, I soon came to realise that I could not make many assumptions regarding this process due to the unique individual and personal experiences of each adoptee who embarks on a search as well as those conditions pertaining to each birth relative with whom contact was established.

I was also very aware that my own experience could influence the present study. I drew on my own experience in conjunction with the existing literature to formulate the research question and the data collection questions only.

The basic questions to be answered were formulated. Firstly, what are the experiences of adoptees in New Zealand who have searched for and established contact with a birth relative and secondly, how do those experiences change and develop over time?

Originally, it was decided to investigate the experiences of adult adoptees who had searched for and established contact with birth relatives since the introduction of the Adult Adoption Information Act (1986). The experiences of the initial participants of the study demonstrated that not all adoptees had waited until the Adult Adoption Information Act (1986), became law before they began their search and in some cases, established contact with members of

their birth family. For this reason, it was decided not to confine the study to those adoptees who had searched since the introduction of the Adult Adoption Information Act (1986), and the criteria was expanded to include adoptees who had searched prior to the law change.

The only criteria for selection for this study was that adoptees needed to have been involved in a search and / or established contact with a birth relative, three years ago or longer. The experiences that searching adoptees have are diverse and unique to each individual and it soon became obvious that while the physical process of search differs with each adoptee, consistent themes emerged from the interviews in relation to the psychological process. It was the psychological process that was under investigation, and the diversity in the physical process actually increased the validity of the adoptees' experiences when the experiences were being analysed qualitatively by grounded theory. (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The experiences of three adoptees in particular have been included for this reason. One adoptee was born in England and, under English law, was entitled to his original birth certificate at the age of 18 years. This adoptee established contact with his birth family while living in New Zealand and was included in this study because the English laws are similar to those in New Zealand.

The two other adoptees did not search for themselves. One adoptee was given the name of her birth mother when she was aged 13 and established contact at that time. The adoptive parents of the third adoptee searched and found the birth relatives for this adoptee without her knowledge. Both of these adoptees had intended to search for birth relatives at some time. These adoptees were included in the study because their experiences are valid.

METHOD.

Pilot study.

At the time the research questions were formulated, a small pilot study was conducted. Three adult adoptees who had searched and established contact with members of their birth families were contacted and asked to participate in the pilot study. These adoptees were interviewed in the same manner as the participants of the present study. From a research perspective, the information gained from the pilot work confirmed that the research questions did elicit both the information and depth of response hoped for. The feedback provided by the participants in the pilot study proved invaluable. The information gained was destroyed prior to the data collection beginning.

Selection of participants.

As the study consisted of an in - depth qualitative approach, participants were recruited in the following manner. The local Birthlink group was approached and given the criteria for the study. The coordinator of this group contacted five individuals and asked if they would be interested in participating in this research. As the researcher, I was only given the names of these individuals after they had verbally consented to participate in this study.

Four adoptees were recruited by word of mouth and were initially approached by other individuals who also ensured that they had the prospective participants' verbal consent before passing the names to me. One adoptee was personally known to myself and was approached directly.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS.

Approval for the present study was sought and obtained from the Massey University Ethics Committee.

Confidentiality.

Interviews and the subsequent transcriptions were conducted by the researcher. The participants' identity was known only to the researcher and they were invited to provide a pseudonym to be included in the completed work. Possible identifying characteristics were also altered in the completed work.

Informed consent.

The participants had already consented to partake in the research. However, as requested by the Massey University Ethics Committee, an information sheet was provided to each participant which advised that the study was concerned with the longer term outcomes of reunions. (Appendix 1). A further informed consent form which included details regarding the participants was signed by all participants. One copy of the informed consent form was kept by the participants and a further copy was retained by the researcher. (Appendix 2).

Debriefing.

Individual debriefing occurred at the end of each interview and each participant was given the option of being informed of the results of the study.

Sensitivity to material.

It was not believed that any of the material used in the data collection would evoke feelings of distress for any participant. The participants were advised that should this occur, they were welcome to discuss the situation with either myself or to contact the Adoption Counsellor at the local Department of Social Welfare office who had been informed of the study and confirmed that they were prepared to meet with the participants should the need arise.

DATA COLLECTION.

The data for this study was collected via an interview format. (Appendix 3). The interviews were taped and later transcribed by the researcher. The interview questions were open ended and allowed for the flexibility of each participant's experience.

Further demographic information was obtained from the participants. This included demographic data relating to the participant's current age, occupation, gender, ethnic group, the adoptee's age at the time of the adoption, the other family members in the adoptive family and a summary of their overall personal relationship with their adoptive parents.

ANALYSES .

The analysis of the data involves a qualitative approach, specifically that of " grounded theory " as developed by Glaser and Strauss, (1967).

" The grounded theory approach is a qualitative research

method that uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon. The research findings constitute a theoretical formulation of the real under investigation, rather than consisting of a set of numbers, or a group of loosely related themes. Through this methodology, the concepts and relationships between them are not only generated, but they are also provisionally tested “. Strauss & Corbin, (1990. p. 24).

Areas of research which involve the nature of an individual's experiences, are more suited to a qualitative method of research for a variety of reasons. Qualitative research can indicate the reasons behind a particular phenomenon which has not been investigated in depth and can also add a new perspective to research which has already been explored in a variety of manners. Further, qualitative methods can add a richness and depth to research which is difficult to express through statistical methods.

In grounded theory, the factors which pertain to the research topic are searched for and the dominant core variables that occur in an interaction or process are identified. Grounded theory is used to discover possible explanations for these processes by identifying the characteristics and conditions under which they occur. The development and the generation of the theory is therefore grounded in the data.

There are four principal tenets to judging how pertinent the emerging theory is to the phenomenon under study, fit, understanding, generality and control. If the theory is induced from diverse data, it should also be representative and fit the

everyday reality of the wider topic under investigation. Because it represents reality, the emerging theory should be able to be understood by both those practising in the area under investigation, and those individuals who participated in the research. If the concepts generated from the data are broad and comprehensive, the abstraction and variation of the concepts should also fit the variety of concepts related to the phenomenon in question. The control should be derived from the data and the conditions to which it applies should relate specifically to the phenomenon being studied. (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The basic steps of grounded theory involve collecting the data, coding and analysing the data simultaneously. In this research, the data was collected by interviews conducted with the study's participants. As the data is collected, it is coded and the underlying elements and patterns are conceptualised. The first step of coding is that of open coding where the data is broken down, examined, compared, conceptualised and categorised. The data is examined line by line and the processes identified and labelled. Similarities as well as differences in the data are equally important and must be noted and grouped to form categories. As the data is labelled, it is compared with other data and the emerging concepts are grouped into categories. These categories pull other groups of concepts or subcategories together and the categories are named. The characteristics relating to a category are referred to as properties and the location of properties along the continuum are referred to as dimensions. The properties and dimensions are systematically developed as they define the relationships between categories and subcategories, and are the basis of the analytical procedures for developing a grounded theory.

Where open coding breaks the data down and identifies the categories, axial coding is the procedure used to reconstitute the data by making connections

between the categories and subcategories. The focus is on identifying a category in terms of the causal conditions which lead either to the development or occurrence of the phenomenon, the context in which it is grounded, the strategies by which it is handled and the consequences of the strategies. The phenomenon, causal conditions, context, strategies and consequences also contain properties and dimensions which link and develop the categories by means of a paradigm. The core variables which have emerged are the central factors in the phenomenon being studied and integration of the core variables occurs along with a selective sampling of the literature and the data. (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The theory therefore is discovered, developed and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon. Thus the data collection, the analysis and theory stand in reciprocal relationship with one another.

ANALYSES OF DATA.

The analysis of the data began when the first interview was completed. A line by line analysis broke the information down into small pieces of information. Each segment of information was given a code depending on the content, and some pieces of data was given more than one code if several properties were evident. Further interviews were conducted at the same time that the data was being analysed. At the completion of the interviews, the initial line by line analysis had generated 142 separate labels.

The next stage involved an abstraction of the substantives codes into a more

theoretical code. Often several substantive codes were grouped together into a theoretical code. The process of categorising began whereby the properties in groups of codes were unified. The categories emerged at different levels of the data and the abstraction of the concepts increased as the analysis continued. The relationships between the categories became evident and thus formed the core of the emerging theory. The 142 individual labels were reduced to 16 categories, each containing their own properties. (Appendix 4).

Memos are an integral part of qualitative research. Memos serve to preserve the researchers thoughts hunches and questions as the analysis progresses. The memos are also categorised and assist in providing insights into the developing theory.

The data was then reconstituted into the results of the study which incorporated the use of selected sampling from the data and a selected review of the literature. At this point, a further three adoptees who had searched for and found members of their birth families, were approached and asked to read the results section. The rationale for this process was to determine whether the central criteria of fit, understanding, generality and control had been achieved. None of these adoptees were aware that the research had been conducted or had been involved in the study in any manner prior to this approach. All the adoptees involved at this point had embarked on a search for birth relatives between four and seven years ago. All the adoptees were positive about the results and all stated that they could relate either completely or strongly to the experiences of the adoptees contained in this study.

In terms of the aims of this study, the grounded theory approach indicated the conditions that have influenced the experiences of the adoptees search and

reunion, reflected the strategies they used for dealing with the experience and demonstrated the consequences of what the experience is like.

The theory is discovered, developed and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon, therefore the data collection, the analysis and theory stand in reciprocal relationship with one another.

CHAPTER THREE

THE ADOPTEES.

SHARON.

Sharon is a 25 year old, single school teacher. She was adopted when she was aged 5 weeks and has one younger adopted brother. Sharon describes her relationship with her adopted parents as "above average" and Sharon's adopted family knew that Sharon had always wanted to find her birth family. When the adoption law changed in 1986, Sharon was 19 years old, and her adopted mother who had some information on Sharon's birth family, searched and found members of Sharon's birth family without Sharon's knowledge. Sharon was delighted to first meet her birth grandmother who arranged for Sharon to meet her birth mother who had adopted out two other children as well as Sharon. Sharon has met virtually all her birth relatives and has a close "sister type" relationship with her birth mother.

MARYANNE.

Maryanne is a 50 year old woman, married with 3 children and works as a hairdresser. Maryanne was born prematurely and was not adopted until she was aged 7 months. Maryanne grew up with an adopted brother who was 7 years younger than herself. Maryanne was not told of her adoption by her parents until she was 23 years old. However, she had been told she was

adopted by children when she was 11 years old and told again by another adult when she was 18 years old and had not believed them at the time. Maryanne describes her relationship with her adopted parents as "good". Maryanne searched and found her birth mother in 1987, wrote to her birth mother at that time and has received one letter from her birth mother containing some information and a statement that her birth mother did not want further contact. There has not been any further contact since that time.

MARGARET.

Margaret is 44 years old, is married, has 3 adopted children and works as an independent distributor. Margaret was adopted as a baby and was an only child. She was told of her adoption by children when she was 9 years old and describes her relationship with her adopted father as "excellent" and her adopted mother as "hard to get along with". Margaret's adopted mother told Margaret that she had a full sister who was also adopted and it was always Margaret's intention to search for her sister. Margaret searched in 1986 and found her birth mother who denied knowing her. Margaret went on to find and establish relationships with all of her maternal birth family but has had no further contact with her birth mother. Margaret has possibly found her birth father and has contacted but not met him.

MARIA.

Maria is aged 35 years, is divorced and works as a nursing supervisor. Maria was adopted as a baby, has one older adopted brother and describes her adoptive parents as "great, the best parents I could have". Maria's adopted parents had some information about her background and assisted Maria in

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her search which began in 1980 when Maria became an active political member of Jigsaw. Maria traced her birth family in 1986 and found that her parents were married at the time of her birth, that they are still married and that she has 6 full brothers and sisters. Maria has a comfortable relationship with her birth family and likens it to a "fairy tale".

JANE.

Jane is a 37 year old woman, separated, has 4 children and works at home. Jane was adopted when she was aged 22 months in an adoption arranged by her maternal grandmother. Jane's birth father was Maori and she was adopted into a Maori family. Jane had periodic contact with her birth mother until she was aged five years old. Jane was raised with 5 other adopted children, all adopted from within her adoptive parents' family and she describes her relationship with her "step family" as "horrible" as she was the only "white person" in the family. Jane grew up knowing her birth mother's name and 16 years ago when she turned 21, she searched and found her birth mother. Jane has met most of her birth family including her birth father. Jane no longer has a relationship with her birth father, but has a deep loving relationship with her birth mother and other members of her birth mother's family.

CRAIG.

Craig is a 32 year old man, married with 3 children and works as a nurse. Craig was born in England and has lived in New Zealand for the last 5 years. Craig was adopted when he was aged 2 weeks and was raised in his adoptive family with a sister who was the natural child of his adoptive parents,

an older adopted sister and a younger adopted brother. He has a good relationship with his adopted parents and began his search for his birth mother when aged 18 years when he was able to apply for his original birth certificate under English law. Craig's search took 11 years and he established contact with his birth mother 3 years ago while living here in New Zealand. While he has regular contact with his birth mother by telephone and letters and his birth mother has visited Craig twice in the last three years, he admits to having "very mixed feelings" about the relationship.

ANDY.

Andy is a 28 year old man, married with 2 children and works as a mechanic. He was originally adopted as a 2 week old baby and was returned to the adoption agency when he was 1 year old after his first adoptive parent's marriage failed. When he was aged 3 years, he was adopted again and unbeknown to anyone at that time, his second adoptive father was the brother of Andy's first adopted father, (who had been adopted out of his original family at birth). In Andy's second adoptive family, he was raised with 5 other children and Andy experienced a very abusive childhood and was removed from this family permanently when he was 11 years old. Andy began his search for his birth mother at this time and eventually traced his birth mother after the Adult Adoption Act changed in 1986. Andy's search took over 10 years and currently, while he continues to have contact with his birth mother, he feels somewhat indifferent to the relationship.

JO.

Jo is a 32 year old single woman who describes her occupation as "a jack of

all trades". Jo was adopted as a baby and was raised with 2 older adopted brothers. Jo describes her relationship with her adopted parents as "very good and glad to have them". Jo had always wanted to search for her birth family and was overseas when the adoption law changed. Jo began her search in 1988 and found her birth mother. The relationship which began so well gradually deteriorated and is currently non existent.

BEVAN.

Bevan is a 43 year old man, married with 1 adopted child and is currently unemployed. Bevan was adopted as a baby and was raised with an older adopted sister. Bevan's sister told Bevan's wife in 1985 that he was adopted when Bevan was aged 35 years and this information only came to light as Bevan and his wife were in the process of adopting a child. Bevan waited until the Adoption Act changed and within days had traced his birth mother. Bevan and his birth mother and the man who may be his birth father met within 2 weeks. He has ongoing contact with his birth relatives.

JACQUI.

Jacqui is a 23 year old woman, single with 2 children. Jacqui was adopted at 6 weeks old and was raised with an adopted older brother. Jacqui's adopted mother died when she was 18 months old. When Jacqui was 13 years old, a friend's mother realised that she knew Jacqui's birth mother and introduced Jacqui to her birth family. Jacqui discovered that a young man to whom she was attracted, was in fact her half brother. Jacqui met her mother and discovered that there were two other sisters who had also been adopted out.

Jacqui's relationship with her birth mother quickly deteriorated and she has not had contact with her for a number of years.

THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING ADOPTED.

GROWING UP ADOPTED.

A number of authors posit that a denial of access to their genetic and historical past deprives adoptees of the opportunity to develop a healthy "genetic ego", the absence of which makes them feel a nonperson. (Cominos, 1971).

These adoptees are generally troubled by feelings of emptiness, insecurity, low self esteem, abandonment and being outsiders. (Burke, 1975; Lawrence, 1976; Lifton, 1979; Triseliotis, 1973), and are susceptible to various emotional and learning disorders, (Kirk, Jonassohn & Fish, 1966; Simon & Senturia, 1966).

Brown (1974) asserts that the way a person develops their self perception is partly based on "rootedness" or "connectedness", a dimension painfully lacking in adoptees.

Thompson (1978) concluded that the quality of adoption experience does not determine the presence in adoptees of a desire to search for genetic parents, but it does influence their expectation of and goals they hope to accomplish from reunions. Adoptees with a positive adoption experience are content with genealogical information to complete their identities, while those with a poor experience seek a close relationship with the genetic family.

Triseliotis, (1973), and Sorosky et al, (1976), have suggested that adult

adoptees who wanted to search were more likely to have been only children. Of the 10 adult adoptees in this study, only one was an only child. Of the 10 adult adoptees, 8 were raised with other adopted children.

Out of the 10 adult adoptees studied, 4 viewed their place in the adopted family as being a normal, positive experience.

" Pretty ordinary. I was told I was special, that I was handpicked".

" I had always known I was adopted, it wasn't a big deal".

"Apart from the different looks, it wasn't a problem".

"No different really from any other kids".

Two adoptees experienced an abusive adoptive childhood and both left home as soon as they were able.

" It was horrible. I grew up in a Maori family and I was the only white person".

" I was adopted twice, and my second adopted father was really set against me. He was taken to Court for molesting and bashing me. I left that house when I was 11 years old".

A further two adoptees, while experiencing a good relationship with their adopted family, experienced a sense of loss or of being different.

" It was normal at home but I always felt on the outside when there was a family gathering, I felt that I didn't belong".

" A deep kind of loneliness that I couldn't do anything about".

The other two adult adoptees were not told of their adoption until they were 23 and 35 years old respectively although the 35 year old male was aware of a vague feeling that the adoptive family's history did not add up.

" I had a funny feeling deep down inside but the fact that I might have been adopted didn't dawn on me".

THE ADOPTED CHILD'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THEIR ADOPTED PARENTS.

The relationships studied between the adopted child and their adopted parents has tended to focus on the hypothesis that adoptees who have expressed a desire to search or have searched for their birth families, have done so due to a poor relationship within the adoptive relationship, (Bernard, 1963; Thompson, 1978; Day & Leeding 1980; Raynor, 1980).

However, more recent studies do not support this viewpoint but maintain that while all adoptees are generally interested in learning about their biological heritage irrespective of their adoptive experience, the amount and kind of information sought may differ with each adoptee depending upon the degree of

satisfaction with the adoption relationship. Triseliotis (1973) noted in his sample of adult adoptees that those with a satisfactory adoptive home life were merely interested in background information while those dissatisfied with their adoptive family relationship tended to seek reunions with their biological parents.

In this study, 8 out of 10 adoptees experienced a good to very good relationship with their adoptive parents.

"I couldn't have wished for better parents".

"I always knew that they loved me. They were parents to me".

"I was family and that was it".

"My adopted family were a great gift to me and they always reassured me that I was a great gift to them".

"I belonged to this couple and had become their child, they lavished everything they could onto me".

Throughout the interviews, the two adoptees who had a very poor relationship with their adoptive parents, interestingly referred to their adopted parents either by their full name or referred to them as step-parents.

THE CHOSEN BABY.

Lifton, (1979), states that while relatives and friends tell the adoptee that being

"chosen" is a wonderful thing, adoptees view being "chosen" as a burden that isolates the adoptee from everyone else who is not chosen but born. It has also been suggested by Lifton, (1979), that adopted children who are told they were chosen can come to feel that if they were "chosen", they can be "unchosen", thus creating a sense of insecurity for the adoptee.

Of the 5 adult adoptees who were told they were "chosen", two accepted the story at face value.

"I didn't think much about it. I just took it like it sounded like".

"It was no big deal".

Two adoptees accepted the story but experienced some feelings of disquiet with the information.

"It didn't altogether make me feel completely satisfied because there was always that doubt".

"Some feeling of rejection stayed with me".

Only one adoptee felt reassured with the story of being a "chosen" child.

"It made me feel special, gave me a real sense of belonging and of being somewhere".

THE ADOPTED CHILD'S AWARENESS AND CURIOSITY ABOUT BEING ADOPTED.

There is ample evidence in the literature to suggest that an adoptee's desire to know their biological roots is not an idle curiosity of individuals who are psychologically and socially impaired, as contended by some writers. (Jaffee & Fanshel, 1970; Simon & Senturia, 1966) but that it is a nearly universal phenomenon in normal personality development, (Burke, 1975; Day, 1979; Hoopes, 1970; Jones, 1976; Lifton, 1976; Sorosky et al 1975; Thompson, 1978; Triseliotis, 1973).

Of the 8 adoptees who knew they were adopted, all of them recalled an awareness of their adopted status and a curiosity or need to know something about where they came from.

" I think that I always knew that I was adopted from day dot, having that little inking of wondering where I really came from".

" I always knew, from the earliest time".

" I had a real sense of belonging and being somewhere".

" I always knew I was adopted and felt alienated sometimes".

" On a very deep level, some sense of being rejected stayed with me. It began when I was born and set a pattern

which I subsequently had to find my way back from".

All 8 adoptees maintain that as children they were determined to discover more information about their birth families or to search for birth relatives even though the law at that time did not allow them access to records.

" I had questions. I thought that when I was old enough and if I still wanted to know, then I would make some enquiries".

" I was always up front about the fact that when I could, I wanted to search, everybody always knew that".

" It was always in my mind to look for my sister".

" I vowed and declared that the day I turned 21 that I was going to go and live with her".

This awareness and curiosity and intention to search appears to be a different cognitive process to that of fantasising about the birth mother in particular. Fantasies that the adoptees experienced were generally unrealistically positive about the birth mother. However, the adoptees would also fantasise to a lesser degree about a birth mother who didn't want them and was uncaring.

" There was always that side of me that wanted to fantasise about who she was and what she was like and the fact that she may be Julie Andrews or someone famous".

On my birthdays, I could picture them in my mind, crying for me”.

“ From the first time I found out, I used to draw pictures of flamenco dancers” . I also had bad fantasies , that she was some whore from some bar who got pregnant and gave me up and it was no big deal for her”.

“ I used to wonder if my Mum was a princess”.

“Every year on my birthday. I put my birth mother on a pedestal and I would think of what she might look like and what she might be doing and 50% of the time I would think what does she care, she doesn’t care, she doesn’t want me or she wouldn’t have given me up”.

Two of the adoptees provided their own explanations for their fantasies.

“ It was a fascinating thing in coming to terms with what it meant to be adopted”.

“I think it was part of the comfort for me, seeing them in my mind crying for me on my birthday”.

One adoptee described a fantasy that fits the concept described by Lifton (1979), in that adoptees can feel that they were never born and that they somehow have been hatched or just appeared. Lifton (1979), likens this to “ *the birth of consciousness, the consciousness of being different from the people*

around him" (p.21).

" When I was little, I wouldn't fantasise so much about a person, but I used to draw these long scenarios about being from another planet and being this person who was placed here for a reason and that I was being monitored".

INFORMATION ABOUT THE BIRTH FAMILY THAT THE ADOPTED PARENTS HAD.

Considering the State's efforts to ensure that adoptions were closed and secret, it was surprising the amount of information which the adoptive parents actually knew and generally told their adoptive children. Seven adoptees grew up knowing much of the information known to the adoptive parents, information that generally proved to be correct.

" My real mother wasn't able to keep me because she wasn't married and my father had Maori blood in him. She tried to keep me but couldn't afford to. So her mother knew my stepmother and told Mum to give me to her".

" Mum told me that my parents were married, that I had a sister and that we were both adopted as they couldn't afford us".

" My parents knew who I was, my birth name and that my mother was Spanish. I thought that my parents had painted a fairy story. I thought it was sweet of them but I thought that

they were protecting me. In the end, it turned out to be the truth”.

“ My adopted father always said I was a love child and that my parents were really in love”.

“ My younger sister was offered to Mum and Dad, but they had just adopted my brother and didn't think they could cope with another child. When I found out, I was angry that they hadn't told me earlier and I suppose they hadn't realised how important it would be to me”.

One adoptee was given patently wrong and misleading information about his origins from Social Welfare sources. This adoptee only found the truth 7 years ago.

“ One set of records said I was born in Wanganui, one said I was born in Wellington and another said I was born in Perth and there were three different years for each of those. Up until I was 19 years old, I didn't even know how old I was”.

Two of the male adoptees discussed the secrecy surrounding their adoption in respect to their adoptive parents.

“ Everything was hush, hush. They weren't going to let the whole world know we were adopted. It was a silly idea”.

" I don't know what the veil of secrecy was. It's very complicated and complex in their minds and they would have you believe that it was to do with illegitimacy not being popular in those days, but I am sure they have got it pretty mixed up, their own feelings towards it.

I did get to look at the papers they had but before I had a chance to read them and take any information that was relevant, it disappeared again, back into the secret case".

UNDERSTANDING ADOPTION AS A TEENAGER AND YOUNG ADULT.

The most significant factor that generated the current controversy is the recognition by professionals that knowledge of one's heritage is a necessary part of identity formation. This is no less true for an adoptee. A number of studies on child development are unanimous in reporting that an individual ignorant of their biological heritage is seriously limited in the psychological dimension of identity. (Erikson, 1968). These studies further assert that it is not only natural but also desirable for a young adult to be curious about their forebears. (Colon, 1973; Horrocks & Weinberg, 1970; Erikson, 1968). Erikson (1968) considers that it is crucial in normal personality development, that adolescents derive a sense of identity from the linkage or identification with their past, and any interference with this process is likely to result in identity confusion.

Burke (1975) contends that a person's healthy, productive life is largely determined by their complete sense of identity and by incorporation into their personality of knowledge about their cultural and biological origins. The

significance of this is increasingly demonstrated by the struggles of many racial and ethnic groups for the rediscovery and maintenance of their histories.

While all children during their adolescence experience in varying degrees the problem of identity formation, adopted adolescents are particularly vulnerable to interference with the development of their self identity because of their sense of deprivation of "rootedness" and linkage with their biological past. (Lion, 1976 et al).

Kornitzer, (1971), notes that in the case of the adopted adolescent, the process of identity formation is complicated by the knowledge that "an essential part of himself has been cut off and remains on the other side of the adoption barrier". (p. 45).

Hoopes et al, (1970) also maintain that ego development, identification and identity formation are more complicated for the adopted child than for the non-adoptee.

Some investigators contend that the struggle for self identity in an adoptee may be largely attributed to their need to integrate into their personality, two sets of parents - birth parents, who are generally obscure, and adoptive parents. Having failed in this process, an adoptee experiences emotional conflicts and anxieties. (Fisher, 1972; Mann, 1976).

Sorosky et al (1975) reviewed literature related to adoption in identity conflicts and concluded that the lack of continuity with the past and of knowledge about one's origins results in "identity lacunae".

Conversely, Foster (1979), believes that every adopted child naturally and

appropriately speculates about their biological origins and would like to satisfy their curiosity about them. Similarly, during the adolescent identity crisis, it is commonplace for many adolescents to feel that these parents could not possibly be theirs. However, Foster states, "rather incredibly, a number of psychotherapists get caught up in this search for parents and actively collaborate as the patient displaces the need to work out their own place in the present world with a fruitless search for answers in the past". (p. 37). Foster maintains that individuals create their own identity, defining and redefining themselves as they go through life and that one cannot discover one's identity from history. An obsessive preoccupation with the past can be a self-defeating act which misdirects the individual's attention and which cannot ever provide a solution to identity problems. However, that is not to say that speculation about one's biological origins cannot become part of the content of an identity crisis. Further, if an adoptee is told that they might possibly find their birth family," then the seeds of doubt and confusion have been sown and the adoptee's unambiguous membership in a family has been destroyed ". (p. 37). These authors contend that holding out such options is contrary to mental health principles.

An adolescent adoptee's state of confusion about their genetic roots is variously characterized as "genealogical bewilderment" by Sants (1965) and as "roaming phenomenon" by Toussieng (1962). Toussieng suggested, on the basis of a small number of cases, that adolescence was a particularly difficult period for adoptees and that such roaming may ensue at this time. This position was based upon the perceived difficulty that adolescent adoptees experienced in accepting rebellion against their adoptive parents and giving them up as love objects. Therefore, they roam as if seeking the fantasied good, real parents. (Lawton & Gross, 1964).

Gawronski, Landgreen & Schneider (1974) noted that while genealogical bewilderment was common to most adoptees in their sample, latency and adolescence marked the development of curiosity about their genealogical past, and pregnancy was the occasion when it was most intensely felt.

The adult adoptees in the Triseliotis (1973) study also reported that as adolescents they were obsessed with questions about their adoption and their genetic parents.

These observations were confirmed by Sorosky et al (1978) in their extensive review of the literature on adolescent development. The authors suggest that adoptees experience the greatest sense of curiosity during adolescence because during this phase of life "the heightened interests in sexuality make the adoptee more aware of how the human race and it's characteristics are transmitted from generation to generation" (p. 113).

As adolescents, three of the adoptees studied perceived their adoption as a positive and favourable event.

" It changed a lot because as I grew up, I began to think of it in terms of not being rejected and given away at birth, so much as it being the best choice which had been made for me and it being in my own best interests".

" It always seemed positive, it always seemed a good thing, an interesting thing. I seemed to have one up on everyone else".

" On the occasional time when the subject came up, then we stressed to each other our feeling that this was meant to be "

Of the other adoptees who knew that they were adopted, 4 recognised that their adolescent years were a time of questioning and felt varying levels of curiosity or isolation regarding their genetic heritage.

" As I got older, I always had that inkling to find out. I wondered if I could, how do I do it, will my birth parents want to meet me, what would they be like".

" When all the family was around, I felt that there was something linking them and even though you can be included in everything, there is still that feeling of being alienated".

" When I was going through adolescence, I was trying to find out who I was, who am I?, and I felt the big rejection thing. I had always been able to talk to Mum and I went away from wanting to talk to her. I did cope because I knew that my adopted parents were there for me".

" I had this thing that perhaps I was Maori, I didn't know what I was, what nationality, and I used to have the usual thoughts that adopted people have, " Why did my mother give me up? How could she do it if she was like me?".

An adolescent adoptee's concern about committing incest or inheriting disease may also reinforce their curiosity about their biological origins. (Burke, 1975).

Five adoptees expressed concerns about the possibility of becoming emotionally and / or sexually involved with unknown siblings.

" There are a lot of people out there who are adopted and could end up marrying or having relationships with their brothers and sisters because you don't know. It's important to know where you come from".

" I knew I had an older sibling and my mother was worried that I might meet somebody and intend to get married and that it would be my sister".

"It was a big worry when I was younger about relationships with possible brothers".

" Living in the same small town, I could have met my sister and got involved, what would have happened then?".

For one woman, this situation almost occurred as her half brother was a member of her group of friends. This situation was prevented by the surprising revelation by a friend's mother as to who the members of her birth family were.

" We knew each other as friends and apparently he thought I was quite nice and I heard he was trying to pluck

up the courage to ask me out which was a real mind blower.

I was rapt when I found out that he was my brother because friends can grow up and go different ways, but as a brother, he would always be my brother. I think he was more blown away by it than I was".

LATE DISCLOSURE OF ADOPTION.

While it is recognised in the literature on adoption that late disclosure to the adoptee about their adoptive status is a relatively common phenomenon, little research has been conducted in this area.

Day's, (1979) study found that 37% of adoptees studied first became aware of their adoptive status when aged 11 years or older. Many of Day's, (1979) adult adoptees were adopted prior to the Second World War and Day (1979), explained this result as being a result of the social and adoption ethos of that time. One in ten of the adoptees learned of their adoption from people other than their adoptive parents.

Three out of the ten adoptees studied experienced a late disclosure of their adoptive status and all were told by people other than their birth parents initially. Two of the adoptees were informed by children when the adoptees were aged 9 and 11 years respectively.

" When I was 9, some friends thought that they would tell me". I went home and asked Mum and Dad and they looked at each other and I knew the answer was yes.

I just broke down and cried, it was such a shock growing up thinking that you were their's and then to discover that you're not".

"When I was around 11, some children seemed to find out and they told me and I thought " No, that's wrong" and an older man told me when I was about 18 and I thought "Oh, there must be something in this.

In the end, I was told by my father when he was dying in a round about way when he was drunk one night, so then I believed. I was 23 years old then and I recognised the truth and I think I felt relieved".

The other adoptee was told of his adoption when he was 35 years old when his sister told his wife while he and his wife were in the process of adopting a child themselves.

" It was the hurt, I went into a shell for a year. Everyone noticed a difference. It was not being told and the way it was told to me via my wife.

I went down, although I carried on with my life, suddenly I wasn't the same. Deep down I had feelings towards my mother because she never told me. After I met my birth mother, I came right".

Two adoptees retrospectively felt that they were aware of feelings before knowledge of their adoption was confirmed, that there was something they were not being told.

" I had a funny feeling deep down, my sister and I were born in different places and I didn't really know if I was adopted or one of theirs".

" At 18, it was a little bit exciting and romantic. The possibility that there might be someone else out there who belongs to me. I didn't know anyone else like that".

This adoptee admitted to fantasies at age 18, fantasies which were far more realistic and logical than those experienced by younger children.

" I remember the fantasy that he was probably an American sailor or soldier as I was born in 1943. There was nothing about the mother because I already had my adopted mother and we were close".

SUMMARY.

The discussion in this chapter has centred on the experience of being adopted. The first category which emerged from the adoptees' experiences was that of **family life**, which included the sense of belonging and acceptance, feeling different, abuse within the adoptive family and the subsequent effects on the adoptive relationship. The second category was that of **ongoing curiosity** about origins, characterised by an awareness to need to discover more, engaging in paradoxical fantasies and a sense of never being born. The third category concerned **information**, both information given, secrecy, adoptees questioning, the fear of incest and the effects of late disclosure of adoptive

status.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE NATURE OF SEARCH.

Of the important studies which have attempted to isolate reasons why adoptees search for birth relatives, Triseliotis (1973) suggested that many searchers appeared to be unhappy and lonely people whose search seemed to prevent them from going to pieces and that the process of search assumed a greater importance than the goal itself. Some adoptees appeared to be seeking a new nurturing relationship, whereas others blamed the lateness of the revelation and the way that they were told about their adoption for their feelings of insecurity and unhappiness. However, there was usually a specific event which could be seen as precipitating the search. These generally included crisis experiences for the adoptees which created a sense of loss or abandonment, such as the death of a parent, (especially when followed by the remarriage of the surviving one), or separation from a parent, spouse or significant other. Such experiences appeared to reawaken the rejection and abandonment felt through the loss of the birth families.

Sorosky, Baran & Pannor, (1974: 1975: & 1976) also believe that the adoptees' search is precipitated by life crisis experiences. The experience of forming relationships and impending marriage may remind the adoptee of the birth parent's possible unmarried status and may in some adoptees induce a fear of an incestual union. These conflicts, in some cases, may lead to difficulties in heterosexual relationships and / or sexual dysfunction.

Pregnancy also can usher in new fears for adoptees as they have no knowledge of hereditary illnesses or of the possible complications of delivery and birth. Even so, an impending birth, especially of a first child, is often keenly awaited as the first opportunity to encounter and relate to a "blood relative". Through the pregnancy experience, adult adoptees can become more aware of the genetic and hereditary aspects of illness, physical features and life span.

Other reasons for search posited by Sorosky et al, (1974: 1975: & 1976), include the death of one or both adoptive parents which can either create in the adoptee a feeling of loss or relieve the adoptee of the burden of guilt and concern about hurting the adoptive parents. Also, an adoptee's separation or divorce can trigger feelings of rejection and abandonment and the crises of middle age can apparently be perceived by the adoptee as a time of concern for the birth mother who would now be elderly and perhaps in need of some kind of support. Finally, the adoptee's own approaching old age may elicit a yearning for them to know something of their origins.

In the 1983 study , Sobol & Cardiff asked their participants whether any specific experience or event triggered their search, and for 26% of adult adoptees, nothing appeared to be related to the beginning of their search. A further 23% stated that they became actively involved in searching after they heard of a self help group called Parent Finders, whereas only 13% felt that their search was triggered by the birth of their own children. Other trigger events cited in this study included health problems with a possible hereditary basis, the death of adoptive parent/s, and dissatisfaction with the adoptive family.

Kowal & Schilling (1985), found that reasons given by adult adoptees included

the need for genetic and medical information regarding their birth parents, pregnancy, the birth or adoption of their own children, a disruptive change with their adoptive parents, such as their death, divorce or estrangement from the adoptee. Many adoptees often stated that it was necessary to fill a void in their lives.

Kennard's (1990) study of New Zealand adoptees assumed Griffith's (1981) equation of self identity conflict, plus accumulated adoption tensions, plus trigger crisis, minus family and societal inhibiting factors, equalled search. Kennard, (1990), found that most adoptees recognised that life events similar to those found by other researchers, while not being given as the reason for searching, were triggers which did increase the adoptees' desire to search.

From observations made in a support group for searching adult adoptees, Anderson, (1989), believes that the reasons for search encompass a broader perspective than has been previously recognised. He believes that search incorporates the adult adoptee's own unconscious chosen assumptions, wishes and set of beliefs as to the strategic nature and function of the search. According to the individual adult adoptee's view of the strategic nature and function of the search, Anderson believes that they can be placed into one of three groups.

The first group are individuals who see search as adventure, that is, reuniting with the birth family for the direct purpose of being together and experiencing the future together. Search in this view is an exciting, straightforward and direct wish for the experience of reunion where the desire to obtain information or further personal development and deliberations on how the reunion may affect both the adoptee and the birth mother, is secondary to the wish for the

experience of reunion.

The second group believe that they suffer from a deficiency of something external to themselves and if it is obtained, through search and reunion, then it will bring about a resolution and the adoptee will be cured of their problems. This view is based upon the medical model of "cure", and it is presumed that two things are missing for the adoptee, a lack of information and a deficiency of experience with their birth family. It is felt that once the adoptee has the information she / he seeks and has made a connection with the birth family, then resolution is complete. It is the "finding" of information and birth families and the trusting that the information will be favourable to the adoptee that is paramount to this group. A consequence of this view is that there are good and bad searches. A bad search is not an incomplete search but a search where the adoptee finds information that is disagreeable.

The third group view the etiology of the adoptee problem to be a psychological trauma and the emphasis is on the adoptee's attempt to actively master the psychological experience of adoption and not just the issue of search and reunion. The problem is seen to be internal and treatment is an active process of responding, learning, defining one's responsibility, and grieving for the irresolvable losses. For this group, the central premise is the "looking", the ultimate goal is growth and there are no bad searches as the emphasis is on action and any search is better than none.

Anderson, (1989), suggests that adoptees probably embrace all of these views simultaneously, (knowingly or not), although the individual emphasis would vary considerably. Adoptees search for varying things, identity, whom they look like, original names, the experience of seeing a blood relative, medical

histories, the desire share part of their life with a birth relative and this search is conducted on different conceptual levels at the same time.

The adoptees in this study were specifically asked about their reasons for searching for birth relatives. None mentioned any definite triggers, (which is not to say that triggers did not exist), as suggested in the literature, rather they discussed a life long lack of sense of identity and a need to establish links with people who were like themselves and / or a sense of curiosity about their origins.

“ I convinced myself I was doing it purely for curiosity’s sake. I was sure there would be some interesting coincidences and I wanted to see if there was a set of people who looked like me, all that kind of thing”.

“ I think identity more than anything. I wasn’t looking for a mother, I had a mother.

I was aware of how my friends were like their parents, how my father was like his brother and I suppose I wanted to know someone that I was like, that I had the same mannerisms, that we had things in common “.

“ My children are all adopted and all my life I have never known blood. I just wanted to see my own blood”.

“ Wondering why I was adopted, wondering whether I had any real brothers and sisters, and what my father and mother looked like”.

" I wondered who I looked like, I wanted identity".

" My main objective was just to find out my name, my birth mother's name. I needed to fill a big gap with personal knowledge and also I couldn't let the opportunity slip by to meet my birth mother".

" I wanted to know her name so I could have an identity and know where I came from".

Three adoptees discussed their reasons for searching in more emotional terms and according to the Anderson (1989) model, these adoptees could be identified as searching in terms of " cure". These adoptees defined the problem in their lives as a deficiency of experience in their adoptive families and by reuniting with their birth families felt the void in their lives could be filled. The primary elements associated with this view are that something external needs to be taken into themselves through a relatively passive process and that ultimately the expectation by the adoptees is that resolution is complete.

" I felt so very alone, I didn't have anyone belonging to me ".

" I had a real bad childhood, and I just wanted to know my real mother because I didn't have any love in my family when I was growing up".

" I think that I was feeling like there might be somebody out

there who wanted me”.

The two male adoptees who searched for 11 years discussed whether they felt if their reasons for searching changed over time.

“ They probably did because having actually started it, I had to finish it. I had a two year break from it, then I decided that whatever it took, I was going to finish it”.

“ The basic reasons didn’t change. However, I wanted it to work and as I got older, I started to get in touch with reality a bit more”.

The adoptees were asked about their expectations prior to beginning to search. Interestingly, 9 out of the 10 adoptees stated that they had minimal expectations regarding their birth parents and the outcome of their search.

“ I always had the impression that I should expect nothing and then I wouldn’t be disappointed, to expect the worst”.

“ I tried so hard not to have any expectations because I didn’t want to be disappointed”.

“ I never went into it thinking that I wanted to be part of that family”.

“ I think that I dampened my expectations over time. When the law changed, I felt very removed from it after waiting for

so long”.

Two adoptees had expectations that they would provide some information to their birth mothers.

“ I just wanted her to know that I knew she was my mother and if she wanted to contact me, I would be grateful”.

“ My expectations were that I would perhaps write to this person, get to know a little about her family and tell her a little about mine”.

Another two adoptees identified a sense of fear regarding their expectations.

“ Fear, I was really frightened because I thought I would find something really bad. I didn't expect anything good”.

“ Over the years, I had so many different scenarios and fantasies, I don't think I could put my finger on just one thing but I was scared she would be disappointed in me”.

One adoptee who began to search as an 11 year old had extremely high expectations which were understandable considering his abusive adoptive family.

“ My highest expectation was that she really wanted to see me, that she had room for me in her life, that she would take me in and give me a decent life and take me away

from the Boy's Home".

THE PROCESS OF SEARCH.

The introduction of the Adult Adoption Act (1985), gave New Zealand adult adoptees the first legal opportunity to learn their original identity by having access to their original birth certificate, thus acquiring the names of the birth parent or parents who registered their birth. To adoptees who had been adopted under the veil of secrecy necessary for closed adoptions, this new Act gave hope to those who had been deprived of personal knowledge. This was the first step for those who wished to establish contact with birth relatives.

For the adoptees in this study, the Act was seen as the mechanism to open previously closed files and the adoptees' reactions to the law change varied.

"I wrote to Jonathan Hunt so many times, it was exciting to watch the process. I voted Labour so it would be passed, it was the most politics I have ever been involved in or ever will be again".

"When the law changed, it meant I could find her, if there wasn't a veto on it".

"I wasn't interested until it became law and I thought then that I had nothing to lose".

"When the law actually changed, I felt very removed from it after waiting for it for so long".

The fact that the adoption law had changed was but the first of many steps for adoptees. The first issue to be faced was the possibility that there had been a veto placed on releasing the original birth certificate to the adoptee. Two adoptees thought through this issue and the possibility of a veto for them, increased their feelings of vulnerability.

" I waited before I began my search until I felt that I could deal with the possibility that there may be a veto".

" What if she forgot to put a veto on and doesn't want to know. It was very scary and could be another rejection ".

Another adoptee who discovered that there was not a veto on her original birth certificate saw this initially as optimistic and ultimately experienced the lack of a veto as a rejection.

" I thought " She hasn't put a veto on it, so she may really want to hear from me". I realise now that perhaps she meant it when she said she had forgotten me because she didn't put a veto on it".

RECEIVING THE ORIGINAL BIRTH CERTIFICATE.

Receiving the original birth certificate was an emotional and exciting time for the adoptees. For the first time in their lives, they had proof of their identity and their first reactions to the information contained on their birth certificates had a profound effect on them all.

" I couldn't believe it because it was exactly what my parents had told me. I cried and cried, then I was really angry because I discovered that my birth parents were married. All sorts of emotions".

" It was exciting. I had this birth certificate and it was real and I thought " I really am somebody else", which was a funny way of thinking because I am not somebody else, I'm me, but I was somebody else right then".

" Amazing. When I looked in the mirror after that, I felt I was somebody. Before I was just nobody. I couldn't wait to open it, I had a Christian name as well as a surname. She had named me after her sister, so a bit of thought had gone into it".

" It took me three days to open the envelope. I kept thinking that this was 11 years work and it was scary. There were a number of times that I almost threw it away unopened.

It was daunting to see " Adoption order for unnamed baby....", and knowing that they were talking about me ".

" I wasn't expecting for there to be any emotion involved in it".

" I started crying and didn't know what to think".

One adoptee after receiving her birth certificate, was still not able to accept the information given as being correct.

" I had it in black and white but I still wasn't convinced, I had to have that contact".

At the point of receiving their original birth certificate, adoptees were becoming extremely aware of the intense feelings of vulnerability and the fears regarding their search. The sense of adventure and excitement that adoptees identified at the start of their search, was again being mediated by their awareness of vulnerability and a serious consideration of the possible consequences for both themselves and their birth families.

" I took it all very slowly, I was more concerned about taking care not to frighten her off. I was really plunging in and every step felt like a leap over a high cliff and I had to be prepared to land on the other side or fall ".

STARTING THE SEARCH.

The process of locating birth relatives varied from adoptee to adoptee. Those adoptee's who waited until the law changed, all visited Levin House in Lower Hutt and conducted a search through the Registrar of Births Deaths and Marriages, and the Electoral Rolls. All were successful in locating either their birth mothers and / or other members of their extended birth family.

" I went to Levin House, first found a brother or half brother, my birth mother's parents, my birth mother and her sister".

" We went to Levin House and took all the information there that we could. Just as we were going out, my wife said "Look, that is (a friend of ours) auntie". This aunt was my birth mother "

The four adoptees who began their searches prior to the law change, experienced different degrees of success in locating members of their birth families.

One woman who located her birth mother 16 years ago found the search to be easy.

" I knew her name, her husband's name, went to the Registrar's Office, looked his name up in the Maori Electoral Roll, looked her name up, put the two of them together and came up with an address".

For the other three adoptees, the search was more difficult, and, for two adoptees, fruitless, until the law changed. These two adoptees attempted to gain information from a variety of means and sources.

" I have letters from Social Welfare, various Social Services, the Salvation Army and I belonged to Jigsaw. We did a lot of naughty things".

" It got to the stage where I had an interview with a Social Worker and my sister and I plotted to get the Social Worker to leave the room and we ripped off the file "

Two of these adoptees discussed the effects of a long and fruitless search. While never losing hope, the years of searching did take a toll on the adoptees.

" I actually got quite tired of it, tired of writing all these letters. There was always the hope that they would just give me the information".

"When the search takes years and years, it becomes tiring and a bit matter of fact".

The actual process of search for the adoptees reflected a number of elements as identified by Anderson, (1989). The nature of search at this point is exciting and the aim for adoptees is to be together with their birth families and share future experience. The wish for experience is paramount and thoughts about personal development are not considered at this stage. The adoptees in this study modify Anderson's, (1989), search for adventure hypothesis in that the adoptees do not necessarily wish to pick up the relationship with their birth mothers as if the adoption has never occurred and the adoptees did give considerable thought to the effects on their birth mother's feelings, including the birth mother's feelings of guilt.

INITIATING CONTACT WITH BIRTH RELATIVES.

Of the eight adoptees who initiated contact with birth relatives, five wrote directly to their birth mothers, one adoptee rang her birth mother and two rang other members of their birth family.

All the adoptees took considerable care in writing the first letter or making the first telephone call. These letters and telephone calls tended to be couched in neutral terms and demonstrated an awareness from the adoptees regarding the possible effects on their birth mother's current life situation.

" I must have written 5 drafts of the letter until every single word was in the right place, to do my best to make it easy for her".

" I wrote a letter that was very vague but to the point. If you knew what I was talking about, then you knew what I wanted".

" Hard, especially doing it so that no-one else could be upset about it if they found it. It was the hardest letter I've ever written, it took such a long time and it was only one page ".

" I wrote, gave her my address if she wanted to contact me. If I didn't hear from her then I wouldn't bother her again".

" I told her we had met in a certain year, mentioned the hospital and said that we had lost contact ".

" We rang my birth mother's brother and bluffed a bit. We said that we were friends of his sister who had lost contact ".

For the adoptees, the overriding emotion at this point in the process was fear, the fear of what they might find, and the fear of being rejected again. One of the significant findings of this study, (and not identified in the literature on adoption reunions), was that all of the adoptees experienced this fear of a second rejection. Adoptees who had not previously consciously considered their adoption to be a rejection, now referred to their relinquishment as a rejection by their birth mothers. This was an emotional and stressful period for these adoptees and some considered stopping at this point as they perceived the risk of continuing and possibly being rejected again as too great. For these adoptees, this was the only time during their process of search and reunion, that they conceptualised their adoption in this way.

" I was really scared of what I was going to find. It was almost too hard to do ".

" For a while I thought " I'm not going to do it". It was too big a risk of being rejected again ".

" I was so nervous and scared. She had actually rejected me once before I realised ".

" I had never thought of my adoption as being a rejection until I wrote that first letter ".

" She had the power to reject me again, she had all the power again. This was the only time that I had second thoughts about carrying on ".

The adoptees who had always regarded their adoption as being a rejection, appeared to be more matter of fact about the possibility of a further rejection, possibly because they felt that they had nothing to lose by continuing their search.

" I'm pleased that my grandfather rang because if she (mother) was going to reject me again , then I wasn't going to have to hear it from her ".

"She had given me up once before and if I wasn't going to get anywhere with her, then I wouldn't bother her again ".

For three of the adoptees, the initial contact with their birth mothers was by telephone. These adoptees employed similar strategies to those used by the adoptees who initially wrote to their birth mothers, in that they were neutral and careful of what they said.

" We really didn't have much to say to one another and agreed to swap letters basically ".

" I freaked. I don't think I made a lot of sense. I was very conscious of what I was saying ".

" I gave her a number of chances to bail out during that first phone call ".

The birth mother's response to the initial contact made by their adopted children was varied. Some were positive, others suspicious and two refused to

acknowledge and have any further contact with the adoptees.

" First of all she was quite paranoid and wanting to know what I wanted from her "

" The first thing she said was that she was worried that I might be bearing some malice. The second thing she said was that she had to give me away "

" I read in tears, the first few lines, "I've forgotten you "

" She denied she was my mother and still does "

" Instead of writing back, she turned up on my doorstep "

PERSONAL CONTACT.

Most adoptees exchanged a number of letters and / or telephone calls before meeting members of their birth families. Some adoptees waited for up to a year before meeting, others just a few days. Distance was the grounds most cited for the time delay in meeting and only one adoptee gave a specific reason as to why a meeting took so long to occur.

" We wrote to each other for a year during which time we felt that we were getting to know one another and making a connection. We didn't rush into a meeting as I had to feel safe "

Meeting a birth mother or member of the birth family was an experience which over awed most adoptees. The adoptees were stunned into silence and felt inadequate and unable to cope with the situation. This appears to be the most emotionally uncomfortable time for the parties involved.

" I cried and didn't know what to think, I didn't know how to cope with it. I didn't know what my response was supposed to be "

" I took one look at her and didn't know whether to hug her or not. I just stood there with my mouth open "

" Really strange, so many mixed feelings. I don't understand it myself "

" We were all stunned and just sat there and looked at each other. I felt that I was being surveyed, being watched and studied. I just wanted to look at them but I didn't want to stare "

"We eyed each other up and down a lot, saw lots of similar physical things "

" It was a strange feeling, everything else seemed to disappear. I didn't hear another thing, it was like my life flashing before me. I couldn't talk for about 30 minutes, I was a mess. The search was over, it was right in front of me

and we got down to whether we were going to like each other “.

“ We hugged and cried and then talked for hours “.

A significant factor in the adoptees' retrospective feelings about the first meeting was the lack of preparedness they experienced.

“ I think that even knowing what I know now, I still wouldn't be prepared “.

“ No preparation for this, it's like stepping into the unknown. I likened it to an experiment by Magnus Pike, the baby on the table having to crawl across the glass to it's mother, a step in faith “.

“ I don't think I was ever prepared for rejection “.

MIXED FEELINGS AFTER MEETING.

Four of the adoptees experienced ambivalent and mixed feelings after they met their birth mothers.

“ Revulsion was one of them. I felt sorry for her, I liked her because of the things we had in common, so many mixed feelings “.

“ It's like meeting a stranger but it's also like meeting

someone you've known all your life, there's these conflicted feelings “.

“ I felt guilty for my adopted mother and that I was betraying her. I felt that I was greedy and that I would have preferred to have my own adopted parents back, it was really strange “.

“ After the first meeting, it was hard to leave. I had the feeling that if I let her go, I would never see her again and it had taken too long to get hold of her “.

One adoptee was told by friends and acquaintances that she appeared different after meeting her birth mother.

“ Friends said I walked differently, I walked with my head up. Others said how much I had changed and how much confidence I now had. Inside I am the same person but I am no longer looking at people and thinking “That person looks like me “.

SUMMARY.

In this chapter, discussion has centred around the nature of search. The adoptees' understanding relating to their **lack of a sense of identity**, which included searching for “ adventure “, and identified and changing reasons for searching. The second category was that of **expectations**, which were influenced by fear and the opportunity to provide information to birth mothers.

The third category was related to **search as adventure** and encompassed the adoptees' feelings of anticipation, excitement, extreme vulnerability and desperation. The final category was that of **initiating contact** and embraced the adoptees' awareness of the birth mother's feelings, the fear of rejection, the reality of rejection, a lack of preparedness and ambivalent feelings towards the birth mother.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE NATURE OF CHANGES IN RELATIONSHIPS.

A question frequently raised is what effect the reunion of adoptees with their birth mothers and birth families has on the lives of the adoptees.

Research studies examining this area are exceedingly limited. Their findings are highly inconclusive and are therefore open to interpretation. For instance, in the 1978 study by Sorosky et al, 90% of respondents indicated that they felt satisfied with the outcome of their reunions. Most of them reported a sense of fulfilment and resolution of their identity and genealogical concerns. Sorosky et al, (1978) further reported that 50% of the adoptees developed meaningful relationships with their birth parents, whereas 32% were satisfied with periodic contacts subsequent to the initial meeting.

A positive experience with reunion was also reported by a Canadian study by Stevenson, (1976) conducted on 11 reunions, of which 8 found the reunion to be "beneficial".

Lifton, (1979) reported the reunion experience resulted in satisfaction to the parties in 80% of the cases.

Consistent with these findings, the overall conclusion of a survey of 24 reunions resulting from search requests made in Saskatchewan in 1976, was that "86%

of the adopted persons felt that the contact event made a significant difference in their lives" and none regretted their decision. 13 of the 19 birth parents interviewed claimed it was a " significant positive event in their lives" with only one birth parent considering it a negative experience. (Tingley,1980. Cited in Sachdev, 1984, p.154).

In a discussion of reunion experiences based on specific case examples, Auth & Zaret, (1986), found that a number of categories of outcomes seemed to exist. There was the satisfying one time meeting; an ongoing relationship with the birth family while the adopted family remained the primary family; an ongoing relationship in which the birth family becomes the primary family; the undiscoverable birth family or the incomplete search; and the rejecting birth family.

In a study originally designed to test whether adoptees were as psychosocially adjusted as non-adoptees, Schoborg-Winterberg & Shannon (1988), noted that of all the adult adoptees who responded to the questionnaire, approximately 50% had located members of their birth families and considered the interaction to have been somewhat positive.

Sachdev (1989), in a study involving 107 adult adoptees, reported that the respondents characterized the nature of the relationship which developed between them and their birth mothers as, 48% developed a friendship; 37% felt the relationship to be that of a stranger or mere acquaintance; and 20% claimed a mother/child relationship.

However, a Scottish study by Triseliotis (1973), is not unequivocal regarding the outcome based only on the reunion. The author states that 80% of the

adoptees reported “no regrets” for the action they took either to locate their birth parents or simply to seek more information about them. Irrespective of their expectations from the meeting, they all found it much easier to come to terms with their identity. Only 20% were either uncertain of the outcome of the inquiry or did not

find it of any help to them. But elsewhere the investigator noted that “where the meeting occurred, adoptees felt disillusioned and disappointed”. (Triseliotis, 1973, p.160).

An Israeli study by Lion et al, (1976), cited in Sachdev, (1984), also strikes a pessimistic note about reunion outcomes. The authors interviewed 50 adult adoptees who made use of the Israeli “Open File” Adoption Law between 1965 and 1976 and found that each of the 7 adoptees who had an encounter with their biological parents felt that their meeting generated feelings of hostility and negativism toward their birth parents.

The results of a postal questionnaire by Humphrey & Humphrey (1989), found that once contact had been established with a birth relative, (either a birth parent or sibling), it was usually maintained for a while at least and that 30% of adoptees still hoped to meet a sibling or half sibling. This wish occurred most often after the adoptee failed to meet their birth mother. The authors concluded however, that at best, reunion between birth mother and adoptee can be a disappointing experience and at worst, it can lead to bitter disillusionment. The authors’ conclusions are based on unsubstantiated claims that birth mothers are unlikely to live up to the strong fantasies which the adoptee has in respect to their birth mother, and that the search for kinship has a symbolic value for adoptees which is certain to remain elusive. Thus, reunion can neither be expected to strengthen a healthy or correct an impaired sense of identity.

The adoptees in this study were specifically asked about the nature of the relationships with their birth families within the first 6 / 8 weeks of establishing contact. With the initial excitement and fears faced, adoptees and their families began to discover each other as individuals and engaging in a mutual sharing of personal knowledge. For three adoptees, this process included coming to terms with rejection from birth mothers but not necessarily other members of their birth family.

" Within two weeks we had our first argument and I never wanted to speak to her again. That opened my eyes as to what she was like , but my brothers were great ".

" Very exciting. My cousins were gathering photos and information for me and the main conversation was mother, wondering why she hadn't accepted me ".

For the other adoptees, this was an exciting time of discovering coincidences and catching up on the lost years.

" Tense excitement. We just talked and didn't run out of things to say for the week I was there. We would go out together and people would ask if we were sisters, that was part of the fun ".

" Totally exciting, more than I ever expected, wanted or anticipated. It was like a miracle ".

" We did a lot of talking about what had happened. Putting the pieces together because I had been told so many lies. It gave me respect for her knowing that she didn't just dump me ".

" For the first time since I was 2 weeks old I was setting eyes on her. It was all very interesting and full of amazing coincidences ".

The adoptees identified their own feelings towards their birth families at this time and for those adoptees whose reunion experience was negative, the primary feeling was disappointment and an end to the fairy tale fantasy.

" I started thinking that this wasn't the fairy tale I wanted it to be. I felt shattered ".

"I was rejected twice. You have this build up all your life and I felt like saying "Were you crying on my birthday?". That was what she was supposed to be doing in my mind and seeing that she wasn't, was what hurt ".

The positive adoption reunions were emotionally very intense for the adoptees and were characterised by the adoptees' perception that if they asked too many questions of their birth relatives, the adoptees may lose this new found relationship.

" I didn't want to push it or ask if she thought about me or it might have been the end of it ".

" It was wonderful but I knew that we were sharing the best part of ourselves ".

" I couldn't get enough of her, very intense. All I wanted was to be around them, hold onto them, not to have them out of my sight. I wanted to ask more and more questions and it was very scary in case I scared her off ".

" It was wonderful just having her around ".

" It was like a miracle that I never thought I could find ".

Three adoptees identified specific early difficulties in their relationships with their birth mothers. Two of these adoptees experienced positive reunions for a number of years. These early difficulties appeared to originate from the birth mothers who attempted to assume the mother role early in the relationship.

" I didn't know how to relate to her and it choked me to call her Mum for the first couple of years ".

" She wanted me to call her Mum and I didn't want to. It was like the hug hello and the kiss goodbye, I didn't like that. It was really stressful ".

" I never asked anything of her, I wanted to be friends. It was she who wanted more than I could give, wanting to be a mother to me and wanting me to be more her daughter ".

As the new relationship with birth relatives and especially the birth mother was being established, the nature of search and reunion changed for all the adoptees. The adoptees recognised a therapeutic side to the process, in that part of the process including the purpose of personal change as identified by Anderson, (1989), of search as therapy and specifically search as cure. The priority for the adoptees at this point is finding the birth mother and an assumption by the adoptees that the birth mother can and will answer the adoptees' questions. This new information, according to Anderson's, (1989) theory will bring about closure, a hypothesis not completely borne out by the adoptees in this study.

ADOPTEE'S AWARENESS OF THE BIRTH RELATIVES FEELINGS.

The adoptees discussed at length their awareness of their birth relatives' feelings and possible reactions to contact and the new relationship. These comments were unsolicited and suggests that this is an important part of the process for the adoptees in initiating contact and / or a reunion. This aspect of the process for adoptees has not been indicated in the research on adoption reunions. It appears that the birth relatives' feelings and reactions are given serious consideration by the adoptees while searching and particularly at the time of contact. The adoptees were acutely aware of the reasons for the birth relatives' responses and the possible consequences for themselves and their birth relatives. Adoptees consistently identified the biggest issue for their birth parents, that of the pain of the past.

" You are so worried about how you are going to be and

then you realise that the other person is going through the same thing “.

“ She had made a life for herself and it was a long time ago “.

“ I spent 10 years trying to think of complicated white lies and how I would not embarrass her “.

“ It was a release for her, all the secrets that she had more or less denied to herself “.

“ They were elated to be given a second chance. Overcome with emotion, confused, excited, feeling threatened, and for my birth mother, the guilt “.

“ In a way, I can understand the birth mother's feelings, she didn't want anyone to feel hurt “.

“ You have to accept that it's just as hard on them as it is on you. I know that I opened a lot of old wounds but I was lucky that they were wounds she wanted opened “.

“ It's not just me in her life, it's her whole life “.

“ She had so much pain relating to the past and she said that I was the means of bringing it all back “.

" I know it must have been very hard on her ".

CHANGES IN THE RELATIONSHIPS.

Like all relationships, the relationship between adoptees and in particular birth mothers, underwent changes over a period of time. For some adoptees, the changes were negative and for others the changes were disappointing and three adoptees experienced a positive change in the relationship with birth parents. Adoptees were asked why they thought the relationship changed and for those adoptees for whom the change was negative, the responsibility from the adoptees' perspective, lay with the birth mothers.

" She has a problem with alcohol. She would get drunk, ring my Dad and I and start abusing us ".

" She began to share more of the very deep and long suppressed parts of herself to do with the time of my birth. Ultimately, I found myself unwilling to play the role of therapist to her ".

Those adoptees who experienced a disappointing change appeared to possess higher expectations regarding their search and reunion. These adoptees also saw that this change resulted primarily from their birth mother's actions or motives. Both of these adoptees were male.

" Rather than me finding her, it feels like she's found me. I feel like I am the one with something to give. Maybe I am being selfish but I don't think she has much to offer me "

really “.

“ I put this woman on a pedestal and then I couldn't get her down quick enough. She tried to start to rule my life, trying to degrade my values. It made me defensive “.

The adoptees who experienced a positive change appear to have managed the relationship over time differently from the other adoptees in this study. These adoptees have consistently worked at the relationship by making sure that they maintain the telephone and written and personal contact.

“ I make sure that I ring them, that I write and that if I am going on holiday, I think of going to see them “.

“ We write or ring when we need each other and when we see each other, we just take off from where we left off and get closer and closer “.

One of the major and unexpected results of this study was the recognition by the adoptees of the underlying reasons why their relationships with their birth mothers did change. Irrespective of how negative or positive the relationship began or became, all the adoptees discussed two major concepts exhibited by their birth mothers. These concepts are firstly, the birth mother's denial to the adoptee of certain information pertaining to the adoptee, and secondly, as part of this denial, the birth mother's need to maintain the family secrets which originated at the time of the adoptee's birth and subsequent relinquishment. Sometimes, the adoptees find themselves unwilling parties in maintaining these family secrets.

" I told my birth mother that I knew about the other two children she also had adopted out. She got really angry and said that Social Welfare had made a mistake, which they hadn't. She then put vetos on their birth certificates. I suppose that when I found her, she realised how easy it was for her to be found. Her husband still doesn't know about the others, one mistake is understandable, but three? "

" I contacted my birth mother on the telephone and when I said who I was, she hung up on me, twice! I met my sister later and she spoke to our mother about me and everytime she stopped for breath, mother would change the subject. My sister let her know that all the family knew about me and we have come to the conclusion that her husband didn't know about me "

" The only letter I have had from my birth mother said that she had forgotten me. She told me she had six children and that her husband was not my father . She told me that she did not want further contact because her husband didn't wish it and that he was a kind and gentle man. To that I wondered "

" There has always been an emotional tension there, added to by the fact that I was her only child. She has never gone back to that period in her life and dealt with

those feelings. She had closed the door on it to the extent that she had deliberately forgotten my birthdate “.

“ She won’t tell me much, particularly about my birth father. I can’t believe anything she says really as it is different each time “.

“ My birth mother is still hung up on what people say and think and says that I am a friend from up north. My birth father doesn’t care, he calls me his daughter. When they came and stayed here, they told my brothers and sisters that they were staying with friends in Auckland “.

“ My birth mother said not to say anything to my brother’s children. I thought that was silly because they are going to find out sooner or later “.

The adoptees recognise that the experience of relinquishing a child under the closed adoption system was a painful ordeal for their birth mothers. The social system of the 1940s, 1950s and the 1960s which gave birth mothers little choice regarding the adoption of their child, also failed the birth mothers. Birth mothers were not given the opportunity to grieve for their lost child and a reunion with this child years later was a traumatic event for some birth mothers.

“ She had so much pain relating to the past that she had closed it off and had never dealt with it. She said I was the means of bringing it all back and ultimately that was too great a burden to lay on me “.

While the adoptees may be unhappy about their birth mother's denial and the family secrets, without exception, they have respected their birth mothers' positions. While hoping for change, none of the adoptees has jeopardised their birth mothers' situations and all have reluctantly accepted this aspect of the reunion experience.

" I always thought it would get the better of her and still hope that maybe sometime she will write. So far she hasn't "

" I don't want to be the cause of any trouble "

" I do what she wants and say that I am a friend from up north "

" I have let them take it at their pace, I don't want to hurry things up for them "

Two adoptees noted that birth mothers appear to have a need to make up the years lost by adoption. These comments could reflect the concept noted in Anderson's (1989) model of search as adventure. In the context of this research, these birth mothers are the individuals who are being searched for and Anderson's (1989) model may well be as relevant for those being sought as those who are searching.

" Arguably, there isn't any need to make up for 30

something years. It isn't necessarily the thing that should happen ".

" It doesn't mean that when you find a natural parent that you now take off from where you left off. It doesn't have to be and isn't a logical progression ".

PRESENT RELATIONSHIP WITH BIRTH MOTHERS.

The adoptees in this study have had contact with their birth mothers for a mean of 7.5 years. The relationships which do exist have had a significant period of time in which to adjust and tentative results about the long term relationships which are formed can be made. Unlike the Sachdev (1989) study which has tended to categorise relationships into friendship, mother / child, or stranger / acquaintance, and Sorosky et al, (1978), Stevenson (1976) and Lifton (1979), who evaluated reunion outcomes as "meaningful", "beneficial" and "satisfying" respectively, the adoptees in this study did not categorise their answers. All the adoptees qualified their responses to the question regarding the current status of their relationships with their birth mothers.

The two adoptees who have not had the opportunity to establish any relationship with their birth mothers placed the responsibility for this lack of contact with their birth mothers. Both appeared resigned to this current situation for the time being.

" She doesn't want to know me, so why should I force myself ? She is the one who is missing out on knowing me ".

*" Maybe it is her husband's influence but that is no excuse.
She was willing to go along with it, so far anyhow "*

One adoptee who has had intermittent and mostly negative contact with her birth mother for 11 years, has not had contact with her birth mother for 3 years. This lack of contact is a relief to this adoptee.

" We don't even acknowledge each other. That's fine for me because it makes it easier for me and my family to have her out of my life "

Three adoptees have built strong and positive relationships with their birth mothers and regard their birth mothers as being important and significant people in their lives.

" I think I have a sister type of relationship more than anything. I can talk to her about the sorts of things you would tell your best friend that you would not tell your mother "

" Comfortable. I am glad and really happy to have found them. I feel privileged that I was lucky enough to come out with a positive fairy tale ending "

" She is like a mother to me, she is always there for me. My Mum and my grandmother are a part of my family "

Two of these adoptees provided further specific reasons why these relationships continue to remain positive.

" I think that if we had met anyhow we would have liked each other. We would have been close because we are so alike ".

" Now that we have found each other, we don't want to lose each other again ".

For the other four adoptees, which include all the males in this study, the current relationship is not as easily defined. The present relationships appear to be more distant and confusing although the adoptees concerned seem to be content and comfortable with the present situation.

" Very mixed feelings. It's a Jekyll and Hyde thing because I do get along with her but she is my worst side, I think. She is my dim and distant past ".

" Not close and not distant, just friends. She doesn't relate to me as her son. You love your parents but these ones, you don't love ".

" We are still in contact but only at Christmas and birthdays".

" Take it or leave it. I try to keep up a good relationship with

her for my sister, brother and her husband. I'm not sure what I should be feeling, it's confusing".

Regardless of the current status of the relationship, all the adoptees have experienced a decrease in the frequency of contact with their birth mothers. All the relationships were intense in the first months or year until the relationships and the excitement began to settle. Adoptees became more realistic about their birth mothers and as the adoptees assimilated the information from their birth mothers, they began to see their birth mothers as real people and the fantasy mothers became more demystified.

" I came to realise that there was a whole lot of stuff that she needed to get clear of before we could really have some sort of a relationship ".

" The initial contact was so exciting, now we tend to take each other for granted a bit ".

" It's almost like I have what I need from her ".

" It's cooled off a bit, the honeymoon is over ".

" Initially it is the availability, then it finds a balance ".

SUMMARY.

The beginnings of the new relationships discussed in this chapter were represented by **emotional intensity**. The concepts which emerged from this

category included search for “cure”, rejection, discoveries, disappointment, the hesitancy for adoptees to question birth mothers and the early difficulties adoptees experienced with their birth mothers. The second category concerned the adoptees’ **awareness of the birth relatives’ feelings** whereby the adoptees recognised the pain of the past and the consequences of both the past and the present situation for their birth mothers. The third category related to the **changes in the relationship**, and referred to who was responsible for the changes, motivation and assertiveness. The final category concerned the **birth mothers denial** which incorporated family secrets, trauma and acceptance.

CHAPTER SIX

ADOPTEE'S EXPERIENCES WITH BIRTH FATHERS, SIBLINGS AND EXTENDED BIRTH FAMILIES.

The adoption reunion literature focuses almost entirely on the reunion between birth mothers and adoptees. Literature on reunions with birth fathers, siblings and other members of the birth families is virtually non-existent and the literature which does exist tends to mention such reunions almost as an afterthought. There are obvious problems in researching this aspect of adoption reunions.

BIRTH FATHERS.

Birth fathers are frequently a neglected factor in the adoption equation. In a study which investigated how members of the adoption triad viewed the birth father, Sachdev, (1991), found that birth mothers often consider the birth father to be irresponsible and exploitive. Adoption agencies have traditionally reinforced this attitude by viewing the birth father's involvement as a complication, or minimizing his role to his part in a biological event. Sachdev, (1991), contends that the negative stereotype of the exploitive birth father who had deliberately abdicated responsibility to the adoptee, is not helpful to the adoptees' self image or identity formation.

Birth fathers' names are seldom on the birth certificates and the one person who knows, the birth mother, often is reluctant to tell the adoptee. Lifton, (1979),

suggests that the birth mother does not wish to reexperience the pain of his rejection or that she may still be bitter about the past. This reticence towards the birth father by the birth mother can often depend on the degree of resentment she still harbours against him.

Lifton, (1979), refers to the search for the birth father as a "mini search" and suggests that adoptees will not usually commence a search for their birth fathers until they have come to terms with the reunion with the birth mother.

In the 1990 study on New Zealand adoption reunions, Kennard found that birth fathers were not as significant as birth mothers at the point the research was conducted. For adoptees who had contacted and established a relationship with their birth fathers, most described the relationship as a friendship. Kennard, (1990), suggests that at time the research was conducted, many adoptees did not know many details about their birth fathers. This view is consistent with Lifton's, (1979) suggestion that adoptees need to find the emotional energy to embark on yet another search as well as breaking through the birth mother's reticence in providing them with information about the birth father.

Five of the adoptees in this study were given varying degrees of information about their birth fathers by their birth mothers. One adoptee discovered at the time of contacting her birth mother that not only were her birth parents were married at the time she was adopted but they were still married. This adoptee has a positive ongoing relationship with both her birth parents.

One adoptee was taken by her birth mother to meet her birth father shortly after contacting her birth mother.

One adoptee who has not been successful in establishing a relationship with her birth mother, approached Social Welfare who contacted the birth mother. The birth mother then gave the Social Worker the birth fathers name.

The other two adoptees have been given their birth father's names by their birth mothers and one adoptee has begun a search. The other adoptee subsequently forgot the name and as the relationship has deteriorated she is reluctant to ask again.

" I have thought about asking her again but it's a bit tricky now. I ask myself, " Does it matter?" and I'm not sure right now ".

The remaining five adoptees have been unable to obtain information from their birth mothers regarding their birth fathers. These birth mothers are either unable or unwilling to provide this information. Those birth mothers unwilling to provide this information appear to be maintaining the denial and family secrets previously discussed. There does not appear to be any relationship between the reluctance to impart this information and the quality of the relationship between the adoptee and their birth mother.

" She is the only one who knows and she is not telling ".

" I asked and she basically downtrod him. When I asked again, I got a different answer ".

" I don't know his name and she doesn't want me to meet

him. Everytime I talk to her, I end up saying, " Can I meet him " and she says " Oh no. It brings back too many memories for me". She's forever saying " You do that just like him ".

When I contacted her, she rang him, it's a mystery to me ".

" All she knows is his first name, so I will never know and that gets to me ".

ADOPTTEES REASONS FOR WANTING TO TRACE THEIR BIRTH FATHERS.

The reasons given by the adoptees for wanting to trace their fathers are similar to those reasons for wanting to trace birth mothers. The adoptees do not appear to experience the same degree of intensity regarding tracing birth fathers as they do with respect to tracing birth mothers. This may be due in part to the fact that for some adoptees they are presently unable to search. Tracing birth fathers seems to be the final part of the mystery for adoptees.

" It's the last part of the jigsaw puzzle ".

" Part of me says that it would be interesting to know where I get some of my traits and interests from ".

" Probably more sober than those reasons for tracing my birth mother. Mostly the same though because you may as well see it as far as it can go ".

CONTACT WITH BIRTH FATHERS.

Apart from the adoptee who has contact with her married birth parents, the two adoptees who have contacted their birth fathers have a distant or non existent relationship.

When the adoptee who has a distant relationship with her birth father first made contact, she found that her birth father was hesitant and reluctant to accept this revelation without proof.

“ He said he was not going to deny me but neither was he going to own up. He wanted proof -- a DNA test . Eventually we gave up on the idea of a DNA test as neither of us could afford it. I told him that if he was my father then well and good, if not, then I had made a nice new friend “.

The adoptee who has a non existent relationship with her birth father was introduced to her father by her birth mother. Initially, she quite liked him, however some time later something happened. Since then the adoptee has refused further contact.

“ He was alright to start with, then he did something so I wiped him. I won't let my children have anything to do with him. I hate him.

At least I know who he is. You can look for unity and you might get it, then again, you get the bad that goes with it -- the part you don't want “.

ADOPTEE'S OPINIONS ON FATHERS NOT TRACED.

The adoptees who have not been able to trace their birth fathers would still like to make contact. These adoptees are more hesitant about the degree of involvement they would prefer to have with their birth fathers. This is possibly due to the experiences the adoptees have already had with their birth mothers and suggests that the emotional toll on the adoptees is as significant as suggested by Lifton, (1979).

" I do want to know more about him. I don't think I would go for contact again, perhaps to know a name, what he did "

" It's the last piece of the jigsaw puzzle but if I met him, I'd find out that it won't be because there will probably be more brothers and sisters. I would have to start all over again. I do think about it, it's not such a big thing as meeting my birth mother. I am quite content with where I am at the moment "

" That's the one thing I would like to know and will never find out "

" I don't know if I want to have contact with him. I wouldn't mind knowing who he is but I don't know if I want to go through it all again. It is something to consider for the future "

" If I do search for him, I want to be absolutely sure that this

is what I want. I want to do it very carefully, meet him by chance and try to ascertain how he would feel about it before telling him who I am “.

SIBLINGS.

An unexpected bonus for adoptees who reunite with birth parents is the discovery of full or half siblings. Little research has been conducted in this area as most adoption reunion research focuses primarily on the reunion between adoptee and birth mother.

According to Lifton, (1979), siblings generally welcome the adoptee into the family. Some siblings see the adoptee as a threat to the birth mother's affections and birth mothers have been known to keep the adoptee's existence a secret from other children.

Kennard, (1990), suggests that other members of the birth family, including siblings, were more significant than birth fathers at the point the research was conducted. Adoptees found that they had different relationships with different members of the birth families and that it was easier for adoptees to add siblings and other birth relatives to their wider family.

Seven of the adoptees in this study discovered siblings after establishing contact with birth relatives. For six of the adoptees the relationship with their siblings has generally been positive.

“ It's been really neat to have a sister. but I don't know if we will ever be really close “.

" I get along really well with one of my two brothers and two of my four sisters. The ones I don't get along with feel threatened by me. I don't want to interfere in their lives, I don't want to go down and change everything, I just want to know them ".

" I met my sister and we got on like a house on fire ".

" My sister is great, I get along with her really well. My brother is a bit of a no hoper ".

" Because I already knew my brother, it made it easier and also because he had a different personality to the rest of the family. Even if we didn't see each other for ages, it didn't make any difference. When we did see each other, it was even better, we had both grown up a bit more .

With my other brother it was different. We always kept in touch although he never came and visited that often . I think that our mother would hold him back from what he wanted to do ".

The process of getting to know one another did change the relationships between the adoptees and their siblings.

" It wasn't until three years later that we really got to know each other. We had been through the same things ".

" Things are changing with one sister who feels threatened and I try to make her feel that I am interested in her too ".

" I think that you get what you need from it, what you are both looking for and then it doesn't need to be as intense as that anymore ".

" It did change, we got to be better friends. As I get older, we did more things together. When he died, it brought my other brother and I closer together ".

For the adoptee who has not had a positive reaction from her sibling, there was an intense feeling of disappointment mediated by understanding of her sibling's family situation.

" I was so very disappointed . I would liked to have had a relationship with her but it would have been hard as she is close to our mother who has refused to have anything to do with me ".

EXTENDED BIRTH FAMILIES.

The adoptees in this study have all contacted their birth mothers. From this contact, only one adoptee, who was not able to establish any further contact with her birth mother, was unable to continue her search for more members of her extended birth family. The other adoptee whose birth mother refused further contact, has gone on to meet and continue contact with the majority of the members of her birth family. The remaining eight adoptees have all met

immediate birth relatives such as siblings, birth fathers, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces and nephews. These birth relatives have and continue to play a large role in the adoptees' life. Meeting the extended birth relatives was a highlight for all the adoptees and the tension that existed when meeting birth parents and birth mothers in particular, was not as evident when meeting these new relations. While the adoptees admitted being nervous when meeting the extended birth relatives, it had more to do with the fact that the adoptees were frequently meeting new relatives in groups rather than individually.

" My Uncle took me to meet all the family and it was a bit much. One at a time would have been nicer ".

" It was really good getting to know lots of cousins. They all came and visited me, one or two at a time or half a dozen at a time ".

" There were so many people involved. Meeting families that you hadn't seen before, then explaining to the kids why they have so many relatives ".

These ongoing relationships are important and meaningful to the adoptees. They lack the denial and family secrets which characterise much of the relationship with the birth mother. In building relationships with other birth relatives, the adoptees and their birth relatives were able to grow to know one another as individuals without pressure. These relationships were a relief to the adoptees who, after the tension of the reunion with birth mothers, found that they were able to relax and enjoy these new relationships for what they were. The emotional baggage carried into the reunions by the birth mothers did not

exist in these relationships.

“ One of my mother’s sisters and I used to go out together. Our children used to spend a lot of time in each other’s homes and learned to live with each other as friends “.

“ My grandfather is very steady and I respect him for that and for not trying to make everything right “.

“ My Uncle is wonderful. He is aware of my feelings, accepts me as I am. It’s the best relationship of them all “.

“ The more I see of them, the better we like each other. It’s a great friendship, no hassles “.

ADOPTIVE PARENTS.

Very few studies are available that explore the effects of reunion on the adoptive relationship. Sorosky et al, (1978), noted in their sample of reunions that although adoptive parents were initially upset, these feelings were ultimately replaced by stronger and healthier relationships between parents and adoptees, who felt closer and had increased understanding and warmth for each other.

The Thompson et al (1978) study cited in Sachdev, (1984), reached similar conclusions and noted that “ it is evident that even in the more upset situations, the adoptive relationship was not destroyed by reunion. Many adoptees reported a feeling of greater closeness to their adoptive family”. (p.27).

These findings are also supported by Lion et al (1976), who found that for the most part, the encounters did not adversely affect the relationship with the adoptive parents, rather, the parents felt more secure and confident in their role as adoptive parents.

Tingley, (1980) observed that 13 of the 19 adoptive parents felt reduced anxiety following the adoptee - birth mother reunion and experienced a positive effect on their relationship with the adoptees. None felt opposed to any subsequent contact by the adoptees with their birth parents.

A British study by Day, (1979) also reported that reunions had a positive effect on adoptee - adoptive parent relationships.

Thompson et al (1978) also examined the reactions of adoptive parents to adoptees' search for their birth parents. Of the limited group of adopted children who had actively engaged in searching out their biological parents, 65% felt that their adoptive parents were "totally comfortable" or "more or less comfortable" with what they were doing. It should be remembered that these were the adoptive parents reactions as perceived by the adoptees. The authors also states that it should be noted that even though adoptive parents were less enthusiastic, some 73% of the adoptive parents were in favour of open records.

Notwithstanding the positive outcomes of the reunions reviewed, the adoptive parents' apprehension of losing their children to their birth mothers looms large and remains an unresolved dilemma. It is not uncommon for adoptive parents to be reluctant to share information about the adoptees genealogical roots for fear of losing their adopted child's loyalty to them. However, some studies have noted that the adoptees interpret their parents' failure to disclose what they

know about the adoption as reflecting a lack of trust (Day, 1979; Triseliotis, 1973). Although adoptees recognised that their parents' attempt to withhold or distort the information about their background was intended to protect them, the adoptees maintained that truth and honesty would have helped to bring them closer to their adoptive parents.

Informing the adopted parents that a search was underway to locate birth parents or that contact had been established with birth parents, was stressful and raised feelings of divided loyalties for adoptees. The irony that the principles of adoption had gone the full circle was not lost on two adoptees. These adoptees recognised that where their adopted parents had reassured the adoptees that they were loved and an unconditional member of the adopted family, when the adoptees established contact with members of their birth family, the adoptees found themselves in the situation of now reassuring their adopted parents that they were loved as parents and that the adopted parents were not about to be deserted for the birth family.

" I had to constantly reassure her that I would always love her as my mother but I always had that doubt that she didn't believe me . This after the lifetime of reassurance and acceptance from her " .

" My Dad went right off the handle and he thought I was going to move out and live with her " .

Two adoptees received a strong negative reaction from their adopted parents when they were informed that contact had been established between the adoptee and their birth mothers. One adoptee had experienced an abusive

childhood with her adopted parents.

" My stepparents disowned me because they were told my birth mother was with me ".

The other adoptee had grown up receiving the message from his adopted parents that it was healthy and positive to be interested in his origins. The reality for this adoptee when he informed his adopted parents that he had found his birth mother, was unexpected.

" I didn't tell them until I actually found her and it didn't go down well. They stopped speaking to me for a while which was unprecedented. It just caused a whole lot of problems ".

The other adoptees were aware of how search and contact with birth families was affecting their adopted parents. The adoptees were not prepared to discontinue their relationships with their birth families and where possible the adoptees attempted to involve their adopted parents in the ongoing search or established relationship with their birth family.

" She was a bit hurt that I was going looking and told me to forget it. I said I wasn't going to drop it and she accepted it a wee bit ".

" I got my adopted mother involved as I didn't want her to feel left out. The more I involved her, the better she felt about it, she wasn't going to lose me ".

Eight of the adoptees felt that establishing contact with their birth families did not damage their relationships with their adoptive parents. The adoptees recognised that their adoptive parents were their psychological parents and that the process of search and reunion with birth relatives heightened their sense of belonging in their adoptive family.

“ They brought me up, they are my parents “.

“ They are my parents and that could never change “.

“ I had an identity and funnily enough that identity was what I had grown up with “.

“ I belong with my adoptive parents, that is my family “.

“ I always knew I belonged with my adoptive parents, searching only cemented it “.

SUMMARY.

The focus of this chapter has been on the adoptees' experiences with birth fathers, siblings and extended birth families. The adoptees' experiences with birth fathers were characterised by the **birth mother's denial**, which for the adoptees manifested feelings of frustration, caution and an awareness of a need for completing the search process. Contact with siblings and extended birth family members generated feelings of **identification** and **satisfaction**

for the adoptees. At the time of searching or early contact with birth relatives, adoptees experienced **cognitive dissonance** in respect to telling their adoptive parents which heightened their **sense of belonging** to the adoptive family.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DISCOVERIES AND PRESENT OUTCOMES.

The adoptees in this study were asked what they discovered by searching and establishing contact with their birth families. Regardless of the adoptees' perception of the present outcome of the search, all the adoptees found answers to questions, similarities to birth family members, and an increased sense of identity.

" She told me why she gave me away and who my father was "

" It was great to find out a name and both my birth parents nationalities "

" She is so amazingly like me, she brings out the worst side of me so far as humour goes "

" My heritage. It's a nice feeling to look at my birth parents and see my eyes and nose. That my brothers and sisters all like the same things and have the same interests as me "

" Interesting details about families and physical

similarities “.

For three adoptees, part of the discovery was a reconfirming that their sense of personal identity was significantly related to their adopted parents and the upbringing they had in their adopted family.

“ It’s hard to define. I’ve discovered more about myself, a confidence in myself, of who I am, what I am doing and where I am going. I suppose it is what people will spend thousands of dollars for therapy for and I’ve got it for free I had an identity and funnily enough that identity was what I had grown up with. That is most of me “.

“ It pleased me to know that my features were a mixture of the two of them. It’s nice to know about the rest of the family and to find that there were some common links . My adopted family is where so much of my identity comes from “.

“ I’m glad I found out who my mother and brothers are. I can’t say that it answered many questions for me but I am glad I know. My heritage comes from my adopted family . They are my family “.

For the two adoptees who were unable to establish any relationship with their birth mothers, the discoveries of identity were related to a sense of personal growth, which in itself is positive.

" Identity. That I am somebody, that I am not nothing ".

" I have discovered that I am who I am and that I don't need to be part of anybody else. I don't feel that I appeared out of nowhere and that has made me stronger ".

COINCIDENCES.

Three adoptees discovered coincidences which added to the excitement of search and contact.

" We had friends in common and I knew her aunt who had lived a few doors away. We had even lived in the same street at different times. I had even been in the same room at the same time as her at an audition at a theatre ".

" My birth mother was a friend's auntie ".

" The first girl born after me looks exactly like me, we have the same spot on our face and we were even born on the same day but different years. My birth mother said that no matter how many children she had, she could never replace what she lost. It was almost like her body had repainted it in another child just like me ".

ADOPTEEES' FEELING FOR BIRTH MOTHERS.

Seven of the adoptees discussed how they felt about their birth mothers. None of the adoptees saw their birth mothers as mothers in spite of the fact that generally strong relationships exist between them.

" I do have a love, and a warmth and I care for her. I don't have the same instinctive bond for her that I have for my adoptive mother "

" She will never be a mother "

" She couldn't be a mother to me in the sense I recognised because I already had a person in that role "

" Just because there is a maternal bond, doesn't mean you are going to like each other "

Three adoptees for whom the search and or contact was unsuccessful, voiced equally strong statements regarding their feelings toward their birth mothers.

" I do not like her as a person "

" I hate calling her mother because to me she is not "

" This person I was looking for was never going to be a mother. I already had one "

REJECTION.

Two adoptees in this study experienced rejection from their birth mothers. Both adoptees found the rejection hurtful and saw the refusal to have contact as a second rejection.

*" To be honest, I was more hurt than I thought at the time.
All I could think was that she had rejected me again "*

*" I found myself saying " It's being rejected twice ". You
have this build up all your life, then nothing. It hurts "*

Both the adoptees had rationalised the reasons why they were rejected based on what information they did have.

*" It could be pride or even shame. Her being an alcoholic
probably doesn't help "*

*" Maybe having six other children and lots of
grandchildren, she just doesn't need anyone else. Maybe
there's not really a gap for me "*

Both these adoptees talked about the regrets associated with the rejection from their birth mothers.

*" I would like to have a recording of her voice. It would be
nice to sit down with the person who gave birth to you and
have a conversation then go your own ways, but to have*

nothing. Just a measure of explanation would be nice, after all I am a human being “.

“ I wish now there could have been some way of asking about my father but that would have meant another letter and I wasn't going to do it again “.

WERE THE ADOPTEES' EXPECTATIONS MET?

At the beginning of the interviews with the adoptees, they were asked what their expectations were prior to starting their search for birth relatives. Nine of the ten adoptees stated that they had minimal expectations regarding their birth parents and the outcome of their search. When asked at the end of the interview whether they thought their expectations had been met by their journey through the search and or contact established, the adoptees disclosed that they did in fact have higher expectations than they were prepared to admit to at the point of starting their search. Eight of the adoptees felt that their expectations were more than met although for some adoptees, these expectations were met in different ways to what they originally expected.

“ Only with my cousins and extended family. I set out to find my sister and ended up with all these relatives. The way they treat me makes up for the lack of the others “.

“ You go in with high expectations, even though you don't think you do. There are so many things that went right when they could have gone wrong. I think they were more than met. I don't know how lucky I am “.

" Yes. I expected the worst and got the best "

" I got more than I hoped for because she could have rejected me "

" Yes, I made sure I found out the things I wanted to know "

" The expectations were to find an identity and I did . At times I was disappointed in the way she has handled things but the expectations were met "

Two adoptees were either not sure or felt that their expectations were not met.

" I'm not sure. I just took things as they were "

" No. I think I wanted a little more than one letter. I didn't want a lot "

Adoptees were asked whether having gone through the experience of searching and contacting birth relatives, if they could go back in time knowing that their experience and outcome would not change, would they repeat the experience? All the adoptees responded with an unequivocal positive reply in that they would all repeat the experience regardless of their own personal outcome. The sense of identity gained by the adoptees was the main reason cited by the adoptees with two adoptees also discussing the benefits for birth mothers.

" Definitely. Even if I didn't know what I was going to find, I would still have to do it "

" Yes. You've got to know where you come from and what your family background is. No matter how it turns out, it is better to know. I was lucky, my mother wanted her daughter and her husband wanted the unity as well "

" Yes, although I might have done it a different way. I like things to reach a logical conclusion "

" Definitely, because of where I am now. If you had asked me halfway through, I would have said "No", but looking down the track to where you get to, it's for everybody, not just me. My birth mother can admit now that it's done a lot of good "

" Yes, to find out what your roots are "

" Yes. I am glad to have the knowledge that I have found and it frees me to go forward. I can be free to be who I am and I'm not controlled by any other destiny than the one I choose and part of that is having that knowledge "

" Yes, because I needed identity. I always wanted to know because I was different "

For the two adoptees who were unsuccessful in establishing a relationship with

their birth mothers and the one adoptee whose relationship quickly deteriorated with her birth mother, all found that the search added to their sense of identity and do not regret their search.

" Yes. I know who I am, I know my roots. I am somebody "

" Yes. Nothing really terrible happened and I don't regret doing it. I don't feel that I have hurt anybody, except for myself a little but that's the risk you take. It has made me closer to the ones I already have. Knowing a little is better than the total mystery "

" I'm glad I know. I have no regrets in finding out and it's such a shame that things have turned out the way they have "

At the time that this research was conducted, the adoptees involved had reunited with their birth relatives for periods ranging from three to seventeen years. The relationships established had all settled and none of the adoptees expressed any regrets regarding their actions in initiating a search and reunion. All the adoptees demonstrated facets of personal growth indicative of Anderson's (1989) theory of a third category of adoptees who regard search and reunion as a psychological trauma which is termed as growth. As suggested by Anderson, (1989), it is not necessary for adoptees to change the history of their adoption in order to change their experience of it. All the adoptees responded to the trauma of their dislocation from their birth families by searching. All except one adoptee have learned from the experience of reuniting with their birth families, and all have grieved for their losses. All the

adoptees confirmed Anderson's, (1989) theory that ultimately the looking for birth relatives is central to the process and that any search is better than none.

FINAL COMMENTS REGARDING THE PROCESS OF SEARCH AND REUNION.

When the adoptees look back at their experience of search and reunion with birth relatives, the overriding feeling was the lack of preparation available for what is a unique experience. There is no point of comparison for the adoptees and all felt that this journey was without boundaries and rules.

" I am still emotional about it. There's no law about how to deal with it ".

" There's no preparation for this, it's like stepping into the unknown ".

" You get stuck doing all the work, making all the effort and being the one who puts yourself on the line without knowing a single thing. You don't know if you are going to be rejected all over again by the one person who should never reject you in your whole life. It is an enormous leap of faith and I don't know if the birth mothers understand that, caught up as they are in the pain they went through in giving their child away ".

SUMMARY.

This chapter has dealt with the adoptees' discoveries about themselves and the process of search and reunion with birth families. The primary category was that of **knowledge**, which incorporated information, search as growth and a sense of partial resolution.

CHAPTER EIGHT

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION.

The process of search and reunion with birth families is a process unique to adopted people. While the physical process of search is different for each adoptee, the psychological process for each of the adoptees in this study was similar. The literature which suggests that adoptees' desire to know their biological origins is a nearly universal phenomenon in normal personality development, (Burke, 1975; Day, 1979; Hoopes, 1970; Jones, 1976; Lifton, 1976; Sorosky et al, 1975; Thompson, 1978; & Triseliotis, 1973), was confirmed by the adoptees in this study.

All the adoptees who were aware of their adoptive status from childhood, recalled that they were curious about their origins and that someday they wanted to discover more information or find members of their birth families. This desire to know more is not a concept unique to the adoptee's childhood or correlated to the strength of the relationship with the adoptive parents and is related to the categories of family life and ongoing curiosity. (Appendix 4). Those adoptees who discovered or had their adoptive status confirmed in adulthood, keenly felt this desire to know their biological origins also.

The concepts of " genealogical bewilderment " (Sants, 1965), and the " roaming phenomenon " (Toussieng, 1962), which refers to the adolescent adoptees' perceived difficulties in accepting rebellion against their adoptive parents as

well as the adoptees' obsession with questions about their origins were partially borne out by the adoptees in this study. Four of the adoptees did experience an increased sense of isolation and self questioning regarding their sense of identity. However, literature on general adolescent development, (Erikson, 1968; LeVine & Sallee, 1990), clearly states that adolescence is a time for all adolescents to question their parents' authority and to complete the tasks of attempting to develop their sense of individual uniqueness, while unconsciously also striving for continuity of experience of their life with the world. Clearly, for the adopted adolescent, this striving for continuity with their past and the concept of solidarity with group ideals, (Erikson, 1968), is more difficult than for the non-adopted adolescent. Had these adoptees remained in their birth families, they may well have experienced the same questions regarding their sense of personal identity and feelings of isolation and it is impossible to speculate as to how much easier the adolescent years would have been for the adoptees had they not been adopted.

For the two adoptees who experienced an abusive adoptive relationship, the need to know their origins was a major issue. The circumstances surrounding the adoption of these two individuals was substantially different to that of the other adoptees as was the adoptive experience. The combination of how they came to be adopted into their adoptive families, the abusive adoptive relationship and the feelings of isolation and abandonment felt by these adoptees all contributed to the almost obsessive need to reestablish contact with their birth mothers. This is consistent with the hypothesis as suggested by Bernard, (1963); Thompson, (1978); Day, (1979) & Raynor, (1980), that adoptee's who have experienced an abusive or unhappy adoptive life, are more likely to seek out the possibility of a more rewarding personal relationship

with members of their birth family.

One of the major issues which emerged for the adolescent adoptee, was the concern regarding an emotional or sexual involvement with an unknown sibling and is related to the category of information. This concern is consistent with Burke's, (1975) suggestion that such concerns may magnify the curiosity over the adoptees' origins. While the possibility of such an event occurring is low, it is a reality for all adoptees under a closed adoption system.

THE NATURE OF SEARCH.

The vast majority of the literature which investigates the reasons why adoptees wish to search for birth relatives, has focused on the concepts that the adoptees experience a number of life crises or a specific life event or trigger which precipitates the need to search, (Triseliotis, 1979; Sorosky et al, 1974, 1975, & 1976; Sobol & Cardiff, 1983, & Kennard, 1990). According to the researchers, these reasons specifically include the death of an adoptive parent, impending marriage for the adoptee, the birth of a child, medical information, or media coverage of adoption groups. The adoptees in this study did not cite any life events or triggers as their reasons for searching for birth relatives. This is not to say that triggers did not exist. However, the adoptees were specifically asked what their reasons were and none of the adoptees cited any of the accepted reasons contained in the literature. All of the adoptees stated that they felt a life long lack of sense of identity and / or a sense of curiosity about their origins. This finding could be explained by the fact that the adoptees in this study were asked open ended questions in an interview, rather than being given a questionnaire as was the case with the cited studies. When options are already listed to which individuals can respond , they are more likely to respond to such

options rather than attempt to write a complex personal history, particularly if space on the forms is not sufficient. It is also possible that the researchers assume and therefore expect that there are triggers to searching and so do not consider that there may be other reasons. This prevents them asking other questions of their subjects.

One model, that of Anderson, (1989), appears to be consistent with the experiences of participants in the present study. He suggested that adoptees who search could be placed into one of three groups depending on their assumptions, wishes and beliefs as to the strategic nature and function of the search. Anderson, (1989), believes that, knowingly or not, adoptees probably embrace all of these views concurrently, although the emphasis is different for each individual. The three groups, search for adventure, search for cure and search for growth are not necessarily mutually exclusive and each has specific characteristics.

The results of this study tended to support the general hypothesis as generated by Anderson, (1989). However, there were some marked differences which emerged from this research. Where Anderson, (1989) suggests that adoptees tend to remain in one primary group of the three, (adventure, cure or growth), the results of this study strongly suggest that while the nature of search and reunion is consistent with Anderson's (1989) hypothesis, the process of search and reunion is in fact a series of stages for searching adoptees, consisting of adventure, cure and growth. The adoptees tended to move through all of these stages in a developmental progression.

While adoptees are searching for different things on different conceptual levels at the same time, trends were identified with the adoptees in this study which

indicated that the psychological process was similar for all of them regardless of their personal adoptive history or their reunion outcomes. At the time of searching, the process is characterised by excitement and the need for the experience of contacting the birth mother, in particular. This can be seen as suggestive of Anderson's (1990), concept of **adventure**. The possibility of reuniting with other birth relatives is not seriously considered at this point, the focus is on the birth mother. However, the prospect of a joyful reunion with the birth mother, with little thought given to the consequences as suggested by Anderson, (1989), was not substantiated by the results in this research. In fact, the opposite was found to be true. As seen with the categories of " initiating contact " and " awareness of their birth relatives feelings ", all the adoptees gave considerable thought to the consequences for their birth mothers in particular. This provides some insight into why some adoptees waited for varying lengths of time before contacting birth mothers. It also explains the care given to the first telephone call or writing the first letter. This view of search has an enormous emotional appeal and impact and for the adoptees, much of the emotion involved feelings of vulnerability and the possibility of a further rejection. These negative emotions were not enough to dampen the need for the experience or the excitement for the adoptees.

Anderson's (1989), second view of search and reunion is that of cure. In this view two things are presumed to be missing, a lack of information and a deficiency of experience with the birth mother. The salient elements for this view are that the adoptee needs to take something external into themselves' something that is missing. This process is relatively passive. Another major premise with this view is that finding the information is paramount and once found, the adoptee trusts that the information will be favourable. A bad search is one where the information gained is unfavourable. Three of the adoptees

identified their reasons for searching in terms of cure in that their birth mother would provide acceptable information and solve the adoptee's problems at the beginning of their search. As the process of search began in earnest, they, like the other adoptees, saw the search as adventure. At the time of contact with birth mothers, the process changed for all the adoptees. Whereas the search itself was emotional, exciting and under the control of the adoptees, the adoptee's perception was that the determination of how the reunion would progress lay entirely in the hands of the birth mothers. At this point, the adoptees were passive, as any information they wanted, was now controlled by the birth mothers. Whatever the adoptees needed to take into themselves as postulated by Anderson, (1989), was external as the birth mothers were the only individuals who could answer the adoptee's questions. For the adoptees, the nature of search was now that of cure in that the adoptees were hoping for firstly, favourable information from their birth mothers, and secondly that some sort of relationship would develop from the contact which had been established. This stage of the process of search was reflective of the early stages of the new relationship formed, or what was retrospectively seen by the adoptee's as the "honeymoon period" in the relationship with birth mother's in particular.

Anderson's, (1989), third view of search was based on the psychological trauma model, which has as its ultimate goal, personal growth. The nature of search and reunion here, is one of attempting to actively master the prior experience which had until now been passively endured. The adoptees learned over the years of contact with their birth families, to respond, learn and grieve for what never was. The process of search and reunion was just one step in the personal growth of individual adoptees, albeit an important step. The adoptees did not completely resolve the issues surrounding their adoption. However, all adoptees stated that they gained information about their origins

and / or, felt that they were able to move on with their lives. This process emerged over time and was assisted by the adoptees' acceptance of the changes in the relationships with their birth relatives. This process would indicate that the adoptees gained a stronger sense of identity and therefore, personal **growth** as they assimilated the information given to them. While some of the adoptees experienced better outcomes than others, the quality of the outcome did not affect the adoptee's current position regarding the process of search and reunion. None of the adoptees regretted searching and the main factor appears to be the fact that they have taken action and that any action is better than none and this finding relates to the category of knowledge. This finding is consistent with Anderson's (1989) view regarding search as growth. To summarise, Anderson's (1989) model can be seen as a process, split into three distinct stages. The stage which is dominant at any particular time depends on what stage in the search and reunion process, the adoptee finds her / himself.

Embarking on the search elicited feelings of vulnerability in the adoptees. The closer the adoptees came to tracing and contacting their birth mothers, the more intense were their feelings of vulnerability. The point of making contact was a time of particular apprehension for the adoptees, and, coinciding with the vulnerable feelings, was the conscious realisation that the adoptees could be rejected again. Adoptees who had previously not consciously considered their adoption to be a rejection from their birth mothers considered that the possibility of a rejection by their birth mothers when contact was established, would be a second rejection. This aspect of the search and reunion process has not been identified in the literature to date. This is possibly due to the fact that the existing literature tends to focus on the physical mechanics of search and reunion rather than the psychological process of the searching adoptees.

The actual contact or meeting with a birth relative was associated with the category of " emotional intensity " for adoptees who felt a lack of preparedness for the experience. The adoptees acknowledged that nothing could have prepared them for this experience and that it literally was a step into the unknown. It is possible that the compulsory counselling session that adoptees attend when receiving their original birth certificates, could assist searching adoptees by discussing this aspect of the process in more detail.

CHANGES IN THE RELATIONSHIPS.

The early stages of the newly formed relationships were exciting and stressful for the adoptees who did not experience rejection from their birth mothers. The adoptees were very aware of the tenuous link between themselves and their birth mothers and tended to hold themselves back and not ask many of the questions they wanted to at this point. The adoptees believed that if they pushed for information, the relationship in which they had invested so much of themselves could be lost.

The adoptees were acutely aware of the risks for their birth mothers as this new relationship developed. The adoptees identified two major concepts in relation to the changes in the relationship and the risk factors for their birth mothers. Firstly, the birth mothers engaged in a denial process whereby they would not disclose important information to the adoptees or other birth relatives and secondly, this denial served to maintain the family secrets which began prior to the adoptees' birth. This aspect of reunion has not been fully recognised in the literature. While acknowledging that reunion can be traumatic for birth mothers for whom a search has been launched, the literature has not investigated this

phenomenon in any depth. The pain of relinquishing a child and the associated guilt for the birth mother does not disappear when a baby is handed over. Birth mothers do not forget their children as they were advised to by social workers, health professionals and families. These women were not given any opportunity to grieve for their children and so suppressed their pain until the now grown child returned. It would appear that for the birth mothers, the stigma of illegitimacy still exists, thus maintaining the need to preserve the family secret.

Contrary to the opinions of both researchers, (Foster, 1979; & Zelinger, 1979), and individuals who oppose legislation such as the Adult Adoption Information Act, (1986), the adoptees in the present study respected their birth mothers' wishes and did not violate their birth mother's requests, either implicitly or explicitly. The family secrets were kept.

Those relationships which continue to grow and remain positive involve work from both the adoptee and the involved birth relatives. The birth mother's current personal situation is a major factor as is her perception of her role in the adoptee's life. Those birth mothers who attempt to assume a " mother " role actually push the adoptee away, sometimes with negative results. For the adoptees, time attenuates the intensity of emotion and adoptees find that having the knowledge and knowing that they can access their birth mothers when they feel the need, is enough.

BIRTH FATHERS, SIBLINGS AND EXTENDED FAMILIES.

The adoptees in this study confirmed the hypothesis suggested by Lifton, (1979), in that adoptees tend to need a period of time between contacting the birth mother before instigating the search and reunion with the birth father. The

adoptees also experienced first hand their birth mother's denial in relation to the birth father. They were disappointed with the lack of information, including a name. However, the feelings were not as intense as those experienced when searching for a birth mother. Only three adoptees reunited with their fathers and only one of them has an ongoing relationship with her birth father. Therefore, it is not possible to even speculate about the nature of the relationships between birth fathers and adoptees. Adoptees are hesitant to become involved with birth fathers not yet traced and this is partly due to the experiences they have had with birth mothers. The adoptees are also aware of what the process involved, both physically and emotionally.

The discovery of siblings and extended birth family members is a bonus to adoptees. With a small number of exceptions, they experience positive relationships with other members of their birth family. As suggested by Kennard, (1990), the adoptees appear to find it easy to add these individuals to their wider family, whereas including the birth mother into their wider family is more of a struggle. Many of the adoptees talked of how easy and comfortable these relationships were for all concerned, and frequently the most special relationship with a member of their birth family developed from contact with a sibling or extended birth family member. These relatives were one step removed from the emotional intensity and free of the emotional baggage which characterised the birth mother relationship.

The adoptees' relationships with their adoptive parents also underwent some changes during the search and reunion process. The cognitive dissonance experienced by adoptees with respect to their adoptive parents was present during the search and the early stages of a reunion. The adoptees found that reunion with birth relatives resulted in a closer relationship with their adoptive

parents who were reconfirmed as their " psychological parents ". The adoptees believe that those adoptive parents who were initially upset at the news of a search and or reunion, accepted the situation and came to see the reunion as a positive event for the adoptee. When the adoptive parents recognised that they were not going to lose the adoptee to the birth family, the relationship between adoptee and adoptive parents was strengthened. This finding is consistent with the literature on the effects of reunion on adoptive parents. (Sorosky, et al, 1978; Tingley, 1980; Day, 1979; Thompson et al, 1978; Kennard, 1990).

The current situation for all the adoptees who had searched and / or reunited with birth relatives was that they had all gained an increased sense of personal identity, irrespective of the actual current outcome with birth mothers in particular. The adoptees discovered coincidences regarding their birth relatives and for those adoptees who did establish a relationship with their birth mothers, none of the adoptees saw them as mothers. It is naive to assume that the majority of searching adoptees are in fact seeking for a parent relationship with their birth mothers. Those adoptees who have a positive relationship with their adoptive parents, knew that they already had parents and that any relationship established with birth mothers in particular, was secondary to that of the adoptive parents and family. All the adoptees were adamant that the process of search and reunion was beneficial to them in that they now felt that they had the sense of identity which they perceived as being missing in their lives prior to search and or reunion. None of the adoptees regretted their decision to search and this supported Anderson's (1989) theory that any search is better than none.

LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY.

A large proportion of the literature on adoption reunions generally tends to present findings in a case study format to support a theoretical formulation or to make a point about a particular practice in adoption. While case studies are interesting and give clues for further research, they can lack generalizability, are open to bias and can allow too free a range of subjective impressions. When presented in a case study format, they are also inefficient for prediction and control.

The grounded theory method of data analysis is based on the experiences, strategies and consequences of a particular group of individuals and the emerging theory is discovered, developed and provisionally tested through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon. The data collection, the analysis and theory stand in a reciprocal relationship. This study is based on a small sample of 10 adult adoptees which is a manageable number for qualitative research. A richness and depth of experience was achieved with this small number of participants and provides a basis only for ongoing qualitative research into the experiences of adoptees who search and reunite with birth families. The construction of a larger quantitative study to determine for example, whether the experiences of a large random sample of adult adoptees demonstrates similar results, is called for at this point.

This study has focussed entirely on the perceptions and experiences of adult adoptees. Much of the data is based upon the retrospective memories of the study's participants and the effects of time on the accuracy of the memories is unknown. The adoptees did however, demonstrate and express a significant

degree of affect during the interview process in relation to their search and reunion experiences and I believe that the stories of the adoptees journeys were recounted with honesty and sincerity.

The wider aspect of adoption generally involves more than the adult adoptee. Adoptive and birth parents have also been profoundly involved and affected by the adoptees' search and reunion experiences. It is impossible to ignore the influence of adoptive and birth parents in the life experiences of the searching and reuniting adoptees. Investigating the thoughts, perceptions and feelings of adoptive and birth parents was beyond the scope of this research.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH.

Further research and understanding into adoption reunions would benefit by including all the members of the adoption triad. Birth parents in particular are profoundly affected by the reappearance of the now grown child they relinquished years before. Their thoughts, feelings and perceptions of the reunion experience are vital to increasing our understanding of the impact of an adoption reunion.

Adopted parents also are affected by adoption reunions. They are generally the passive members of the initial adoption reunion although they may become more actively involved at a later stage. It would be interesting to investigate whether the adoptee's belief that the adoptive relationship was strengthened by a reunion with birth relatives is actually confirmed by adoptive parents. Their observations of the process and the effects of the reunion experience on the adoptee would also enhance the knowledge base of adoption reunions.

An area of adoption reunions not yet investigated is the effect of the search and reunion process on the adoptee's own family members. Adult adoptees' children also have to incorporate their parents' newly discovered birth family members into their concept of family. Children of adopted adults can find themselves with possibly four sets of grandparents and an enormous number of extra aunts, uncles and cousins. These children also have to cope with the changes in the relationship that occur between their parent and members of the birth family.

SUMMARY.

A grounded theory approach was used in this research to investigate the experiences of adult adoptees who search and establish contact with members of their birth families. This method allowed richness and depth in describing the experiences of participants which cannot usually be seen using a quantitative approach. It also allowed more freedom of response by participants. The implications from this research indicate that the underlying process for adoptees relates significantly to a life long need for identity and that a search and contact with birth relatives, regardless of the outcome, fulfills that need to a significant degree.

The adoptees in this study did think through the issues regarding the consequences of their actions and were sensitive and aware of the possible impact on their adoptive parents, their birth relatives and themselves. The adoptees were deeply affected by the reunion experience as were many of the contacted birth relatives. While some of the adoptees expressed regrets at the current situation regarding the contact with birth relatives, none regretted taking

action and following the process through to the end. All the adoptees expressed the opinion that all other adoptees should be enabled to experience the journey of search and reunion and that the personal growth achieved was worth the risks.

Adoptees who embark on a search for birth relatives are courageous individuals. They are not unbalanced, irrational or ungrateful individuals who have nothing better to do than reopen old wounds for birth relatives. They are responding to an identified need to know their origins. In effect, adoptees are no different from the thousands of non adopted individuals whose hobby is genealogy.

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APPENDIX ONE

INFORMATION SHEET.

ADOPTION REUNIONS.

Sylvia Alexander - Principal Investigator

Thank you for your interest in my research project. The overall aim of this research is to provide information about the experiences of adult adoptees in New Zealand who have searched and established contact with members of their birth families since the introduction of the Adult Adoption Information Act, (1985). One of the main aims of the research, is to investigate the types of relationships that develop over time after the adult adoptees contact their birth relatives.

If you agree to participate in this research, I would wish to interview you for approximately 1 hour with the possibility of a further 30 minute interview in 6 to 8 weeks time.

You have the right to withdraw your consent at any time, you can decline to answer any particular questions and you also have the right to ask me questions about the research.

I give you an undertaking that all the information you discuss with me is confidential and will be known only to me. In the completed thesis, your information will be anonymous and unidentifiable. If you wish to receive feedback on the final results, this will be made available to you.

Thank you again for your participation in this research.

APPENDIX TWO

INFORMED CONSENT FORMS. ADOPTION REUNIONS.

Principal Investigator:

Sylvia Alexander,
C/- Psychology Department,
Massey University,
Palmerston North.

I have read the information sheet provided for this research and the details of the research have been explained to me. My questions about the research have been answered to my satisfaction and I understand that I can ask further questions.

I understand that I can withdraw from the research at any time and that I can decline to answer any particular questions.

I agree to participate in this research and I understand that the information I disclose is confidential.

Signed.....

Statement by the investigator.

I have discussed with the aims and procedures involved in this study.

Signed..... Principal Investigator

Date.....

APPENDIX 3.

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR ADULT ADOPTEES.

What was it like for you to grow up adopted?

What were your expectations when you began your search?

What were your reasons for wanting to search?

Who of your birth relatives have you established contact with?

How would you describe your birth relatives' reactions when you first established contact?

What form did the contact with your birth relatives take in the beginning?

How would you describe the relationship with your birth relatives during the first 6 / 8 weeks?

Since you first established contact, do you feel that your relationship with your birth relatives has changed in any way?

Why do you think the relationship has changed or not changed?

How would you describe your present relationship with your birth relatives?

Since the time you established contact with your birth relatives, what have you discovered?

Were the expectations that you had when you began your search, met by establishing contact with your birth relatives?

If you could go back in time but knew that you could not change anything, would you still seek contact / reunion?

Demographic data.

Participants current age.

Occupation.

Gender.

Ethnic group.

The adoptees' age at the time of the adoption.

The other family members in the adoptive family.

A summary of their overall personal relationship with their adoptive parents.

APPENDIX FOUR

TABLE OF CODES AND CATEGORIES

SUBSTANTIVE CODES

Sense of belonging

Sense of acceptance

Feeling different

Abuse within adoptive family

Effects on adoptive relationship

CORE CATEGORY: Family life

Awareness to discover more

Paradoxical fantasies

Sense of never being born

CORE CATEGORY: Ongoing curiosity

Information given

Secrecy

Adoptees questioning

Fear of incest

Late disclosure of adoptive status

CORE CATEGORY: Information

Search for adventure

Identified reasons for searching

Changing reasons for searching

CORE CATEGORY: Lack of sense of identity

Fear

Providing information to birth mothers

CORE CATEGORY: Expectations

Anticipation
Excitement
Vulnerability
Desperation

CORE CATEGORY: Search as adventure

Awareness of birth mothers feelings
Fear of rejection
Reality of rejection
Lack of preparedness
Ambivalent feelings toward birth mother

CORE CATEGORY: Initiating contact

Search for cure
Rejection
Discoveries
Disappointment
Hesitancy to question birth mothers
Early difficulties

CORE CATEGORY: Emotional intensity

Past pain
Consequences for birth mothers

CORE CATEGORY: Awareness of birth relatives feelings

Responsibility for change
Motivation
Assertiveness

CORE CATEGORY: Changes in relationships

Family secrets
Trauma
Acceptance

CORE CATEGORY: Birth mothers denial

Frustration

Caution

Awareness to complete

CORE CATEGORY:

Birth mothers denial

Contact

CORE CATEGORY:

Identification and satisfaction

Cognitive dissonance

CORE CATEGORY:

Sense of belonging

Information

Growth

Partial resolution

CORE CATEGORY:

Knowledge