# BLOOD TIES

## THE LABYRINTH OF FAMILY MEMBERSHIP IN LONG TERM ADOPTION REUNION

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# *ABSTRACT*

This thesis reports original research conducted with twenty adoptees, adopted under closed-stranger protocols, who have been experiencing regular post-reunion contact with their birth families for more than ten years. It examines the themes of the mothering role, family obligation and family membership to uncover how adoptees navigate their family membership within and between two families (adoptive and birth family). This study presents the thoughts, feelings and observations of the participants in their own words to convey a deeper understanding of their experiences. Drawing upon in-depth interviews, this study has sought to expand on earlier research focussing on the search and reunion and immediate post-reunion stages to examine the long-term experiences of adoptees in post-reunion.

The principal finding is that reunited relationships have no predictable pathways and are approached with varying levels of ambivalence and emotional strain, and that there is no fixed pattern of family arrangements and relational boundaries. While closed-stranger adoptions and the subsequent reunions may eventually cease, this research may assist in understanding the issues surrounding the reunion between gamete (egg) and sperm donor's and their offspring in the future.

KEYWORDS: Adoption Post-reunion, Adoptee, Birth Family, Family Membership, Family Relationships, Closed Adoption Reunion.

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# GLOSSARY OF TERMS AND ACRONYMS

Adoption

The Adoption Act 1955 does not define adoption. Neither does it set out the objects, principles or social goals of the Act; it merely describes the necessary procedures for obtaining an adoption order and the legal effects (Griffith, 1997:17). Trapski's Family Law (cited in Griffith, 1997:17) defines Adoption as "a legal process culminating in the making of an adoption order by which the child's birth parents lose the parental status in relation to the child and are absolved from their rights and responsibilities".

Adoption Order

"Documentation detailing that by adoption order, the adoptive parents assume the status of parenthood and the accompanying rights and responsibilities in relation to the child. The child gains a new parent or parents and acquires a new set of relatives traced through the adoptive parent(s). The child loses its birth parents and the set of relatives traced through them. Adoption authorises and effects a legal transplant of the child, severing relationships with its family of origin and creating a new set of family relationships through the adoptive parent(s). An adoption order seeks to transmute biological and genetic links by legal decree and creates artificial parenthood in favour of the adoptive parent(s)". (Trapski's Family Law, cited in Griffith, 1997:17).

Adoptee

Person relinquished for adoption by genetic parent(s).

Adoptive Parent

Persons who adopt a child.

Adoption Triangle or Triad

Includes the three parties involved in adoption, the birth parents, adoptive parents and adoptee.

Birth Parent

Biological or genetic parent of a person relinquished for adoption.

Bonding Theory

Relates to infant-to-parent attachment. Based on Lorenz's and Bowlby's theories of attachment.

| | |
|---|---|
| Closed Adoption | The adoption system based on the Adoption Act 1955 that prevented the release of identifying information pertaining to birth origins or adoptive parents details. |
| CYFs | Child Youth and Family. |
| DSW | Department of Social Welfare. |
| Environmentalism | The belief that environment will overcome heredity. Place a child in the right environment and it will grow likewise (Griffith, 1997:9). |
| Complete Break Ideology | The belief that if the adopted child is completely cut off from its genetic origins, then the environment will develop the child's personality to become fully integrated into the new family. |
| Open Adoption | Identifying information relating to the adoptive and birth parents are released or open for inspection as requested. |
| Jigsaw | Auckland based Support Group for anyone involved in adoption. |
| MOA | Movement out of Adoption – Support Group for Birth Mothers. |
| Psychodynamic Theory | The theory was developed and used to understand and explain the *real* reasons unmarried mothers got pregnant. It suggested the resulting child was not wanted for itself but merely a symbol of the mother's deeper needs. This led to the idea that unmarried mothers were immature and unstable and that the baby was unwanted. The theory was used to justify the complete break ideology of 1950-1980 (Griffith, 1997:305). |

# *INTRODUCTION*

"How can you get very far,
If you don't know who you are?
How can you do what you ought,
If you don't know what you've got?
And if you don't know which to do
Of all the things in front of you,
Then what you'll have when you are through
Is just a mess without a clue
Of all the best that can come true
If you know what and which and who.

(Hoff, 1992:6)

"**I** said, "are you my mother?" and she said, "yes I am" and then we spoke for two hours. I just loved her – it was so right, like coming home. It's a bit like falling in love, you see someone and it's so powerful and amazing. I just took a couple of breaths and we ran into each other's arms and feeling her hold me; I was feeling her body again for the first time since you know" [Caroline]. With these words Caroline, an adoptee, relayed the story of her first meeting with her birth mother. She had been searching for several months before locating her birth mother and this was her reunion experience with a woman who was a virtual stranger to her.

Legends and myths depict the adoptee's plight in attempting to unravel the truth pertaining to his/her origins. Oedipus seeks the truth about himself (Dawe, 1982:6) and Sorosky asserts many of Sophocles early writings include the plea of Oedipus "I must pursue this trail to the end, till I have unravelled the mystery of my birth" (1978:25). Knowledge and truth about one's heritage and lineage is probably not questioned by those raised by the parents who bore them, nor would they

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necessarily understand the significance of this knowledge to others who are not raised by their biological parents. However, the act of removing the right to this knowledge further intrigues and raises questions elevating the importance of this information for some people. It is simply the need to know, good or bad.

Many studies have investigated the search and reunion process, few have uncovered the long-term reunion experiences of adoptees or birth families and little is known about the actual relationship established. The subject matter is not only of practical interest to adopted people, but also delves into deeper themes to do with belonging, identity and family relatedness. Are the ties of blood stronger and more compelling than the social bonds formed with the adoptive family? What is the nature of the relationship with biological families and how does the adoptee navigate this relationship? This study seeks to extend the current literature on post-reunion experiences and focuses on the long-term relationship forged between the adoptee and their birth family.

## RATIONALE

Since the implementation of the Adult Information Act 1985 (hereafter referred to as the 1985 Act), 31,353 adopted persons and 8,695 birth parents have applied to Child Youth and Family seeking identifying information (Griffith, 2004)[1]. In 1987 2,736 applications were submitted but then over the next ten years numbers declined and remained on average 1,801 each year until 1998. From 1998 to 2004, applications continued to decline and averaged 1,272 per year. 2001, 2002 and 2003

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[1] Note: Statistical information quoted from Griffith 2004 is unpublished data received directly from Keith Griffith by email and has no page numbers. The data is planned for publication during 2004.

application numbers were below 1,000 (see table below for year by year statistics

prepared by Griffith, February 2004). The application statistics reflect an initial flood

of interest from those intending to seek information soon after the 1985 Act

implementation and then applications steadily tapered off. These statistics do not

however, include those who successfully fulfilled their quest for identifying

information through other means prior to the 1985 Act as there is no way to verify

how many people achieved this.

TABLE 1. Applications for identifying information. (Griffith, 2004).

| Adult Adopted Person Applications For Original Birth Certificate per Adult Adoption Information Act 1985 Section 4-5 Access Commenced 1-9-1986 | | | | Birth Parent Applications For Identifying Information On Adopted Child per Adult Adoption Information Information Act 1985 Section 8 Access Commenced 1-9-1986 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | MALE | FEMALE | TOTAL | | BIRTH FATHER | BIRTH MOTHER | TOTAL |
| 1986 | 1077 | 2819 | 3896 | 1986 | 50 | 589 | 639 |
| 1987 | 868 | 1767 | 2736 | 1987 | 36 | 632 | 668 |
| 1988 | 824 | 1431 | 2255 | 1988 | 44 | 628 | 672 |
| 1989 | 658 | 1258 | 1916 | 1989 | 37 | 550 | 587 |
| 1990 | 730 | 1065 | 1795 | 1990 | 47 | 473 | 520 |
| 1991 | 711 | 1042 | 1753 | 1991 | 34 | 382 | 416 |
| 1992 | 637 | 976 | 1613 | 1992 | 20 | 176 | 196 |
| 1993 | 733 | 957 | 1690 | 1993 | 54 | 484 | 538 |
| 1994 | 754 | 981 | 1735 | 1994 | 90 | 629 | 719 |
| 1995 | 768 | 893 | 1661 | 1995 | 63 | 510 | 573 |
| 1996 | 803 | 1074 | 1877 | 1996 | 80 | 555 | 635 |
| 1997 | 743 | 975 | 1718 | 1997 | 72 | 483 | 555 |
| 1998 | 648 | 752 | 1400 | 1998 | 64 | 377 | 441 |
| 1999 | 662 | 661 | 1283 | 1999 | 78 | 291 | 369 |
| 2000 | 523 | 612 | 1135 | 2000 | 61 | 258 | 319 |
| 2001 | 460 | 501 | 961 | 2001 | 40 | 214 | 254 |
| 2003 | 434 | 457 | 891 | 2003 | 54 | 234 | 288 |
| 2004 | 451 | 481 | 932 | 2004 | 64 | 195 | 259 |

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It is difficult to verify whether individuals take any action with the information they receive, and seek to meet their birth parents. Kennard suggests they do, and concludes that "almost everyone seeking identifying information *intends* [emphasis added] to search and the majority of people who did search and made contact with their birth parents formed ongoing relationships" (1991: 126-127).

Kennard (1991), Alexander, (1994), Kenworthy (1992), Shannon (2001) and Bergin's (1995) New Zealand based studies [2] focus on the short-term post-reunion. This study will focus on the long-term experiences of adoptees in a New Zealand context. It is based on the hypothesis that there are many people who, as a result of obtaining identifying information about their birth parents, are experiencing long-term relationships exceeding ten years duration, and their reunion has resulted in some sort of kinship relationship.

In contrast to the studies cited above, this is an exploratory study providing insight into an area where little research has been done to date, and none of it in New Zealand. This study does not seek to discuss the reunion event or reasons for reunion, but rather the kinship ties that adoptees may or may not experience in relation to their birth families. However, it does accept that the reunion event is a significant and important starting point to the relationships formed.

Current adoption research focuses on inter-country, inter-racial and open adoption, reflecting the preferred practices today. However, the closed adoption era aftermath still provides opportunities for research to further inform policy makers on

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[2] These studies are New Zealand based relating to search and reunion and post-reunion in the short term conducted by Masters Degree candidates.

the way forward for future adoption protocol and policy. This study is significant for commencing research into the relationships formed during long-term post-reunion in New Zealand and acts as a window through which to understand the relationships between adoptees and their biological relatives. Although adoption reunion in New Zealand is nearing saturation[3] this study provides an understanding of the relationship between adoptees and their biological relatives and also may provide insight into the potential relationships that may be initiated between people conceived by donor insemination and their biological parents. Post-reunion adoption narratives provide a point of reference in which to prepare for the near future when assisted human reproductive technology reunions will begin in New Zealand.

## The Language of Adoption

The discourse or language of adoption identifies the familial association between the people involved. It is both substantive and active (Gubrium and Holstein, cited in Hargreaves, 2001:22). The terminology is, in terms of substance, a resource in which to name or explain a particular person's position. For example, "birth mother" describes the woman who gave birth rather than the social or adoptive mother who raises the child. The discourse is active when it communicates particular legal or professional knowledge claims. In legal terms the Adoption Act 1955 refers to the "mother" and the "adoptive mother". In contrast, social workers and counsellors use language that emphasise social outcomes such as birth, biological or genetic mother to differentiate from the social mother.

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[3] By saturation, I mean it seems likely that most people affected by the closed adoption era who intend or are interested to seek identifying information about biological relatives have done so.

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The language of adoption is a revealing index of the anomalous status of adoption and any choice of terms represents an implicit position or evaluation (Melosh, 2002:viii). According to the literature, many birth mothers perceive themselves as the "real mother", albeit not the "parent" (Modell, 1994:4). However, Modell further asserts that, for the adoptee, the "mother" is the adoptive mother (1994:4). Moreover, Melosh contends that adoptive parents object to the term "natural parents" as a term that denigrates adoptive kinship, and "biological parents" strikes many as cold and clinical (2002:viii).

"Birth mother or father" acknowledges the associated reproductive relationship and in the absence of a term to best describe the relationship, would seem the best among the alternatives available. As many of the participants in this study indicated a preference and this research is centred on the adoptee's experience, I use the terms preferred by them. I use "mother" and "father" to refer to the adoptive parents and "birth mother" and "birth father" to refer to the biological parents. For continuity, the term "birth" also appears when describing biologically related siblings, grandparents and other biological relatives.

In describing a child being placed for adoption I use the term "relinquish". Adoption professionals often use the term "placement", however I am uneasy with the connotation of employment recruitment in this term and relinquishment carries a respect for the complicated emotions involved in the termination of parental rights.

Not surprisingly, the task of assigning terms is complicated by the personal preferences and complexity of the emotions associated with the connotations that these terms present. Furthermore, the English language does not yet contain the words that best delineate the many and varied relationships that people experience pre

and post-reunion. Thus, I can only draw upon the available terms in conjunction with the preference cited by participants in this study.

## Locating the thesis in the field of Adoption

This thesis investigates how adoptees construct meaning around family and kin in a situation where they have reunited with their biological relatives as adults. This research makes a contribution to the field by including discussion on the meanings that people attach to cultural concepts such as "family", "family relatedness" and "family obligations". Although I have chosen to confine this study to adoptees, this does not imply that I do not acknowledge the experiences of the biological and adoptive family members as significant. This research acts as a pilot study from which further research should stem and the limitations imposed by the study provide an opportunity for further research to understand the experiences of extended family members in similar situations. Research into the experiences of birth parents, grandparents, siblings and extended family members of adopted people would contribute to a greater understanding of post-reunion ties in the wider kinship context.

By delving into the implications experienced by adoptees, questions are raised around the appropriateness of the term "family" in post-reunion narratives. This question has informed this study from the beginning. It also explores issues relating to the relative importance of biological and social ties and of belonging to multi family networks.

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American researchers, Kressierer and Bryant examine adoption as a "deviant" family form where parent-child relationships lack the "legitimacy of consanguinity," have an "ambiguous linkage," lack "community acceptance". Furthermore, Kressierer and Bryant found the adoptive parent-child relationship to be "socially marginal and stigmatised". It was for these reasons that Kressierer and Bryant concluded that "deviance" is an appropriate appellation for adoptive families (1996:391). Therefore the question arises as to whether the re-established relationship between adoptee and birth family in post-reunion is a "deviant" family form. The negative evaluations and lack of comprehension that arise about family in post-reunion relationships may mean that adoptees and their birth family are marginalized and stigmatised.

This thesis is located in the discipline of social anthropology, however drawing upon writings from sociology and psychology further illuminates theoretical concerns pertaining to the cultural implications and interpretations of family. Predominant in the discipline of social work and sociology, adoption theorising in relation to kinship has focussed on the adoptive family (see for example, Seglow & Pringle, 1972; Pringle, 1967; Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990; Triseliotis 1973; Triseliotis & Shireman, 1997; Benet, 1976; Rockel & Ryburn, 1988; Rosenberg, 1992; Sorosky & Baran & Pannor, 1984; Wegar, 1997; Melosh, 2002; Kirk, 1981, 1964; Howe, 1998). This thesis contributes to and extends the literature on adoption by focussing on the complex relationships and meanings afforded to kinship ties when biological relatedness exists, but social history does not; when adoptees reunite and maintain ties with their birth family. Thus the relationship formed in adulthood between biologically related people warrants investigation by social scientists to

establish the familial formation and the extent to which diversity exists within family networks in society today.

The centrality of biogenetic ties in Euro-American ideology of family is highlighted in the work of anthropologists Schneider (1968, 1984) and Strathern (1992, 1995) and expanded in the writings by Carsten, (2000, 2001); Stone, (2004); Ragone, (1996); Hayden, (1995); Modell, (1994, 2002). As discussed in chapter two these authors destabilise the notion that family is based on biological descent alone and the new ways of thinking about kinship incorporate both biology and social ties. This research contributes to this theory by examining how adoptees make meaning of their social and biological kin networks. In addition to the anthropological literature, this study draws upon the recent work of sociologists who argue the "family" is in state of flux, is diverse, fluid and changing (Silva and Smart, 1999; Morgan, 1996; Smart and Neale, 1999; Weston, 1991; Melosh, 2002) arguing the decentralisation of family as more than a biogenetically related unit.

This study parallels Hargreaves (2001) and extends the discussion in a field that is under-theorised. Like Hargreave's (2001) thesis, this study does not attempt to discredit, test or develop a theory, but rather draw upon the literature both within and outside of the field of adoption in the disciplines of anthropology, sociology and psychology. This research is emerging during a time in which understanding how adoptees make meaning of family in post-reunion will inform how children resulting from new assisted reproductive technologies will make meaning of family in the future if and when they reunite with donors.

## Locating the Ethnographer in the field of Adoption

In contemplating the importance of reflexivity in the research process, this section begins with a discussion outlining how I came to choose this topic. Myers asserts "reflexivity is not just an approach toward analysis and writing, but also an essential condition of interaction with the people we study" (cited in Jaffe, 1993:51). I locate myself in the field of enquiry as an adoptee and also as a member of a particular family that consequently results in an attachment to particular ideas, values and meanings about adoption and family.

Inspiration to study the experiences of adoptees in post-reunion has been a topic that has evolved throughout my student career. I undertook a research project as an undergraduate on the loss of culture through inter-country adoption of Chinese children and later, the life story of a birth mother. During my final undergraduate year I conducted research into the three eras of adoption in New Zealand history, closed adoption, open adoption and inter-country/inter-racial adoption. I was captivated by the adoption literature and the essay further sparked a desire to pursue research in the adoption arena to carry out groundbreaking research and make an original contribution to the field.

The decision to study post-reunion adoption oscillated between the desire to pursue the topic and the consideration of how this may affect me personally. As an adoptee who fits the criteria set for this study, I am squarely positioned as an insider. So, the question needed to be one that would motivate me, contribute to the field and subsequently provide relevant information to the adoption community and anyone who might embark on a reunion process with biological relatives. So my approach

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has begun from both a personal and a theoretical standpoint that is informed by a

desire to investigate the experiences of adoptees from an anthropological perspective

that allows a methodology that delineates the lived experience.


My own experience of being an adoptee provides useful insight and resources

for embarking on this research. However, the meanings I personally attach to family

relatedness and kinship is deeply embedded in the experience of participating in the

family in which I was raised. On occasion, during the course of this research I have

experienced a re-evaluation of my interpretations, especially when presented with

ideas and meanings that contradict my own. During the course of the interview phase

I found myself considering my own answers to the questions posed. As Pahl outlines

"when one is doing research one is often thinking about one's own life as much as the

life of others" (1995:196).


Prior to this research I had not considered the varying roles and position of my

three families within my own framework and interpretation of family. Okely's

interpretation of anthropologist writers experiences fits well with my own during the

course of this research when she says, "the anthropologist writer draws on the totality

of the experience, it is recorded in memory, body and all the senses. Ideas and themes

are worked through the whole being throughout the experience of fieldwork, gestated

in dreams and the subconscious in both sleep and waking hours, at the desk and away

from the desk and during dialogue with people" (1994:21). This constant evaluation

and re-evaluation has resulted in an enriching experience, an expanding of my own

consciousness even, it has forced me to *consider* my position rather than simply

accept it and thus resulted in some clarity where once there were grey areas.

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I was born in 1965 to a young unmarried woman.  My adoptive parents had been waiting five years for the opportunity to adopt a female baby and three days after being notified of three available babies they made the drive from Dargaville to Whangarei to choose their child.  Although the paperwork process was short, due to my small size my parents had to wait until I was eighteen days old (a further thirteen days) before they could take me home.  Although I had not gained enough weight by eighteen days old, they were allowed to take me home because they already had two "natural born" children of their own and were "experienced parents".

My adoption story was always talked about openly and honestly whenever and wherever I chose to raise a question.  I have no recollection of a time that I did not know about my adoption status and the idea that one day I would meet my biological mother was usually part of any conversation pertaining to my adoption.  At sixteen, having experienced a medical problem that was potentially biologically inherited, my mother suggested the timing might be right to pursue a search.  Triseliotis observes that many adoptees embark on the search for the biological relatives after the "experience of a crisis, trauma or event which moves them from the deliberation stage to action" (1973:92).  My experience differs from all the participants in this study in this respect.  Therefore this research has provided an opportunity for a personal comparison of interpretation and experience.

I met my birth parents, their children, their parents and extended family members within a six-month timeframe twenty-three years ago.  My most regular contact is with my birth mother and my maternal and paternal half sister's.  In terms

of my wider kin network, I now see myself positioned as the youngest of my adoptive family, the only child of my biological parents and the oldest of my biological half siblings. With six siblings in total, their issue amounts to thirteen nieces and nephews so far. However, the relationship with these people falls into three distinct and separate family structures (birth mother and family, birth father and family and adoptive family) that require separate interaction and relatedness. There is always a sense of making an "identity shift" from one family to another for the short time frame within their presence but always returning to the adoptive family identity between times. Aside from me, no one within these three groups is related to anyone in the other two groups, socially or genetically; they each operate as a distinct family unit that claims me as a family member, daughter, sister, aunt, grand daughter, cousin, niece.

In acknowledging my insider status, my role as researcher is inextricably entwined with my personal experience. My previous study on other aspects of adoption further illustrate that my interest is deeply implicated in my choice of a field of study. My initial approach to this research was one in which I planned to exclude my personal position. The reason was rooted in a desire to protect the privacy, not only of myself, but of my three families. As the author, I cannot claim anonymity and neither can family members who share my surname.

Seeking consent for inclusion of my adoption story from family members is not a subject easily initiated because although spoken about freely within the family, speaking publicly remains taboo and, in their view, unnecessary. Adoption in my family is "family business". However, as the research progressed, I realised that this

would result in an incomplete thesis, eliminating the opportunity to position myself as an insider for the participants as well as for the research, and the justification began to have less significance. However, the feelings, opinions and preferences of extended family members should be considered. The Ethics Committee process does not currently account for the family members of an "insider" during research and this issue does warrant careful consideration. I have personally struggled with disclosing my personal status in this thesis but as Else (1991:vii) states "adoption is an extraordinary experience which, like other experiences of difference can best be studied from the inside", but as for my own story as Else (1991:ix) also comments, "like all adoption stories, it does not belong only to me". To further disclose details of my own adoption experiences requires a moral requirement on my behalf to seek consent from family members also involved because as the author I cannot remain anonymous. Therefore I have not discussed details of my own experiences in this thesis or included aspects of it in third-person disguise.

The journey through this research has required me to search through and re-evaluate my interpretations and beliefs surrounding adoption, secrecy and identity. Adoption during the 1960s promoted "as if born to" the adoptive parents and the paperwork buried the truth. Keeping adoption a family secret protected the family from those who held deeply-rooted beliefs about illegitimate children, how they might turn out and where and who they might have come from. Although, as an adult one can logically dispel these opinions and know that they are just opinions, there is a difference between knowing intellectually and knowing emotionally. To publicly acknowledge one's own status as an adoptee in this format renders the author

vulnerable and unable to control the readership. In other words, I am identified to the reader, but the reader isn't to me.

Openly positioning myself in the field of adoption has been a particularly difficult task to undertake as it flies in the face of nearly forty years of socialised secrecy. It is not uncommon within adoptive families for their "adoptive status" to be kept hidden from the wider community to present an illusion of a family without difference. As Weir's study indicates, adoptive families "mask" the true nature of their adoptive family status because they experience a "social stigma" and "communities have negative perceptions of adoption" (2003:8). However, I have taken courage from the two participants in this study who, from the beginning, were not only determined but also proud to identify themselves in the research as adoptees. Identifying as an adoptee is after all just one *small* part of who we are.

## Thesis Structure

This thesis is presented in two parts. Part one sets the scene and includes four chapters: this introductory chapter, a brief history of adoption in New Zealand, a review of the theoretical substratum of this study, and lastly, the methodology applied for this research.

Chapter two is "Looking back for the way forward". This chapter is integral in setting the scene for adoption in New Zealand historically. A brief overview of the legislation and theories of the day act to trace the phenomenon of adoption and highlight the changes in practices throughout New Zealand's history. The focus of

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this chapter is to illustrate how the practice of adoption has progressed from a closed

and secret exercise to open records resulting in reunion and post-reunion experiences.

Chapter three examines the literature investigating adoption and kinship by

drawing upon anthropological, psychological and sociological writings that explore

the social construction of kinship in the context of biogenetic and social relatedness.

In particular, this chapter sets the theoretical framework in which this study has been

based. This chapter introduces the themes that were identified through a combination

of the literature, interview questions and the comments presented by the participants.

The themes this study focuses on are family membership, mothering roles, family

obligations and inheritance.

The final chapter in part one, chapter four outlines the processes involved in

conducting this research. The methodology section discusses the choice of research

approach, ethical issues and gaining ethical approval. The participant profile

illustrates a snapshot of each person participating in this research at a glance to

furnish a connection with the names used in this study and basic background details.

Part two of the thesis includes two chapters. Chapter five is the ethnography

reporting the participants' experiences in their own words. This chapter explores the

negotiation and navigation of relationships within reunited families (including

extended family members) and between the adoptive and biological family units from

the adoptee's perspective. Drawing upon the themes identified in chapter three, it

looks at how participants make meaning of family and to what degree they immerse

into their birth family as a "family member". The concluding chapter, chapter six,

analyses and discusses the findings of this research and sums up the arguments

presented. It provides an overview of how this study contributes to this field and

identifies the implications for adoptees in post-reunion, informing an understanding of

families and relatedness more generally.

# 2. LOOKING BACK FOR THE WAY FORWARD (HISTORY)

> "Speaking from my experience as a magistrate
> exercising jurisdiction in the capital city of
> New Zealand, I can say with confidence that
> the system of adoption practised in New Zealand
> has been a success from every point of view".
>
> (Senior Magistrate W.G. Riddell, 1921, cited in Campbell, 1957:7).

P akeha[1] adoption has been practised (legally) since 1881 when New Zealand became the first country in the British empire to pass an Adoption Act. Between 1881 and 1980, 102,978 adoption orders took place with only 28,351 occurring before 1955. Two surges in adoption orders are noted with the first in 1944 seeing an increase from 577 to 1313 and then again in 1961 when numbers from the previous year totalled 1880 and increased to 2579. A steady increase continued until 1971 when adoption orders peaked at 3976 (Griffith, 1981:A2). Since then a steady decline has continued with 323 registered adoption orders for 2003 (Griffith, 2004).

The sudden increase and then decline in adoption orders over the past century is synonymous with the changing attitudes of New Zealand society. This chapter will identify how the changes in New Zealand adoption practice were a reflection of the views surrounding identity, family, morality and values.

Summarising the history of adoption in New Zealand in the form of a timeline traces the practice from its beginnings to the present day and discusses the theories supporting these practices. Tracing adoption history illustrates how the current

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[1] The Maori term for white settlers, now in universal use in New Zealand (Else, 1987:238).

practice of adoption and recent changes in legislation resulting in adoptees and birth

parents obtaining identifying information about each other, has resulted in the next

stage of adoption history, reunion and post-reunion. The final section discusses how

the current use of Assisted Reproductive Technologies has once again raised the

question of anonymous parentage and how Government is dealing with this issue.

Firstly, before commencing the chronology of adoption in New Zealand, it is

appropriate at this point to briefly name and summarise the theories influencing the

closed adoption phenomenon. These theories, retrospectively named "genetic

determinism", "environmentalism", "psychodynamic" and "complete break", were

based on the scientific tradition of their period and underpinned the development of

adoption protocol from disclosure of adoption records, to a closed and secretive

approach.

**Genetic Determinism**

Genetic Determinism is the notion that our genes determine who we are

physically, emotionally, and behaviourally. An issue of concern primarily to

philosophers and religious thinkers, who believed dysfunctional or immoral behaviour

in the parents, is conveyed genetically to the children, this idea influenced early

adoption history by suggesting that "it's all the in the blood" (Griffith, 1997:9).

Griffith asserts that the genetic determinism rationale opposing adoption pre-1940,

was based on the idea that, "most adopted children are illegitimate, they have sinful

parents and their sin will be passed on to the child" (1997:9). This meant that

children were often adopted as labourers, maids and farm workers instead of out of

love, or the desire to be a parent (Tennant, 1985:39). This belief, according to Collins

also suggested, genetic predispositions to everything from cancer or diabetes to homosexuality, and "carried to its extreme, the "Genes R Us" mentality denied the value of social interventions to maximize individual potential" (cited in Peters, 1997:ix).

## Environmentalism

By the 1940s the "pendulum had swung" according to Griffith and environmentalism became popular (1997:9). Post-war child development theories supported an emphasis on environmental concerns rather than genetically inherited traits. Environmentalism was based on the idea that "due to the overwhelming influence of environment, nurturing an adopted child should be no different from a natural child" and by "placing a child in the right environment, it will grow likewise", (Griffith, 1997:9). Consequently this ideology influenced adoption history significantly. The idea that environment was more important than heredity in determining the physical, mental and emotional development of the child meant that adoption became a desirable option for infertile couples to have a family of "their own" without the fear of inheritable immorality.

## Complete Break Ideology

Environmental theory, in turn influenced the "complete break ideology" of the early 1950s. That is, the belief in environmentalism had reached the level of unquestioned acceptance demanding implementation (Griffith, 1997:10). Because, Griffith outlines, "an adoptee's heredity was now considered largely irrelevant, it was in their best interests to be completely cut off from their origins and a complete break would allow the adoptive environment full reign to take over and shape the adoptee's

life into the mould of the adoptive family" (1997:10). It was with this notion that

provisions were made in the Adoption Act 1955 to include an "impenetrable wall of

secrecy" between the adoptee and their origins (Griffith, 1997:10).

### Psychodynamic Theory

If the complete break ideology was not sufficient to support the theory of

environmentalism, then psychodynamic theory provided the rationale for maintaining

adoption record secrecy. Many of the post-war experts who set out to explain out-of-

wedlock pregnancy claimed that unwed mothers came from "difficult homes" (Else,

1991:12). Psychodynamic theory of personality was used to understand and explain

the unmarried mother's "real" reasons for getting pregnant. It suggested the resulting

child was not wanted for itself but was merely a symbol of the mother's deeper needs

(Griffith, 1997:305). The theory portrayed unmarried mothers as immature and

unstable, the baby as unwanted, conceived to fulfil her neurotic needs and fantasy.

Therefore it was in the best interests of all involved to permanently separate them in

order for the birth mother to heal her dysfunctional personality (Griffith, 1997:10).

### ADOPTION HISTORY – PRE NEW ZEALAND

Adoption spans many centuries and cultures and can be traced back to biblical

times. Biblical and classical literature indicates many representations of the plight of

adopted children: Moses was left in the bulrushes, Oedipus was abandoned then

adopted and Joseph was sold by his family of origin (Rosenberg, 1992:89).

Mythology illustrates the desire of adopting parents to make the child as if "begotten" through the simulation of birth. Diodorus tells us that when Zeus persuaded his wife Hera to adopt Hercules, "the goddess got into bed, and clasping the burly hero to her bosom, pushed him through her robes and let him fall to the ground in imitation of a real birth" (Frazer, 1996:17). Birth simulation in adoption was not only the domain of myths, but was practiced by the barbarians according to Frazer and continued in modern times in Bulgaria and among Bosnian Turks (1996:17).

Dramatized in children's literature, adoption was portrayed in the experiences of abandoned children in such stories as Hansel and Gretel, the Ugly Duckling, the lost boys from Peter Pan, Tom Thumb and my favourite, Thumbelina[2]. The objective of these stories may well have been a reflection of everyday life for some, highlighting abnormality or even normalising the practice of adoption during that time. Nevertheless, living happily ever after by the end of the story with adopted parents, or being rescued by a handsome prince, was the ultimate goal of the story that in turn, negated the difficulties that these characters endured in their lives.

Historic and current information indicates that children in need of permanent adoptive homes come from a wide range of classes, cultures, religions, national origins and personal circumstances (Rosenberg, 1992:89). Ancient adoption literature illustrates the primary reason for adoption as being a religious act associated with ensuring continuity of families with heirs. Some form of adoption or care of orphaned or abandoned children is common to all civilisations. Historic adoption codes, such as

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[2] Rosenberg (1992:89) also observes that adoption was dramatised in children's literature and includes the story of Babar in her discussion.

Chapter 2. Looking Back for the Way Forward (History)

the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi (2265-2242 BC) and Mesopotamian Legal

Documents detail the adopted son's right to inheritance and his associated obligations

(Pritchard, 1958:160-7). Cultural differences and the implementation of legal

requirements tracing the history and changes over generations in Greece, Rome,

Arabia, China, India, Japan and Polynesia are documented in depth[3]. Specifically

highlighted, is the adopted person's retention of identity through name and contact

with biological kin. Differing from modern western practice Griffith suggests "almost

all practitioners of adoption, ancients, tribal society, previous civilisations, Asians to

Polynesians would have viewed modern western adoption secrecy as bizarre"

(1997:2).


## CHRONOLOGY OF NEW ZEALAND ADOPTION HISTORY

### Pre-European Settlement

Maori operated a system of caring for and raising children by members of the

whanau[4]. These children were referred to as atawhai[5] (by the iwi of Tai Tokerau),

taurima[6] (by Taranaki tribes) and whangai[7] (by the rest), (Metge, 1995:211).

Parentage of these children was a matter of public knowledge and it was not

uncommon for the child to maintain contact with their parents and other family

members openly (Colebrook, 2000:12).[8] The traditional Maori family is not a nuclear

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[3] For further information see a detailed chronology including Court case studies, the influence of religion on adoption and law reform by Griffith (1997). The history of adoption worldwide is also discussed in Benet (1976); Kennard (1991); Alexander (1994); Iwanek (1987); Zamostny & O'Brien & Baden & Wiley, (2003); Gillard-Glass & England (2002); Modell (1994); Howe & Feast (2000); Else (1991); Kirk (1964), Bergin (1995), Sorosky et al (1978).

[4] Whanau is Maori for extended family.

[5] The ordinary meaning of atahwai is 'show kindness to, be liberal, foster; be inclined to, desire' (Metge, 1995:211).

[6] The meaning of taurima is 'entertain, treat with care, tend', (Metge, 1995:211).

[7] Whangai means 'feed, nourish, bring up', (Metge, 1995:211).

[8] Whangai adoption has a significant position in New Zealand Adoption history, however an indepth analysis and history of whangai falls outside of the scope of this thesis which focuses on secret adoption.

unit in space, but an integral part of a tribal whole. A child is not "a child of the birth

parents, but of the family". Ultimate power does not rest with the biological parents,

but with the whanau, hapu, and iwi (family group, subtribe and tribe), (Trapski,

1995:154). Webster explains that for Maori "the right of kin to lay early claim to the

child of a kinsman implies that parenthood at the outset is a function of the kin group

rather than the parents." He goes on to suggest that "jural parenthood is not divided

or transferred among kinsmen, but rather it has been there to begin with" (1973:6).

Therefore, welfare of children is best assured by the community care and

responsibility assumed by the family group (Trapski, 1995:1/112).


For centuries Maori practiced the informal kinship fostering of children.

Children were given to family members to raise, and the care of them was shared by

other members of the whanau or extended family. The arrangements were open and

fluid and the child may return to the care of their biological parents at any time. Often

Grandparents looked after children and this resulted in the passing on of knowledge

about the child's whakapapa (ancestory) and whanaungatanga (historical and cultural

information about the whanau, hapu and iwi), (1995:1/113).


Metge explains that Maori place a positive value on the process of atawhai,

whangai and taurima adoption and the status of all parties involved. They emphasise

she says, the aroha[9] in behaviour rather than seeing it as a strategy for handling failure

on the part of birth parents. Metge goes to say, that birth parents are not criticised for

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[9] The meaning of aroha according to Metge (1995:332) is more than the usual translation of love. Its primary reference is caring, compassionate love for others, especially love for relatives. It is also used to convey sympathy for those in sorrow or trouble, gratitude and approval. It is not however, used for sexual love.

shirking their responsibilities or not loving their children but instead are praised for their generosity (1995:212).


Atawhai, whangai and taurima relationships are established for a wide variety of reasons and under a variety of circumstances. Underlying most of these reasons according to Metge are three closely related themes: concern for the welfare of whanau children, concern for the welfare of whanau adults and the building up of whanau strength. Aroha she says, in the sense of altruistic love is combined with aroha in the sense of kinship commitment (1995:219). Webster suggests that Maori parenthood appears to have no necessary tie with procreation, but is *necessarily* [emphasis added] tied to kinship. The concept of Maori adoption "blurs the family boundaries but appears to define the kin group" (1973:8) shifting the importance from the nuclear family to the wider extended family for involvement in child rearing.


## Post-European Settlement
### 1850 – 1880

In the mid 1850s illegitimacy was linked to prostitution. The 1850s and 1860s public debate over moral issues focussed upon the wanton doings of a prostitute class, (Griffith, 1997:5) and were considered inexcusable in the colony because New Zealand was supposed to have learnt from the mistakes of other British territories (Tennant, 1992:51). New Zealand had the opportunity, according to Tennant to become a "new society", free from the evils of the "Old World". Instead, the contemporary estimates of prostitution were high. Dunedin boasting a population of 12,000 in 1864 supplied two hundred full-time prostitutes and Auckland was estimated to have eight hundred (1992:51).

The late 1890s reflected a shift in focus from the immorality of prostitution to the "problem" of illegitimacy that, it seemed, could affect even "decent" families (Griffith, 1997:5). Griffith goes on to quote a Christchurch press article of 23 March, 1900: "Illegitmacy [10] is a social cancer, encouraged by agencies which made things especially easy and comfortable for the viciously inclined" (1997:5). Thomas Norris, secretary of the North Canterbury Charitable Aid Board commented "the country is getting overrun with bastards whose erring mothers are only too keen to divest themselves of their natural responsibilities" (cited in Tennant, 1985:30). Illegitimacy was perceived to be a moral disease affecting women of little character and judgement. Lucy Hudson, matron, described the inmates of St Mary's in Auckland as "the most degraded rag of humanity", she goes on to say:

> "I should not dare to say there was no good in the most depraved, abandoned specimen of womankind, for even the dirtiest pool of water gives back some reflection if only the sun shines on it, and even the very scum of womanhood will respond in some manner if only the sun of love is made to shine on her" (cited in Tennant, 1992:65).

Male moral responsibility for reproduction featured as a secondary focus because ultimately women had control, if only through abstaining from sexual activities. McDonald notes a fundamental paradox in reasoning and states that the very same group of female immigrants who had been imported to improve the balance of the sexes were soon being blamed for male licentiousness and bringing prostitution

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[10] Under English common law a child used to be considered legitimate only if his or her parents were legally married at the time he or she was born. The status of legitimacy was created by law, which meant it was a legal fiction (a child is labelled either legitimate because his/her parents are legally married or illegitimate because they are not. Illegitimacy in its legal sense persisted until the Status of Children Act 1969 was passed), but it was jealousy guarded because it affected the distribution of property and impinged on social and religious beliefs unsympathetic to sex outside of marriage (Gillard-Glass and England, 2002:21).

to the colony (1986: 20). Men were perceived as having no control over their sexual urges and were compared to "fiends in men's clothing" and "waiting like wild beasts" to pounce upon their prey (Tennant, 1992:65). Else explains that "uncontrollable masculine sexual urges could only break out when there was a handy supply of abandoned women .... someone who puts herself at the voluntary disposal of men" , (1987:238). Lucy Hudson expressed her outrage at male sexual irresponsibility by urging every "clean-minded woman to refuse to know any man who had harmed a woman by deed or word" (cited in Tennant, 1992:65). However, Eveline Cunnington, member of the St Saviour's Guild in Christchurch claimed that "neglected children, cruel parents, miserable homes, drink and a lack of technical and industrial education of young women" were the major factors in producing fallen women. Regardless of the statements made by Hudson, Cunnington and others, the emphasis on "sexual irresponsibility" remained the scorned conduct of women alone when the Secretary of Labour, Edward Tregear stated that "it was better to support a trade union than a Magdala"[11] (cited in Tennant, 1992:65).

The State did however attempt to reduce the financial burden of supporting abandoned women and children by pursuing men for maintenance and prosecuting them. Thomson notes that the laws on maintenance and destitute persons were enforced and occupied a good fraction of court time and that most prosecutions involved the maintenance of young children (1998:144). He goes on to state that between the years 1881-1914 prosecutions for abandoning wives or children or fathering illegitimate children appear in all years (1998:148). Tennant, however observes that "paternity orders were rare; even more unusual was their successful

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[11] Magdala is a name given to a "fallen woman" or inmate of the Mt Magdala Catholic home for women either accused of prostitution or unmarried and pregnant.

enforcement" and, failing a paternity order, the support of an illegitimate child was the responsibility of the mother (1985:30).

The moral standard was quite different for deserted wives who achieved a higher degree of importance than the single mother. There was a differing view on the predicament of abandoned wives in that there was more inclination to offer support and sympathy. This was because it was believed a deserted wife had not lowered her moral standards like a single mother did. However the errant husbands, according to Tennant were roundly condemned for their rejection of stable family life, as it was believed that they calculatedly used the welfare apparatus to evade responsibility and detach themselves from inconvenient unions (1989:109).

For women who wished to divest themselves of their offspring, pre-1881 adoptions occurred but on an informal basis. In a legal sense, the courts held that a birth mother could not transfer her rights or obligations in respect of her child. Women were blamed for their predicament as either inadequate wives, women who had failed in their domestic, servicing role, had driven their husbands away (Tennant, 1989:109) or as a single mother, a moral imbecile with degenerate vices inbred (Tennant, 1992:69). In some instances informal contracts were drawn up between the birth mother and adoptive parents, but courts would not uphold these contracts should the birth mother change her mind (Gillard-Glass and England, 2002:21).

The courts' stance in relation to child ownership and responsibility was based on English societal values during the early colonial period in New Zealand and remained an influence on our adoption protocol for nearly one hundred years. New

Zealand adoption stemmed from the Victorian period when children were viewed as possessions and expected to obey their parents immediately and without question, were subject to control and authority of, first, their father and then, later, both parents until adulthood (Trapski, 1995:1/109). Griffith questions whether the values of capitalist society, with its emphasis on ownership, possessions and materialism were responsible for the rigid exclusiveness of adoption laws. Treating children as possessions suggests that they are "goods we transfer ownership of by adoption, fostering is lease-hold, adoption free-hold" (1991:13). This was contrary to historic views about adoption whereby adoptees retained contact with their biological families for reasons of knowledge about ancestry and inheritance (Griffith, 1997:2).

Iwanek, states that in modern western adoption "the needs of children seemed to have a low priority" (1987:5). In other words, providing there is no financial responsibility to maintain the child by the State, ownership by whoever agrees to it has no bearing on the child's needs. Benet concludes "if adoption is to exist at all in society where possessions, ownership and materialism hold sway, it must be made absolutely total and water-tight" (1976:79). The impetus behind these ideas relate to ensuring uniformity for understanding adoption and the associated parental rights of the adoptive parents as well as the child's right to inheritance (1976:79). These comments summarise the general feeling of society towards adoption during that period and set in motion the implementation of legal action to control what was believed to be out of control and immoral.

Chapter 2. Looking Back for the Way Forward (History)

**1881- 1911**

By 1881 the idea of the "best interest of the child" in addition to the

immorality of illegitimacy was at the forefront and New Zealand became the first

country in the Commonwealth to implement adoption legislation. The Hon George

Waterhouse introduced his Private Member's Adoption of Children Bill to parliament

in order that "the benevolent might find wider scope for generous action; and that the

results of their generosity might obtain some security by law" (Colebrook, 2000:13).

The provisions outlined in the Adoption of Children Act 1881 assert that:

> "the interests of such child will be promoted by the adoption [and] the
> adopted child shall, for all purposes, civil and criminal, and all advantages and
> benefits and other legal consequences of the natural relation of parent and
> child, be deemed in law to be the child born in lawful wedlock of its adopting
> parents".

In terms of inheritance the adopted child was given rights to the estates of both

adopted and natural parents[12]:

> "the adopting parent shall for all purposes ..... be deemed in law to be the
> parent of such adopted child, and subject to all liabilities affecting such
> child.... Such order shall thereby terminate all the rights and legal
> responsibilities and incidents existing between the child and his or her natural
> parents, except the right of such child to take property as heir or next of kin of
> his or her natural parents, directly or by right of representation."

This section was a contradiction; the adopted child was to cease being the

child of his natural parents but was entitled to inherit from them and retain his/her

original name. This meant he remained in some part, in the same position as he/she

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[12] Note: Detail of the provisions under the Adoption Act 1881 in relation to inheritance have not been discussed here, for further information and detail pertaining to rights to inheritance of adopted grandchildren see Campbell, (1957:115).

was prior to adoption, thus creating a legal fiction. The child can only be born once to one mother and one father[13]:

> "The order of adoption, .......... shall confer the name of the adopting parent on the adopted child, "in addition" to the proper name of the latter.

The new Act had unforeseen consequences as pioneering entrepreneurs capitalised by opening homes for fallen women to give birth and later, arranged for the adoptions of their children for a fee. The maternity options available for single mothers involved voluntary or church administered homes that Tennant observes illustrated the growing tension between medical and moral definitions of maternity (1985:29). Pressures to eliminate distinctions between married and unmarried women, and the tenacity of moral assumptions which continued until very recent times, determined the treatment received by women in childbirth. Some single mothers, Tennant explains may have managed to conceal their unmarried status, if not their pregnancy by passing themselves off as widows or deserted wives in districts where they were little known (1985:30). For most however, the discovery of pregnancy meant moral condemnation, social rejection and economic hardship. Else observes that "right up until the 1940s many believed that keeping an illegitimate child was a fitting punishment for the mother's sin – and a warning to other women who might be tempted to stray" (1991:23). Smart concurs by saying, "the position of the unmarried mother was so undesirable that her parental obligations were seen as little more than part of her stigma and rejection. Having sole custody rights ...... was more a form of legal punishment than a concession" (1987:109).

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[13] Campbell (1957:9, 82, 103-114) also observes that the Adoption Act 1881 created difficulties in interpretation based on the seemingly contradictory stance of the inheritance provision. He goes on to comment that the divergent viewpoints by those debating Mr Waterhouse's Bill resulted in an incoherent pattern and inconsistent policy.

Since illegitimate children were thought to be tainted by the circumstances of their birth so the demand for ex-nuptial babies to adopt was rare. Small babies Tennant says, were uneconomic, requiring care but unable to work and contribute to the financial income of the family or undertake domestic chores for some years. Prospective adoptive parents preferred children of "useful" years. It was not uncommon for children to be adopted to work on farms or in factories (1985:39).

Regardless, babies were still offered for adoption by desperate and destitute women who were unable to care for them. Individuals set about accommodating these women by taking in their babies with a view to receiving payment for finding them new homes. Due to lack of laws pertaining to the care of children, baby farming became a profitable business and the infamous trial of Minnie Dean[14] resulted in the initiative of the "Infant Life Protection Act 1893" which required the licensing and inspection of houses where children were taken in (Campbell, 1957:11). This initially did not apply to adoption, but by 1907 when the statute was revised, it was deliberately extended to cases of adoption (1957:11). It was made unlawful however in 1906, for any person adopting a child to receive any premium or other consideration in respect of the adoption except with the consent of a Magistrate (1957:11). Involvement by a Magistrate resulted in strict controls of premiums paid on adoption and these were to restrict profiteering and to ensure maintenance payments adequately covered the care of the child. The State became a guarantor of the agreement and on default of instalments undertook the task of enforcing the liability of the natural parent (1957:12).

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[14] Minnie Williamina Dean resided in Winton, Southland and took in babies and children awaiting adoption. She was tried for baby farming and the murder of illegitimate infants placed in her care, found guilty and executed in Invercargill in 1895 (Hood, 1994:11). At this time there were no laws to stop her taking in as many children as she wanted for whatever fee she desired and keeping them in a manner she chose (Griffith, 1997:229).

The humiliation of unmarried mothers continued as they found themselves in the situation of having to pay for institutionalising their children, but due to low wages, ill health or unemployment, often fell behind in payments. It was unthinkable for assistance to be provided to encourage them to keep their children and this often resulted in the child being abandoned (Griffith, 1997:7) creating a burden on society to provide care for these children. In most cases, although expected to pay maintenance to the State for the child, women attempted to keep their babies despite the difficulties involved. Adoption was mainly reserved for instances where a married woman had an extra-marital child (Colebrook, 2000:14).

## 1912-1955

Statutory adoption in New Zealand was initially viewed as a means of lightening the burden on the State of maintaining destitute persons (Colebrook, 2000:13). Adoption could not only "save" both the child and the mother; it also had the outstanding merit of costing the state almost nothing (Else, 1987:240). C. Kettle made the following statement in 1912 regarding Court responsibilities for adoptive children (cited in Griffith, 1997:8):

> "the duty of the court is to, as far as possible, protect and safeguard the interests of the infant. A thorough investigation should be made into the social position, expectations and rights of the infant, the character, social and financial position of the child's parents, and of the proposed parents. In short, every possible precaution should be taken to secure as far as possible the future welfare and happiness of the child ...... The magistrate should be thoroughly satisfied the adoption will be for the benefit of the child .... before making an adoption order."

Griffith goes on to suggest that these concerns resulted in the gradual

tightening up of requirements for adoptive parents including affidavit information

from social workers and police reports on adoptive applicants that culminated in the

Adoption Act 1955 (1997:8).

By 1915 the first restrictions surrounding adoption records was introduced.

This legislation, in the 1915 Births and Deaths Registration Amendment permitted a

second birth certificate to be issued substituting the adoptive parents' names for those

of the birth parents. The intention of the legislation was not to prevent adoptees from

seeking identifying information pertaining to their birth origins, but rather to

safeguard them from the stigma associated with illegitimacy. The original birth

certificate remained on file and Court records were open and accessible to those

involved until 1955 when the implementation of the Adoption Act 1955 restricted

access.

Although court records remained accessible until 1955, agencies had a

different view; working in the best interest of the adopting parents they assumed the

role of "information protectors" to prevent reclamation of the child by his or her birth

mother (Griffith, 1991:14). It was assumed that, by circumventing access to

information pertaining to the child's origin, they were also protecting the child from

unsavoury information about, for example, conception being a result of rape or incest.

The side effect of this Act was a slow and steady move towards closed adoption

shrouded in secrecy (Gillard-Glass and England, 2002:20).

Chapter 2. Looking Back for the Way Forward (History)

In the late 1940s institutions such as Bethany, Motherhood of Man and Alexandra involved with the care of unmarried mothers began to promote adoption as the best option for unmarried pregnant women. Such institutions emphasised that adoption allowed the mother to return to her life as if nothing had happened (Colebrook, 2000:14). However, before the Second World War more women still chose to keep their child rather than have the child adopted. By 1949 the Society for Protection of Women and Children were promoting adoption as the "best arrangement", "if the unmarried mother wishes it, adoptions into good homes can always be arranged" (Else, 1991:24).

In the 1940s and 1950s some older institutions, mainly run by churches, persisted in regarding the single mother as a "fallen woman" (Else, 1992:226). Their regime still required her to work hard before and after the birth and to care for her child, at least for a time, in the interests of her moral welfare, according to Else (1992:226). Tennant quotes a report from the St Mary's home in Auckland saying "there is no time when so great an influence for good can be exerted on a girl on the downward path, as when she is about to become (or has just become) a mother" (1992:67).

Else notes that the newer non-denominational agencies, such as, Motherhood of Man were much less interested in moral condemnation. Focussing on the baby to find it a home solved the problem for the single mother and the needs of a childless couple (1992:226). Else further observes that in order for adoption to be widely accepted by prospective parents and the public in general, single mothers had to be presented, and treated, as nice but foolish girls who had merely slipped, rather than as

fallen women. However, this worked two ways: maintaining one's status as a nice girl depended on agreeing to adoption and never seeing the child again (1992:226).

One account of a twenty-one year old woman, while incarcerated as an inmate at a home for unmarried pregnant women, illustrates the pressure that women endured when an attempt to influence them in the decision to give their child up for adoption was applied (cited in Else, 1991:45):

> "At Bethany they kept pointing out to me all the problems that would come to me and the child if I kept it. I still clung to my belief that the child and I belonged together though my certainty was beginning to become eroded ........ Keeping the baby instead of allowing it to be adopted is putting the mother's needs ahead of the baby's. Good mothers put the needs of their child ahead of their own. Therefore, mothers who do not allow their babies to be adopted are not really good mothers. This was a very powerful equation for a vulnerable pregnant woman to learn."

Officially, according to Else, Child Welfare social workers were supposed to advise but not influence a mother about what to do. Child Welfare's deputy superintendent, Lewis Anderson had this to say (cited in Else, 1991:43):

> "... our officers customarily give advice to unmarried mothers but they are not permitted to influence her in any way at all for or against adoption. Her decision must be entirely voluntary ....."

However, Anderson had made no secret of his own views and stated:

> "I am assuming that all who read this ... think as I do that, in principle, adoptions are a good thing, and that I do not need to write about the emotional satisfaction for adoptive parents and child that can ensue from a

> good adoption. We will agree that adoptions should be encouraged rather
> than discouraged."

The stance was one of pointing out the pitfalls of single motherhood to young women with a view to subtly influencing them through scare tactics to relinquish their child. This approach excluded the emotional and psychological well being of the mother. It was presented to her she could go on to marry and have more children to replace the one that was lost and she should treat the birth of her child as nothing more than a medical experience, such as having one's gall bladder or appendix removed.

**The Adoption Act 1955**

The Adoption Act 1955 which came into force on October 27th 1955 consolidated and amended the legislation relating to adoption (Campbell, 1957:73). It incorporated a number of new provisions dealing with matters not covered by the previous statutes, notably the effect of the order on the domicile of the child, appointment of guardian, affiliation orders and maintenance agreements (1957:73).

The Act sought to formalise practices promoted by homes such as Bethany, Motherhood of Man and Alexandra. It imposed some much-needed controls according to Else, and was broadly in line with their views; it encouraged their activities and reinforced the attitudes behind them (1992:226). The Adoption Act 1955, section 16(a) strengthened the idea that what mattered was the rapid conversion of an "abnormal" situation into a "normal" situation and supported the fiction of the child's parentage to be "as if born to the adoptive parents" (Else, 1992:226):

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

And in section 16(b),

> "The adopted child shall be deemed to cease to be the child of his existing
> parents"

Coupled with the idea that the adopted child should be viewed "as if born to"
the adoptive parents, section 23 of the new act closed access to adoption records and
subsequently information pertaining to the adopted child's origins:

> "Adoption records shall not be available for production or open to inspection
> except on the order of the Court or of the Supreme Court."

Contrary to New Zealand's first Adoption Act 1881 that placed no restrictions
on access to information, closing records was a major shift in the attitude surrounding
adoption protocol and the adoptees rights to know their origins.

Trapski summarises the themes permeating in the Adoption Act 1955 and
notes that not only does it treat women more favourably than men by the reflecting the
view of the 1950s and earlier, that mothers are the natural carers of children and the
sole male applicant can only adopt a female child if the Court finds there are "special
circumstances. Otherwise, adoption is the preserve of married couples. Unmarried
couples cannot adopt a child, although a single female or male can adopt, he or she
acquires honorary married status on the making of a final adoption order
(1995:1/117). The driving force behind adoption is explained by Trapski as a "desire
to provide benefits for adults"; initially as a means of low cost assistance with
domestic work or farm labouring, reducing the charge on the public purse. Later,

adoption was utilised as a convenient means to avoid embarrassment and social stigma attached to extra-martial sex and unmarried pregnancy. Also he states, as a means for infertile couples to obtain a child whom the law treated as their own (1995:1/117). Nowhere is it mentioned that the "best interest of the child" is tantamount to the driving force behind adoption as a solution for both adults and children.

For Maori, the Adoption Act 1955 was a totally alien concept, contrary to the laws of nature, for it assumed that the reality of lineage could be expunged and the birth and parental rights irrevocably traded (1995:1/153). Professor Moko Mead in his evidence to the Court regarding the impact of the Adoption Act 1955 on Maori stated (cited in Trapski, 1995:1/154):

> "A fundamental cultural imperative for Maori is that a child is not to be viewed in isolation or as part of a nuclear family, but as a member of wider kin or hapu ...... To Maori the whanaungatanga principle is fundamental. It is designed to protect the child's social place, his heritage (including land rights), the culture and the language, and the self-esteem, mana, and tapu of the child. Children are taonga, valuable assets of the whanau as future participating adults..... The Maori child has a fundamental right to grow up in his kinship group ...... To give a child to a stranger is tantamount to throwing the child into the sea as happened to the Demi-God Maui a tikitiki a taranga."

New Zealand family statutes largely reflect a view based on the narrow nuclear family rather than the whanau or broader family (1995:1/113). The relationship between Maori customary arrangements involving kinship care and the pakeha view of parents as guardians and custodians of their children do not fit easily.

Else summarises the rationale for closed adoption by saying, "the Adoption Act 1955 tied up the loose ends of pre-existing legislation into a neat and tidy package. Women with husbands were supposed to have children and women without husbands were not. But some married women did not have children and some unmarried women did. What could be more sensible than to rearrange these unseemly tangles into the proper patterns", (1987:252).

## 1956-1984

The implementation of the Adoption Act 1955 was underpinned by the change from the idea of genetic determinism[15] to environmentalism[16]. This, according to Griffith justified the complete break theory[17] throughout the 1950s and 1960s (1997:9). The logical and well-intentioned approach of the Adoption Act 1955 assumed the veil of secrecy and silence as the main benefit of adoption for birth mothers, the child and the adopted parents (Else, 1987:253).

The environmentalism underlying the legal principles of adoption was supported by Konrad Lorenz's studies during the 1930s of Graylag Geese and other species of birds. Lorenz promoted the notion that attachment was transferable and his research suggested that, as long as the primary caregiver met the immediate and basic needs of the hatchling, it would become attached to the mother-substitute as if born to her (Lorenz, 1961:52-64). Bowlby applied Lorenz's findings to humans. His theories

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[15] Genetic determinism is the theory that behaviour and morality as well as physical characteristics are predominantly genetically determined. Dysfunctional or immoral behaviour in the parents is conveyed genetically to the children, it's in the blood, (Griffith, 1997:9).
[16] Environmentalism theory is the belief that environment will overcome heredity. Place a child in the right environment and it will grow likewise. Environmentalism and adoption was seen as, transplant the child into an adoptive family and he/she should turn out 'as if' born to them (Griffith, 1997:9).
[17] The "clean break theory" is based on the idea that complete severance between the adoptee and the birth family is the best solution (Griffith, 1997:9).

on childhood bonding became influential in supporting the complete break theories of adoption. He promoted early placement of infants for adoption on the premise that a child needed to bond with the mother (or primary care-giver) as early as possible (1951, 1953, 1969). The nearer to birth that the substitute mother takes possession of the child, the more she will feel the child is hers and the child will bond with her (1953:124). Iwanek asserts that while these studies resulted in a major shift away from hereditary and genetic determinants to environmental concerns, they also introduced the notion that the family of origin could be discounted as being of little importance to the child (1991:11).

During the 1950s and 1960s a new set of psychodynamic theories was developing to justify the ideology of secrecy in adoption. Psychodynamic theory worked in unison with the belief that environment rather than genetics was the prevailing aspect to child development and the complete break theory was in the best interest of the child.

Iwanek comments that the work of Bowlby influenced the use of psychodynamic theory of personality, particularly Freudian theory in social work practice. Social work training, she says, was based on psychodynamic models enabling social workers to develop skills in identifying the unconscious needs and motivation of birth parents and of adoptive applicants. This was instrumental in the "matching" approach to adoption whereby the adopting parents were identified as "best suited" to the child based on the background of the birth mother (1991:12).

Chapter 2. Looking Back for the Way Forward (History)

The psychodynamics underlying the illegitimate pregnancy have been studied in depth with many opposing views argued. The earlier concepts, according to Sorosky (1978:47), were influenced by psychoanalytic thinking, which viewed the phenomenon as a purposeful neurotic acting-out of underlying conflicts and female promiscuity. Leontine Young was influential in supporting this theory. Studying a sample of one hundred unmarried mothers she found that "all of these girls, unhappy and driven by unconscious needs, had blindly sought a way out of their emotional dilemma by having an out-of-wedlock child" (cited in Else, 1991:10). Young argued that "the baby is not desired for himself but as a symbol as a means to an end ... he is a focal point of her unconscious fantasy, she must seek to force him to fulfil that purpose for which he was conceived" (cited in Griffith, 1997:305).

Jane Rowe promoted Young's work in her book *Yours by Choice* as a guide for adoptive parents to have insight into the adopted child's family of origin. Rowe's views contested the idea that unmarried mothers were over-sexed, but argued instead that it was the "most trusting and unsophisticated girls who get caught". Rowe preferred to portray the birth mother as a naive but nice girl (1959:58):

> "One characteristic which is common to all these women is that almost without exception they are unhappy, dissatisfied people and emotionally very immature .... They do not look to the future but act impulsively."

New Zealand theorists agreed with Rowe's (1959) British findings, and in 1956 a spokesperson for the non-denominational organisation dealing with unmarried mothers, Motherhood of Man, stated that "bad girls didn't have babies: they are either too well versed in birth control methods or resort to other means to terminate pregnancy" (cited in Else, 1991:10). In this view Else observes "a pregnancy was

mitigating proof that the girl had not deliberately planned to have sex, and had merely slipped rather than fallen" (1991:10). Therefore, promiscuity was not the main cause of out-of-wedlock pregnancy.

In an effort to analyse the predicament of out-of-wedlock pregnancies, Thelma Smith, former matron of Bethany Hospital for unmarried mothers stated (1968:17):

> "the primary cause of an out-of-wedlock pregnancy in adolescence is concerned with faulty family relationships ...... growing up in disturbed, shaken, chaotic relationships to a certain extent predestines the girl to unmarried motherhood .... This can also be interpreted for both the girl and the boy."

Illegitimacy and its cause was a "hot topic" during the 1960s and deserving of discussion in the media. The *New Zealand Women's Weekly*, whose primary reader was the "respectable married woman", printed a series focussing on the increase in illegitimate births. Cherry Raymond in her 1965 weekly column, *Speaking Frankly*, commented, "illegitimacy is not just a straight moral issue". Beginning with an explanation that "these girls are nice girls", Raymond states:

> "a girl who has an illegitimate child isn't necessarily a girl who habitually indulges in what is called bad behaviour. Promiscuous girls are rare among unmarried mothers...... many unmarried mothers are particularly shy, the kind of girl described as not interested in boys, not at all the bold, provocative miss who so frequently raises ire in matronly bosoms."

Commenting that "sometimes the child is the result of one isolated incident, completely out of character for the girl concerned", Raymond asserts that the one time "joyless" encounter was not the "passionate" and "flaming" illicit love that is perpetuated in the myths surrounding illegitimacy. She goes on to suggest that

unmarried mothers deceive themselves about their sexual exploits and claim

innocence and naivety about such things as contraception:

> "when pressed, she cannot say why she didn't (use contraception), except for
> the girl who says, in effect, "I'm not a girl like that." After all any girl
> equipped with the means of protecting herself is admitting to herself that she
> is considering a sexual relationship."

However, Raymond also promoted psychodynamic theory and stated "the

girls very often are driven to it by compulsions they do not recognise and which have

nothing to do with the sex act". She goes on to suggest that "these girls have no

interest in the father, they have used him as an inseminator and nothing more – this

baby is mine and nothing to do with anybody else. Their subconscious drive, the

irresistible compulsion is to have a baby" (1965:19).

By the 1970s these theories became outdated (Sorosky, 1978:8). Outlining a

large study on unwed mothers Sorosky comments that "the results showed that before

becoming pregnant, the majority knew their sexual partners for at least six months and

had a sense of commitment and a feeling of being "in love". Their relationships were

similar to courting couples in general." There was no indication that un-wed mothers

suffered from any pathological indications that lead to an unconscious desire to get

pregnant (1978:8).

During the mid 1960s concern was being raised that there were too many

babies available for adoption and there was a danger that adoption could be seen as

the "easy option" (Else, 1991:161). Social workers were becoming uneasy about the

surplus of babies available for adoption and Else suggests that, as the only help on

offer, adoption and fostering were not sufficient. The only realistic way to reduce the surplus, she states, was to enable more single women to keep their children (1991:159).

Women's groups began putting forward arguments promoting the view that due to the surplus of babies, women should be encouraged and supported to keep their children. Parliament was urged to pass Dr Martyn Finlay's private member's Bill advocating that maintenance payments be made for single mothers as well as their ex-nuptial children (Else, 1991:161). The Domestic Proceedings Act 1968 and the Legal Aid Act 1969 made it easier to obtain maintenance from the fathers of these children. But agitation continued, and single mothers were themselves beginning to take action. The hardships of the "ringless" and "the forgotten mums – the unmarrieds" were having their stories heard in the media (1991:162-163). In 1972 the Royal Commission on Social Security recommended one statutory benefit for "all those who fall within this broad category". The criteria would be (a) that the woman (or in a few cases the man) has children dependent on her; and (b) that her income is below the prescribed levels. The government was not prepared to go as far as abolishing distinctions between different types of solo parents according to Else (1991:163). But in 1973 it did introduce the Domestic Purposes Benefit (DPB) as a new statutory benefit, available as of right to solo parents, who met the criteria (1991:163).

The following classes of applicant may qualify according to the Department of Social Welfare policy manual (DSW[18] Policy Manual, 1986:3):

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[18] DSW = Department of Social Welfare.

a) A woman who is the mother of one or more dependent children and who is living apart from, and has lost the support of, or is being inadequately maintained by her husband.

b) An unmarried woman who is the mother of one or more dependent children.

c) A woman whose marriage has been dissolved by divorce and who is the mother of one or more dependent children.

d) A woman who is the mother of one or more dependent children and who has lost the regular support of her husband as a result of his imprisonment.

e) A man who is the father of one or more dependent children and who has lost his wife by death, divorce or some other cause (other than her admission to hospital within the meaning of the Mental Health Act 1969).

Where the applicant was unable to meet the requirements of the legislation, and was therefore not entitled to receive the statutory domestic purposes benefit, payment continued to be made by way of an emergency benefit under the prefix EU/DPB (DSW Policy Manual, 1986:1).

By 1963 there were too many babies available for adoption, by 1973 there were too few (Else, 1991:159). The introduction of the Domestic Purposes Benefit in 1973 was blamed for the shortage of babies available for adoption according to Colebrook (2000:15). However, Else observes that there were a number of other factors involved in the baby shortage: the removal of the stigma of illegitimacy, the increasing availability of contraception and the softening of attitudes towards illegitimate babies and their mothers (1991:168).

Due to the changing attitudes in society towards illegitimacy, it was becoming less of an issue by the 1970s. An increasing proportion of technically "illegitimate" children were being born to women living with, though not married to, the father (Else, 1991:170). Else asserts "the harsh terms of the "complete break" form of adoption were part of the moral climate from which it developed. The rigid moral code of the 1950s that promoted virginity before marriage loosened its hold on conventional, judgemental morality and there was an increasing proportion of unmarried women openly keeping their children". Thus "the corresponding decline in stranger adoptions was one of the most striking aspects of this major social change" (Else, 1991:170).

By 1975 more openness in adoption began to emerge and Social Workers facilitated the practice of open rather than closed placements of children. Open adoption[19] involves varying degrees of contact between the child, members of its adoptive family and members of its birth family (Colebrook, 2000:4). Contact may involve visits, communication by mail or telephone. The parties involved decide upon contact regularity by mutual agreement, usually prior to the adoption taking place (2000:4).

With the move towards openness birth mothers may choose to be involved in the selection of the adoptive parents with the view that by building rapport, they can select prospective parents amenable to their needs in relation to contact with the child. The growth in open adoption arrangements, according to Colebrook, has been

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[19] Open adoption is complex and much research has been conducted investigating views from all involved. Outlined here is a brief synopsis of the open adoption option and an in-depth discussion on the topic is not covered as it falls outside the parameters of this thesis. Refer Ryburn M (1994), *Open Adoption: Research, Theory and Practice,* and Mullender A (1991), *Open Adoption: the philosophy and the practice,* for a full bibliography on open adoption.

promoted by social workers who believe that open adoption is beneficial for all involved because it circumvents the issue of genealogical bewilderment for the child (2000:4).

New Zealand is the only country in the world where adoptions of this kind occur through private and government agencies. Currently, there is no legal provision for enforcement of contact; it relies on the good faith of the parties involved. "Since the beginning of the 1980s, open adoption in New Zealand has become standard practice. However, openness in adoption at the time of placement is not yet written into the legal process in New Zealand. Instead it is based on a moral commitment that both adoptive and birth parents make at the time of the adoption. Because of this, openness and contact of any sort between birth parents, adoptee and adoptive parents after placement of the child is a matter of trust only, with the adoptive parents having the ultimate choice of whether or not contact is maintained, and the birth parents having no legal rights to contact at all." (Fowler, 1995:1).

Lack of provision for conditions of contact between adopting parents and birth parent in the adoption order indicates that open practice is not encouraged. However, "good-will agreements for continuing contact after adoption have become almost universal over the past two decades" according to (Ryburn, 1994:16). The Adoption Act 1955 reflects the belief of a bygone era and does not include a provision for contact between adoptee and birth parent. Although submissions have been made to

Parliament to update the Act and include provisions for the current climate of inter-country, inter-racial and open adoption, no new Act has been passed.[20]

## 1985 and Beyond

With the change in attitudes towards illegitimacy, a shift occurred through the stirrings of campaigners seeking Government assistance for single parents. During the 1950s and 1960s adoption was promoted as the only option for single unmarried mothers, but the 1970s change in attitudes paved the way to Government support in the form of the Domestic Purposes Benefit. As a result of these changing attitudes, adoptees and birth parents also began to agitate for changes in legislation that prevent the release of identifying information contained in an Act no longer reflecting the current climate of openness.

Campaigners like Keith Griffith, Joss Shawyer and Jonathan Hunt brought adoption concerns to the public eye and the efforts of these people and many others culminated in the Adult Adoption Information Act 1985 (Ludbrook, 1990:36). The Adult Adoption Information Act was passed in September 1985 and came into effect on 1 March, 1986. When the Bill was passed, New Zealand was the first country to give rights to both adopted people and birth parents to obtain identifying information from official records (Iwanek, 1991:1). It was only the third time in New Zealand, Iwanek states, that a private members' bill had been passed by Parliament on a free or conscience vote (1991:1).

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[20] Inter-country and inter-racial adoption are recent additions to the adoption arena for research and legislation worldwide. These areas have not been discussed in this thesis as they fall outside the parameters of this topic, however, they do form an integral aspect of current adoption practice in New Zealand.

The philosophy of the new Act was to provide birth parents and adult adoptees with greater access to information about each other. Therefore the new Act repealed Section 23 of the Adoption Act 1955, which prevented access to identifying information, and gave controlled access to various parties. Access to information pertaining to adoption orders granted after 1st March 1986 is unrestricted to the adoptee and birth parent once the adopted child reaches the age of twenty. With adoptions that occurred prior to 28th February, 1986 the adopted adult or the birth parent can place a ten year renewable veto on disclosure of adoption details. Otherwise identifying information is available for access (Ludbrook, 1990:36).

However, access to Court records containing information pertaining to all adoption orders, the adopting parents and interviews conducted with them are only available in limited circumstances, and at the discretion of the presiding judge. The 1985 amendment to section 23 of the Adoption Act 1955 is open to interpretation and although it appears to provide openness to the records, it also has the ability to prevent disclosure of information:

> "An adoption order shall be open to inspection by any person who requires to inspect it for some purpose in connection with the administration of an estate or trust of which that person is executor, administrator, or trustee.
>
> (2) Adoption records shall be open to inspection by any Registrar of Marriages or marriage celebrant under the Marriage Act 1955 for the purpose of investigating forbidden degrees of relationship under that Act.
>
> (3) Adoption records shall not be available for production or open to inspection except —
>
> (a)    To the extent authorised by subsection (1) or subsection (2) of this section or by section 11 (4) (b) of the Adult Adoption Information Act 1985; or

(b)     On the order of a Family Court, a District Court, or the High Court, made

(1) For the purposes of a prosecution for making a false statement; or

(2) In the event of any question as to the validity or effect of any interim order or adoption order; or

(3) On any other special ground."

The Adult Information Act 1985, Ludbrook states gives no guidance as to what constitutes a "special ground" and there is little consistency or logic in the court decisions on the point. In some cases emotional distress or an identity crisis suffered by an individual adoptee or birth parent has been accepted as a special ground. Other judges have stressed that the personal needs of the applicant must be weighed against broader policy considerations and that the prevailing philosophy of the Adoption Act 1955, is one of secrecy and concealment of identity (1990:39).

Additional elements of control in the Adult Adoption Information Act 1985 relate to conditions of information disclosure: section 5 (c) requires adoptees adopted prior to 1 March 1986 to receive counselling from an approved counsellor before receiving their original birth certificate that may identify one or both birth parents:

However, for adoptees adopted after 28th February, 1986 counselling is optional and the birth certificate can be received directly rather than through an intermediary.

Since the provisions of disclosure apply to adopted people who have reached the age of majority, and the adopted person is considered an adult, the involvement of

a compulsory intermediary such as a social worker or counsellor, is controversial.

Mullender asserts "there are two aspects to this debate: the provision of counselling to

the person seeking adult adoption information (adult adoptees adopted prior to 1986),

and the question of whether there should be a (compulsory) intermediary between

birth parent and adopted person when re-establishing contact,[21] (1991:133).

Mullender goes on to quote Keith Griffith's view arguing:

> "the continuing protection of someone once they are an adult by counsellors
> and intermediaries – and the existence of this different principle in law just for
> adoption and not, for example, in the field of marital disputes – is a
> contentious human rights issue." (1991:133)

In other words, the adult adoptee is viewed always as the *"child"* in law rather

than an adult capable of making his/her own choices in relation to a personal need for

counselling. Mullender points out that it is perfectly reasonable and helpful to have

counsellors available, if requested. On the other hand, she states, the policy-makers

may have been concerned to protect the interests of the birth parents whose lives

could be radically affected by a retrospective change in legislation (1991:133-134).

Thus, speculation may arise as to how much influence a counsellor has on an

individual given the objective of seeking identifying information to meet a birth

parent and why the counselling requirement does not apply equally to both parties.[22]

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[21] Many participants in this study had comments to make about the intervention or lack of intervention by Social Workers and Adoption Counsellors. Unfortunately this aspect of the reunion process falls outside the parameters of this study. However, it is acknowledged that the actions and practices of Social Workers had both positive and negative outcomes for this group of adoptees and it should also be recognised that the practices for adoption reunion may well now be different.

[22] Note: Adoptees whose birth parents seek identifying information about them are not required to undergo compulsory counselling.

**New era of concerns**

The closed adoption era of reunions in New Zealand is nearing saturation. But the next wave of potential reunions and relationships may be initiated between people conceived by donor insemination and their biological parents. Post-reunion adoption narratives may provide insight into the potential relationships that these people may develop. The following section briefly outlines Assisted Reproductive Technologies in New Zealand to illustrate the potential for reunion and post-reunion relationships that may occur in the future.

New Zealand, like many other countries in the western world, began to report an increase in the use of assisted reproductive technologies during the 1970s and 1980s. Ostensibly, this was prompted by social and technological factors including advances in gynaecological technology, the decline in numbers of children available for adoption, and increased public awareness of the availability of the techniques (Hargreaves, 2001:12).

Since the early 1970s it became possible in New Zealand to assist infertile couples to have a family by way of donor sperm, donor eggs and surrogate mothers. This recent technology, not easily available during the early years was the domain of Professor Denis Bonham at National Women's Hospital in Auckland. In September, 2001 a Television One Documentary, "Are you my father?" followed the story of Rebecca Hamilton, a twenty-three year old woman desperately seeking information in relation to her sperm donor's identity. The documentary followed Miss Hamilton on her quest in an attempt to uncover records pertaining to her donor father who had

donated sperm during the late 1970s. Professor Bonham was unavailable to speak to Rebecca due to ill health, but Bonham's Nurse, Margaret McGregor and Dr Freddy Graham, Director of Fertility Associates in Auckland, who both assisted Bonham in the donor insemination programme, were available to discuss the practices of the programme during that time. According to Dr Graham, and unfortunately for Rebecca, the system purposely involved no record keeping pertaining to donors or their matching to parents. This practice, Hargreaves states, was common among the few practitioners undertaking this technique then (2001:12). Also, Mrs McGregor pointed out that Dr Bonham *always* mixed the sperm of two donors to further protect disclosure of identity. Dr Graham stated that no one other than Dr Bonham was privy to the donor's identity and he (Dr Bonham) handpicked the donor's for the programme. Many were hospital staff.

Assisted reproductive technologies open up a whole new area of concern in relation to the question of biological parent anonymity. The moral concerns to "tell or not to tell" the child of their origins and ensure biological parent anonymity, echoes the era of closed adoptions. The use of assisted reproduction by way of insemination has a long history. Daniels states that the first reported use of donor sperm occurred in the United States in 1884, however, it was not reported in the medical literature until 1909 (1998:78). Although Hargreaves suggests that some doctors as early as the 1940s in New Zealand assisted women to become pregnant through artificial insemination, the practice was largely shrouded in secrecy because of religious, moral and legal concerns (2001:12).

Prior to the Status of Children Amendment Act 1987, anonymity for donors was paramount to protect them from any legal responsibility for the child produced. Parents were required to sign an agreement that stated they would not attempt to find or identify the donor. However, the child created from the insemination programme was not privy to or legally bound by the agreement, having not yet been conceived. At the time, the rights of the child were not considered and the focus lay solely with the goal of successful insemination resulting in a baby to meet the needs of infertile couples.

It is now possible Else eloquently states to "mix and bake a child much like a cake: to take sperm from this man, an egg from that woman, plant the resulting embryo in another woman's womb and hand the new born baby over to others" (1991:207). In our current climate of assisted reproductive technologies there is a new dimension to the old metaphor of having a "bun in the oven".

Although the use of donors became possible in the 1970s, donor anonymity was promoted, thus corresponding with the Adoption Act 1955. In an era where environmentalism reigned supreme, little thought was given to fact that the donation of sperm or an egg would result in a human being who may desire to know his or her genetic origins.

Growing developments in the field of assisted reproductive technologies over the past two decades has raised concerns in many countries about the need to formulate policy and legislative frameworks to govern its use. In New Zealand, increasing concerns about the moral, legal and social implications afforded by new

reproductive techniques, and the lack of a regulatory framework, fuelled developments in this area in the mid 1980s. By 1985 the first action by the New Zealand Government with regard to addressing the issues relating to assisted human reproduction took place (Hargreaves, 2001:14-15). The Law Reform Division of the New Zealand Justice Department published an issues paper, *New Birth Technologies*, which aimed at encouraging New Zealanders to decide on acceptable options in this area, and to make submissions.[23] By 1996, Labour MP, Dianne Yates introduced to Parliament a Private Member's Bill in an effort to devise restrictions and controls. The Human Assisted Reproductive Technology Bill 1996 sought to ensure:

a) clinics would be licensed

b) centralised records on donors would be maintained

c) no cloning

d) no sale of babies, body parts, tissue and fluids.

The government finally introduced its proposed legislation in the form of the Human Assisted Reproductive Bill 1998 which:

a) prohibits unethical techniques

b) provides rights of access to information to both donor and child

c) prohibits sale of body tissue and fluids and

d) stress a policy of openness in information sharing.

Reproductive Technology clinics in New Zealand now operate on the premise that identifying information must be made available to the child if requested after the age of eighteen, or, to the parents before the child is eighteen. Since 1997 donors

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[23] For a detailed chronology of the bid to achieve a legislative framework for assisted reproductive technologies see Hargreaves, K (2001).

have only been accepted on the basis that they agree to their identity being made available to the child produced after the child reaches eighteen (Devereux, 2003:1). Under the Status of Children Amendment Act 1987, the husband or de facto partner of the biological mother can consent to become the legal (and social) father of the child. The donor is not the legal father thus creating a "legal fiction" similar to adoption. For a lesbian or gay couple, the partner does not become the legal parent but the donor still has no rights or responsibilities, thus the child is in law "father-less".

The early efforts of assisted reproduction echoed the era of closed adoption where it was believed the complete break with the past and the ideology of environmentalism would shape the child as if "born to" their adoptive parents. Nowadays, as a result of the research into the closed adoption era, the importance of "knowing one's origins" and the requirement to consider how best to facilitate this information for future generations is better understood.

Human assisted reproduction has many complexities, and as the fast pace of technology supersedes the legal parameters, consideration of the future needs of the next generation of people created, demands policy and law to keep up with the ethical and moral issues.

Submitted in April 2003, the Human Assisted Reproductive Bill 1998 amendment, which provides a legislative framework for restrictions and controls to reflect the changes in technology, was presented for discussion in Parliament during August 2004 (Select Committee Office, Press Release, 6th August, 2004). Legislation

governing the use of assisted reproductive procedures and human reproductive research is currently still under scrutiny.

## SUMMARY

Beginning with George Waterhouse in 1881, New Zealand's adoption history has elicited much debate and concern for the human rights of the parties involved. Based on the theory of environmentalism, the perceptions of adult morality and the sins of the father (and mother) the Adoption Act 1955 was born. This Act represented the attitudes of an era that sought to protect the identity of the parties involved in adoption and control information access.

However, with the increasing awareness that individuals may need to know about their biological parents and the circumstances of their birth, legislation met the demand and accepted the basic human right to "know one's origins" and implemented the Adult Adoption Information Act 1985.

The Adoption Act 1955, reflecting the attitudes and beliefs of a bygone era, remains as the basis for adoption law today. The efforts of the various groups to reform the Act has met with ongoing parliamentary obstruction. Despite the efforts of various groups who have commissioned reports and made submissions to Government on the options for reform, Ludbrook asserts, "no one seems to be able to see the way ahead", and the debate continues (cited in Trapski, 1995:95).

Reunions resulting from the closed adoption era may lessen in time as those intending to seek identifying information about each other do so, or forever remain

anonymous. But the next generation of potential reunion relationships may occur when the people conceived from sperm and gamete donation reach the age of majority. Therefore, the importance of implementing appropriate policies to protect and assist those involved is imperative as time for potential reunion for these people is imminent.

This chapter has traced the history of Adoption in New Zealand to provide an overview linking the phenomenon of adoption with the topic of this study, adoption post-reunion. The next chapter, Chapter Three examines the literature investigating adoption and kinship by drawing upon anthropological, psychological and sociological writings that explore the social construction of kinship in the context of biogenetic and social relatedness. This chapter introduces the themes of family membership, mothering roles and family obligations.

# 3. BLOOD AND WATER

"The woman who gave birth to me invites me over to her house. We sit on the
couch, drink wine, talk about rain, how she says each drop is like another not like
snowflakes, and how I say maybe she hasn't looked closely enough – just last
weekend I saw different ones, some like inverted pyramids, some like smooth flat
stones. We talk for hours but all those molecules of shared DNA come down to this
– when we reach for our glasses, our middle fingers touch first. In a way it's a
miracle, but also untrue – just as the woman in the grocery store has my voice, the
woman at the Y, with her small, naked body, just my breasts, my line of thigh."

(Bumps, 1999:299).

This chapter examines the literature investigating adoption and kinship
by drawing upon anthropological, psychological and sociological
writings that explore the social construction of kinship in the context of biogenetic
and social relatedness. Setting the theoretical framework in which this study has been
based, it introduces the themes of family membership, mothering roles and family
obligations.

The metaphor "blood is thicker than water" is a widely accepted notion and a
deeply held cultural construct in both popular and scientific understandings of
biogenetic inheritance. The way in which the formation of our understanding about
family is based on blood, or genetics is discursive; a social construction that
transforms biological facts into social facts. The following discussion acknowledges
the importance of biological relatedness but also disrupts this notion and
problematises the idea that biology is *the* criterion for family. Drawing upon the
current debates in relation to family connectivity that uncovers the relatedness of kin
in "different" circumstances, provides a framework in which to interpret this study.
For adoptees, biological kin are strangers who potentially become *like* family in post-

reunion contact. The development of this relationship is distinct from traditional

forms of family due to the lack of a shared history.

## Fictive Kinship

Discussion pertaining to the changing family structure, family practices and

kinship provides a framework in which to analyse networks of relatedness in long-

term reunion narratives. There is a plethora of literature on adoption spanning

sociological, anthropological and psychological disciplines[1], and much has been

written about family structure[2].

The scholarly literature on adoption has been dominated by a focus on

adoption reunion between the relinquished person and their biological relatives[3].

Central to the argument in search narratives is the idea that the adoptive family is a

"kinship of biological strangers" and biological curiosity is the basis for searching for

the "real" and "true" kin (Waterman, 2003; Kirk, 1964, 1981; Melosh, 2002; Wegar,

1997; Modell, 1994, 2002). This argument supports the idea that biological

relatedness is important, but under-emphasises the importance of social relatedness

and a shared history.

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[1] Seglow & Pringle, 1972; Pringle, 1967; Verrier, 1994; Shawyer, 1979; Else, 1991; Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990; Triseliotis 1973; Triseliotis & Shireman, 1997; Benet, 1976; Campbell, 1957; Rockel & Ryburn, 1988; Gillard-Glass & England, 2002; Rosenberg, 1992; Sorosky & Baran & Pannor, 1978; Modell, 2002, 1994; Wegar, 1997; Melosh, 2002; Kirk, 1981, 1964; Griffith, 1981, 1991, 1997; Howe, 1998; Bean, 1984; Henaghan & Atkin, 1992; Jigsaw, 1982; Morris, 1994; Saunders, 1971; Sprengers, 1997; Woods & Holland & Mansfield, 1982; Youth Law Project, 1994.
[2] Schneider, 1968, 1984; Lewis, 1994; Weston, 1991; Stacey, 1996; Edwards, 2000; Strathern, 1992; Silva & Smart, 1999; Blankenhorn, 1995; Davidoff & Doolittle & Fink & Holden, 1999; Steel & Kidd, 2001; Carsten, 2000; Gittens, 1993.
[3] Haimes & Timms, 1985; Bailey & Giddens, 2001; Brodzinsky & Schechter & Henig, 1992; Howarth, 1988; Sobol & Cardiff, 1983; Sanders & Sitterly, 1995; Wrobel, 2004; Andersen, 1989; March, 1995a, 1995b, 1997; Carsten, 2001; Association of British Adoption & Fostering Agencies, 1971, 1979; Fischer, 2002; Gershon, 2003; Griffith, 2000; New South Wales Committee on Adoption, 1990; Swain, 1992; Department of Child, Youth and Family, 2000.

Furthermore, as adoption research has focussed on the search and reunion event, there is a paucity of literature investigating the long-term experiences of adoptees in post-reunion and how these people make meaning of "family". Melosh suggests this scarcity is due to an abandonment of the relationship post-reunion and argues "reunited kin do not establish close or sustained relationships". She explains "rarely do reunions result in radically reconstituted families …. Faced with the daunting prospect of assuming all the mutual obligations associated with two sets of kin, many adopted persons back off" (2002:252). Melosh's claim is premature and speculative because literature surveyed for this study has indicated that research has been conducted for the short-term post-reunion, three to five years and some for periods averaging ten years. Moreover, this research indicates that it is a common phenomenon for reunions to result in a period of "backing off", but potentially contact may be renegotiated.

Studies conducted in the short-term post-reunion (up to fives years) discuss reunion expectations and "sense of satisfaction" from the reunion experience (Affleck & Steed, 2001; Pacheco & Eme, 1993; Gladstone, 1998; Campbell & Sliverman & Patti, 1991; Carsten, 2001). Long term studies investigating "relationship models borrowed by adoptees and birth families" in post-reunion, conclude reunited people "lack a script for their relationship" and "love does not play a central part in the enduring solidarity between adoptee and birth parent" (Modell, 1997:63). Howe and Feast observe the desire for genetic connectedness is important, but it does not imply the desire for a relationship, and the affectional bonds formed in childhood with adoptive parents are strong and long-lasting (2001:365). These findings support the

idea that social and biological relatedness are complementary rather than imply one is more important than the other.

Research focussing on the inter-relatedness over the longer term between all members of the reunited group (adoptee, birth, adoptive parents and respective extended families) in post adoption reunion remains curiously hazy. Focus has tended to shift to the study of the "open adoption" and "inter-racial" phenomena rather than investigate the phase that follows short-term adoption reunion[4]. Family relatedness research on the other hand, has shifted from adoption reunion to new reproductive technologies that challenge the ideology of the nuclear family consisting of mum, dad and the biologically related kids (Strathern, 1992; Weston, 1991; Edwards, 2000; Stanworth, 1987; Hartouni, 1997).

Defining the social construct of "family" is problematic. The New Zealand Families Commission Act 2003 section 10, item 2 defines "Diversity of Family":

> Family includes a group of people related by marriage, blood or adoption, an extended family, two or more persons living together as a family, and a whanau or other culturally recognised family group.

The Young Persons and their Families Act 1989, section 2 defines "Family Group":

> In relation to a child or young person, means a family group, including an extended family,
>
> (a) In which there is at least one adult member
>
>     (i)    With whom the child or young person has a biological or legal relationship with; or

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[4] Open Adoption and Inter-racial adoption falls outside the parameters of this study, refer to Dominick, 1988; Feigelman, 1998; Hall, 1994; Simon & Alstein, 2002 for bibliographies on the topic.

(ii)    To whom the child or young person has a significant
psychological attachment; or

(b) That is the child's or young person's whanau or other culturally recognised
family group.

Malinowski's view is that the relationship between culture and the innate

consists of kinship bonds which are essentially psychobiological in nature (cited in

Schneider, 1984:171). Clarifying further Malinowski states:

> Social and cultural influences always endorse and emphasize the
> original individuality of the biological fact. These influences are so strong that
> in the case of adoption they may override the biological tie and substitute a
> cultural one for it. But statistically speaking, the biological ties are almost
> invariably merely reinforced, re-determined, and remoulded by the cultural
> ones (1930:137).

Malinowski asserts that adoption creates kinship where no biological

relatedness exists[5]. In light of this statement, Schneider suggests, "there ought to be a

clear cultural distinction between "true" kinship and all other kinds of relationship"

(1984:172). Schneider asserts that "it is no accident that the assumption that "blood is

thicker than water" is fundamental to the study of kinship … it is an integral part of

the ideology of European culture". But Schneider points out that basing kinship

studies on this assumption is fundamentally flawed and Euro-centric (1984:176).

David Schneider has been charged with transforming the anthropological

study of kinship and in doing so anthropologists moved from a focus on kinship in

relation to social organisation to a reformulated view around culture, human agency

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[5] There has been a long anthropological tradition, going back to Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown of
kinship studies many of which bear upon the issues discussed here. A discussion of this is beyond the
scope of this study, but would be an appropriate subject for further research.

Chapter 3. Blood and Water

and process (Stone, 2004:243). Schneider claims that the core of American kinship is the cultural concept of love. "Love" he says, "is the symbol of American kinship and further serving as a symbol of love is the "fact of nature", namely, sexual intercourse between husband and wife" (cited in Stone, 2004:245). Schneider distinguishes between what he calls the "order of nature" and the "order of law" in relation to kinship. The "facts of life" he suggests, are "that blood relatives partake in the law of nature whereas the order of law is modified by man and consists of rules and regulations, customs and traditions" (cited in Stone, 2004:398). Relations by marriage and adoption come under the latter. Understanding the nature of kinship in anthropology, Schneider asserts, is based on three axioms of which the rest, evolutionary or antievolutionary theory, follow from[6] (1984:187-188). Schneider acknowledges that for American kinship the importance of "blood" is socially constructed and states "kinship is whatever the biogenetic relationship is" (cited in Stone, 2004:399). He states "in my own view whether kinship exists or not depends on how it is defined by the observer" (Schneider, 1984:vii).

The Sociologist Emile Durkheim took a different view from the Anthropologists and although he stated there are significant limitations on fictive kinship, he drew conclusions that although there is a " very great resistance that normal kinship appears to have been placed in opposition to the encroachment of adoptive kinship", like Schneider he returns to the notion that all kinship is constructed rather than consanguineal (cited in Lamanna, 2002:92).

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[6] Schneiders three axioms for understanding the nature of kinship in anthropology: First, Kinship is one of the four privileged institutions, domains or rubrics of social science, each of which is conceived to be a natural, universal, vital component of society. Second, kinship has to do with the reproduction of human beings Bland the relations between human beings that are the concomitants of reproduction. Sexual relations are an integral part of kinship. Third, sexual reproduction creates biological links between persons and these have important qualities apart from any social or cultural attributes which may be attached to them.

The new focus on the family has moved away from functionalist views of the family as a "universal institution performing certain specific functions essential to society's survival" (Gittens, 1993:60). Instead, it emphasises social ties in the meaning of "family". Feminist theorists often agree with the Marxist approach that sees the functionalist image of the happy nuclear family caring for each other as rather blinkered and uncritical. They posit that the traditional family view undervalues women's true position in the family and is of a patriarchal nature (Steel & Kidd, 2001:49). Contemporary theorists recast kinship with a preference for accentuating diversity, fluidity and variability of "family" rather than accepting the assumption of biological relatedness as a means for defining "family" (Silva & Smart, 2000; Weston, 1991; Modell, 2002; Morgan, 1996; Strathern, 1992).

In an effort to extinguish unrealistic views of the family, Stacey portrays a nostalgic picture of the 1950s "ideal" family and suggests the memory of that time is misguided and romantic (1996:38). In 1994 the United Nations proclaimed "The International Year of the Family", however Stacey claims by "imposing a deceptive unity on a contested term, the UN was criticised as being ethnocentric" (1996:38). Nostalgia for an idealised version of the 1950s image of the family has become an increasingly potent ideological force in the western world according to Stacey (1996:48). Furthermore, she says, "the demise of the "idealised" family is being used as a political campaign. This campaign posits the "decline of the married-couple family, crime, violence, poverty, drug abuse and sexually transmitted disease as the cause in the decline in moral standards" (1996:48). Stacey's post-modern view suggests "the family is in a "condition" of flux and instability" and there can be no

one answer as to how family relationships can be or should be organised (1990:46).

Smart and Neale expand on Stacey's argument by suggesting the new interest in

studying the family, relates to the "empirical findings of changes in family life and

relationships" (1999:4). By this they are suggesting that family studies demand an

"empirically driven motivation towards reconsidering the family" (1999:4).

Like Smart and Neale, Weston asserts there has been a "reconfiguration of the

terrain of kinship" (1999:1). Weston focuses on what she terms "families of choice",

specifically referring to gay and lesbian configurations of "family ties". Stating that

"many cultural anthropologists working abroad have busied themselves by classifying

all sorts of relationships as "family" that might better be viewed through a different

lens. Within their own societies they have tended to overlook certain bonds regarded

as kin by the "natives" themselves". Gay and Lesbian families dispute the old saying,

she says, of "you can pick your friends, but you can't pick your relatives" concurring

with Syliva Yanagisako's and Jane Collier's assertion that families should not be

confounded with genealogically defined relationships (2004:284).

Weston points out "not only can these families embrace friends; they may

also encompass lovers, co-parents, adopted children, children from previous

heterosexual relationships, and offspring conceived through alternative insemination"

(1991:3). Furthermore, "gay kinship features familiar symbols such as blood, choice

and love, but it also redirects those symbols toward the task of demarcating different

categories of family", (1991:3). Weston's argument postulates that the representation

of the nuclear family as the ideological structure in society reduces other forms of

"family" to "derivative variations or marginal alternatives" and "locates these groups outside kinship's door" (1991:17).

For other theorists the term "family" is problematic and Giddens avoids the term, instead preferring to talk about intimacy, child-parent relationships, sexuality and the body (cited in Smart and Neale (1999:7). Morgan, prefers to focus on the "family" as a representation of a quality rather than a thing (1996:186) and he illustrates the "quality" as ε process of relationships that are fluid, complex and open to change (1996:187). For Morgan, the idea of "family practices" is a key component of the theory of "doing" family rather than "being" in a family, which he says, "recognises a sense of fluidity and multi-facetedness which rarely abides by the categories chosen by sociologists" (1996:187). So, as Morgan points out, family in his view, is more of an adjective than a noun (1996:187).

Theorists who contend that "family" needs to be reworked to encompass the many variations that exist, argue that there is an erosion of the notion that only one kind of family is ideal and that ideal is based on biological kinship. Carsten, who interrogates the role of biology in practices of relatedness asserts "gender, the body and personhood feature prominently in the analysis while relationship terminologies are barely referred to and kinship diagrams scarcely make an appearance" (2000:2). Preferring to use the term "relatedness" instead of "kinship", Carsten explains this term "signals an openness to indigenous idioms of being related rather than a reliance on pre-given definitions or previous versions" (2000:4). But Carsten is quick to point out, even the use of the term "relatedness" is not free from criticism and is "in danger of becoming analytically vacuous" (2000:5).

Central to the theoretical basis of this thesis is the illustration of how adoptees

construct and deconstruct "family" between the "social" and "biological" within their

kinship network. Anthropologists concerned with the issues about the relationship

between the "social" and the "biological" destabilise the notion that these concepts are

in opposition, instead they suggest the boundaries are blurred (Carsten, 2000;

Strathern, 1992, 1995). Hargreaves concurs, "a distinguishing feature of twentieth

century notions of kinship in Euro-American cultures is the combination of social and

biological facts" (2001:422). Anthropologist Judith Modell has argued that "adoption

provides a lens through which we can see that all kinship is made or constructed,

rather than being the unfolding of a natural reproductive imperative. Kinship is the

process of claiming people as belonging to a group that sees itself as connected in a

fundamental way, a group that cares for its members through life transitions and crises

as well as on an everyday basis, rears children, shares resources in an understood

manner, and maintains often unspoken boundaries and rules for inclusion and

expulsion" (cited in Gailey, 2000:15).

## Naming it Family

In adoption circumstances the cultural understanding of the metaphor, "blood

is thicker than water" is problematic because, if blood is the basis for family

membership or kinship ties then adopted people and their adoptive families do not

meet the criteria. The axiom that "blood is thicker than water" suggests that for an

adoptee, their birth or blood related kin are their "true" or "real" family and their

adoptive family is a legal fiction, not real and not true. Modell suggests that adoption

reunion "reactivates natural bonds" and the "bond of biology will triumph" over the social bond of the adoptive family (1994:232). By suggesting " bond reactivation", Modell is claiming that it is based on biology, it is "natural" and it defines "true" kinship. However, when shifting to the scholarship that characterises family as "people who share meals, live, work and care for each other together" (Steel & Kidd, 2001:11), adoptees' biological kin are excluded. Thus, adoptees' "real" kin are biologically related "strangers" and the adoptive family are "family" in the social understanding of what constitutes "family".

For some theorists, the idea that biological relatives could be strangers does not change their kinship status. In Bernardes view "not only is biology considered the proper basis for family formation but other forms of family formation and bonding consequently tend to be regarded as pathological and unworkable" (cited in Wegar, 1997:41). Furthermore, Riben explains adoption as an "absence of kinship" and thus, defines "kinship" in terms of biological relatedness (cited in Wegar, 1997:89).

The historic ties of blood and kin are significant in the western world. For example in Scottish heritage, identity through claim on a family surname indicating clan membership and kin ties link people as "family" throughout the world. Historic family feuds identified family alliances through social and biological kin and rivalries revolved around these alliances and clan affiliation. In 1692 the massacre of the MacDonalds clan in Glen Coe, Scotland by the Campbells dated back to a feud initiated in the 1500s. News of the event turned the massacre into a national scandal and the name Campbell, is still not welcome in the Glen Coe area of the highlands

today[7]. Perhaps better known is the feud between the Montagues and the Capulets in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet.* Juliet pleads to Romeo:

> Deny thy father and refuse thy name;
> Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love, and I'll no longer be a
> Capulet.

She attempts to reason why a name should hold such power:

> Tis but thy name that is my enemy;
> Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.
> What's Montague? it is nor hand, nor foot,
> Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part
> Belonging to a man.
> O, be some other name!
> What's in a name?[8]

The importance of a name to delineate the "family" association was recognised in adoption historically. The New Zealand Adoption of Children Act, 1881 section 10 stated, "the order of adoption, except that made under section eight, shall confer the name of the adopting parent on the adopted child, *in addition* [italics added] to the proper name of the latter". By retention of their original (proper) name in addition to their adoptive name, the adoptee remained, in this way aligned to their biological origins. Biological origins were also central to inheritance when section 6 of the same Act states the child has a right to "take property as heir or next of kin of his or her "natural" parents, directly or by right of representation". This changed with the implementation of the Adoption Act, 1955 when genetic relatedness in the

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[7] The MacDonald – Campbell feud is a well-known story in the highlands of Scotland. Facts and dates were cross-referenced against the website for the National Trust of Scotland's Glen Coe (http://www.undiscoveredscotland.co.uk/glencoe/glencoe/index.html).
[8] William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet,* Act 2, scene 2, line 35 and 40, p. 75.

instance of adoption was considered less important than the theory of environmentalism[9].

Kinship networks for adopted people parallel Weston's notion of "distinctiveness" in kinship relationships. Kath Weston argues for the distinctiveness of a certain configuration of kinship in which biological ties are decentred and choice, or love, becomes the defining feature of kin relationships (cited in Hayden, 1995:41). For adoptees' biological relatedness in adoptive kinship is absent, and the sense of relatedness to biological relatives is acquired through social contact but, at the time of reunion, lacks a shared history. Therefore biological relatedness with "strangers" in post-reunion relationships is a crucial axis around which claims of "distinctiveness" are central and indicates a departure from "traditional" forms of western kinship ideology that assume a social history exists where biological relatedness exists. As Hayden (1995:42) points out, "when biological ties are displaced (as in Weston's work), claims to distinctiveness can be made; where biological ties are central, claims to difference lose their relevance or legitimacy." Biological ties are absent within the adoptive family, but are not necessarily central in post-reunion relationships with the birth family. This distinguishes adoptee family networks from others and suggests feelings of kinship may transcend biological relatedness.

Centralising the metaphor of the "blood tie" around the idea of "family" is a historic and deeply held belief in western society. So, Wegar contends that opposition to decentralising the "blood tie" in kinship is problematic, "public dialogue encourages conflict between different interpretations of truth and reality and the

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[9] See chapter two for discussion of the theory of environmentalism and the Adoption Act 1955.

media supports the dominant structures and interpretations (1997:15). Gusfield noted

in his analysis of public debates that "although knowledge about a social phenomenon

is often uncertain, inconsistent and inaccurate at first, it is quickly fashioned into a

public system of certain and consistent knowledge in ways which heighten its

believability and its dramatic impact." He calls this phenomenon the "dramatic

significance of fact" (cited in Wegar, 1997:16). For example, Wegar asserts adoption

activists seeking changes in legislation to open sealed records and those who oppose

open records have "failed to understand experiences of adoption as rooted in

conflicting cultural conceptions of the "natural" and the social aspects of kinship"

(1997:16).

The argument emphasising biological relatedness in kinship narratives relies

upon the fact that we assume we know who our parents are. According to Gittens,

"biology determines the "real" family and is seen in society as the basis for strong ties

and bonds" (1993:65). In Gittens' view kinship is "a way of identifying others as in

some way special from the rest" (1993:65). Biological kinship is supposed to

demarcate people as more important than friends and increases the sense of

responsibility for each other (1993:65). This may or may not be so in the

relationships experienced by adoptees in post-reunion with their birth families,

regardless of whether they consider themselves to be "family" or not[10]. But a "sound

family life" according to one bioethicist in the United States is based on clarity about

who your parents are, clarity in the lines of generation, clarity about who is whose

(Kass, cited in Stanworth, 1987:19) supporting the view that knowledge about

biological relatedness is important. Clarity in relation to one's blood ties is a

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[10] For further discussion see section on family obligations later in this chapter.

powerful theme when applied to scientific theories about intelligence as a genetic characteristic and to equally contentious claims to biologically based prenatal bonding (1987:20).

The western interpretation that kinship is based on relations afforded by procreation is what Strathern terms a symbol for "flesh and blood" in the literal sense. She explains that "those joined by substance are kin, and it is the act of procreation that accomplishes the joining." However Strathern contends that the "new ways of knowing about kinship, displaces the old ones and this displacement turns on how family members know themselves as kin, there is more to kinship than family life" (1995:351). Strathern further observes that the "kinship field now includes a miscellany of actors assembled for the purposes of procreation and not all biogenetic relationships may be activated as social ones". She further explains that "Euro-American kinship always made it possible for one to be related without activating the relationship" (1995:353). In other words, biologically related mothers, fathers, siblings and extended family of an adoptee are kin whether they know each other socially or not. Concluding, Strathern asserts that biological relatedness is a "fact of life" and "while kinship in Euro-American thinking may be predicated on the facts of life, learning more about the facts of life will not, necessarily tell us more about kinship" (1995:360).

## The "Real Mother"

"Natural" motherhood is assumed to be biological according to Gailey (2000:19). Birth mothers' identify as the "real mother" opposed to the adoptive or

social mother (Inglis 1984; Modell 2002; Waterman 2003; Lifton, 1979)[11]. In this

interpretation the idea of the "real mother" is associated with biology; sexual

intercourse, gestation and birth rather than the social functions of nurturing after birth.

On the basis that biology is central to kinship, the biological mother is the real mother.

But adoption poses a challenge to notions that mothering grows out of a genetic or

birth connection between woman and child (Gailey, 2000:15). Furthermore,

displacement of motherhood occurs when the biological mother becomes a stranger

after relinquishing her child for adoption. The birth mother's "motherhood" is

disrupted and excluded from the realm of social kinship. Not differentiating between

biological and social motherhood, Erich Fromm asserts "mother's love is

unconditional, it is all-protective, all-enveloping. Its presence gives the loved person

a sense of bliss; its absence produces a sense of lostness and utter despair" (1989:58).

Lifton posits that adoptees are in despair as a result of losing their "first" mother, the

mother that can offer them unconditional love and thus, in Lifton's view, the adoptive

mother is a substitute for the "real thing" (1994:74).


The biological mother as the "real mother" is often confirmed in law today

when the courts rule in favour of a surrogate mother's right to retain custody of her

offspring. According to Hartouni, the law "recovers the maternal bond or a

conception of motherhood as something instinctual, natural, and ahistorical as well as

the world this bond presupposes and produces." Hartouni argues that by

"recuperating natural motherhood", the court "re-biologizes motherhood" and

"codifies as well as constructs against other possible meanings, practices, or

formations who and what will count as mother" (1997:81). Fromm contends that it

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[11] This discussion focuses on the "mother" rather than the father because in adoption, it is usually the
birth mother who is primary focus in reunion and post-reunion contact. Relationships formed with
birth fathers require further research.

is for the "altruistic, unselfish character that motherly love has been considered the highest kind of love and the most sacred of all emotional bonds" (1989:45). But by ruling in favour of the biological mother instead of the biological father and his wife, the courts set a precedent that biologically related mothering outweigh the biological father's fathering. Gitten's argument opposes the idea that motherhood is predetermined through the act of giving birth when she says, "there is no such thing as maternal instinct" and that "from the moment of birth, motherhood is a social construction" (1993:67).

Ann Dally posits "there have always been mothers, but motherhood was invented" (1982:17). She goes on to suggest "each subsequent age and society has defined it in its own terms and imposed its own restrictions and expectations on mothers" (1982:17). Furthering Dally's statement, Gillis, contends that because we assume that the physical act of giving birth naturally produces the desire and ability to nurture, we are stunned when we learn of birth mothers abusing or murdering their children (1996:152). For Gillis the meanings of motherhood and fatherhood are never stable or transparent, but forever contested and changing (1996:153). Biology and conception, he suggests are universal, but maternity has no predetermined relationship to motherhood and paternity no fixed relationship to fatherhood. "When a woman gives birth in the late twentieth century, she does so not once but four times: to the child, to herself as mother, to the man as father, and to the group that in our culture we are most likely to call family" he says (1996:153).

The fictive kinship of adoption blurs the definition of the "real" mother between the social and biological. Adoptees have two mothers, two families and

therefore the meaning of "mother" is reworked to account for the associated kinship network in which it best fits. In other words, adoption challenges the biology-based ideas of motherhood but does not exclude them. Adoption is an exception to the idea that motherhood is grounded in biology but it does not deny the importance of genealogical knowledge.

## Family Obligations

Family obligations, duties and ties are defined within the structure of the family group. The closeness of individual members determines the intensity of the tie and the parameters of obligations. The idea that kin support is founded, in whole or in part, upon duty and obligation, implies that there is something special about social relationships with kin according to Finch (1989:212). Finch suggests this duty is biologically based, "biology" she explains, is "the foundation of social obligation and is just part of human nature" (1989:37). Friends can be transient through the life cycle, but family is a constant providing support to its members and this Finch asserts, "is the proper thing to do" (1989:300). The "norms" of obligation constitute a "natural" part of family life and support springs from moral impulses which have been a long recognised characteristic of the "descent family" (Finch, 1989:300). For Morgan, family obligations are seen as "an important part of an individual's moral horizons" (1996:195).

Due to the changing structure of the "family", the "norms", in light of family obligations become nebulous. Stanworth notes that the rights of children conceived by reproductive technologies have become a "battleground" in terms of inheritance based on the significance of genetic parenthood (1987:19). Reunited adoptees and

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birth families face a similar situation. If biological relatedness dictates a sense of

obligation and duty, then adoptees and their birth families defined as kin by biology

are indebted to each other. However, the basis of biology does not necessarily create

an instant social bond in reunion. It is only over time that social bonds are forged and

relationships are nurtured. Strathern argues that even in biologically related families

obligations and a "sense of duty" occur from the emotional ties forged over life times

(1992:29).

Significant for the adoptee in post-reunion relationships, obligations to both

biological and social relationships require reworking to identify "who counts" in

terms of family obligations and whether a "sense of duty" to the biological family in

fact exists alongside or even in opposition to the "sense of duty" felt towards the

adoptive family.

## Betwixt and Between

The secrecy and mystery surrounding an adoptee's birth origins is such that

some, according to Lifton, identify with being betwixt and between (1994:4). Never

quite a member of their adoptive or their birth family: a semi-stranger in both.

Secrecy, Lifton asserts, was the ingredient that gave the adoptive family an aura of a

biologically-related one, and this perpetuated the larger conspiracy of silence within

the closed adoption system (1994:4). For Modell, secrecy conspires in the perception

of an essential difference between contracted (legal) and consanguineal (natural)

parenthood. The presumed "not real" fictive, and liminal quality impinges on

adoptive kinship by differentiating it from biological kinship (2002:179). Modell

argues that "difference" is replaced in legal terms with the phrase "as if begotten" to

disguise rather than acknowledge the difference of adoptive families. "Western

adoption customs recognise a genealogical model in three primary ways" she asserts.

"First, by law adoption transforms the identity and the kinship status of the child.

Second, adoption practices replicate the norms of a biological relationship by

matching child to adoptive parents. Third, according to western conventions the

adoptive family is indistinguishable from any other family" (2002:5). Changing the

child's identity in law does not change the child's genetic characteristics, biological

legacy or history. Although indistinguishable from other families, it consequently

creates a dual identity, one of kinship in legal terms and one of biology. Modell

expands her argument and suggests cultural anthropologists accepted the rule of

custom and ignored that adoptive families are different. This is because, she states,

"once legalised, the transfer of parenthood was no longer visible, or interesting and

the family was "just like" the family created out of sexual intercourse, pregnancy and

birth" (2002:4). The natal family remains in the "biological background" and thus

retains its link to being "family" genetically. The ideology of the "family" does not

account for adoption reunion because to consider family membership in two families

is counter-hegemonic as it involves re-orientation of the values surrounding family

membership and relatedness. It requires a social construction of relatedness with the

biological family while maintaining the historic social ties with the adoptive family.

Enmeshed within the two families, the adoptee is betwixt and between the only family

they have known and the family that they are biologically related to.


"A "new wave of caution" was registered" according to Melosh when the

book *The Adoption Triangle* was published in 1978 about the risks of adoption

(2002:238). Throughout the book, adoption is rendered in the language of illness and

disability warning that adoption is a lifelong process. The authors highlight that

adoptees "suffer the handicap" of being "severed" from biological kin which results in

a disease labelled "genealogical bewilderment". Their "true identity" has been stolen;

only lifting the veil of secrecy can make the adopted person whole (2002:238). The

suggestion that an adoptee suddenly becomes whole once reunited with their birth

family indicates that before such an event, they are only half or at least not quite one

thing or another. Comparatively, in Carsten's view the division of the social and

biological elements is paradigmatic of kinship in adoption and she suggests that this

kind of kinship is a blend of two different kinds of background or, at least,

heterogeneous in origin, and thus "inherently hybrid" (2000:29).


Without the knowledge of history and origins the adoptee is "lost" according

to Lifton (1994:4). Being caught between two families is comparable to being caught

between two worlds. James Barrie illustrates the plight of being betwixt and between

in *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*. Peter consults Solomon Caw and has the

realisation that in fact, he is not a bird nor a human, but something in-between.

> "Poor little half-and-half," said Solomon, "you will never be
> able to fly again, not even on windy days"
> "Then I shan't be exactly a human?" Peter asked.
> "No."
> "Nor exactly a bird?"
> "No."
> "What shall I be?"
> "You will be a Betwixt-and-Between," Solomon said.

Barrie posits "the birds never got used to Peter", he was an "oddity to them"

and perhaps, to himself for he realises he is neither one thing nor another (1980:9).

Lifton contends that adoptees recognise Peter Pan as a brother, they are fantasy people

(1994:4) and like Peter Pan identify with animals. Furthermore, Lifton contends that "animals and adoptees share some state of grace that is outside the human condition" and that "many adoptees associate the "stray" as a quality that captures the feeling they have of being a stray themselves, taken in, and not suitable for ordinary human attachment" (1994:5).

## Summary

This chapter has drawn upon sociological and anthropological theories to discuss the discourse on "family" and "kinship". The social and biological construction of "family" and "kinship" discussion has illustrated how these are used simultaneously to explain relatedness and to give meaning to the various structures of family and kin.

The nostalgic view of the family is characterised by a tendency to exclude divorce and illegitimacy and is epitomised by an unrealistic version of the family portrayed by the Waltons in a bygone era and the Cunningham's, a 1950s family on the television show, Happy Days. Coontz emphasies, "the vision of the golden age evaporates on closer examination. It is an ahistorical amalgam of structures, values and behaviours that never co-existed in the same time and place (1992:9). Blankenhorn concurs that the nostalgia for "the family of a bygone era" is to believe in something that never existed (1995:23). Family has, according to these theorists always been diverse and in flux. Secrets once hidden in families are now more likely to be exposed forging a wider network of kinship related by biological and social ties. Family define themselves based on their own criteria and parameters and who one

family may or may not include, does not necessarily set a precedent for another, and the associated obligations may vary.

Biology alone does not make for family ties. In post-reunion narratives, families are reconstituted and reworked to form a "different" kind of family including both adoptive and biological kin. In post-reunion narratives the adoptee is the link between the two families in which they are member. Their adoptive family and their biological family have neither affiliation with each other nor mutual obligations. Adoptees find themselves in a precarious position negotiating varying levels of "family membership" between their social and biological families as sole member of both.

The next chapter outlines the methodological basis for this study and introduces the participants interviewed. Including discussion on my insider status, ethical considerations and the rationale for research approach, this chapter sets the scene for part two of this thesis, the interview material.

# 4. METHODOLOGY
## WHY, WHO AND HOW

"Self and other share the same world, even though their projects differ. To fathom another is not, therefore, all projection and surmise, one insular subjectivity blindly reading out to an alien other. To compare notes on experience with someone else presumes and creates common ground, and the understanding arrived at takes its validity not from our detachment and objectivity but from the very possibility of our mutuality, the existence of the relationship itself"

(Jackson, 1989:34)

A s a newcomer to research, entering the field and conducting interviews with strangers is but one challenge. The fact that they share a common experience that renders the researcher an "insider" creates a sense of what Durie terms "dual obligation" (1995:5). This obligation is delineated through a sense of empathy and understanding and by ensuring the participants are represented as they would wish to be. But, from a professional and academic perspective, maintaining a sense of objectivity within one's own subjectivity must also remain at the fore.

The participants' reasons for partaking in this research is unknown, but speculation might suggest that they wish to have their story and experiences presented to counter existing research or even agree with it. Nevertheless, we share the common view that research in adoption is worthwhile. So, self and other do share the same world as Jackson states above, the participants and the researcher are both adoptees. But our projects differ, mine is not only to represent the participants' viewpoints, but also to write a thesis on family membership in adoption, which may entail significantly differing views being presented.

Chapter 4. Methodology

George proposes that research can be an endeavour composed in part of relationships, a process of collaboration (2004:7). Bishop claims, from a Maori perspective that it is a "joint construction of meaning" in which the "wairua (spirituality) in a story binds the listener to the teller beyond any linkage created by words on their own" (1996:25). Prior to the interviews, I did not consider how privileged I was to be invited into the homes and private lives of these people to hear the intimate and, in some instances, emotional stories they would relay to me. The link forged during the interviews had a momentary intensity, an experience of like meeting like, an opportunity to share experiences with the knowledge that the listener was following the scene every step of the way. The sharing of information between myself, as researcher and the participants has been more than merely an exercise of research. It has been a process in which I have questioned the depth of my own views and beliefs emotionally and intellectually. Thus the result has been a very rewarding personal experience in terms of what Roseneil suggests is "an exercise in reflexive, un-alienated labour, involving the unity of hand, brain and heart" (1993:205).

The aim of this chapter is to weave a guiding thread through the methodological framework that this study is based on. Presented in two parts, part one explores the methodological theory chosen for this study and discusses the position of the researcher in the research and choice of approach. Part two outlines the methods used, the participant profiles and the ethical considerations for this study.

## PART 1.

## Research Approach

This study aims to present the lived experience of adoptees who have maintained regular contact for a minimum of ten years with various members of their birth families[1]. Phenomenological enquiry best approaches the task of translating the lived experience because it supports a free flowing focus on how people interpret their lives and make meaning of what they personally encounter. An emphasis on the importance of individual experience provides an understanding of the lived experience from the viewpoint of the adoptees so the phenomenology defined and used for this study is,

> An approach to human inquiry that emphasises the complexity of human experience and the need to study that experience holistically as it is actually lived (Martin, 1996:3).

It is not the intention of this study to establish claims of success or failure in adoption post-reunion, but to focus on the standpoint of the adoptees as they experience membership in their birth family.

So to best understand the adoptees' experience the ability of the researcher to engage with the participants and not feel afraid to step outside the confines of one's own worldview by becoming fully involved is advantageous, and not uncommon to research generally. However, there is possibly an understanding, empathy or even similarities for an insider conducting research, but there is still a requirement for the

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[1] Birth family is a term coined by the participants and relates to their biological relatives. Although many participants believe the word "family" does not best describe the individuals or group they refer to, there is no other word or term fitting the description of who they are or how they fit into the family structure of the adoptee without seeming foreign or distant.

researcher to put aside her viewpoint and consider things from the "other" point of view. So as an insider, the opportunity to realise the lived experience in the research field suggests that the researcher is possibly operating in two modes, that of researcher and that of insider, an oscillating and ever-changing identity. Ever-changing because the lived experience of an insider doing research changes the researcher during the course of the research. This change comes about through the experience of reflecting upon one's own views and the ability to compare experiences with the participants.

Considering the researcher is operating in two modes she is situated as a participating observer with one foot placed firmly in the field of academia and one foot in the field of the other, neither fully in one place or another, but half way, or at least, moving back and forth between two places. But to suggest that the researcher is only half in any one place at any one time is somewhat disconcerting. Narayan's (1993:3) view, that of the anthropologist who participates in several communities including academia and their native one has, what she terms "multiplex identities" which is seemingly more congruous with my own position. This is because we carry the fullness of self wherever we go and only certain facets of self take precedence of focus in any given situation.

The idea of multiplex identities fits well with my own concept of where I situate myself on the continuum between my personal status of adoptee, academic life, work and also the time spent outside of these roles, personal life. It is not so easy to establish a line where one can step to one side and be fully in academic life, then move to the other side and "be" an insider and then make yet another shift to the work

environment. The personal life aspects seem to act as a medium that facilitates the oscillation between all areas of the multiplex identities that require some transformation linguistically, mindfully and physically as you move across the social boundaries that divide these realms. However, Mead's idea of self suggests that the researcher makes a shift from one state to another when she says, "self arises in social experience, which is why one's sense of self is unstable and varies from context to context" (cited in Jackson, 1996:26). But then Schechner asserts that the researcher acts as a medium between states and suggests, " the fieldworker is a professional link, a person not at home either in his own or in someone else's culture – an in-betweener" (1982:80).

So stepping from one realm or state to another creates a dilemma for the researcher and is unavoidable. This is because perception and translation of the other through the lens of the ethnographer's own lived experience, although generic to research, denotes another layer for the insider. Being an insider forces oneself to not only interpret "others" interpretations of their own experiences, but to interpret one's own which can be congruent and similar to those of the "others". But also, in an effort to relay the participants' experiences, the result cannot deny the researchers own filtering process that in fact, is not necessarily an interpretation shared by the participants. This is regardless of the insider status of the researcher.

Ruby says, "one of the functions of the researcher is to give definition to self by seeing the self alongside or in opposition to the other" (1982:30). Seeing new facets of ourselves as if for the first time is synoptic of the experience of being an ethnographer, an opportunity of re-birth perhaps, or expansion of one's own

consciousness. Ruby explains further by saying, "in one sense, the success of an ethnographer is measured by how well they can become not themselves while at the same time retaining their original identity" (1982:30). So, immersion in the field according to Ruby suggests that we become like our participants and not like ourselves. It is difficult to imagine becoming immersed into a field that does not have deep meaning that resonates already with some part of oneself. The opportunity to expand parts of self rather than forge whole new facets may conclude that my preference of research topic renders me an "insider-ist".

Whether retaining or evolving one's identity during the course of research there is no escape from its incorporation into the final product. So in acknowledging the researcher's insider status the advantages to the research are clear:

- Closer empathy with participants.

- Insider knowledge.

- More equal status between researcher and participants.

- An opportunity to receive detailed information that might not otherwise be disclosed.

- An opportunity for reciprocity.

- Agreement to participate on the understanding that the researcher is an insider.

Overall the advantages to insider research in this case outweigh the disadvantages and concur with current debate that argues insider status helps rather than hinders the research process. Gaining perspective, however, on something you

are in the middle of poses distinct challenges such as failing to notice pertinent

questions or issues because of the inability to step back from a situation and fully

assess the circumstances (Delyser, 2001:442). Kanuha believes that as an insider

conducting research, it is critical to distance oneself from the project because self-

reflecting upon one's own experiences is distracting, and she goes on to quote

Ohnuki-Tierney (2000:442):

> The intensity with which native anthropologists
> recognize and even identify the emotive dimensions
> of behavior (as insiders) can be an obstacle for
> discerning patterns of emotion. As an endeavour
> to arrive at abstractions from the "native's point
> of view," if nonnative anthropologists have
> difficulty in avoiding the superimposition of their
> own cultural categories and meanings, native
> Anthropologists have the task of somehow
> distancing themselves, both intellectually and
> emotively.

Although consideration must be given to the idea that distancing oneself from

the research emotionally, as an insider is challenging, I concur with Delyser, when she

says "some researchers find topics close to home, or close to our hearts, topics so

compelling we can not leave them alone and we try to find ways to use our "insider"

status to help, not hinder insights" (2001:442). But to constrain oneself and become

detached can become counterproductive. Delyser's statement is reflected by Geertz

who suggests, distancing "could result in less "thick" descriptions" or at the very

least, superficial analysis of complex phenomena (1973:3-30). So by embracing and

acknowledging my insider status I have reflected upon and accepted the many and

varied positions of the knower and of knowing.

Chapter 4. Methodology

## Living the Experience

Exploring the "lived experience" as it is actually lived is central to the phenomenological approach. Phenomenology according to McCutcheon is devoted to developing techniques for non-critical, empathetic descriptions of human behavior as the basis for making a creative leap across the divide (1999:3). Empathy, being the core concept, is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as, " the ability to identify oneself mentally with, and so understand a person or thing". Having empathy, the researcher presumably is then in a position to gain a deeper understanding of the participants actions, intentions and meanings – a shared experience of feelings and emotions as well as experience.

For Jackson phenomenology is a way of illuminating things by bringing them into the daylight of ordinary understanding (1996:1). As post adoption reunion narratives are a personal account of a personal experience, Jackson's view that, "detailed descriptions of lived reality are seen as ways of resisting the estranging effects of conceptual models and systematic explanation which, when pushed too far, disqualify and efface the very life one wants to understand" is germane (1996:2). But feminist scholarship further observes that seeing things as they are, whole, entire and complex requires that we see things in context, that we understand and explain our eventful, complex reality (Du Bois, 1983:111). So, the phenomenological approach would appear to be "all encompassing", the "best of both worlds" and is possibly best described in Merleau-Ponty's words, "the world is not what I think, but what I live through" (1962:xvi-xvii). Although what we live through does not have meaning until we think about it.

The phenomenological approach to research is complex. It requires the researcher to gaze upon the other while walking in his (the other's) shoes and all the while reflecting on the lived experience along the way.

The interplay of the relationship between lived experience, text and theoretical ideas is cultivated through a collaborative narrative brought together by the participants and ethnographer that results in a colourfully descriptive world of words portraying not only that of the other, but that of the ethnographer's interpretation, the lived experience of the lived experience. As the objective in this thesis is to convey a deeper emotional feeling of closeness (Jayaratne, 1983:145) to those participating in the study, by including the spoken word and observable behaviour, as it is actually relayed in a qualitative narrative, the choice for this study is a phenomenological approach.

## Information Gathering

Contrary to Alexander's findings that adoption research is primarily based on small samples of volunteers hand picked by social agencies and discursive in nature (1994:15), I found that most adoption related studies are largely conducted through mailed questionnaires where the researcher does not meet face to face with the participants. The focus of this kind of research has tended to be on search and reunion events between adoptees and birth families. This method is advantageous in achieving a response from large populations to generalise the findings, is cost effective and less time consuming than one on one interviews. However, the disadvantage of these studies is in the limited response to the questions being posed

and the inability to clarify questions resulting in some missing data. According to Judd, Smith and Kidder a questionnaire is not considered a good means of obtaining complex or emotionally laden information because the respondent might not answer correctly (or at all) out of confusion and often the researcher is unable to tell that the question has been misinterpreted (1991:217). Also, written questionnaires do not allow for the researcher to answer any questions that the respondent may have, potentially leading to misinterpretation.

Face to face interviews establish rapport and motivate the respondent to answer fully and accurately allowing for in-depth questioning about complex or multifaceted issues. It was evident during some interviews in this study that the face-to-face situation was advantageous. On occasion further clarification was required and examples given so participants could consider their own experience in a similar situation. Furthermore, the real advantage of using this method was that it allowed me to clarify the meaning participants gave to their use of words.

To explore family membership in post-reunion adoption a qualitative research design was chosen informed by phenomenological philosophy. This design is best suited because the aim of the research is to report the lived experience of adoptees (quoted) in their own words. Therefore it was appropriate to consider feminist thought on research interview techniques. This is because as the researcher is evident in the process of feminist enquiry supporting a position of equality with the participants, it fits well with the interviewing approach used in this study.

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Expanding on feminist thought in consideration of participant interviews Ann

Oakley suggests, "the goal to finding out about people through interviewing is best

achieved when the relationship of interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical and

when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the

relationship" (1988:41). The goal of this approach differs from the traditional

interview that pre-supposes that the interviewer elicits and receives but does not give

information. Oakley argues that a more equal dialogue incorporating disclosure and

sharing of knowledge by the researcher, known as reflexivity can facilitate this type of

relationship (1988:30). The sharing of knowledge in this research was advantageous

to the outcome of the interviews. When I was asked questions pertaining to my own

situation, I was able offer answers that in some instances lead to areas of discussion

that may not have otherwise been highlighted.

Disclosing my personal status was also found to be an advantage at the outset

when one respondent making enquiries about participating asked what my

involvement in adoption was and then advised, "she would only participate if I were

also an adoptee." For others, there was the assumption that I was doing this research

*because* I was an adoptee and they felt this was advantageous to them to have their

experiences understood on a deeper level.

My insider status was undeniable and strengthened trust and empathy ties with

the participants in almost every interview. It was clear that there was a research

advantage in advising all participants of my insider status either before or during the

interview process.

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To achieve the information sought, giving participants the opportunity to talk in depth and at length was the best approach for this study and has achieved the objective, which was to relay their lived experience.

## PART 2.

## Method

The preparation for this study commenced with consultation with Adoption arena experts. I contacted five experts in the fields of Social Work and published authors on adoption to elicit input and feedback on the proposed study and interview questions. I also gained an understanding of the process adoptees and birth parents undergo when seeking identifying information from two Social Workers including anecdotal comments on people's experiences and their own preference and protocol for adoption reunion counselling. This input was invaluable as it provided an opportunity to refine the research questions as well as identifying a network of information pertaining to literature, both published and unpublished.

Once Ethics approval was obtained (see Ethical Considerations later in this chapter) I advertised for participants in the North Shore Times Advertiser and Auckland Central Leader newspapers as well as through the University staff and post graduate email lists outlining the criteria for participation eligibility. The criteria for selection were adoptees of European descent who had been adopted in a closed stranger adoption prior to 1986 and who had experienced ongoing and regular contact with their birth family for more than ten years. The staff and student community passed on the email to prospective participants, and those meeting the criteria made contact with me by phone or email. This method resulted in interviewees self-

selecting based on the criteria of eligibility presented to them. Once contact was made I forwarded an information sheet (Appendix A) and the question guide (Appendix B). The questions were forwarded along with the information sheet for two reasons. Firstly, this method was preferred in anticipation of eliciting in-depth replies where consideration and thought had been given prior to meeting and these replies I believed, would be more advantageous than those received by surprise questions. Secondly, to commence the research with an "open book" bares the researcher and her plans for all to see, comment on and provide feedback. This resulted in a stronger relationship between researcher and the researched because it allowed the interviewee to be prepared for the interview and there were no surprises.

In many instances the respondents replied soon after receiving the information and confirmed their eligibility and interest in participating, for others, I followed up with a phone call or email within two to three days. Interview times were scheduled with twenty people and in most instances I travelled to the participant's homes in the Auckland area. For various reasons, six interviews were conducted at a mutually agreed place requested by the participants. I travelled to the South Island for one interview and conducted another over the phone with a participant residing in Wellington.

Upon meeting, interviewees were offered contact details for volunteer adoption counsellors provided by Child Youth and Family should they wish to discuss anything that may arise as a result of the interview. This offer was met with an indication from all participants that the information was not necessary, but was left with them for their reference. The interviews ranged in length from one and a half to

four hours and all were tape recorded and then transcribed word for word by me. All participants received their interview transcripts to review and comment on.

All participants signed consent forms (Appendix C) and eighteen chose a pseudonym to be used in the final report. For two participants who have chosen to use their own Christian names (see section below on Ethical Considerations) written agreement was sought stating their preference do so. It was suggested to other participants that they may wish to use the name their birth mother originally gave to them and some did, but I have not disclosed who these people are to further retain their anonymity. Participants were given the option of receiving the chapter that their comments may appear in via email and all requested to receive this.

## Interviews

I personally conducted all interviews, which in most circumstances occurred in the respondent's own homes. This was valuable in providing additional insight into the lives and families of those whose stories I was listening to. In several instances I was shown family photos with likenesses pointed out and compared, gifts received from birth mothers and the pamphlet that many adoptees received from the Department of Social Welfare[2] during their childhood providing physical characteristic information about their birth parents.

Due to travelling distance and participant preference, six interviews were conducted at a mutual meeting place and one over the phone. Because I did not immerse myself into the daily lives of the participants, I was not able to observe the

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[2] Now known as Child, Youth and Family.

ways in which they constructed themselves in different situations and could only

perceive of their feelings about their experiences on that day at that time rather than

over a period of time[3].

On occasion however, it would seem that my role as interviewer was minimal

and the use of monosyllabic questions or a word of acknowledgement in

understanding was all that was needed as the enthusiasm for relating one's experience

became unstructured and took on a life of its own. The interviews yielded very rich

and complex information and lasted for between one and a half to four hours. It was

during the interviews that, usually over coffee and muffins, I realised I was bearing

witness to the trials, tribulations, joys, intimate experience and exaltation of the

knowledge about themselves woven into the stories being relayed. For some, the

questions themselves provided insight into areas that had not previously been thought

about or considered. Many were keen to hear about answers provided by other

participants and stated that it was helpful to gain understanding and insight to their

own thoughts and feelings. "What have you found out so far" and "how does my

answer compare with others" were just a few questions proposed at the conclusion of

the interview. Some participants also provided additional questions in areas that they

deemed important and weren't covered in the questions provided. "Do you want to

know this", "why haven't you asked that" and " is this outside the scope of this study

because I'd like to tell you about ....". Whenever this instance arose, the participant

was given the opportunity to tell me about whatever they were wishing to say and it

was delightful to pursue an informal ongoing discussion about adoption generally

both during and after the interview.

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[3] Longitudal research following reunion and post-reunion experiences with people conceived by donor insemination would reveal how the immersion into the birth family over time evolves.

## Question Guide

The questions formulated as a guide (appendix C) are aimed at identifying specific areas for discussion that relate to the goals of the research. Used as a checklist in the course of the interviews these questions assisted to prompt discussion rather than elicit questionnaire type answers.

## Ethical Considerations

Deciding what is "safe" to write is a consideration for those who have participated in this study. One such consideration highlighted by the participants was in the area of anonymity. During the preliminary stages in preparation for this research, I proposed the idea that there might be some participants who would want their identity disclosed based on the premise that adoptees up until pre-reunion when they attained their birth origin details, lived a life shrouded in secrecy and thus implying shame (Shawyer, 1979:5). That some participants might choose not to be anonymous seemed possible, but extremely unlikely, and it was assumed that anonymity would be paramount and all participants would desire confidentiality. So Ethics approval was sought on that basis.

However, once interviews began it became clear that two participants did wish to use their own names in the final report instead of a pseudonym. However, on the other end of the spectrum others had extreme concerns that general information that might identify them could be used, for example, their occupation, relatives occupations and story themes, so throughout the interview process they highlighted to me which comments and stories they did not wish to have included for fear of

identification and possible stigmatization not only for themselves, but also for their family members.

The idea that two adoptees participating in this study wished to be identified needed to be considered in the best interest of translating the lived experience through the eyes of the participants but also, the same could be said for those who wished to be anonymous. The sensitive nature of this topic was emergent but as Goyder hypothesized, different social groups attribute different meanings to requests for participation in research and it may well be that a study seen as threatening by one group will be thought innocuous by another (cited in Renzetti and Lee, 1993:5).

So in contemplating the pros and cons of naming the participants, I considered the connotation of an "expose" such as that found in the media. For the researcher, this creates a research dilemma and Sheehan posits that this can lead to an almost "paralyzing fear of offending informants and a closing off of opportunities for further research at the field site" (1993:75). However Scheper-Hughes disagrees and outlines that what is written in ethnography does not always please the participants whether they are named or not (2000-125). In 1979 Scheper-Hughes conducted research in a small village in Ireland about the high rates of hospitalized mental illness. The villagers were not happy with the representation of their village or its inhabitants in the book and Scheper-Hughes in an article discussing the backlash had the following to say:

> In hindsight, if I had the opportunity to write the book again, I would not use pseudonyms because the practice makes rogues of us all – too free with our pens, with the government of our tongues, and with our loose translations and interpretations of the villagers.

> Anonymity makes us unmindful that we owe our anthropological subjects the
> same degree of courtesy, empathy and friendship in writing as we generally
> extend to them face to face in the field where they are not our "subjects" but
> our boon companions. Sacrificing anonymity means we may have to write less
> poignant, more circumspect ethnographies. But our version of the
> Hippocratic oath – to do no harm, in so far as possible, to our informants,
> would seem to demand this (2000:125-128).

Scheper-Hughes makes her point clear and Renzetti and Lee concur by saying
"where sensitive topics are involved, utilitarianism can lead to a lessened rather than a
heightened ethical awareness, while deontological theories may be too restrictive,
replacing the sin of callousness with the sin of scrupulosity" (1993:8). Furthermore,
MacIntyre suggests intimacy cannot exist where everything is disclosed, sanctuary
cannot be sought where no place is inviolate, integrity cannot be seen to be
maintained and so to violate sanctuaries is to do wrong to those one studies (cited in
Renzetti and Lee, 1993:8).

So, the tension arising between naming and not naming, including or
excluding occupations has had an impact on some aspects of this study, namely in the
inability to introduce a profile of each participant so the reader can formulate
knowledge around each character's personal story and comments. However, the
participants are central to this study and their experiences and views may be
generalised to the adoptee population to some degree, therefore giving them some
control over the process ensures that the principle of anonymity and the right to be
identified is respected.

Therefore in conclusion, two participants will be referred to by their Christian name but which two people this relates to will not be disclosed. No occupations are stated: all interviews are virtually anonymous unless a reader personally knows an individual participant and the details of their adoption story.

## The Participants

Twenty adopted people volunteered to participate in this study investigating their kinship relationship with their birth family. Based on the research question, ("to what degree does an adoptee immerse into their birth family as a family member?"), all participants were required to have ongoing and regular contact with their birth family for a minimum of ten years since reunion following closed stranger adoption.

The following table outlines a brief profile of the participants and introduces each person. Included is the name they will be referred to in this study, their age, marital status, when reunion occurred, whether they or their birth parent sought contact and how often they maintain contact with each other. Excluding marital status, this information formed the basis for eligibility for participation in this study.

TABLE 2. Participant Profile

| NAME | YEAR OF BIRTH | AGE NOW | GENDER | MARITAL STATUS | WHO INITIATED CONTACT | | | NUMBER OF YEARS IN REUNION | FREQ OF CONTAC |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | ADOPTEE | BIRTH MOTHER | BIRTH PARENTS | | |
| Denise | 1973 | 31 | Female | Single | * | | | 11 | 4-5 x per y |
| Suzanne | 1933 | 71 | Female | Married | * | | | 18 | Monthly |
| Clare | 1978 | 26 | Female | Married | | * | | 11 | Monthly |
| Jane | 1965 | 38 | Female | Married | | | * | 18 | 2 x per mo |
| Natalie | 1964 | 39 | Female | De facto | | * | | 17 | 2 x per mo |
| Ethan | 1968 | 36 | Male | De facto | | * | | 15 | Monthly |
| Sonia | 1966 | 37 | Female | De facto | | * | | 15 | 3-4 x per y |
| Marilyn | 1956 | 48 | Female | Single | * | | | 19 | Every 3 weeks |
| Tiare | 1968 | 36 | Female | Married | * | | | 15 | Every 2-3 months |
| Ian | 1968 | 36 | Male | Married | * | | | 18 | Monthly |
| Rebecca | 1971 | 33 | Female | Engaged | * | | | 11 | Monthly |
| Sandi | 1972 | 32 | Female | Single | * | | | 10 | Every 2 weeks |
| Paige | 1967 | 37 | Female | Married | * | | | 14 | Every 2 months |
| Eddie | 1959 | 45 | Male | De facto | | | * | 26 | Fortnightly |
| Pamela | 1964 | 40 | Female | De facto | * | | | 23 | Weekly |
| Rua | 1966 | 37 | Female | Married | | * | | 18 | Every 3 weeks |
| Marie | 1968 | 36 | Female | Single | * | | | 15 | Weekly |
| Quentin | 1972 | 32 | Male | Married | * | | | 10 | 3-4 x per y |
| Caroline | 1970 | 30 | Female | Married | * | | | 12 | Weekly |
| Jacinta | 1965 | 38 | Female | Married | * | | | 21 | Monthly |

NOTE: Frequency of contact includes any and all contact by email, mail, phone or visits.

## Gender

It is not uncommon for adoption research to solicit more responses from

women than men and this study was no exception with only four men volunteering to

participate compared to sixteen women. Adoption studies presenting male to female

ratios have not discussed or speculated why the ratio of women to men respondents is

vastly different (Kowal & Schilling 1985; Triseliotis 1973; March 1995b; Howe &

Feast 2000; Sobel & Cardiff 1983; Wrobel & Grotevant & McRoy 2004; Campbell &

Silverman & Patti 1991; Gladstone 1998).

## Participant Background

All participants are of European descent, although three also claim Pacific

Island and Maori lineage from one or both parents who are half or quarter Pacific

Island or Maori. The rationale behind this research excluding Maori adoptees was

based upon the complicating factors associated with Maori adoption[4].

Ages range from twenty-six to seventy-one with sixteen in their thirties having

been born during the height of the closed adoption era between 1966 and 1973

(Department of Statistics, 1955-2003). Ten participants are married, one divorced,

three single and one engaged. Half have two children, six have none and one has

four, one has three and one has five grandchildren.

## Birth Family Contact

Time since reunion ranges from ten to twenty-six years with an average of

15.95 years. This is unrelated to the age of the participants at the time of reunion as

the first meeting occurred between the ages of fifteen and fifty-three. However,

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[4] The different protocols surrounding Maori adoption has been briefly discussed in Chapter Two, Looking back for the way forward. The differences associated with the inter-family custom of adoption is significantly different to the "closed adoption" custom of Pakeha. Although it is acknowledged that there were some adoptions of Maori children under the "closed adoption" protocol, further complications of inter-racial adoption may have presented. To remain within the confines of the parameters for a Masters Thesis rather than attempt to include all potential aspects of adoption, it was deemed that further research within the Maori community in relation to the adoption of Maori children, requires a special project that is best conducted by a Maori researcher who has a cultural understanding of the protocol required to undertake such a task.

seventeen participants met their birth families after the 1985 Amendment to the Act allowing access to identifying information. Thirteen adoptees, five birth mothers and two birth parents (birth parents who married or remained together) sought information with an intention to meet their biological family member(s). The frequency of contact between adoptees and birth families varies considerably primarily due to geography and distance and this, according to the participants, has an impact on the ability to meet face to face as often as they would like to. Therefore, contact is primarily maintained via email and phone on average once per month with some maintaining weekly and fortnightly contact. Meeting face-to-face ranges from every two months to once or twice a year. Nine participants have some birth family members (either birth mother or birth father) Auckland based and five have internationally (either birth mother or birth father) based family members. However, face-to-face contact is still maintained at least once or twice per year regardless of distance.

All but one participant experienced initial contact with their birth mother. One participant located her birth mother's family and was advised she had died four years earlier and formed a relationship with her siblings and later her birth father. All other participants formed relationships with their birth mothers initially then half brothers and sisters and in four instances, full blooded siblings.

Extended family members on the birth mother's side were introduced to all but one participant who has only met her immediate family and nine participants have not met their birth father or his extended family. Two were advised by their birth mother that their birth father is unknown and five have either no desire to pursue him or have enough information to satisfy their curiosity at the moment, but may still make

contact in the future. Two birth fathers died prior to the participant making contact

with the family. However, seven participants have met both birth parents' extended

families.

Contrary to the popular belief that adoption was primarily a means for infertile

couples to become parents (Stanworth 1987; Brodzinsky & Schechter 1990; Seglow

& Pringle 1972; Pringle 1967; Triseliotis & Shireman 1997; Kirk 1981) this study

differs in that nine participants were adopted into families where natural born children

were born either before or after their adoption. Four of these nine were raised in

families with both adopted and natural born children and the reason for adoption was

not related to infertility.

## Summary

This chapter has set the scene for this research in depth.

It provides insight into the position of the researcher in relation to the participants to

trace the connection between research and the researched. The methodology and

method chosen is strongly linked to the topic. This was to meet the objective of this

study and provide a detailed analysis of adoptees experiences in their own words, to

convey personal accounts, ideas and perceptions of what it is like as an adult, to

immerse into a second family, a natal family, and form a kinship relationship with

them.

Drawing upon the themes of family membership, obligation, mothering roles

and inheritance, the next chapter, Chapter Five presents the participants' experiences

in their own words. In light of the phenomenological approach to this research, this

Chapter 4. Methodology

chapter presents the interview material before the analysis. Chapter Six conveys the

participants' words without disruption to the flow of their comments to relay their

stories uninterrupted by discussion. The analysis follows the subsequent chapter.

# PART TWO

# 5. STRANGERS AND KIN

> In the spring of 1978, when I was still not quite 9 years old, The Who released their last album before Keith Moon's death, Who Are You. I remember this well because of the effect the album's title track had on me when I first heard it. I began asking myself the same question Roger Daltrey kept repeating throughout the chorus: "Who are you?" I had always known I was adopted, but for the first time I was feeling the full weight of just what it meant. It was the first time I began to comprehend that I had this other identity apart from my adopted family.

David Torsiello (1997:6)

Results of search and reunion studies indicate that adoptees seek contact and information pertaining to their birth relatives to gain a sense of "biographical completion" (Carston, 2000, 2001; March, 1992, 1995; Andersen, 1989; Campbell, 1991; Howe and Feast, 2001; Pacheco, 1993; Affleck, 2001; Sobel and Cardiff, 2001; Wrobel, 2004; Gladstone, 1998; Pacheco & Eme, 1993). For some, the act of the search is all consuming, for those who are sought, demystifying. For many though, the period that follows, post-reunion, has no guidelines or clear pathways, boundaries are unclear, obligations confusing and the customs perplexing. The experience of post-reunion is a life long process. This chapter describes in the participant's own words their thoughts, feelings, observations and experiences as they navigate the labyrinth of a relationship with their birth family.

How participants interpret their family membership and relationship with their biological relatives sets the scene for the following sections, which delve into perceived obligations, locus of control in the relationship and conceptualising "difference" in family structure.

Chapter 5. Strangers and Kin

**FAMILY MEMBERSHIP – A RIGHTFUL PLACE**

As discussed in Chapter Three, defining family and family membership is problematic. For some of the participants in this study there is a sense of belonging to their birth family as well as their adoptive family, Natalie and Marilyn explain:

Natalie    It is a sense of "I'm one of you" when I'm with them [birth family]. I'm one of them really, warts and all. I look like them, probably personality traits and things I do. I just fit in really. They are my connection to being here; they are how I got here. I don't really see them as family though, what I know of as family is my adoptive family and even though I feel like I'm one of them, they have their own family and I want them to have their own family. I think though, they see me as a grown daughter, as family, yeh they do.

Marilyn    I can look at my niece and see myself in her, I look at my nephew and see myself in him, that's a continuing on of something. I don't know about the word family even in the thing of, I have a step mother, I have an adoptive mother, I have a birth mother, I have an adoptive father, I have a birth father, I have multitude of sisters and brothers when I count step brothers and half brothers and all of that. It is a cast of a lot, so I'm not sure about the word family really. I see them as connected to me, I definitely see that and that the connection is different to what it was with my adoptive family. There is something about the familiarity with them, their humour, although I couldn't do the historic humour, the sense of humour is the same quirkiness, there is something about them the way they look at the world which is like me. There is a lot more mirrored in my birth family than in my adoptive family, much more, but there is much more history with my adoptive family. The two are very different really.

For adoptees in post-reunion ascertaining where and how their birth family features in their family structure is further complicated by how they perceive the birth family sees them.

Michelle    They think I'm a family member, I don't necessarily think of them in that way.
They are, but they aren't. I refer to my birth sister as "sister" but I don't really
feel as though they are. It is more like getting together with friends or cousins,
but there is this knowledge that she is in fact a sister – it's weird.

Tiare    They are friends, but when I do talk about them, they are my birth mother,
birth father, my sisters and my brother, it is that way. But I've got my family,
the family I've been brought up with and they, well they are just there you
know. They see me as part of their family though[1].

Rebecca    When we first met we established that we would be known as "family
friends", but as time has gone on I'm less comfortable with that term "family
friend". I'd love to be able to communicate with people that I'm adopted. I'm
just concerned for my birth mother and her feelings.

Jane    I suppose I see myself as a daughter, I still think I'm treated differently though.
I don't know if they feel it is their responsibility to make sure that even though
I am an adult making my own way through life that they have to make sure
that I actually make it through safely. I suppose they are family but sometimes
better than family – good friends. My relationship with them, is it family or
friends? It's probably in-between that, good friends with a blood connection.

Clare    We get on really well and we laugh lots, but it is definitely more a friendship
role, an equal role than a parent/child relationship. I think she probably sees
it more as a mother/daughter relationship because she gave birth to me and
has thought about me everyday all of my life, which to me, is beyond
comprehension. Whereas for me, I've always had two parents it was never my
choice to be given up, that was her choice and so that is something she has had
to live with and I know that for a lot of birth parents it is never an easy thing
to live with, so I think yeh, she probably does see it as a mother/daughter
relationship.

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[1] Tiare's birth parents adopted out three daughters at birth, they later married, moved to Australia and
had three more children they didn't adopt out. Tiare is the eldest.

Marilyn   I was quite flattered that my birth sister wanted me to change my name to theirs, I really liked that she said that. It felt kind of nice, it felt good and weird that for her its so black and white and for me its so not. She just really sees that I am her sister and that's it. She is very congruent with it like that, she doesn't have any other imagining although I've talked to her about my Grandmother and Dad and stuff, for her it is just that I am her sister really. It's a lot clearer, much, much clearer than what it is for me[2].

Some participants believe their adoptive family was well matched and similar to their birth family in terms of socio economic status, resemblance and lifestyle. However, for others realising their birth family fits into a lower socio-economic group than the family they were raised in highlights the differences in values, morals and worldview.

Sonia   My family, my Mum and Dad, they are National party voters, my dad is a professional man, he is a pharmacist – I had a great childhood and then there is my birth mother, she is so different you know, she is a Labour party voter – I know I am stereotyping people but that's kind of what it is like and of course her relationship with a Pitcairn Islander is just very different[3].

Clare   It is very different the way my half sisters have been brought up and things, its just very different to anything I've ever experienced. My birth mother and her husband have this really bizarre relationship, which I now know, isn't so bizarre from growing up and having a clue that not all relationships are like my parents. They have completely separate groups of friends and they are only together for the children, they never hug, kiss or anything like that. Whereas I grew up with two parents who loved each other, like clearly loved

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[2] Marilyn's primary contact in her birth family is her sister now and she maintains a close relationship with her.

[3] Sonia's mother was never able to have more children. Talking about being her birth mother's only child initiated some emotion for Sonia as she reflected upon the sadness she feels for her birth mother because she hasn't been able to have more children.

each other, they had the same group of friends, they would have dinner parties and things like that – its not meant to sound snobbish but you know, they would drink wine and the others would drink beer that kind of thing, whereas, I had never been around a lot of drinking. My parents are older and have both been to University that kind of thing.

Sandi          Their values are completely different because of what surrounds them really. When I went down and stayed the weekend I took some photos. I thought it would be nice for her to see me at two years old and at five and seven and you know, I was very fortunate in who adopted me as my family is fantastic, great upbringing, every opportunity. We weren't rich by any means but we were certainly comfortable, very comfortable and they had lived in a state house all their lives and very different, and you know, every photograph the kids were saying wow, whose Mercedes is that or whose horse is that, or where is that house or whose house is that, they couldn't give a stuff about what I looked like and the young boy the next day he said, "I wish you had given me up", bad ah, I knew I was lucky and that I had a great family, I knew I had a good upbringing and we weren't struggling but I didn't think that we were better off than other people, you know what I mean, I never thought that[4].

Over time I've gotten to know them better and I have also been able to set the boundaries about my independence from their family. At first it was too overwhelming. I can't suddenly be somebody's big sister when I've always been the baby of the family. I think its because of that socio-economic thing again, I found that really difficult because she would say things like "look at what Sandi is doing and look at what Sandi is and how successful she is at it". Her children didn't grow up with what I grew up with and their choices will always be different from mine because of that, so she was using me as leverage to make them be something that they probably couldn't be, you know what I mean, they can't suddenly turn into their older sister just because we are blood related, cause we've had none of the same upbringing.

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[4] Sandi was shocked and embarrassed by her birth brothers wish to have been given up for adoption based on her photographs that depicted a somewhat more affluent lifestyle than that her birth family had experienced.

Chapter 5. Strangers and Kin

In contrast Jane and Ethan learned their birth parents were of a higher socio economic status than the family they were raised in and this changed their perception of where they thought they might have come from and of themselves.

Ethan    Her parents, my grand parents, her mother in particular was instrumental in my being adopted and she involves herself in high society circles and it was considered very improper to be a solo mum back then. My expectations were quite low prior to the meeting. I had had a phone call out of the blue from Social Welfare and I think up until that point of the meeting I was still holding on to this idea that it was a bit of a pointless exercise. I don't know, I guess there was that element of curiosity and I guess the shell I had put up around myself had begun to melt somewhat because clearly I wasn't being rejected I was being sought out so in hindsight I think that curiosity was starting to come through, but I still didn't think much about it. Things changed dramatically within minutes of meeting my birth mother because who I actually came across was a very well dressed, well presented, well spoken and articulate middle to upper class person and I guess that intrigued me at some sort of level because this is where I came from and its sort of like – to put it into context I actually had had quite an extremely unsuccessful adoption and I wasn't particularly happy – pretty much a downhill slide and this was fuelled I guess, by fantasies of my birth parents not having much worth, so to me to actually come across someone who had more worth. . . .. Now when I look at people I don't sort of judge them by material values but at that time, that was it. I guess that sort of intrigued me at some level, maybe I'm not this person who I thought I was at that point. How could I have this articulate, well-presented person as a mother and be so useless myself? So those questions started coming out. At that point my expectations did change and I became fascinated by the whole process[5].

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[5] Ethan learned that his birth parents had been living together prior to his birth. Ethan's birth father, an American musician was deported before he was born and although his birth father wanted his birth mother to return to the States with him, she didn't want to leave New Zealand.

Jane            With Mum and Dad, how we were raised[6], it almost makes it like conditional
                love, whether you are being good or whether you are being a bad girl, you
                know whether Mum and Dad are happy with you but if you do something
                wrong you know they are not approving and its all about punishment to teach
                you a lesson whereas I knew I wasn't going to get punished from my birth
                parents – they didn't have a right to punish me anyhow. They definitely do
                become the flavour of the month and at nineteen or twenty you still have a lot
                of issues with your parents and how you've been raised and all the injustices
                that you think have happened to you and what's gone down and all of a
                sudden Ma and Pa Kettle turn up and they are young and appear to have
                money and they inundate you with presents and you appear to be able to do
                no wrong. They just love you because you are their long lost child.

In some instances the birth family, keen to integrate the birth child into their

family introduce the adoptee as their son or daughter to family and friends.

Introductions that include a reference to "daughter" or "son" by the birth parent

represents biological relatedness but suggests a parent/child relationship. Many

participants find this type of introduction desirable. By being introduced as

"daughter" or "son" the adoptee feels the birth parent is making a claim on them, an

acknowledgement of their relatedness. But for others it is interpreted as inappropriate

because biological relatedness does not compensate for the social understanding of

what it means to be a "son" or "daughter". There is a sense of disloyalty to the

adoptive parent when introduced as the birth parent's child. Also, the adoptee often

feels they are "not really" the child of their birth parent, but rather, the child of their

adoptive parents.

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[6] Jane was raised in a religious family that had very strict guidelines in terms of a code of a conduct and
expectations to abide by the rules of the church.

# Chapter 5. Strangers and Kin

Marie
She introduces me as "this is my eldest daughter". In the beginning I was uncomfortable with that but now because it has been so long it is just part of what happens. I don't give it any thought now. But to me a mother is somebody who raises you, whereas my birth mother is the person who gave birth to me, but now she is my best friend.

Jacinta
Not long after we met I went down to my birth father's 50ᵗʰ birthday. I was introduced as his daughter to family and friends and I loved it, that's what I wanted, although it took until I was twenty-five when it didn't really matter then, I wanted that as a child, but if he had said "this is a friend of ours" that's fine – the acknowledgement between he and I was enough really.

Caroline
The last trip to see my birth mother she introduced me as her daughter. That was cool; it took a long time to happen. I felt fantastic, I was acknowledged, and it was great.

Rebecca
She just introduces me by name. I'd really like to be introduced as her daughter. I don't want to hide the fact that she is my birth mother, I'm proud of that.

Sonia
I would cringe if she introduced me as her daughter. I think she pre-warns people who I am so the situation doesn't arise where she has had to explain, at least in front of me.

Paige
I don't feel very comfortable with being introduced as her daughter. I feel it's betraying [to the adoptive parents]. It assumes a history and it sort of wipes out my family really, that is what it makes me feel and then I feel uncomfortable because I'm not family so then you feel some weird limbo person being said you are in this family but you're not.

Quentin
I don't think I would be uncomfortable being introduced as her son, but it just doesn't seem right. Just because she is my birth mother doesn't mean she is my mother, a mother and a birth mother is a different thing. But reality today

is that I actually have a better relationship with her than I do with my adoptive parents. The reasons for that, I don't know.

Natalie    They both introduce me as their daughter. My birth father definitely, he is so proud. He likes to take the credit a little bit for what my Mum and Dad have done because the way I am is because of them not because of him. He is responsible for genes but the way I turned out is really, and the opportunities I had, made me who I am and are from my adopted parents not the ones that gave me away. I just introduce them by their names and even now when I talk about my birth father in business things, I tell him, "don't tell them I'm your daughter", but he just can't help it sometimes and then it gets all confusing and "oh yes he is my natural father, I'm adopted"[7], I don't like telling people that I'm adopted, its just another thing to tell you know, its like I don't really care and when you tell people you are adopted you always get this "oh you poor thing" reaction, I don't want your sympathy, just want to put you in the picture you know.

Invitations or expectations of participation in the activities of the birth family represent a sense of acceptance of the adoptee into the family as a family member by the adoptee. Interpreted as a key indicator, the involvement or exclusion in activities represent an indication as to the degree of immersion into the birth family for the adoptee. This degree of integration varies from activity to activity and according to the participants, is defined by the birth family.

The invitation to attend family gatherings from the birth family situates the adoptee as a family member amongst the wider kin network. Through participation in family activities the adoptee is invited into the exclusive family setting and often treated no differently from other family members. In this instance, the adoptee is in a

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[7] Natalie and her birth father often work together; they are both private contractors that complement each other in a business sense. Natalie chooses to utilise her birth father for certain jobs but would prefer that they keep their personal lives separate.

"family" situation and in terms of the expectation placed upon them: they comment that they are expected to participate and take on the role of a family member.

Sandi       When I was staying there, my brother was staying there, he is a twenty-six year old boy and we were expected to share a room, that was bizarre for me because you know, this is a twenty-six year old young man, I don't know him, he is not my brother, I didn't have any knowledge of him and I just can't share a bedroom with somebody like that[8]. It was weird, I just put up with it, some nights I would sleep on the couch and they would say "why did you sleep on the couch", I would say "well I fell asleep watching TV".

They treat me as a family member, you know my brother [birth brother] rang and said "I'm coming up to Auckland, can I stay with you for a couple of days", sure, no worries, but you know when somebody I've met once rings me up and says "hi it is such and such here, I am such in such sister, would you mind, I'm catching a plane and I'm arriving and can you pick me up from the airport. I see them as strangers really.

Ian       I was barman at my birth sister's wedding, I was also MC and my brother and I were cooks on the BBQ. I was asked to do it, one of my brothers was supposed to be MC but he passed it off on to me. I had no problems with it, I'm not a public speaker but I enjoyed it.

Eddie      I think I am sort of like an extended family member but certain things I would get included in and some things I don't. Things like a 70th birthday or a Christmas gathering I get included in that, but then the ordinary birthday celebrations they do their own thing, but then the other brothers and sisters don't necessarily get invited to certain functions anyway. I'm quite happy with what I get invited to. Since the kids have been born it has been a closer relationship, we tend to have Christmas day with them all, even my adopted

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[8] Sandi has travelled the world extensively and immersed herself in a wide variety of cultures and situations. However, she couldn't believe this was being asked of her and it was more that she felt it was an inappropriate expectation of her.

mother comes along so they all know her and she is in the fold and we have a Christmas lunch gathering [9].

Marie
I now consider them family. I think it just gradually came up and smacked us on the face. I couldn't pinpoint a moment that changed really. I think the first time I met extended family was at my birth uncle's funeral and they knew who I was I didn't have to explain who I was, they knew. Maybe that was it, I couldn't say.

Rua
I see myself as a family member to a degree, but not as close as "family", the boys (birth brothers) certainly regard me as a half sister and they treat me as a sister and my birth mother really does treat me like a daughter and her husband does the same … I'm treated like one of the family, I get invited to family outings, special birthdays and lunches. I see them as friends bordering a family.

Paige
Because I have children of my own and they are the first of that generation, there was a comment "we haven't even met them yet and they are our first great, great grandchildren" so I do think they do see them as part of the family, probably more so than I do.

Quentin
Acceptance as a family member from their perspective is definitely the case, my family has even been added to my birth family's family tree created by my birth grandfather. From my perspective the relationship is just very good friends with the knowledge that there is something deeper. It is not necessarily a spoken thing; it is just the knowledge. In my mind you can't break that natural bond that is there, but in terms of family interaction, it is more like a very close or very good family friend.

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[9] Eddie's birth mother was married to someone else when she got pregnant to his birth father. She already had a family with her husband and he was physically abusive and often away. She later divorced her husband and is now married to Eddie's birth father.

Chapter 5. Strangers and Kin

For some, this inclusion is an experience of total acceptance, but for others, discomfort and anxiety. Marilyn has experienced both the anxiety of not being sure about the protocol but also conveys a feeling of sadness when after the event she experiences a realisation about what she has missed growing up and how the past can't be reclaimed.

Marilyn       I walked up the stairs with this box of presents and I opened the door and they were all sitting there, I remember I was so nervous and then it was kind of like I was on display or something. I was smiling because you smile at Christmas but I felt awkward, I didn't know how they did their Christmas, I didn't know what the routine was, it was really, really uncomfortable and it was very hard work.

I was at a BBQ and the whole family was there, it was like a normal family BBQ and it just felt like a normal family New Zealand BBQ really and I felt really immersed in it and then when I came home I was really in a lot of grief and I thought how weird, its like forty-seven years and it looked like a normal family and in some ways it is but it is so not a normal family, it just made me really cry, I really cried about that, about I suppose, normal family BBQs that I'd never been at and a part of me can never completely be there even though I can be immersed in it. I always leave and go away and be sort of sad. You realise you are never going to *get it normal.* So its immersed but a disjunction somewhere, the watching her watching me that's what makes it not normal. I was talking to my birth sister in the kitchen about what plate we use and my mother is watching us and that is the weird thing and I'm aware of it.

There can be confusion about the expectations of participation in family events and the right to participate. The adoptee may wish to be included and yet not feel able to step up without being asked. The "rightful place" having not been defined between

the adoptee and their birth family can lead to disappointment and disillusionment about being a family member. This in turn results in a disparity of the degree of perceived acceptance or right of involvement in the family.

Jane       When Nana [birth Grandmother] died, my birth siblings got up as the grandchildren to say something about their Nana, they didn't look at me to say, "get up with us" and yet I suppose I could have but I didn't feel it was my place. The minister even asked me at the end of the service was I a relative, so no one had told him who I was. I didn't feel comfortable to just go up, but if I had it probably would have been ok. I have never felt that I have a right to invite myself to anything — I still wait to be asked[10].

Michelle      I was invited to my Grandmother's 70th birthday and although I didn't want to go, I sort of felt compelled to attend, but when I got there, there was no one to really talk to. It was just difficult, I sort of felt like I shouldn't cling to my birth sister because there were all these relatives there she wanted to talk to and there was this expectation that I knew everyone and they all knew me. They didn't and I felt exposed and a bit of an impostor to be included in that. In fact, I made an attempt to speak to a cousin who I thought would know who I was and she didn't, she went off and clarified it with someone and came back and apologised, if I could have crawled under a rock[11] …. Its like you know, they pick and choose to include or exclude you, you are neither "in" nor "out", but half way and moving back and forth as and when it suits them and the pressure and expectation to go to these things is difficult to manage.

Denise      My birth mother is worried that my birth sister will get jealous which kind of pisses me off, so this dictates how we interact[12].

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[10] Jane's hurt was still apparent during the interview when she talked about being left out at the funeral and how difficult this made feeling a part of the family for her.

[11] Michelle covered her face with her hands when she made this comment. She felt so embarrassed that no one had made sure people knew who she was and she found this particularly distressing.

[12] Denise was clearly annoyed and disturbed that her birth mother used her sister as a reason not to form a closer relationship with her.

The degree of perceived immersion into the birth family by adoptees can be interpreted by the willingness of their birth family to acknowledge and recognise their family member status publicly. When a family places a death notice in the newspaper for example, the birth child may or may not be included regardless of their relationship with the deceased. The participants commented on their feelings about how they would feel to be either included or excluded.

Paige          I guess I would expect to be in my birth mother's death notice, but I certainly wouldn't be upset if I wasn't.

Denise         I wouldn't expect it no. If it were there that would be fine, it wouldn't disappoint me if it weren't.

Marie          We always joked that I would go to my grandmother's funeral even though she has said she doesn't want me there[13]. She lives such a different lifestyle in a little country town and they have no idea I exist. They have no idea that my birth mother's father isn't who they think he is. When my aunt died I was in the notices, I was part of the family and I think probably would want something in there, because my grandmother, no matter what, is part of our life, she may not like it but she is there you know. I think if I really wanted to go, my birth mother would let me.

Ian           If I wasn't included it wouldn't worry me, if I was, fine. I'm the sort of guy that if something goes wrong, how-do you fix it you know, get on with life.

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[13] Marie's Grandmother pretends Marie is not related and although the rest of the family have accepted Marie, her Grandmother has stated she will never accept her. Marie commented that her Grandmother believes that when she forced her birth mother to sign the papers, that was the end of it and Marie should not have been allowed to locate her birth mother.

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|---|---|
| Suzanne | I was included actually. I would possibly be disappointed, yes, if I wasn't because I feel so totally accepted by them[14]. |
| Tiare | If I knew the person, yes it would be important to be acknowledged, but if I didn't, no. |
| Sonia | Not really important, but that's just me. I'm not terribly formal. I would feel the same way about my adoptive family. |
| Clare | It would surprise me if I were there. I think anything when I've been included has been an added bonus. It hasn't been an expectation that I would be invited. |
| Natalie | Interesting you ask this question because my natural grandfather, my birth mother's father put a book together, a family tree and they have my birth mother's family and she didn't put me in it. This was after meeting me, but she explained that she just felt that her parents didn't want me and didn't want to acknowledge that I exist or anything like that and now that they are older and she just felt it was not right. In some ways I don't mind because I think, I don't need to think that I belong there. I don't actually feel I need to be included. I'm probably in some respects a bit of a loner although I've got lots of friends and am a sociable person, I don't feel like I need to have anybody to validate who I am or where I belong. I feel as if I belong anyway. |
| Marilyn | My niece died and I wasn't included in that death notice and I had quite a bit to do with that niece. It would be unusual because I've never been included publicly, so it would be out of the blue that suddenly she wasn't anymore ashamed. |

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[14] Suzanne missed meeting her birth mother by four years as she had died, but did meet her birth father and conducted a ten-year relationship with him before he died. Her maternal aunt facilitated a formal welcome into the family on her 60th birthday, she made a speech and Suzanne described this as a particularly emotional moment. She now conducts an ongoing relationship with cousins, aunts, uncles and her maternal half brothers.

## Chapter 5. Strangers and Kin

For Rebecca and Michelle being excluded from the funeral of grand parents was more than disappointing because it contradicted their initial understanding, interpretation and experience of being accepted as a family member from previous invitations to attend family activities.

Rebecca        It was really sad for me when my birth mother rang up and told me about the death of her parents and she was calling after the funeral, after the event and part of me would have liked to have gone to the funeral, but I am guessing that there is still a bit of hesitation on her part in how to integrate me into more of that family environment.

Michelle        I was pretty disappointed and unclear why my birth mother didn't let me know her father had died. I actually heard about it from another member of the family. It was after the funeral too, so there was no opportunity to attend. I thought maybe she had enough to deal with without thinking about letting me know, but I was kind of put out because I had developed a relationship and grown fond of the Grandfather and by not telling me she was not giving me the chance to grieve his loss along with everyone else. I just don't know what that was about especially when she wants me at everything else.

In contrast, for others, embracing the birth family as "family" comes from a sense of "genetic belonging" to each other rather than through the involvement of family activities.

Ethan        To me it's simple, she gave birth to me, she is my mother. We didn't have a relationship for the first twenty years of my life, but we did have a relationship for the first nine months. Its simple and its been fifteen years and I don't strongly remember how it felt for them not to be my family, so no I don't see them as friends and I don't frame them as something other than what they are, family.

Chapter 5. Strangers and Kin

Suzanne            They have taken me into their hearts. I see them very much as family[15].

Ian                You could say we are close because of blood and we are similar. We know we
                   are family: we get on well. When you think of friends – when my mum went
                   overseas you have this sad feeling, when we went down South for a holiday I
                   had that same feeling and its different to when a friend goes away, you have a
                   going away sort of thing but with family its different.

Natalie            It feels like genuine love, without being disloyal to my Mum, the hugs I have
                   from my birth mother just feel like I've come home[16]. There is a strong tie, a
                   blood tie isn't it, kind of like the reason for you being on this earth. I think
                   the blood tie is quite important. It is when *you can look at your natural father
                   and you can see that you have the same kind of skin as him and the hair on
                   your arm grows the same way*. You just feel like wow, that's who I am, that's
                   why I am here. They are unspoken things.

Marilyn            I do feel a deeper connection with her [birth mother] and that is disturbing
                   because one of the things about her is that she can read my face because she, I
                   suppose, when you have brought up children, my siblings look similar so if
                   they didn't like something and they pretended that they did, she would know,
                   so it was very strange to know a stranger who could read my face and I
                   couldn't betray anything. With my birth sister, I always say we are *cut out of
                   the same piece of cloth*.

                   I suppose the thing that really stays with me from all that I've said that was
                   revealed to me in my talking is, just how strong the sense of connection to
                   them actually is, to each one of them, as I run through them in my head and
                   each one of them I have a very strong sense of connection. Even my older
                   sister who I don't have anything to do with, I feel very connected to her and its
                   kind of like as I've talked I've felt that more and more. With people who are

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[15] Suzanne maintains ongoing contact with her birth mother's family. She also enjoyed a ten-year
relationship with her birth father and his wife, however her paternal half siblings will not have anything
to do with her and this saddens her deeply.
[16] Natalie expressed her sense of coming home when she hugs her birth mother with a smile and her
voice softened as she spoke about it.

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friends and lovers you kind of develop a connection, you develop similarities and develop what you love about them and you develop a connection really, its like fibre isn't it and you grow them together. I already have these fibres with these people, here's my older sister I never see her, I've seen her maybe three times in my life but I feel very connected to her. I could say with my mother if it wasn't blood, that's where it is most likely to be blood, if it wasn't that, that incredible relationship that we had for nine months but with the others it is not that because I didn't spend nine months inside my sister, so it must be that genetic fabric. I think of blood, well yeh, well it must be that whole fabric, that whole matrix or something. *Like cloth, this is the family cloth,* you can cut all these kids out and put these ones here and these ones there. The cloth is the blood and the bones and the DNA and the genes – the same cloth, it is something about that that makes the connection. I don't have that, it's a different feeling, the connection that I have with them because they have different values, interested in different things and yet there is something else which is incredibly the same.

## MOTHERS AND MOTHERING

Many participants communicated a fear of upsetting their adoptive mother by either talking about or through maintaining contact with their birth mother. In most instances it was the adoptive mother who felt most threatened by the arrival of the birth mother and what this might mean to the relationship with her. Navigating the relationships with or between the birth mother and the adoptive mother had emotional challenges for some participants. Over time the perceived threat to the mother/child relationship has lessened, but for the adoptee conceptualising the difference between birth mother and adoptive mother, in terms of a mothering role is very clear. However, keeping everybody happy is not without some challenges.

# Chapter 5. Strangers and Kin

Eddie
It was emotional for my mother and she was scared about that, so when I'd go over and see them, this was in the early stages, I never mentioned it to my adoptive family. I just sort of went, so not to upset them. Earlier on I wanted them to meet because I knew they would get on well together and I knew my Dad, he would have probably liked to have met them and he talked to them on the phone and they got on quite well. On reflection I think I might have pushed the meeting more, looking in hindsight. After probably a year or two I should have said you know, I want you to meet them and get this out of the way, I suppose it's a thing that when you get older you perhaps wish you had done that.

Marie
Mum didn't want this other woman – although my birth mother didn't want that, she doesn't want to be my mother but she wants to be involved. So for three years I had separate birthdays and Christmas's. That was until my son was about four, so for his fourth birthday, I decided no, not doing it. The birthday party at home, same day, invited my birth mother and my adoptive mother. When my birth mother arrived I told her that I hadn't told my Mum she was coming, she went in and introduced herself to my mother, whatever was said in there, I have no idea. My mum came out and said "you should have never done that" and I said, "why are you going?" She said, "no, she is a lovely woman", I said, "well it would have never happened if I didn't do it this way" and from then on we have always done it this way.

Natalie
We really have our own lives happening and bringing another person in can be a bit tricky also I think that they so want me to be part of their family and so welcoming which is really lovely in small doses but because my adopted mother is very threatened when I see my birth mother, I feel guilty when I see her. So I have her "back here" a bit because of my mum and not wanting to cause problems. I think my Mum was worrying that she might lose me to this other lady who in some respects had more of a right to me emotionally, legally no, but it goes way beyond a legal thing doesn't it when it comes to flesh and blood.

Chapter 5. Strangers and Kin

Rua recently became a first time Mum and this has created some challenges in terms of deciding what everyone should be called. Although her birth mother has never introduced her as her daughter, nor does she presume any mothering role, she has begun to assume a grandmother role with the new baby. Assuming a grandparent role by right can be seen as inappropriate and Denise is not comfortable with her birth mother claiming biological grandparent rights over and above her adoptive mother.

Rua          She gave my daughter a little bib that said, "if mummy says no, dial 0800 Nana" and I thought, oh, what is her name going to be for my daughter and that's caused me the biggest headache. My mum is Nana, my father is Grand dad and his partner is Grandma and then there is my husband's father and stepmother, luckily they have their own set of names which is quite cool, but I just can't think of anything for her. It is her first grand child and I've got to think of something. I just don't want something like Nana or Grandma, I wish for my birth mother to have something special for herself. Nothing comes to mind.

Denise       My birth mother sees herself as my children's grandmother, she said to me just the other day, "I know your mum is saying they are her grand children, but biologically they are mine", I didn't like that, at first I was flattered but no, I didn't like it. It is to do with the loyalty to my mum. For me, everyone stays in the roles that I grew up with.

Deciding what to call the birth mother was less of a problem for Marie's children who were also the firstborn grand children in the birth family.

Marie        My son never called her Grandma, I never called her Mum, he has always called her auntie and her first name, but now as the years have gone on with my five year old, she is called grandma and her first name, sometimes my son will call her grandma and her first name but for the first ten years he didn't.

Some participants expressed their relationship with their birth mother as one of a familiar stranger. Recognising similarities in personality traits and physical resemblance provides a sense of belonging but also identifies and highlights the socialised differences. Being "like them" can be exciting but also distressing and disturbing because the adoptee is on the outside looking in at their birth family and potentially recognising aspects of themselves not previously known in a kinship of social strangers. For some there is an awareness of a "meeting of minds" with birth parents and they comment, "we are alike, we think alike". Because there is a sense of like minds some participants have commented that there is an unspoken understanding about appropriateness in physical contact and expectations in the relationship. However, for others, it is clear that the lack of history has an impact on mutual understanding of each other's needs.

Sandi        We were in the car going around to a friend's place and my birth mother and I were in the back seat and Mum and Dad in the front. We drove along the road and a dog ran across and got hit by a car and I just went hysterical and Mum sprung around from the front seat and grabbed me and talked to me and my birth mother just, I could sense that she was just so lost, she wouldn't know how to comfort me and didn't know that I would even react like that, she just sort of sat there, the outsider you know. Mum and Dad just knew, they know, she doesn't.

Paige        She once turned to me when we were out somewhere and said, "I don't feel like your mother" and I said, "well good because I don't feel like your daughter". So it's actually been quite good because we are kind of similar and neither of us are needy or emotional. It was emotional when we first met and it was especially for her but at the end of the day we both have happy lives and

she has her daughters and I've got my mother you know. My birth mother and I had some really weird coincidences like we both got the same kind of dog when we were fifteen, really weird ones, I've forgotten them now but we kind of rattled them off when we first met and they are weird things you know like we are both the middle of three girls and strange things like that.

Sonia     I suppose I am still a little edgy now when I introduce her to people, it doesn't happen that often, it does become a little awkward, but what annoys me sometimes is when people call her my mother because she is not my mother, she is my birth mother and that's the only thing that I am really particular about. I don't particularly like the term birth mother but I don't know what else to call her but she is not my mother. I am family but I'm not family. I am family because there is this connection there but my birth mother probably spends more time with her nieces and nephews, she knows them better, she has seen them grow up. I feel they would be more like family to her than I am – I should ask her, but I'm not an outsider, that connection is there, but I don't see myself as family even though I am – again I just think it goes back to I am just so comfortable with Mum and Dad being my parents.

Jacinta     I wouldn't choose her to be my friend. I find her a bit scatty, a bit of a spinner. After saying that, if I met her as a friend our relationship would be different because she wouldn't have had the expectation or baggage about me. I went down and spent some time with her and she showed me around to her friends, it was lovely, she was "oh this is my daughter", she was really happy to show me off, but I could see also an edge in there that she felt really hurt that I wasn't really her daughter and that's why I say that I would possibly have her as a friend if that wasn't there. As my birth mother, I find her really hard work emotionally.

For Jane, Marilyn, Michelle, Rebecca and Sandi their relationship with their birth mother is not as satisfying as they would like it to be. Unlike other participants who feel they have a meeting of the mind with their birth mother, these participants

feel that circumstances or a lack of meeting of the mind causes a disparity in expectations.

Jane          I was her baby right from day one, from the moment that she had me and yes we met each other when I was twenty, I didn't have that memory of her or anything. I think for her she thought the adoptive mother would just melt away and I'm here now and this is my child. I think she thought I'd just blend into the family and we would all live happily ever after. I know my birth father [her husband] and the their kids felt differently. She had spent her whole life thinking about me and wanting me to be part of their lives but they hadn't and neither had I.

I don't know what I was expecting, its really strange how it is, I have Mum who raised me all my life and Mum is always going to be Mum. My birth mother wasn't, but in the same token I wanted to be treated like the other brothers and sister because that's what she was offering me. I guess if I'm honest I wanted my cake and eat it too. I wanted to be treated the same as the others and I wanted to be mothered by her but with little input from myself. Whether it's like testing her with this unconditional love – it doesn't matter how bad I treat you but you are still going to love me. Doesn't mean I have put out because you are still going to love me because I'm your child. I think it all comes down to the word mother. What I think a mother is and how I think a mother should be. But it is not that I needed to be mothered by her as I already had a mum for that and she loved me and nurtured me. The difference between them is that my birth mother would have raised me differently. It was just so natural to be around her [birth mother], it was just comfortable.

Marilyn     I'm comfortable to introduce her as my mother, more so than she is to introduce me as her daughter. My sense of that is that I'm not ashamed of it. I think she carries a lot of shame and I think that's the weird thing about being adopted because I was wanted as adopted people are and in my reunion with her I have to face that I was not wanted, I was rejected and psychologically I

think that's a lot of work because its like connecting to before that time when you are not wanted and I remind her of what she did. It is written all over my face what she did, that's how she behaved. In her lounge she has a whole lot of photographs and she used to say to me "I must put one of you here" and I knew she wouldn't and actually I didn't want her to either because it would be as if I am the same as them and I'm not the same as them and I don't feel the same as them.

My adoptive mother and father split up when I was two and a half, so I grew up with my Dad and my Grandmother and Grandfather, so to say she is my mother, its not like I had another mother.

Michelle          Growing up I felt like an ugly duckling you know – its not as if my adoptive family were a family of beauties or anything but there were physical aspects about myself I detested and I longed for that image of a mother/daughter where you know, you can look at a mother and a daughter and see the sameness about them. I never got that with my birth mother when we met, the fantasy was destroyed. I just don't see any resemblance and there is no connection. So why are we still in touch, I don't know, what is it that keeps us coming back to each other. Its really weird because she just isn't enough for me and I don't think I'm enough for her, its probably frustrating for both of us but it would be just too hard to sever the tie now, too much time has passed. I've read adoption stuff about the adoptee searching for their identity and that's why they search but you know you don't necessarily find it. In fact it can be even more confusing because here you are raised by one set of parents with their values and expectations and then here is this other person, a blood relative who you would expect you would relate to, have things in common with and you don't. Their ideas can be so different that they are almost alien.

Rebecca          I'd love to feel more of a connection with my birth family but because of circumstances I don't because of what I do with my birth mum, I look forward to the relationship that will develop further with my brother and sisters when

they get a bit older and I think that's really exciting. But I think for me there is probably a bit of a fantasy element to it but I would really like that.

Sandi    My expectations of meeting her were exceeded because now we have a relationship, it was too much to hope for before the meeting but we are not the same and I don't see myself as her daughter but I don't think she has to work at it quite as much, it came very easy for her to want to build a relationship and see me as a daughter and treat me as a daughter and back when I was staying with her there was no guest about it. I was someone that was part of the family, living in the house expected to do all the chores and sweep the floors and make the dinner and get things for myself, get my own food, get my own towels. I was definitely like a family member and I found that really hard too because even in my own family, if I went to stay at my brothers house for example, there is no way he would say "just help yourself to dinner tonight", he would be "what should we eat together", you know, "lets cook together". But for me I definitely had to work at having a relationship and had to try and fit that into my life really and to think about what I want and don't want out of it. When I'm with her I feel like a city girl in the country, in fact she drives me fucking mad sometimes.

The less than satisfying relationship experienced by some of the participants is believed to stem from the perception of who holds the locus of control in the relationship. Regardless of who found whom, some participants express concern for the emotional well being of their birth mother and a desire to not upset her feelings. Many of the participants have learnt of a particularly difficult past for their birth mother and feel sympathy for her experiences. Because they sense an element of fragility about their birth mother, some participants feel an obligation to abide by her terms without question. In an effort to abide by these terms, the adoptee feels their own needs and desires for the relationship are not met and there is a difficulty in conveying to their birth mother what they want and do not want from the relationship.

Marilyn  I don't have any more fantasies that she is going to mother me and I wouldn't have told you that originally I wanted a mother to mother me, the interesting thing is that now those fantasies have gone they must have been there in those years of knowing her. I can't imagine what it is to be pregnant with one child and then to lose that child and leave the hospital empty handed with your breasts still with milk and having just given birth. I can't imagine it, but to do it twice[17], I can only imagine you have to be incredibly disconnected to be able to do that in the same way that I think how those Nazi's could go and kill children and then go home and care for their own kids with measles. It is that level of disconnection to do that twice and not grieve it. I had a sense that she never grieved it. Sometimes I would bite my tongue and I would not say things. She is very racist and it was very offensive to me, I did not like that at all and I was too scared in case she would reject me. It is so nuts because in the end, I would never put up with some of the stuff that she said about people and yet with her, somehow she had some kind of power that I couldn't do it, I was too afraid.

Caroline  She is really fragile, but she comes across as really strong but really, she's not, she is masking, I can see that now. She is not as strong as she appears, she appears almost arrogant, but yeh, she has some real hurt and some real rejection. I hold back a bit due to her fragility. She was so fragile on the day I left: she was just beside herself. She said, "oh I just don't want to let you go, it's been so good".

Michelle  Its interesting you know, my friends would probably describe me as someone who speaks their mind, knows exactly what I want and don't take any shit from anybody – in fact one of them has told me as much, but when it comes to my birth mother, well she seems to put this thing on me to go to family gatherings, go down and see her for the weekend and it is pretty one sided, in fact it is pretty one sided for all of them – they expect far more from me than

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[17] Marilyn's birth parents gave two daughters away for adoption. Marilyn was the second daughter and her older sister had reunited with the birth family several years before. Marilyn's parents were married and had several more children. Her birth father died before she located the birth family and now she is not in contact with her birth mother.

I do from them. I have my life and I'm busy living it. Yeh, I guess it is because I feel this sense of loss about her and I just don't want to disappoint her somehow.

Sandi      I'm not as comfortable when I'm "Sandi" because I don't know quite how to, because I don't want to offend really, I don't want to upset her, if I can do anything to avoid that then I'll do it. I never worry about that with my family, offend them all the time, they are used to it, but I think she would be heart broken, devastated. Their perception of the situation is so different from yours, you know. Giving up someone is totally different to finding someone. Because we are given to, we get given to somebody when you are adopted, so you have a family, you don't have that sense of loss for a mother because you have somebody, they have nothing. I think that when they meet you it is very different for them than what it is for you and I think that's where you get confused about boundaries and relationships. I found it really difficult because I was this long lost daughter, knitting singlets for my first born child and including me in the family as though I had never left it, but I didn't fit in the family, I had nothing to do with them, I didn't even know them you know. To me they weren't family, they were in some way connected to me but not family. I had my family. You know its funny when you are growing up and you are adopted, different, and you don't know who your birth mother is and you are the one that feels bad, you were given up, you weren't good enough for them to stick around and good enough for them to change their life around so they can keep you, all these horrible little things, then when you have met them, it completely flips to the other side, you feel sorry for them, they had to give you up, they lost you, you know, and how lucky you are. She said when she met me that she felt the only thing she had ever done right in her life was to give me up, the only thing she has ever thought that she did right. I think that's phenomenal and that's also why I would never reject her.

Ian      She quickly became a mother again after giving me up. She married my father and had a baby one year later, but I haven't yet talked to her about my

adoption, I have been thinking about it though and I might talk to her the next time I go down because I'd like to know, but I won't just go bang, the time needs to be right.

For others setting the boundaries and expectations has come more easily either because they went into the relationship knowing what they wanted or they had the support from adoptive family members to help set the expectations with their birth mother.

Jacinta      I would like to comment that the relationship with my birth mother hasn't worked out[18] because of geography because even when she lived in New Zealand she was quite a distance away and now in Australia it is very difficult. But to do with her own baggage and circumstances she distanced herself rather than the other way around. Had it been different, had she wanted to continue a close relationship, I would have, but I think it would have been like a strained mother-in-law rather than what I have with my father, a comfortable, no expectations on either side, you're just there and I like you and hi, how are you sort of thing. I think if I had continued a closer relationship with my birth mother I think it would have been strained because of what her baggage and expectations were which I had no intention of meeting or living up to. I am who I am.

Natalie      When I first met my birth parents my birth father took my parents out on the deck and said something, I think Dad said we don't want you coming in and taking over Natalie's life, just leave her alone, she is our daughter and we brought her up and that. So my birth father gave them his promise that he would never try to interfere or take over or anything and he has kept that promise, it was easy for him to do that because he didn't want to anyway. I never heard what was said to my birth mother or what was said back.

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[18] Jacinta's birth mother had a personal crisis when her husband died and reduced her contact with Jacinta and other family members. She later moved to Australia and retains minimal contact. Jacinta remains in regular contact with her birth father.

## Chapter 5. Strangers and Kin

Quentin       I was prepared for a meeting, a cup of coffee and a chat about life in general. What I actually got was a friendship and it all goes well.

Paige       I think my expectations were met because I was welcomed and acknowledged, if she didn't want to pursue a meeting I would have understood.

Rua       I didn't really have any desire at the time to meet her – everything was fine, no curiosity. I had all that satisfied when I was about ten years old cause my sister is also adopted and we got in touch with social welfare and they sent out these little books called "My Story", you know, him/her and that sort of thing and I was quite fine with that but the guy at social welfare phoned me every 2-3 days trying to get me to change my mind about meeting her because I said I had no desire to at this stage. I got pestered for a month until I sort of gave in and said ok lets do it, so I wasn't a very happy camper, but I met her and we got on well and it was good. I didn't really have any expectations, just went along not really knowing what to expect. Really it was just a case of meeting her and seeing what she looked like. That was probably the key thing to see who I resembled, that was the thing I was most curious about.

Marie       I didn't want another family, the family I had were as useless as tits on a bull and that's putting it nicely – I didn't want another failure, I didn't want somebody to come in and pretend that they loved me and promise to do this and that and the other thing. I had been independent for so long. I wanted to know who I was and where I came from and that was basically it.

Tiare       I was pretty clear about what I wanted. I worked at WINZ[19] so I kind of had an idea, that's when I tracked them down on the computer at work. I knew what I wanted, I knew I wanted to meet them or if not, talk to them or know that they were still alive and what they looked like. I did it very slowly, just enough to not overpower and I pulled back and waited for a year and went back in again. I just did it gradually so you know it wasn't just like bombarding the family and I've felt it was the only way it felt comfortable for me and I felt it was comfortable for them as well – just enough.

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[19] Work and Income New Zealand.

**IDENTIFYING WITH IDENTITY**

Adoption reunion narratives accentuate the importance of finding a physical resemblance for the adoptee as a key factor in the reasons for the adoptee search (Carston, 2000, 2001; March, 1997, 1995b; Gillard-Glass & England, 2002; Lifton, 1988, 1994; Andersen, 1989; Campbell, 1991; Sorosky & Baran & Pannor, 1978; Wegar, 1997; Howe and Feast, 2001; Pacheco & Eme, 1993; Affleck, 2001; Sobel and Cardiff, 2001; Wrobel, 2004; Melosh, 2002; Triseliotis, 1973). This was no exception for many of the participants in this study and was expressed as part of their identity completion. However, meeting people where, for the first time in their lives, there is a physical resemblance was unsettling for Marilyn and Michelle and continues to be so.

Marilyn      The whole thing about physical resemblance is one of the most disturbing aspects to me. For me familiar is really strange, being with people who are different from me and that thing about being with people who are in this way the same, is very unfamiliar and strange. So it's like for people who grow up in their own family, I have the opposite experience. It's very unfamiliar for me to be immersed in so much the same. Familiar is to be immersed in difference, think differently, look differently, different body shape, skin is different and their eyes are different, that's much more familiar. Now looking the same as me, I've got really overwhelmed, particularly when they are different ages. Seeing the past, present and future at the same time, whereas other people grew up with that as supposedly normal. That's why I think in part it is so difficult for them to get what we're on about because we have a different experience and different is normal.

Michelle   All my life I longed to look like someone but then when I met that someone who I do resemble it wasn't quite the fantasy experience I had in my mind all those years. I've studied them all much like you study a lover when you first meet, I've compared every inch of them to me and sort of worked out where I got what. Even now I continue to search for aspects of myself every time I see them. As we all age the gate posts keep moving and it is unsettling to have looked like my mother when we met but now look more like someone else, but have this bit and that bit from other family members. I wonder if people who aren't adopted even think about this stuff, it is a constant for me and I'm not entirely comfortable with being this combination of people somehow.

Considering the participants have been in regular contact with their birth family for more than ten years and have in many cases got to know them intimately, sorted out the likenesses and differences, met extended family and found out about their genealogical history, I asked them, "in terms of your identity, has reunion changed you?" This question solicited a wide range of answers, but predominantly participants felt changed by the experience. Most were happy with the knowledge they received and indicated that anything over and above was a bonus.

Sandi   I would probably say no to reunion changing my identity, but having said that, I would say that I would probably be a different person if I hadn't known them. If I was still asking the question and searching then I think I would feel like a different person. You know what its like when you are searching it's different to knowing. I remember what that feeling was like, not knowing. I am different in that sense.

Natalie   I've never needed to know another family, I've just always enjoyed the one I've had, so when this person came and said she was my natural mother, I guess it was a little bit like opening a treasure box and if I can explain that, its like there might be something good in there, you know. I might have an Uncle that wants to leave me a million dollars or something like that but if I look

back now, I may not have even tried to find them if they hadn't tried to find me. But yes it has changed my identity a lot really, now I know who I am. I know why I look the way I look and I feel like I fit in. Because I look quite different to my adoptive parents and to my sister, we look like a bag of mixed all sorts really when we are out, especially when my brother who is 6ft 2 and my father is about 5ft 1.

Sonia      Sometimes I guess *I feel like two different people* and being in those environments sometimes sees the two different people in me come out every now and then. But then you do that with different friends that you have as well so I don't know if it is just related to the situation.

Rebecca      Reunion totally changed my identity, when you look in the mirror and especially reflecting upon birthdays which I never liked and just seeing a face stare back and thinking who are you, where do you come from and not feeling happy with that big question hanging over my head. I didn't really know who I was so I didn't feel comfortable in myself, I still hate birthdays. I think it is the history of my birth definitely because that's the day I was born and that's the day you think back to how your life might be especially before I met my birth parents and it raised all those questions and feelings about who the hell am I really, and why do I look like this, just too many unanswered questions that had really deep emotive content to it. But yeh, certainly after reunion it helped with my identity and its odd how I see myself, *if I was to make a mental picture of myself in this world, I would almost have me just standing by myself.* But knowing where my identity comes from now I'm feeling more and more comfortable with things.

Caroline      Just finding her name was like yeh, *I just had such an ache in my heart not knowing anything about myself, it was such a need for information.* It was a physical ache you know, *I just had this big hole in my heart.* But even the small things like knowing her name and seeing her photo was just huge, it was like, I know why I look like that you know. When I heard her laugh I just about fell over, it was just me. All the little things, hey, it was really the little

things that were so special[20]. The physical attributes and things, she is highly creative and I'm really creative too and she is really resourceful and now I know I get that from her, there are some things that are just genetic and I wasn't conditioned by my environment, I am creative because she is, and I'm proud of her. There is definitely something like a psychic connection between us. It is just amazing, we buy the same things, it is just uncanny. We buy the same paint colour or the same dinner set, we live in different countries, I always know when the phone rings if it is her and it's pretty amazing, there is definitely some connection there.

Denise     *I feel like I'm whole now*, I've met my mother, I come from my mother, I know *who I look like* whereas I was told I was adopted since I was about four years old and I've wondered since I was about ten and *I didn't feel complete* until I met them. But now I am more disconnected really – I feel I am becoming more my own person now. I'm not identifying with either, I'm going my own way sort of thing.

Marie     Yes I think my identity has changed – as I said before I always believed I was my father to a "t", I am stubborn, I like things black and white, I want it done now, I have the filthiest tongue in the world which is my father to a "t", but then the amount of times I am told that I am so much like my birth mother – I will do a thing a certain way or we'll say something or we are both thinking the same thing at the same time. I sort of get quite jumbled about who I am but then at the end of the day I'm me and my lifestyle is what has made me who I am and the influences from my father and my birth mother have been part of that, but at the end of the day, I've made it who I am.

Ian     Probably the only thing that changed is that I know I have a real family that I didn't realise I had. I use that word "real" because I didn't know I had them

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[20] Caroline began to cry with the mixed emotions of joy and sadness when she conveyed the story of making contact with her birth mother for the first time. "Just to hear her voice" she said, was phenomenal. Their first contact was over the phone. Caroline described walking past a book shop shortly before visiting her mother and seeing a book with a picture of a middle eastern girl with the words "I've been looking my whole life for your face and today I've seen it" – she felt this was so appropriate for capturing her feelings about seeing her birth mother's photograph for the first time, she described it as being "so powerful".

and real because they are full and I know there are people out there who have been adopted where the mother hasn't married the father and they have half brothers and sisters, so *I use the term real to say we are from the same chest.*

Eddie    I suppose I would probably have to be honest and say yeh my identity probably has changed because I know the circumstances of my past and how I got here so it's been that a lot of my questions have been answered. Yeh, it has changed me in some ways really. It is probably a completion I think. I would sometimes be going along the street and think and wonder if that could be my mother and I wonder if she had any more kids, that could be my brother or that could be my sister. There was all those feelings of what if you're meeting someone and think how could I know if this person is a relation of mine and there are the other things you hear about, one recently, an adoptee on TV met and fell in love with his sister, they got married and had kids and it devastated them when they found out. So that was in the back of my mind at times, if I met someone, they might be related to me when I was dating and stuff like that, you might be taking out your sister and not realise it.

Suzanne    Yes it has changed my identity because I always felt there was a *black hole behind me and now it is filled in* and I have absolutely wonderfully warm little things when I discover nature hits the root every time because there will be something, or even my family will notice it. Someone in my natural family will say "oh we always like to do this or we would rather do that" and immediately my husband or daughter or grandson will say "oh she is just the same" and yet it would be something that would not be common to my adoptive family, so I show these little traits that you would think I've been brought up with and all those moments help to fill in the hole. I believe I had the same kind of upbringing as I would have had with my natural family though because they were quite alike really.

Clare    I think when I was younger reunion definitely changed my identity because I think you make up all sorts of things about what your birth family could be like. I think when you are a child as well you can make up a fairy story about

it and in some ways it is a great thing to get the reality shock that, no, you weren't Cinderella or anything like that. There are really basic reasons as to why you were given up, so I think the reality of it has been really good and made me realise where I've come from rather than having all those questions and you can't live in that world of, well, this could have happened and that could have happened. I know as a child I had a really active imagination and came up with all sorts of things. So getting to know the facts was really good.

Jane      I suppose meeting them has changed my identity. I kind of always knew, even how I was raised, I was always different from the rest of the adopted brothers and sister, we all are unique and different. I could see myself in my natural family and I could see myself in my adopted family and I think that the reason I felt adopted was because I now had two families. I am very comfortable with who I am and like I said to you, I can be with them and then be with that lot, but at the end of the day, I come home and I'm me. But, then I think I'm me with either lot. I don't think I change, I don't role play from family to family, I'm just me. I might swear a little less around mum, as I know that offends her.

Rua      Yes it did change my identity a bit. Yeh it did when I was twenty. It certainly did because it changed my entire family. It just exploded, my perception of family. Being adopted was never an issue because my parents had always been so open about it, it was just life.

Marilyn believes reunion has shaped her identity and it has been a catalyst to a deeper relationship with herself and understanding of who she is on the inside as well as the outside.

Marilyn      Oh God yeh, absolutely. Mmm, that's such a biggie ah, that word. Yeh definitely, I think a lot about identity and I think about what is identity and what it actually means. Is it a growing thing anyway for everybody? For my sense of identity it is probably, I would say that, by knowing them I can claim

some things about my own self that I didn't know and one example I give about that is the family I grew up in, they were very good at and very interested in sport and fortunately I was quite good at running and a few other sports so they really reinforced that so I continued to do quite well at it. But I also really liked arty type stuff and they were not into that so they didn't encourage or discourage me. When I met my mother she told me that she wanted to be an artist and a whole story about that and it helped to kind of ground it I suppose, it helped me kind of go "oh yeh" and I remember I found this old school report when I was in standard three and there was a little bit of writing about art and I didn't know I was quite good at art because no one had said anything. They didn't say to me you are no good or it's a waste of time or any of that, but there was just nothing, so knowing them, I've known more about myself. I've kind of claimed more about myself.

Part of my identity is to do with what I've been through because of reunion, the incredible amount of pain, the incredible anger, the depth inside myself that I've had to go to because of it. At different times it was a choice I could face the thing and go really into it and hope like hell I'm going to get through it or else fall into drugs, alcohol and sex to back it up because its just going to be too much and as you know I chose to go through it. So all of that has really shaped who I am. So it has definitely shaped my identity but it isn't just the thing of meeting them, it is all the journey of that. In some ways it is displaced, that thing of not belonging to this and not belonging to that, I can relate to a lot of different kinds of people like refugees or people who are out on the edge and displaced. Now that has shaped my identity enormously.

For one participant, reunion came at a crucial time in his life and totally changed his life and future.

Ethan
Reunion dramatically changed my life to the point that, I'd probably go as far as saying that if my Mum hadn't tracked me down, *I suspect, I would probably be dead.* I was brought up in an abusive family environment and at that time I hadn't gone into deep drugs but I was smoking a lot of marijuana and I was basically falling apart. I was drinking enormous amounts of alcohol

and smoking enormous amounts of marijuana and yeh, basically I hadn't had any education. I had left school at the start of the sixth form thinking I was absolutely stupid because I had been told that I was my entire life and I was a mess and with my mother tracking me down and finding that she was quite an intelligent, articulate person and then to find my father, and find out that he wasn't merely articulate and intelligent, but he was virtually genius level, a very intelligent guy and to see that's where I came from, caused me to question, well how can I be as bad as I was brought up to believe and this is what my parents are and it was from then on that I began to rebuild my life. That's why I went to University and I remember making a pact with myself when I went back to University that if I was to fail and get and E in every subject, then I would accept that I am as stupid as I believe I am. But I said I am going to give myself one year and really try and see what happens and maybe that won't happen. So of course, I went through and got mainly A's and found that underneath what was actually happening, there was this person there that had these parents so that shaped my whole self image from that moment on. There is still residue from that; within me there are aspects of the person who has very low self-esteem. For the first twenty years of my life I had very low self esteem and that's still a part of me and it comes out in varying degrees at times but on the whole, the last fifteen years I've been working through building up my self image and self esteem and my self worth and that's all 100% attributable to the reunion. I was brought up being told continuously that I was incredibly ugly. To meet both of my parents, they are both very good-looking people. Even now I won't go as far as to say that I think I am an attractive looking person, but I certainly don't view myself as being ugly and I've had quite a few people tell me that I am quite good looking. I have trouble accepting that, but I will go as far as to accept that I am not ugly.

Ethan is unique in this group of participants because he deemed his adoption as unsuccessful and identifies as the son of his birth parents. He has severed ties with his adoptive family and considers his birth family his only family. It was important to

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Ethan to claim an identity that related to his birth family and as a result, he chose to change his name legally to the one originally given to him by his birth mother.

Ethan   I had thought about changing my name a number of times. This is before she even came on the scene because to me the adoption had been a total failure and I didn't feel, it was a way to try and reclaim myself without even realising it I think, but I had fantasies all through my teenage years of changing my name because I hated it with a vengeance and I guess that was all around identity. That was a feeling that was very strong with me at that time in my life and yeh, my mother had actually suggested that this was the name you were born with, so if you are interested in changing your name, what about this one. I did give it a lot of thought and then went ahead with it. My father's name is the same so I felt uncomfortable with taking the whole lot, so I have his first name and her surname. Also I don't know, I kind of, intellectualise it, my father had to leave the country, that's why I was adopted out and to my way of thinking at the time was, well, if my mum hadn't decided to adopt me out I would have been raised with this name, I wouldn't have taken his surname anyway, so it was about reclaiming who I would have been had she not made that decision. So I think the latter is more compelling even, and is supported by not wanting to take on the first and surname of my real dad.

Medical history is an important aspect of many adoptee searches and specifically for Quentin and Paige meeting their birth family has provided important information above and beyond the physical resemblance and personality traits of an identity.

Paige   I don't feel reunion has changed my identity but I certainly feel good that I have met them. One thing that has been interesting is the problems that the older daughter [birth sister] has. I've had in my life various bouts of depression and times when I've felt things are falling apart. I've always pulled myself out of things and it's been very interesting to see her because for me it's

kind of like what could have happened. Mmm, so that's kind of interesting and just to see that it is kind of genetic, heredity thing so in a sense it certainly provided some answers. My birth grandmother is what I term emotionally fragile. She was emotionally fragile at various stages of her life and that is why she was not told about my birth mother's pregnancy.

Quentin    I'm not a particularly family focussed person in terms of immediate family — for my own family, yes in terms of my wife and two children but family outside of that are neither here nor there. Curiosity, information particularly about medical background because I suffer from quite a lot of headaches was of interest to me. Really curiosity, *where did I come from*, why am I here, it was that sort of thing. To me I must say, it was quite remarkable, emotionally it was quite remarkable when I first met her. Before I met her she put together a small photo album of pictures of her growing up and of the family which she sent up to me and it really was quite a strange feeling because for the first time in my life I could open the picture and *see people who looked like me* and I saw a picture of her brother in his early twenties or late teens and I looked at him and his facial expression and facial features and they looked *just like me*. It was a strange feeling because it was the first time this had ever happened. In anticipation of meeting, if we became friends great, if it all went pear shaped on us, so be it. I was never overly concerned about it, but curiosity was really the main driver particularly because I had a young family of my own and it was important for me to know where I came from and the medical history.

An important aspect of identity for Caroline, Rebecca and Suzanne is a desire to experience motherhood and reclaim a sense of heritage or a passing on of their own genes and to form their own genetic family history.

Caroline    For a long time I wanted to have a baby for the pure reason of having something that is part of me and my own family and *she would have the same blood in her veins that I have*, part of me you know and that alleviated a lot when I found her [birth mother] but for years, even as a teenager I just desperately couldn't wait until I had a baby because I felt all alone in the world and I felt that when I, particularly my husband's family with four children,

they were either like Dad or Mum and it was so hard for me, I was really jealous and when I saw, I still do this, I was walking behind what was obviously a mother and daughter and they held their heads the same way, their head popped to the side and the same bodies and I just really loved that, I really loved seeing that and I went up to them and said "excuse me, I just have to say you guys are just two peas in a pod, I'm walking behind you and you are just exactly the same and it is just really cool" and we end up getting into this conversation and I say "I'm adopted and *I have just craved to know why I am like I am and why I do these things*", so I am always really chuffed to see this. I just now really *appreciate seeing likeness*, before, it was really painful for me. It is just important to me that I tell them I think its neat. That's a huge thing, when I had my first baby, I just felt wow, I had already met my birth mother but I just thought, how could you give a baby away.

Rebecca      It is hugely important for me to have my own family. My partner and I have been talking about it and I'm very lucky with him he is a very intuitive guy and incredibly supportive. I think it will be an incredibly emotional time maybe more than having a child when you're not adopted. Yeh, I look forward to that time, I'm a bit scared about that in terms of my emotions but that's not a reason not do something. I think it will be really incredibly exciting and I think that *it will deepen the relationship between my birth mother and me* and I have thought about it a little bit but haven't voiced it to anyone yet but my instinct is that I will probably be calling up my birth mother and therefore my adoptive mother might feel really left out, I can see that could happen.

Suzanne      I was hell bent on having my own children and when my son was born I remember the first thing I said was "*this is the first blood relation I've ever seen in my life*" and they have been perhaps more special because of this, but I don't know, I think every mother loves her children.

## OBLIGATION OR CHOICE

Many people would say that a sense of obligation comes from being a member

of a particular family. Family rituals including attendance at gatherings, gift

exchange, recognition of mother's or father's day, inheritance and financial support

are some examples of perceived family obligation or duty. However, for the

participants in this study, what might seem like an obligation for some is not for

others. Instead, they deem it to be a choice rather than a duty and interpret family

obligation as only relevant to their adoptive family and not their birth family.

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| Marilyn | Obligation is not kind of the right word because I feel more in some ways obliged to my adoptive family. I feel, the language, it is really hard to get the language, I feel, I don't know what the word is, maybe if I just talk a little bit. I definitely know she is my sister and I can't fake that, I can't dilute that, my older sister, I know she is my sister too and I can't dilute that and that kind of complicates the relationship. Probably the next thing is I imagine my mother will die and it will touch me very deeply. The thing about gifts though: well the gift from my mother, both Christmas's to my other siblings were really expensive, to me they weren't and that was really difficult. She was really very obvious in that and my friends were just completely furious with her and that was hard to manage too, because my friends would say to me "what did she give you?" and the first Christmas, see that sheep there, my friends were just outraged that she would give me a sheep, "why did she give you a sheep", you know, stuff like that and she is not poor and she gave my brothers and sisters really expensive things so that was weird, my status in the family was really on the outside[21]. I felt adopted, I haven't got the same status as them, I'm not fully fledged, not only do I not have the history, but there is something in all that culture and history and the jokes and stuff and some of it, with things like, that I could get because there was some credible familiarity which is also disturbing. |

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[21] Marilyn was perplexed about the meaning of the sheep gift and she referred to it several times during the course of the interview.

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Clare   Christmas presents and things, for years I've done the Christmas present thing but she's not very into presents. I get birthday presents from my half sisters, they send them over from Sydney but I've never had a birthday present from her, had a birthday card, normally a Christmas card. But for the last several years since I've had my own money I've sent stuff down. She came to my wedding, all of them did really, my half sisters and half brother. Of course, it was emotional for her and she hadn't met a lot of my relatives up until then and my grand parents were there and that kind of thing. I just saw her at the wedding, so there were lots of nice photos taken with her. She was invited to come to the family photos but it was pouring with rain so she didn't come to the house for them.

Jacinta  I did feel a sense of obligation at first with my birth mother. As I said, because I made the initial contact, even when she was going through some difficult times and flipped out a bit, at one point I would have been happy to turn around and walk away because in many ways she was a little bit hard work emotionally. But I did feel an obligation to leave myself open and available to her and be as loving as possible although there were times when I really had to bite my tongue. When we were first married we shifted into a house in Glenfield and she phoned me up and just said, "oh we're coming up to Auckland I 'm bringing my friend and her son because I have to take them to the airport, so we'll stay the night at your house", just things like that and my husband was like "oh really", I did feel that obligation then too. That was maybe four-five years after we met. If a friend of mind did that I wouldn't blink, but she didn't actually nurture a friendship with me, like I said before, she kept saying "I would have parented you like this". So I almost felt she was still trying to be a bit of a parent to me and I was a fully-grown woman, I was married in my early twenties. I know I sort of bristled a little bit but through the responsibility. I did feel obligation to be as loving and as accepting of who she was because I hadn't had expectations of who she was and this is who she is. She came from Gisborne and maybe they are all like casual down there. I don't know – sure you're welcome, here's a mattress crash on the floor – so yes, but not to my birth father because he has never put any pressure on,

there's never been any responsibilities for my birth father. After saying that, I send him a father's day card and a birthday card and I do make phone calls and think, "oh I must get around to sending him an email", but that's because I choose to.

Sonia    There isn't an obligation like I have with my parents, but certainly an obligation more like what I would have to a friend, a bit more than that I suppose. It is kind of different. We exchanged Christmas and birthday presents for a little while, but her partner is from the Pitcairn Islands and they don't celebrate Christmas, so she doesn't really celebrate Christmas so we don't do that anymore really. We don't do birthdays either. It's more that that's what I do with my family and it's more like she is this new person in my life that you would treat as a friend and if you do that with friends that's great, but if you don't then that's fine as well. *I did invite her to my wedding but I didn't feel obliged, but I thought it was the right thing to do* and I wanted her there anyway.

Suzanne    Not an obligation no, but I have great joy in attending gatherings, but I don't feel an obligation. They accepted me so warmly that it is a joy to me to do things like that, if I missed something I would feel sorry I missed it. I do gift give with several of them. The cousins I'm close to and my two brothers go out of their way to give me something that was perhaps something my mother used to use or wanted or liked or whatever and they say this was Margaret's. My youngest brother took me to the family home because his father was in a home by this time and they hadn't sold the home because they were afraid they would upset their father, so I was able to walk through the house and touch my mothers things and look at her books, stand at the sink and look out the window and think of how she must have felt and that was absolutely wonderful and play with some of the things and then since then they have given me books and all sorts of things that were hers. My aunt who welcomed me into the family, whenever she found something that used to be my mothers she would give it to me. She also gave me quite a bit of jewellery that she had because by then she had inherited all the bits and pieces from her older sister and she gave me all sorts of things because my mother loved jewellery and so

do I. So that sort of attitude was lovely. My mother had given a ring to my sister-in-law when she died and said that she wanted her to have it because she didn't have a daughter to give it to. My sister-in-law boxed it up into a beautiful box and wrote a note and sent it to me saying "I want you to have this because your mother would have given it to you". That is the kind of family that are my natural family.

Ethan     With my father, neither of us have failed to recognise each other's birthdays, there is always a phone call or a gift or some such thing. The same goes for Christmas. I have spent two Christmas's with him. I guess there is an expectation, I had this discussion with my partner about if we were to get married, that's quite possible at some point in the future and yeh, it is important to me, it does have a lot of meaning for me for my father to come out for that and he has actually since made comments over the years and more recently, to the effect that, if I was to get married, he would make the effort to come out. But the obligations aren't there the same with my mother.

Quentin   Certainly I don't feel obliged. Obliged is a fairly strong word, I wouldn't consider myself obliged to do anything and likewise I would hope they are the same. They were invited to my wedding that also provided an opportunity for my birth mother to meet my adoptive mother, which went off reasonably well. I invited them because I wanted them there: it wasn't out of obligation. My reason for going down for their 25th wedding anniversary was because their daughter (my half sister) arranged it, but again it was an invite, it was nothing more than that. I thought it would be nice to go with my older daughter and take her down and get out of the house for a weekend and go away.

Rebecca   No, no obligations. Birthday cards and Christmas cards are the only thing, but there has been no gift exchanges. I've given them a couple of things, that's more from the pleasure in giving it. I do crafty things and I thought that would be a really cool thing to do, I'll make her something because I'd done that for other people. But when I was doing that for her you know, it was really special, it meant a lot more when I was making it. So that was the only thing and she loved it. I've just made her something else. We went out

together and she picked out the frame, so that was a really special day. We don't often do things just the two of us but because her kids have moved away and she doesn't have anyone at home and only one of them is in Auckland, it is going to open up the opportunity for me to do more things like that. But I've never been invited to family gatherings.

Natalie    I do feel a bit obligated because I think the reason I go to see her is because I know how happy it makes her. I don't think she ever got over giving me up and I actually sense that a wee bit and I think I've always sensed it a wee bit and now having had children I could really, I just don't know how they did — she didn't have a choice and I guess in a way that's better because how could you even make that choice. It must have been so hard and I feel that for her and even though I'm an adult now, she was quite needy to see me for a while but now she has her own life happening and she has a grand son, so she isn't so wanting or needing.

Jane    I always felt my first obligation was to my adoptive family. But I knew that I would be disappointing one mother on Christmas day. Christmas was always hard and things were more difficult because my husband had never really got on with Mum and Dad but he felt quite comfortable with my birth parents. We would always try and fit everyone in.

Paige    I don't have any obligations to them. It has changed a lot since I had children. I do send Christmas cards actually, but only to the Grandparents, mainly because they are the generation that do send cards and they have sent the boys Christmas presents, but I don't even send my birth mother a birthday card because I can never remember which day it is, obviously, it is important that she sends me one, but she doesn't give me presents — I don't think we have ever given each other presents unless it was a bottle of champagne or flowers or something like that, with the children it has definitely changed a great deal. She is very into the children and they get sent birthday presents and Christmas presents and Easter eggs and things, but as far as I'm concerned, no.

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Ian    Obligation – we don't do anything for birthdays, Christmas for the children
and I'll get something for her from them. She does assume a Nana role with
the children. My mum is Grandma and my birth mother is Nana, it gives the
children an appreciation of the two different mothers.

Caroline   I always ring my birth mother on mother's day, I don't yeh, I always ring her
for mother's day but I wouldn't send her a card on mother's day. I think it is
reserved for my adoptive mother. But I always send birthday presents; she is
always sending boxes over at Christmas. We are yet to spend a Christmas
together cause she is all alone and she has never had a family Christmas in her
life, her family is just terrible, gosh she has really had some terrible life
experiences.

Marie    I don't really feel any obligations, I wouldn't call them obligations. It's for me
to be who I am when I'm with them and I am treated no different, the only
person who treats me different is my grandmother, everyone else accepts me
for who I am as my birth mother's daughter. I didn't attend my birth mother's
wedding, but I was invited and at that stage it was still very new and my
grandmother doesn't accept me at all, so as far as she is concerned the day my
birth mother signed me over that was it, there are no rights or responsibilities.
I didn't want to take that away from my birth mother's day. I didn't want
people saying, "is that her daughter", so I kept away, I went to the engagement
and the after function a week later though. It disappointed me in a way that I
couldn't be there for her because she wanted me there, but I also was glad I
didn't because she had a fantastic day, she didn't have to answer questions that
she shouldn't have to on her wedding day.

Sandi    Obligation – yes absolutely. I think I feel obligated because I know how
important it is to her. It is really important to her and I'm not great at
keeping in contact and get this "what's happening, where are you, why are
you", so I feel I have to keep that up, whereas with my own family if I went
travelling for six months and didn't write to anyone then they wouldn't think I
wasn't ok, but at the end of six months then "what's going on" you know, but
it wouldn't be a rejection probably, *but with her its like I'm rejecting her if I*

*don't nurture the relationship continuously.* I see them as kind of like extended family. It carries obligation with it and a friend doesn't as I see it. But they're not family, not by a long shot to me. My family is who I grew up with to me. Who I would call upon for anything, I wouldn't call upon her for anything. We are just different in our outlook about things.

Eddie        No I don't think of it as obligation. But I do like to keep in touch anyway because obviously I like them or I wouldn't.

Michelle     Obligations – yes, more that they put that on to me, especially my birth father's family really. Attendance at things and they are drama Kings and Queens really. I don't really understand why they don't get that I'm nothing to do with their historic battles. I try to stay "Switzerland" and keep my opinions to myself, but also, I am the only one that keeps in touch with all of them. There is usually someone not speaking to someone else all the time, so they like to blah, blah to me. Sometimes I've seriously considered just walking away from them all because I can't be bothered. I didn't grow up in a family like that and I can't relate to it.

## PASSING IT ON: KEEPSAKES AND HEIRLOOMS

Inheritance is often an aspect of "family" interpreted as an expectation by some individuals. It is an emotional subject that often defines a person's interpretation of how important they are perceived to be within the family network. In post-reunion narratives the idea of an adoptee being included in the Will of their birth parents, grand parents or even other family members has potential ramifications for them and other family members. It also raises questions around the perceived right to inherit from the birth family. The next section discusses the participants' views on their perceived right to inherit from the birth family bearing in mind that adoptees

have no legal rights to inherit from their birth family[22]. Participants were asked, "do you think you are included in the Will?" and "is there an expectation that you should be included in the Will?"

Jane    I don't know if I'm included in the Will. Her ring which she still wears, she has said that it is my ring when she dies, I said to her "don't wait till you die, give it to me now"[23], but I honestly couldn't tell you. Whether I get the ring or not I don't know. When Nana died we all got a piece of jewellery. I think things being passed on actually define you as a family member and I expect to be included in these things, I would feel like the odd one out "the adopted child" otherwise[24].

Rua    I don't imagine I am included, she has her husband and her two boys and I've got my parents so if I was to get an inheritance anywhere it would be from my parents and not from my birth family. It has never been discussed.

Suzanne   On my mother's side the aunt that welcomed me to the family has included me in her Will and has subsequently died and I felt that was testing everyone's feelings about me and they were so good. I actually apologised to my brothers because it meant they got less, each family was given a finite amount to share between how ever many members there were. So my two brothers stood to gain quite an inheritance with just the two of them, but I make it three and even though I love them dearly and I feel they do love me, we have a wonderful relationship, I still feel bad about it and I approached my eldest brother about it and he said, "don't say another word", he said, "if she hadn't done that we were going to split it with you anyway because we felt you were entitled", which was very nice and it made me feel much better. When my

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[22] Refer to chapter two on the history of adoption for an explanation of the Adoption Act 1881 reflecting the legal rights of adoptees to inherit from their birth family. The Adoption Act 1955 changed this clause to exclude any inheritance between the birth family and the child given up for adoption and stated that the child could only inherit from their adoptive family.

[23] Jane expressed that this was said in humour.

[24] Jane's birth strarents are no longer married. Her birth mother met someone else while on business in America and moved there several years ago, her birth father now has another partner as well. This has changed the dynamic of contact and the relationship considerably due to geography and through the discomfort of the marriage breakup.

aunt included me in her Will, my first reaction was total embarrassment. I thought this is going to wreck the relationships I've built because it is going to prove to them that I am just looking for an inheritance which scared me to death because I didn't want tuppence from them. I was after emotional stuff, I wasn't looking for anything material. I was never confident that everyone would have that open attitude and as I say, probably one or two probably thought I was looking for that. I was really hoping for extended family support but really *all I wanted was to meet my mother*[25].

Eddie    I have no idea at all if I'm included in the Will. Nothing has been brought up about it and I don't expect to be included. I'm not looking for that and I don't expect that. Some things, I've thought, its not a nice thought but maybe, when I was working in my last job I was around their area and popped in about once a fortnight to have a coffee with them and I sort of thought that my brothers might think I was being friendly because of that, but I don't think they do. The only thing I'd really like is just some photos, that's all. Memento's, especially I can think of this photo of my birth father's mother, I've always been drawn to that. I put more value on photos and things like that and personal memorabilia than other fancier stuff like a TV or video. If that were gone you would be upset, but if your photos were stolen, that would really devastate me, my value on personal items like that are far more than those other things.

Denise    No I don't think I'm included in my birth mother's Will, but maybe the Grandparents.

Michelle    Yes. My birth mother has told me to pick something special that she can leave me, a memento of some sort, which I haven't done because it's just too morbid. I think if she wants me to have something she should decide what it is and I find out when the time comes. But as for the actual Will, I doubt I am officially included.

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[25] Suzanne broke down at this point and cried. She commented that "this happens sometimes, it is quite extraordinary that there are times when I say something like this and it just gets to me, I don't do it often", sadly her deepest desire to meet her mother would never happen as she had died four years prior to Suzanne finding her birth family.

Sandi
   I wouldn't have a clue whether I am actually included in the Will. She has things set aside for me, there are definitely things in the house for me, and I know that. I feel I am taking something away from her children. I wonder how it must be for her daughter, she was the oldest and now she isn't. Now suddenly her Mum's got this girl in her life that she thinks is wonderful.

Ian
   No, I don't know, it wouldn't worry me. I would say when she dies she will include me in the ceremony or something like that. In some way perhaps, with a memento or something like that. Included but maybe not much in the Will or anything like that.

Quentin
   Nothing like that has ever been mentioned and certainly there is no expectation on my behalf that there would be anything like that. I think it would be a bit embarrassing in fact if there were.

Tiare
   They have already included me in things that I didn't expect. I mean I've been included in the family tree, also given a plot of land on an Island that I didn't know about. Was told I can choose to build something there if I want to, but it's kind of like, you know. I've already been told that if my father passes away do you realise you will inherit such and such and I'm like, ok. I'm not really comfortable with that because it is the other siblings that are there and have been there the whole time and here I am coming in and taking a bit of their inheritance. I don't push the issue.

Caroline
   I wasn't included in my birth father's Will because I never heard anything and I am sure I would have been contacted if I was. I was really disappointed about that because I felt there was no recognition. His wife said she would send me something that belonged to him. I just wanted something tangible because all I have is memories. She said she would send me something but she never did. She never actually saw what she had done, she never saw that it was wrong not to. She didn't think I had a right to anything. That was sad, I don't know you are always trying to feel secure in yourself and who you are and it is almost like you have to start again a lot of the time, it was really such

a hard time. I felt like I didn't matter, he was my birth father and you know, I do matter. I have a copy of my birth mother's Will though. She talked about it when I was over there and said, your not getting it all though, she is giving such and such to a charity, that's cool, whatever, I don't even want to talk about it. I said just do what you feel you want to do, I'll find out if you want to give to that charity and that person, that's fine you know.

Sonia       I don't expect anything from her. One day she made a comment to me, we were just joking about a couple of things, and she made a comment about her Will and she said "well you know I'm not going to have any money left over I hope you're not counting on it". We were just joking and it had never entered my mind that I would be getting anything at all from her anyway.

Clare       I would be really surprised if I was included in her Will. If stuff changed, you know there is always the chance that she would leave her husband at some stage. My birth family on my birth mother's side is in our Will (my husband and I) but I wouldn't expect to be in hers. We are in a financially better position even now just being twenty-five/twenty-six than she is in a lot of ways and compared to our parents, my dad, if we died the money would make a much bigger difference to her because both our sets of parents are well established, they have retirement savings and that kind of thing with professional jobs and things.

Natalie      No, I'm not included in my birth mother's, but yes in my birth father's, not that he has any money, but he always tells me that if he wins lotto he would leave it to me. So I would definitely be involved if he won money or if he died yeh, but my birth mother, no I don't think so. I would be a bit uncomfortable if I was, I don't deserve anything there. I don't think my half brothers and sister would like that either. My birth father doesn't really have a family as such[26]. If I was not me, if I was somebody else that he didn't like he wouldn't

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[26] Natalie's birth father never had more children and he considers her his daughter. He never forgets to acknowledge her and her daughter's birthday and usually arrives with presents, flowers or something extravagant. Natalie has had a unique experience in that her birth parents although not together now agreed to meet with her together, this resulted in an opportunity for her to be photographed with both birth parents and she treasures the photo. However, she did not expect that this meeting would ignite

know me, but because I am who I am he is into it. So I guess there is a condition on it, like if I was guy, if I was born a boy and was a bit of a pansy instead of a blokie guy and had a way about me, he wouldn't have anything to do with me. I could be wrong there.

Marilyn    I don't think she will leave me anything in her Will. It's hard to know, a lot of my friends are curious about that. A lot of my friends have been very angry on my behalf especially when I couldn't feel the anger of "how dare she give you a sheep, how dare she not give you a $100,000.00 and say go and buy a house" you know, "how dare she not treat you like everyone else", but that's hard for me because I don't feel like everyone else and I don't know what it would be like if she left money in her Will to me. In a way it is sort of fitting that she give me that weird sheep, you know, somehow, I would feel not obligated but it would feel very sticky, I would feel a lot more stuck or something. If she had given me a house it would be so kind of confusing. My friends don't get it and of course the ones who get it the most are the ones who are adopted. I have a friend who is a birth mother and around the same age as me and she has a really good understanding of it. I can hear what it is like to be them, but the friends who aren't adopted they just think she is just so fucked up, they can't kind of get how incredibly complex it is.

Sometimes she would give me food, she rang me up a few times and said "I've got meat, extra meat and I don't need it, come and get it and you can give it to your cats", I wouldn't, I would chuck it away, I didn't want my cats eating her food, now what is that about? – it's just to, it was just very hard and she would give me things, I'd accept them but I'd never use them, somehow the things from her had a funny feeling to them so if she gave me an inheritance or something it would feel very weird. One thing she did give, she gave me this little music box thing as if I was a child and somehow it did touch me. That seems really appropriate. She bought it for me, but somehow it seems appropriate, it was an appropriate present. Whereas if she did give me money

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old feelings between her birth parents and for a short time they conducted an affair before calling it off and returning to their respective partners. Natalie conveyed how "weird" it was to see her birth mother "gazing lovingly" at her birth father knowing that they were married to other people.

I wouldn't know what to do with it, I'd leave it in the bank and be too scared to use it and would I give it away, I don't think I could even do that. I couldn't eat her food outside of her house. Once while I was there she gave me some soup, there seemed something incredible about getting homemade vegetable soup from my mother, it seemed like such an incredible thing, the idea that it heals you when you are sick and the whole idea that your mother makes you homemade vegetable soup and I had it in this container in my freezer and I had written on it "my mother's soup" and I couldn't drink it. There was something about it and symbolically, but the idea of actually drinking it, I don't think so. Yeh, tainted, its sort of very hard to explain, its not just somebody giving you soup. If I see my Dad and he gives me soup or he gives me something it has a whole different feeling to it, normal.

## SUMMARY

Drawing upon themes of family membership, the mother role, identity, obligations and inheritance, this chapter has presented the thoughts, feelings and observations of the participants in their own words to capture the richness of this information and enable the participants to speak for themselves. Based on the comments presented in this chapter, the next chapter will analyse each theme in conjunction with the question at the centre of this study, ("to what degree does an adoptee immerse into their birth family as a family member?").

# *6. A FAMILY OF FRIENDS*

> We think of ourselves as temporal beings, as coming out of a past and being
> formed by what has gone before us, and of having a connection with the
> future. We are shaped by and shape the world through physical procreation,
> works of craftsmanship and art, friendships, material bequests and spiritual
> legacies, and in many other ways. Our sense of history and continuity,
> extending back into the past and forward into the future, is part of what
> gives meaning to our existence and our works.
>
> (Shanley, 2001:22)

In the last chapter, the participants' thoughts, feelings and observations were presented in their own words to convey how their birth family features in their lives. This chapter will re-visit each theme identified in the previous chapter and explore the content of the interview comments to analyse the similarity and difference in the experiences presented. Whilst the experiences of the participants have been presented in the previous chapter in sequence, the implications of these themes is best discussed in relation to one another rather than isolation. Therefore, the following discussion incorporates an overlap of the themes identified.

## REUNION AND EXPECTATIONS

Until recently the motivating factor for adoptee search was thought to relate to dissatisfaction with the adopted parents (Triseliotis, 1973; Sorosky, Baran & Pannor, 1975; Sobel & Cardiff, 1983). More recent studies have indicated that most adoptees who either search, or enter into reunion with birth relatives have positive relationships with their adoptive family, and the quality of the relationship has no bearing on the search or agreement to reunite (Sachdev, 1989, 1992; Pacheco & Eme, 1993). Moreover search and reunion narratives have established that many adoptees seek information about themselves to gain a sense of biographical completion and physical identity (Carston, 2000, 2001; March, 1995a, 1995b; Andersen, 1989; Campbell &

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Silverman & Patti, 1991; Howe & Feast, 2001; Affleck, 2001; Sobel & Cardiff, 2001; Wrobel, 2004; Gladstone, 1998; Pacheco & Eme, 1993). Few search with the intention to find a substitute parent or second family (Sachdev, 1989) and searching is simply a function of being adopted (Pacheco & Eme, 1993:55).

The participants in this study were no exception to these findings and many stated that they searched or agreed to be identified to their birth family out of curiosity to learn about the "reason for their adoption" and "whom they look like". While these studies have contributed to our knowledge of adoption searches and reunions, this study investigates beyond reunion and the immediate post-reunion period, to explore more fully, the dimensions of the relationship forged.

In Chapter Five a section has been dedicated to the participants' thoughts on how their identity may have changed since reunion. This is an important aspect of adoptee experience and has not been ignored by its absence in this chapter's discussion. Identity is linked to the overall research question, but is not the focus. Instead, it is incorporated into the main body of the discussion generally rather than discussed in isolation.

Personal accounts of adoptees who have met their biological parents suggest that the aftermath of reunion has many variations (Lifton, 1979:101). Some suggest that the completed search is not the end; it is only the beginning of a period of adjustment for the adoptee, adoptive and biological parents (Howe & Feast, 2000:91). As highlighted by Clare, "reunion eliminates the fantasies and mystical secrets that are replaced by the reality of a live person."

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In contrast to Pacheco & Eme's study, which reports 32% of their respondents "principal element of dissatisfaction with the reunion was related to unrealistic expectations" (1993:56), in this study all participants stated their expectations were exceeded because forming a relationship with their birth family was more than they hoped for[1]. The participants entered into reunion anticipating they would have their questions answered, but had low expectations about anything more. This was expressed by Quentin when he said "I was prepared for a meeting, a cup of coffee and a chat about life in general" and Sandi, "my expectations of meeting her were exceeded because now we have a relationship, it was too much to hope for before the meeting". Furthermore, although Ethan also agreed to reunion out of curiosity, having experienced a less than satisfactory adoption, he did not expect to "gain a second family". For Ethan the reunion did result in his birth mother becoming his substitute mother, and he has gained a family he now considers his "primary" family.

The outcome of reunion was unclear at the onset and ongoing contact post-reunion was not planned or anticipated. The participants stated they kept their expectations focussed only on "seeing how the meeting went" and "anything more would be a bonus". This has highlighted that the outcome of reunion and embarking on post-reunion contact cannot be predicted, and therefore preparation in relation to setting boundaries, is difficult to achieve. Thus, emerging long-term experiences of adoptees in post-reunion reveals varying pathways, outcomes and degree of involvement in the birth family that concurs, with short-term post-reunion findings

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[1] Pacheco and Eme's study criteria included adoptees deemed to have "successfully" completed their search for their biological parents between 1985 and 1990. This group included participants who had maintained contact since reunion and those who did not. None were yet experiencing long-term reunion.

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(Lifton, 1979; Pacheco & Eme, 1993; Campbell & Silverman & Patti, 1991; Sachdev, 1992; Affleck & Steed, 2001; Howe & Feast, 2001; March, 1995a, 1995b, 1997; Gladstone, 1998).

Participants were asked if it would have been helpful to have had a guide pre-reunion that highlighted possible outcomes to assist them with setting expectations and boundaries. Most indicated they would not have found it helpful but rather, disappointing if the relationship did not eventuate in the way the guidelines suggested it might. For others, outlining potential outcomes would have been extremely helpful and Ethan goes as far as to say[2], "things went wrong and I take some responsibility for that [in terms of his relationship with his birth mother], but there is a feeling of being let down by the Government, I feel let down by the Government in the first instance for providing an environment in which adoption became an option, and then when an opportunity came to remedy what had been done, there was no support, and it led to an unsatisfactory result".[3] Ethan claims that with information, suggestions for boundary setting and indications about how to negotiate expectations, his problems with his birth mother would never have happened. Unfortunately for the first wave of reunions little was known about expected outcomes, and even less about how best to offer assistance to those involved.[4]
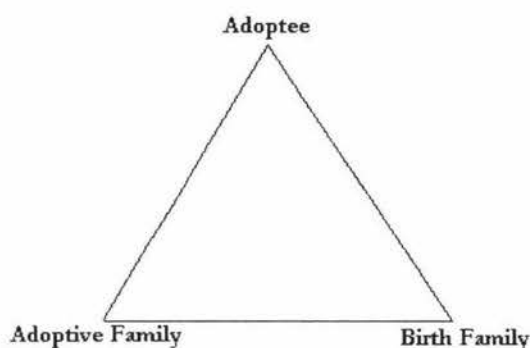
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[2] Ethan's comments in relation to assistance pre-reunion have not been discussed in Chapter Five. This is new material for this chapter and has been included because of the relevance to this particular discussion.

[3] Adoption counselling is mandatory for adoptees when seeking identifying information about birth relatives (see Chapter Two, Looking Back for the Way Forward), but not in the instance that a birth mother seeks identifying information about the adoptee, which is the scenario that occurred for Ethan. Ethan did not receive any form of counselling, information or support from the Department of Social Welfare at any stage when they contacted him to advise his birth mother was seeking contact.

[4] This thesis does not include detailed information pertaining to the current processes relating to reunion assistance by Child Youth and Family. I can only speculate that over time, with more knowledge, the practices may have changed. Further research in this area is warranted to determine if there are differences in the level of satisfaction associated with information sharing and support by Child Youth and Family for all parties involved in reunion.
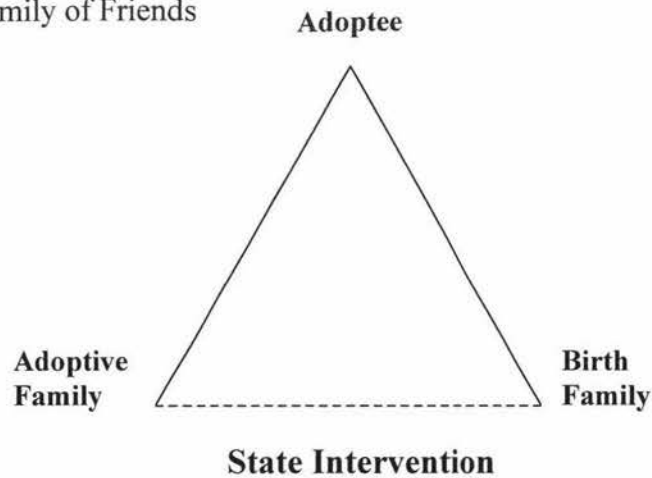
## THE FAMILY STRUCTURE

Much of the literature depicts the relationship between the adoptee, birth parents and adoptive parents as a triangle[5]. It is often referred to as the "adoption triangle" or "adoption triad", (Verrier, 1994; Shannon, 2001; Rockel & Ryburn, 1988; Sorosky, 1978; March, 1995b; Sachdev, 1989). Each point of the triangle represents one member of the triad and the lines between connect them to each other. (Fig. 1).
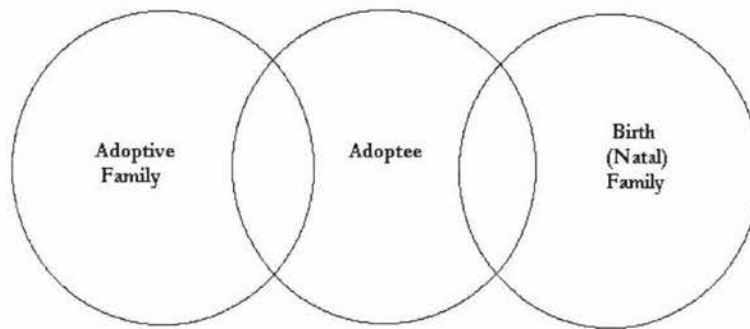


This study has highlighted that in most instances, both pre and post-reunion, the adoptive and birth family are kept separate and operate independently from each other. The relationship between the adoptee and the birth family is biological and between the adoptee and adoptive family, legal and social. However, the relationship between the birth and adoptive family has no biological, social or legal connection, the child was surrendered to the State and then adopted rather than surrendered directly to the adoptive parents. (Fig. 2).

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[5] This diagram has been used to illustrate the adoption relationship generally and does not specifically refer to the relationship before or after reunion.

**Adoptee**

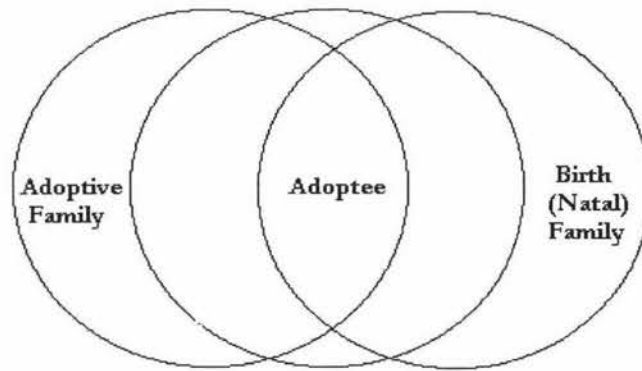**Adoptive Family**

**Birth Family**

**State Intervention**

In phenomenological terms for the participants in this study, the interpretation of their family structure is best depicted on a continuum with their adoptive family at one end, and the birth family at the other, and themselves moving back and forth along it. Apart from Ethan, who locates himself at an extreme towards his birth family, all others locate themselves at varying points along the continuum, but generally more towards their adoptive family. Based on the participants' comments, the following diagram illustrates a more congruent interpretation of the relationship between the three groups. However, there is an exception when the birth and adoptive family maintain contact and this is illustrated in figure 4 on the following page. For most of this group of participants, they see themselves as a central member operating in both families at varying degrees[6]. This diagram represents the adoptees relationship with both families but in most cases excludes any relationship between the adoptive and birth family (Fig. 3).

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[6] For the purposes of the illustration the relationship with adoptive and birth family is shown as equal, however, the degree in which participants may include or exclude their birth and adoptive families varies from participant to participant.

Many participants have introduced their birth family to their adoptive family

through attendance at, in some instances, the participants wedding, or at the initial

reunion, but a relationship was not formed between the birth and adoptive family and

ongoing contact was not pursued. However, for four participants, Ian, Eddie, Caroline

and Paige there has been an ongoing relationship between their adoptive parents and

their birth family. Eddie and Ian's adoptive mothers attend Christmas day

celebrations with the birth family and Paige's adoptive parents attended her birth

mother's husband's funeral. Caroline's birth mother sends her adoptive mother

"mothers day" cards. Her mother has formerly thanked the birth mother for "having"

Caroline, and has stated to Caroline, that she thinks of her (the birth mother) as a

younger sister. For this group of participants the relationship is best illustrated in the

following way where there is an overlap rather than a separation of the adoptive and

birth families. (Fig. 4).

Chapter 6. A Family of Friends



In this diagram the adoptee remains centralised but the two families overlap into each other's domain. This is also indicated by the participants' interpretation of how they believe the birth family sees them; a member of their family. However, because this study has been limited to the adoptee's perspective only, additional research gaining the viewpoint of adoptive and birth family members, may uncover a different conclusion. Notwithstanding these limitations, it should be clarified that the main intent of this study was to elicit the experiences of adoptees in long-term post-reunion that may represent a larger number of adoptees at a similiar stage of post-reunion contact. Perception of how the adoptee believes they feature in the birth relative's family is pertinent for comparing with future birth relative studies.

In light of the participants' comments in most instances, that they are "treated as one of the family", are "included as one of the family", I speculate that the birth family may interpret the adoptees family membership as more towards their end of the continuum than their adoptive family's end. This is illustrated by Paige when she says, "I do think they [her birth family] see them [her own children] as part of the family, probably more so than I do".

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When asked how the participants viewed their birth relatives in terms of family or friends, notably all indicated they were family, some initially said, "good friends" but later changed it to "family". With the exception of Ethan who frames his birth parents as his "only" parents, all others considered their birth parents to be "like extended family", an aunt, uncle, closer than good friends, but not as close as Mum and Dad. Siblings, although there isn't the usual sibling relationship, are still framed as siblings rather than extended family members. These findings are consistent with the studies of Gediman and Brown (1989:157) and Modell, (1997:58). Modell asserts since adoptees and birth parents lack a script for their reunited relationship, they borrow elements from the models of other lasting reciprocal relationships: patronage, friendship, courtship and extended family ties – primarily those between aunt/uncle and niece/nephew (1997:49). Adoptees for example, are more likely to use a friendship model than are the birth parents, the latter being more likely to adopt a "courtship" or "romantic intimacy" model (1997:55). Modell also found that adoptees in long-lasting relationships had "tried-out" the conventional model for a parent-child relationship. Although this met the needs for love, intimacy, obligation and responsibility each participant wanted, the parent-child model did not fit the life stages of the "child" and the "parent," or (often) their generational closeness, or their pasts, which were empty of each other (1997:57). A model that was more acceptable to Modell's participants was one where love and obligation were expressed under certain circumstances, not unconditionally; contact obeyed rules of conduct not waves of emotion; interactions were controlled by a position in a kinship system rather than by an experience of "oneness". This Modell suggests is described as an aunt-like model, in which the birth mother is conceptualised as a "relative in general rather than a parent in particular" (1997:58).

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The participants in this study wanted to differentiate "good friends" by including their birth family as "family" because they felt there was "something else" that connected them just that much closer than a friend. So considering the participants state that the relationship is based on more than friendship, they were asked to apply to their birth family the old saying, "you can choose your friends but not your family" and consider whether they would "choose" a friendship with them. Unexpectedly, even those who feel less than satisfied with their relationship believed they would maintain a friendship if they met under different circumstances and were not related. Once again, this was explained as a "sense of likeness", they expressed "I like them", "I am like them", regardless of difference in values, socio economic status and outlook on life. The feeling of likeness may also then, be interpreted as the basis on which they also choose their friends.

The use of the metaphorical term "blood" and an emphasis on "blood ties" and being "blood related" is suggested as an innate yearning for adoptee search according to Lifton, (1979:6), Howe and Feast, (2001:352) and Sachdev, (1992:56). More than half (eleven participants) in this study used the term "blood" to describe their connection with their birth family[7]. For Natalie "the blood tie is quite important" and "there is a strong tie, a blood tie" she says. Ian stated, "we are close because of blood" and Caroline, in conveying the importance of having her own child said, "she would have the same blood in her veins as I have". Others provided new metaphors to describe their sense of connection such as "there was a black hole behind me and now

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[7] The comments of eight participants who used the term "blood" is included in Chapter five, the comments specifically referring to blood for the additional three participants have not been included because due to the parameters of length for this thesis, unfortunately, not all comments from the transcripts can be included.

it's filled in" (Suzanne) and in referring to the birth family they are "like cloth, the cloth is the blood and bones and DNA and genes – the same cloth", (Marilyn). For all participants the sense of "connection at a genetic level" was clearly important. But, apart from Ethan, all other participants were adamant that their primary family for whom they had a shared history, felt closest to and a sense of obligation to, was their adoptive family. Conversely, when asked, "for you, is blood thicker than water", they replied yes. Some struggled to expand upon how they reconciled how they felt about their adoptive parents as their primary family, but "blood-related" was "special" and "unexplainable" and had a high level of importance. Ian stated that his adoptive family was "blood" too. The metaphor of blood for Ian not only suggested a genetic relationship but also, a social relationship distinguished by care giving, nurturing and love. Blood is a metaphor for a sense of familial closeness that may in fact come from socio-emotional experience rather than genetic relatedness.

Howe and Feast identify that adoptees maintain their primary relationship with their adoptive parents because the parent-child relationships established during childhood have an enduring quality. Children's experiences of being nurtured by caregivers create strong socio-emotional bonds that continue into adulthood. Children raised continuously by their parents also have a shared history, class and culture. These elements favour the continuation of a long-term relationship and go some way towards explaining the post-reunion bias towards maintaining a primary relationship with one's adoptive family (2001:364). However, Howe and Feast go on to acknowledge that the arguments in favour of nurture are not necessarily incompatible with those that recognise the role that nature might play in people's reunion experiences. The drive and motivation to search or agree to reunite is motivated by a

desire to know information and suggests the need to know is strong, but this does not imply a desire for a relationship to result (2001:365).

## ESTABLISHING BOUNDARIES

Working out the roles the birth family is to play in the life of the adoptee can create challenges. Setting expectations about every possible situation at the onset of reunion is not only difficult because of the unpredictability of how it might transpire, but also as participants stated, a potential relationship was not considered prior to reunion. The participants in this study conveyed they just did not think about the possibility of a post-reunion relationship and what that might mean, or how they would treat invitations, obligations and introductions. Therefore expectations about such things as attendance at family gatherings, exchanging birthday, mothers day and Christmas cards and presents, how to introduce each other, and what the adoptees children will call the birth parent, were never considered or discussed. Each situation has required evaluation as and when it arose. For some, this has caused anxiety, such as in the instance of Rua in trying to decide what her new born daughter will call her birth mother, and Marie who prepared two birthday parties for her son so as not to offend either mother, and Jane who always found Christmas day a challenge because "one mother would be disappointed". Time in reunion according to the participants has made the relationship easier, but, every new situation that arises requires a re-defining of the roles and boundaries.

Several studies maintain that successful post-reunion relationships are achieved by setting expectations and "negotiating a comfort zone" soon after the initial meeting (Gediman & Brown, 1991; Gladstone & Westhues 1992; Trinder,

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Feast & Howe, 2004). In this group of adoptees there is a clear indication that over the long term, setting expectations is ongoing and still challenging. Howe and Feast identify a number of mediating factors that may contribute to, or affect the development of post-reunion relationships including: structural factors (for example, time, distance and transport); interactive factors (for example, amount of support from the adoptive family, perceived non-responsiveness of the birth relative); and motivating factors in maintaining contact (for example, a sense of involvement, pleasure, obligation, ambivalence and guilt), (2001:353).

According to Gladstone's study adoptees and birth relatives who were able to establish clear boundaries around their relationships were more likely to develop relationships that were "close". These boundaries were usually defined in terms of the degree of involvement that each party agreed to have in the other's life. Conversely, when negotiations around involvement were not clear, relationships tended to be "distant" or "tense" (1998:189). However, setting boundaries soon after reunion can create longer-term problems as the relationship changes over time, and the boundaries do not change with it. Rebecca commented that soon after reunion "everyone" decided that they [birth relatives and Rebecca] would term each other "family friends". Everyone agreed at the time, however, for Rebecca this is no longer satisfactory. She wants to be acknowledged as her birth mother's daughter, the goal posts have shifted, but she is unable to redefine the boundary. The dilemma Rebecca is facing suggests that setting boundaries soon after reunion is advisable for the interim period, but over time, one person may become less content with the relationship guidelines, and new definitions of the relationship are required to be re-negotiated.

Gladstone speculates that adoptees who pursued their reunions with minimal expectations were better able to accept the differences or idiosyncrasies presented by birth relatives and were able to develop closer relationships. He goes on to say, "in an ironic way, being less invested in the relationship at the outset may reduce the chances of disappointment and increase the likelihood that a positive relationship will result" (1998:189). Trinder, Howe and Feast concur with Gladstone's findings and suggest "some pairings manage to find a comfort zone at an early stage, where both are committed to the reunion at similar levels of intensity, with no real problems of working out their relationship" (2004:43). This can be compared to the way in which Eddie, Sonia, Paige, Quentin and Ian's relationships have evolved. They want very little more from the relationship they have established and are happy with the level of contact and degree of immersion in their birth families; it would seem it has been a match in expectations. However, Trinder, Howe and Feast point out that there is "no blueprint for reaching this comfort zone" (2004:43). Others have indicated they had little expectation at the onset, but this has changed over time for various reasons: because of geography, difference in values and outlook on life, fear of upsetting family members and a perception that the birth mother is emotionally fragile; it is not possible to match expectations. This results in the adoptee remaining "stuck in limbo" between gaining the knowledge that they initially sought and gaining a deeper sense of "closeness" with their birth relatives. Affleck and Steed found that few respondents had actually verbalised their expectations to the other party and various responses to unmet expectations emerged. These they say can be conceptualised in terms of reducing expectations, withdrawing and pathologising the other's behaviour (2001:43). This is conveyed by Denise when she says she would like to have a closer

relationship with her birth mother but she isn't able to tell her this, so she has withdrawn her expectations and accepts the relationship the way it is. Marilyn's belief in the ascribed pathology of her birth mother was indicated when she said "I can't imagine it, I can only imagine you must be incredibly disconnected to be able to do that [give up a second child] in the same way … my friends who aren't adopted think she [the birth mother] is just so fucked up".

## AMBIVALENCE

Ambivalence is a well-documented aspect of adoption in short-term post-reunion (Gladstone, 1998; Gediman & Brown, 1989). Of significance, and unexpected, was the finding that ambivalence in long-term reunion is also apparent. The participants' comments have illuminated the underlying motif of ambivalence throughout each theme. This was conveyed for example by Michelle, when she explained she was not comfortable at birth family gatherings, didn't want to go, but was disappointed and hurt when she was not included at her birth Grandfather's funeral. Jane wanted to be treated like her birth siblings and expected to be called upon to join her siblings at her grandfather's funeral, but states, she is not like them: she is different. Marilyn reflects upon the desire to be accepted into the family by her birth mother, but states that she can "never be a normal family member, like they are" (her siblings). The questions surrounding inheritance highlighted that the adoptees didn't "expect" and would feel "embarrassed" to be included in their birth families' Wills and they "didn't want to take away from other family members", but would like some sort of memento, or would like to be acknowledged in some way. For example, Eddie desired a specific photograph to be passed on to him. Jane, although suggesting

she is different from her birth siblings, believed she was entitled to be included "like everyone else" or she would feel "adopted and different".

Gladstone's findings identified ambivalent relationships were related to limited contact between the adoptee and the birth parent. He concluded that in ambivalent relationships the adoptee wanted considerably more contact but did not feel "close" to their birth parent. In this type of relationship the adoptee interpreted very little change in their contact with the birth parent since reunion. Visiting and written correspondence had occurred only a few times a year in the period immediately following reunion and remained so since. Reflecting a sense of ambivalence around the way in which the relationship was developing, Gladstone's group expressed disappointment with their birth parent's personality or behaviour or confusion over how to reconcile feelings towards birth relatives with feelings towards adoptive family members (1998:184). There are similarities to Gladstone's findings in this study, but in contrast, Michelle's ambivalent relationship is conducted on a weekly basis rather than only a few times a year. She is confused about her birth mother's behaviour and personality and does not desire more contact, but rather wishes to be given the *choice* to *pick and choose* to participate in family gatherings. Marilyn did desire more contact with her birth mother but was very disappointed with her personality and behaviour and found this particularly difficult to deal with. Marilyn is "stuck" in an ambivalent relationship both desiring more and yet, she anticipates, more would not be satisfying and therefore she does not pursue it. Jane's initial contact with her birth parents was intense, almost daily in fact. Since her mother moved to the United States and divorced her birth father, contact has reduced to several times a year. Jane expressed she has "moved on" from the desire to "have

more" from her birth mother, but the relationship is disappointing because she does not "get more".

Many studies have identified distance as a obstacle to maintaining closer ties between the adoptee and their birth family (Gladstone, 1998; Lifton, 1979; Howe & Feast, 2001). Many participants indicated that their relationship would be considerably different if distance was not a key factor in preventing them from getting "closer" to their birth relative. But for others, the distance allowed them to manage the relationship at a pace that suited their needs. Jacinta indicated that she would have liked to forge a closer relationship with her birth mother but distance prevented it. But she commented later in the interview that, "the relationship would be like a strained mother-in-law" if she maintained closer contact. For Ethan geography is an obstacle to forging closer ties. His birth father is located in the United States and Ethan desires to build a closer relationship with him. Their relationship is mainly conducted through email and over the telephone with a face-to-face visit usually only once a year.

**INHERITANCE – OBLIGATIONS**

In light of the difficulties associated with defining the appropriate language in adoption post-reunion, Quentin and Marilyn suggested that "obligation" was not quite the right word to describe how they felt about their relationship with their birth family. However, excluding Ethan, but for all others ,"family obligation" was clearly indicated as a responsibility associated with their adoptive family. Most participants conveyed there was no sense of obligation to their birth family, they chose to exchange cards or gifts or attend gatherings rather than through a sense of duty. In

contrast, for Natalie the obligation to her birth mother arises in her sense of "making her happy". Natalie's obligation stems from not wanting to cause her birth mother any further pain, so maintaining contact she says, has become an obligation. Sandi's sense of obligation is similar: "it is really important to her to know where I am and what's happening, so I feel I have to keep that up" she says. Sandi explains further by saying she believes her birth mother would feel rejected by her if she didn't nurture the relationship. Michelle's obligations relate to "putting up with the behaviour" of the birth family. Having not been raised in a family where there is constant bickering, Michelle finds herself in the middle of some of their family battles. The underlying motif for Natalie, Sandi and Michelle relates to a sense of obligation in maintaining contact. For all three, the problems and challenges experienced do not outweigh their desire to keep the birth family happy through maintaining contact, albeit at an emotional cost to them. However, speculation about why they maintain contact under these conditions would suggest they do receive some sort of satisfaction from the relationship, and this is indicated in other comments in relation to biographical completion, liking them and being like them.

For some, inheritance is construed as an obligation. Finch and Mason's study asserts that inheritance is characterised more by symbolic practices and moral reasoning than materialism (2000:139) and through inheritance the character and quality of family relationships is revealed (2000:2). This interpretation coincides with one participant in this study for which being included in inheritance from her birth family, symbolises her status as a family member. Not to be included for Jane, is to "feel adopted" and "not quite one of them". Since the Adoption Act 1955, adopted

people have no legal rights to their birth families estates[8]. However some people may interpret that long-term post-reunion may result in a moral obligation to include the birth child as an heir. There has been no research into the adoptee's expectation in terms of inheritance from the birth family, but Gediman and Brown have studied the birth mother's view on making her birth child an heir (1989:158). Gediman and Brown present their findings under the heading of "money matters" and discuss how birth mothers ascertain their birth child's wealth, based on the potential inheritance they may expect from their adoptive parents before deciding whether the adult adoptee should be entitled to inherit from their estate (1989:159). Questions surrounding whether the birth mother feels financially responsible is represented on a continuum between "somewhat" and "not at all". Particularly they say, when the adoptee grew up in financially comfortable circumstances, "these birth mothers don't feel that they have any financial responsibility, or that anyone would expect them to have it. It's not an issue that comes to the fore, because he's well taken care of" (1989:159). However, like many aspects of the adoption relationship with birth family, the findings of this study were complex and variable with an element of ambivalence. For some birth mothers, financial gifts or loans were given as a symbol of the parent-child bond, many wanted their birth child to be an heir that represented a maternal connection and responsibility to the adoptee. For others in this study there was no sense of financial responsibility, or desire to include the adoptee in their Will. Believing their adoptive family have made provision for the adoptee was enough to satisfy any sense of responsibility in making sure the adoptee was going "to get something" (1989:161).

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[8] Refer to Chapter Two, Looking Back for the Way Forward, for further details on inheritance rights.

Chapter 6. A Family of Friends

In light of the comments presented by the participants in this study that they "do not expect" to be included, but many desire some sort of keepsake is significant in comparison to Gediman and Brown's birth mother study. Some participants have already been informed that they will inherit, but for most, they did not know whether they were included or not. It was not a subject that had been discussed nor was it a topic they wished to highlight to their birth parents. Through inclusion, Gediman and Brown point out, "inheritance can also mean being cared for" (1989:164). The birth mothers in their study recognise that inheritance can be used to "affirm, even underlie an equality of family position or, to imply (good intentions notwithstanding) that the adoptee is somehow different or apart" (1989:164). It will be some time before the participants in this study will ultimately learn of the decisions their birth parents have made about their legacies, and how the adoptees will feel about and interpret these decisions. At this stage little is known about the outcome of inheritance between adoptees and their birth family. The long term post-reunion position of the adoptee within the birth family is in addition to the redefining of family relationships that include, divorce, re-partnering and step-relationships which makes the potential "inheritance family" complex and variable.

**THE OTHER MOTHER**

As outlined earlier none of the participants in this study initially sought a relationship with their birth mother[9]. Instead, they hoped to gain knowledge pertaining to their origins and have their questions answered. In hindsight, a question relating to why the participants initially maintained contact and how this came about

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[9] Note: as all participants in this study initially made contact with the birth mother (excluding Suzanne whose birth mother had died), and not all participants conduct a relationship with their birth father, this study focuses on the relationship forged with the birth mother in the first instance and the other birth relatives as a secondary aspect.

would have been useful in gaining an understanding as to how the relationship initially evolved. Because there was no intention or expectation to retain contact or forge a relationship, something clearly changed at the point of reunion that resulted in both parties desiring to keep in touch. Also, many of the participants were well aware that contact and then maintaining contact, was upsetting to their adoptive parents, but pursued it regardless.

At this point, it is opportune to comment on the effect of reunion on the adoptive parents. Many of the participants in this study indicated that their adoptive parents were less than happy about their making contact with their birth mother, or their birth mother making contact with them. Others were supportive and understanding, but in most instances it was the adoptive mother who found the adoptee's desire to meet their birth mother threatening. This finding concurs with other studies investigating the reunion experience (Pacheco & Eme, 1993; Waterman, 2003; Kirk, 1981; Melosh, 2002; Wegar, 1997; Modell, 1994, 2002; March, 1995b, Howe & Feast, 2001). Over time the adoptive mother has become more tolerant and in some instances, accepting of the relationship between the adoptee and their birth mother, although for some participants, juggling their obligation to their adoptive mother, and their desire to maintain a relationship with their birth mother is challenging. Natalie elucidates this by saying, "because my adopted mother is very threatened when I see my birth mother, I feel guilty". She does not discuss her relationship or planned visits to her birth mother with her adoptive mother because of the way in which her mother feels about the relationship. However, as already mentioned, others include their adoptive mothers in their birth family gatherings and some get along very well, as friends.

Chapter 6. A Family of Friends

This study has only touched upon the adoptees' perception of how their adoptive family felt about their reunion and post-reunion relationship. It has not gathered first hand experiences from the adoptive family, nor has it delved into the differences between the more accepting adoptive family versus the threatened adoptive family, and how this might affect the adoptee's relationship with their birth family. Further research focussing on the long-term experiences of the adoptive parents who are also in "post-reunion" would uncover whether the perceived threat of the birth family relationship diminishes or changes over time and why some adoptive parents view the post-reunion relationship differently to others. Secondly, it would elucidate whether the position of the adoptive family contributes to, or prevents the adoptee forging a closer tie with the birth family.

This study found that all but one participant maintained a primary relationship with their adoptive mother. Levels of contact between the two mothers differed significantly in favour of the adoptive mother and participants indicated that "mum is mum", "my birth mother is something else". These findings indicate that over the long term adoptees do not pursue the mothering role from the birth mother, nor does it resume for those who believe their adoption interrupted it. Complementing Howe and Feast (2001) and Auth and Zaret's (1986) studies and furthering Gladstone and Westhues (1992) study which discusses the seven types of adopted person-birth relative relationship, this indication suggests the childhood bond and shared history with the adoptive mother is paramount. Howe and Feast point out that by retaining primary contact with the adoptive mother, these findings add weight to the mounting evidence that the affectional bonds formed in childhood (nurture) are strong and long-

lasting, that most adopted people have a need to feel a sense of genetic/genealogical connectedness (nature) and that this does not imply a desire for a second familial relationship (2001:365). Expanding on their findings, Howe and Feast suggest that growing up in a family and having a shared history is important, perhaps "even more important than the blood tie" (2004:90).

Separating the mother and child through adoption can be described as naturalness[10] disrupted. Biologically, the mother is equipped to feed the child providing the essential ingredients including colostrum[11] to sustain the newborn's immune function and development. However, after the Adoption Act 1955, adoptees were generally not breast-fed and the bonding that is said to ensue through this physical contact was discouraged[12] (Else, 1991:88). However, two participants believe their bond was forged before birth and adoption interrupted this bond. Marilyn and Ethan explained they felt they had a relationship with their birth mother intrauterine: "that incredible relationship that we had for nine months" [Marilyn] and "we didn't have a relationship for the first twenty years of my life, but we did have a relationship for the first nine months" [Ethan]. The pre birth relationship described by Ethan and Marilyn is a discursive narrative that represents for them, a relationship that commenced pre-birth. It indicates the connection for them existed prior to reunion and was interrupted by their adoption and resumed through reunion. It is unknown

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[10] The term naturalness is used in this context as defined by the Merriam Webster dictionary "begotton as distinguished from adopted". The term natural and naturalness has been used by the participants in this study to describe their birth mother, "my natural mother" and is therefore an appropriate term to use when referring to the relationship between the adoptee and their birth mother.

[11] Colostrum is the milk secreted for a few days after parturition and characterized by high protein and antibody content (Merriam Webster).

[12] From the 1950s general policy developed that prevented the birth mother from seeing, holding or feeding the child. This practice became wide spread in the 1960s and was based on the theory that it was better for mother and child if cutting the umbilical cord marked the final severence (Else, 1991:89). Bowlby describes this bond between mother and child as an evolutionary behaviour that provides a survival advantage (cited in Cassidy & Shaver, 1999:4).

whether they felt this way prior to reunion or whether reunion and time has ignited their sense of connectivity to their birth mother. For Natalie, the relationship began after birth when her birth mother held and fed her before watching out of the hospital window, as her adoptive parents carried her away. This she says, "formed a bond between us". For others, who were not held, fed or even seen by their birth mothers, the relationship began at reunion.

Adoptees are less likely to discuss or explain their feelings about their birth mother in terms of "bonding" or "attachment", but their desire to know their origins is often discussed by social scientists in this way. The question surrounding the relationship between mother and child pre-birth is a subject on which many researchers have sought answers (Bowlby, 1969; Cassidy & Shaver, 1999; Plomin, 1994; Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall, 1978). Furthermore, Gediman and Brown suggest the mother-fetus bond may well have an impact on the desire for reunion (1989:46). There are no definitive answers to this question, but Howe and Feast sum up their findings by saying "a genetic, evolutionary perspective is a powerful one in all adoption studies, but adoption outcomes also help us to understand the vital, albeit complex and subtle role that environmental and care-giving experiences play in behaviour and development" (2001:366).

None of the participants in this study call their birth mother Mum, instead all refer to her as either "my birth mother" or her first name. Many stated that the term Mum reflects the role in which their adoptive mother has responsibility and generally, they do not require their birth mother to assume this role, even if occasionally, she attempts to. "She is my mother but she isn't" and "they are family, but they're not"

mirrors the birth mother's sentiments in Gediman and Browns study (1989:154). The

problem of what to call whom also reflects the anomaly of the post-reunion

relationships they say, which is often described as both a "yes" and "no" at the same

time (1989:154). The labels and what they represent are ambiguous to the outsider

trying to come to grips with the situation. Adoptees are aware that the confusion

arising from the language used to describe the birth mother is really a

misunderstanding about her status. Marilyn conveys this when she comments that her

friends "don't get it", they expect much more from her birth mother than she does

because as far as they are concerned, she (the birth mother) *is* her mother. Returning

to Rua's dilemma in trying to decide what her daughter should call her birth mother;

Gediman and Brown suggest the issue of what to call each other symbolises the

essential ambiguity of the post-reunion relationship (1989:157). The labels and roles

that identify what is and what isn't appropriate is what makes labelling the birth

mother ambiguous in post-reunion because the labels generally do not fit the situation

or perceived relationship. This in turn, creates anxiety and disrupts the development

of the relationship. This is reflected by the participants' comments when they say

they can't approach certain topics or gain certain resolutions to what they desire from

the relationship. It may also explain why in some instances participants have

commented that their birth mother is either trying to assume a mothering role one

minute and confusingly, not in the next. Interestingly, Rebecca suspects that she will

achieve a closer relationship and find some resolution with her birth mother when she

has a child of her own. She anticipates that it will be her birth mother whom she will

contact in the first instance rather than her adoptive mother. For Rebecca it is a sense

of closer connectivity and a shared experience of childbirth that will "shift" the relationship to a new level of closeness and understanding[13].

This ongoing ambiguity results in the relationship falling somewhere between mother-child and friendship, but oscillating between the two. Gediman and Brown suggest it is a "limbo" state (1989:157), which assumes the relationship is stuck in a transitional place, floating around somewhere in no woman's land. Although I have suggested there is a sense of ambivalence in the relationship, the interaction between the adoptee and their birth family is best described as being in a state of flux, continually moving and being redefined. Many hope to advance the relationship further through additional knowledge, time and eventual resolution or by simply participating in each other's lives.

**SUMMARY**

This chapter has revisited the themes identified in Chapter Five and presented them in conjunction with the available literature delineating similar themes. Because long-term post-reunion is a recent phenomenon there is very little research to draw upon, but this study has sought to expand upon existing research focussing on the shorter post-reunion term to compare the outcomes of adoptee reunion over the life span.

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[13] Following on from Rebecca's comments, it was expected that adoptees may have a desire to have their own children for similar reasons that they chose to search for their birth relatives – a sense of belonging, connectedness and so forth. However, as outlined in Chapter Five, only three participants expressed this as "important". It was noted that many others had a baby as a late teen or young adult and stated that they either had never wanted a baby or thought they probably would at some stage but it was not important to them. Research into adoptees as parents falls outside the parameters of this study but warrants further investigation to compare to the general population.

Chapter 6. A Family of Friends

The question central to this study, ("to what degree does an adoptee immerse into their birth family as a family member?") has no definitive answer. This study has highlighted that there are threads of similarity between experiences, but the complexities of the relationships and extreme variations indicate that there is no guide or blue-print for defining post-reunion relationships. What it does indicate is that the post-reunion map includes many routes and pathways in which to gain insight and understanding of how the birth family features in the adoptees life.

The common feature throughout the participants' comments was one of ambivalence and in some instances, emotional strain. Because long-term adoption reunion is a new phenomenon there is no ideal relationship model which the parties involved can emulate and thus, those involved experience very little societal understanding or support. Despite the challenges, the highs and lows of the relationship both parties in long-term reunion persist, often with a "handle with care" preciousness about it. But, this fragile relationship is seen as worthwhile and worth pursuing and the participants, both those happy with their relationships and those not so happy with certain aspects, all agree, there have been no regrets and the relationship is what it is, whether that be satisfying or not so satisfying.

The following chapter, Chapter Seven sums up the findings presented in this chapter. It provides an overview of what this study contributes to the knowledge about post-reunion adoption and how this, in turn, contributes to understandings about family relatedness in general. Recommendations for further research are highlighted as a means of understanding family relatedness from all perspectives of those involved to prepare for future potential reunion relationships.

# 7. CONCLUSIONS, REFLECTIONS & CONNECTIONS

> Odysseus' erratic journey homeward after the sack of Troy to his own kingdom in Ithaca consumed ten years. There is a sense in which this sea-battered wanderer, who at one point in concealment calls himself 'Nobody,' represents the human journey toward eternity.
>
> (Eiseley, 1970:7)

This study has sought to present the thoughts, observations and experiences of adoptees in their own words to illuminate the relationship forged in post-reunion contact exceeding ten years. The themes discussed arose out of the motifs identified in previous studies and the interview material gathered. These themes were applied to this study to retain a focus that the participants determined was most suited, and best described their post-reunion experience.

Many studies have focussed on the search, reunion and immediate post-reunion phase (Haimes & Timms, 1985; Howe & Feast, 2000, 2001; Bailey & Giddens, 2001; Brodzinsky & Schechter & Henig, 1992; Howarth, 1988; Sobol & Cardiff, 1983; Sanders & Sitterly, 1995; Affleck & Steed, 2000; Pacheco & Eme, 1993; Gladstone, 1998; Gladstone & Westhues, 1992; Campbell & Sliverman & Patti, 1991; Wrobel, 2004; Andersen, 1989; March, 1995a, 1995b, 1997; Carsten, 2001; Bergin, 1995). These studies stress the importance of setting expectations and boundaries between reuniting people to achieve a "successful" and "mutually satisfying" reunion. Bergin speculates that the rule rather than exception is that post-reunion relationships benefit from the passage of time. She suggests that less than one year represents very little time in which to develop a relationship. "After three years

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and more realistically around five or six, significant turning points are reached and a sense of resolution may ensue for both parties" (1995:25).

This study sought to investigate these long-term reunion experiences of adoptees to uncover information about the actual relationships established. It has delved into deeper themes to do with belonging, identity and family relatedness to gain an understanding about the nature of the relationship with biological families. The primary question of this thesis, ("To what degree does an adoptee immerse into their birth family, as a family member?") sought to establish how adoptees make meaning of, and navigate this perceived membership.

Post-reunion relationships are a life-long journey that requires the redefining of each person's needs along the way. Reunited relationships, like all other relationships, vary in nature and experience highs and lows, varying degrees of intensity and change over time. My evidence shows that the relationship forged follows no defined pattern and is unpredictable and variable from the onset. Earlier research has suggested setting expectations prior to reunion results in happier and mutually satisfying relationships. In contrast, there was no evidence in this study that setting or not setting clear expectations had any bearing on the outcome of post-reunion.

Furthermore, there was very little evidence from this study to support Bergin's speculation that over time, five to six years, resolution for adoptees and birth parents is attained. In contrast, the idea that growing a shared history resolves all issues falls short in terms of the experiences presented in this study. The evolution of the

relationship continues on past the death of the birth parents as in Suzanne's experience, and then new dimensions to the relationship with remaining birth family members arise. Every milestone overcome in the adoptee/birth-family kinship process is a building block in the relationship, but the outcome remains unpredictable and variable with no specific guidelines or blue-print to assist in the process. Post-reunion relationships are not unlike any other emotionally significant relationship where both parties are continually negotiating and compromising in an attempt to meet each other's needs, sometimes successfully and sometimes not. Unlike other significant relationships though, adoptee/birth-family relationships are marked by a lack of clear rituals and norms. The taken-for-granted assumptions of everyday family life for social situations are not applicable in the adoptee/birth-family situation. There is much less clarity around the boundaries and terms of the relationship, hence, there is ongoing reassessment of the social interaction between the two parties.

Findings from this study build upon our knowledge of post-reunion outcomes in a number of ways. Firstly, the long-term view that is emerging from this study is one that reveals little change takes place in the level of intimacy or closeness in the relationship over time. This study has elicited similar challenges as outlined in short-term post-reunion studies (Carston, 2000, 2001; March, 1995a, 1995b; Andersen, 1989; Campbell, 1991; Howe and Feast, 2001; Pacheco & Eme, 1993; Affleck & Steed, 2001; Sobel & Cardiff, 2001; Wrobel, 2004; Gladstone, 1998). The key themes of distance and geography and fear of upsetting the other person hinder the ability for some reunited people to develop a closer relationship. For others, where a close relationship has developed, the fear of losing the forged tie remains, so adjustments are made to fortify the relationship, but the path is trodden carefully.

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Secondly, in most instances, adoptees in long-term reunion maintain their adoptive family as their "primary" family and accept the birth family as an extended family that provides a new dimension to their overall family structure. The birth family is perceived as "family" in the absence of a more appropriate term. This is reconciled on the basis of a belief that genetic relatedness has more meaning than non-genetic friendship, despite the fact that in practice non-genetic adoptive family seems to have more meaning and retains stronger affectional bonds. Time in reunion does not significantly change the status or perceived roles of the birth family even if these roles are not defined or communicated between the adoptee and the birth family.

Thirdly, the variable outcomes and degree of satisfaction with the relationship had no bearing on the regularity of contact or level of involvement in the birth family. For some participants, distance was not perceived as an obstacle. In some instances, those who live close to their birth family maintain by choice less contact than others living at greater distances. Degree of perceived immersion into the birth family varied from person to person and had two main dimensions: a sense of acceptance by the birth family as a family member and the desire to *be* a family member. However, the ambivalence of reunited relationships was identified when participants commented, "I am like them", "I'm not the same as them" indicating a sense of not being "fully fledged". Apart from Ethan, participants were clear in their own minds that their strongest "family obligations" remained firmly with their adoptive family; their primary family. To be fully fledged may require a severance of the bond between the adoptee and adoptive family, such as in the instance of Ethan's story or by the death of the adoptive parents. Based on this group of participants, the change

in balance from contact with the birth parents versus the adoptive parents as a result of death is unknown, it has not happened yet, but future research may establish that closer ties and degree of immersion in the birth family changes as a result of death of the adoptive parent (assuming birth parents survive them).

This study has also highlighted that the image of the triangle for describing the relationship between the adoptive, birth parents and adoptee becomes less applicable in post-reunion experiences. Instead, the interlocking circles represent a more congruent depiction with the relationship structure experienced by the adoptees in this study. These images represent scenarios where the birth and adoptive parents have a relationship and when they don't, which highlights that variations exist, but the adoptee remains as the connection between the two families.

Because the social tie of a shared history with the adoptive family remains, the participants indicated they felt little sense of obligation to the birth family, but were acutely aware of not wanting to upset their birth mother. The interpretation of obligation was problematic when it was understood by the participants to mean "something you do, but don't necessarily want to" and was expressed as "no I don't feel obligated, I enjoy doing it". Clarification was required in these instances during the interview process to determine that "obligation" was not necessarily associated with a sense of "unwillingness", but rather related to the social practices of family membership. Participants had developed practices of reciprocity from sending birthday cards to attending funerals and family gatherings. This illustrated their "willing obligation" and the associated social reciprocal processes that were being undertaken.

The participants did not originally intend to pursue a long-term relationship with their birth mother post-reunion, and so this was an unpredictable outcome of their meeting. Some agree that guidance or assistance would have been helpful to experience a smoother and more satisfying relationship, but others believed setting expectations may lead to disappointment. The challenges remain in defining the appropriate roles for both the adoptee and birth mother and this is highlighted by the absence of appropriate language in which to describe these roles. For example, confusion arises when the label of birth mother conflicts with the role associated with it; and although the roles may be defined and agreed within the adoptee/birth mother pair, expectations about these roles from outsiders create added pressure to the relationship.

For some, the resumption of their relationship reflects a biological bond forged pre-birth and exists from a "blood tie" disposition. So, are the ties of blood more compelling than the social ties of a shared history? The participants in this study have shed light on this question by illuminating the importance of a sense of genetic relatedness and identifying with similarities and likeness. However, by retaining a primary relationship with their adoptive parents, they have also highlighted that the social ties forged in childhood, and a shared history, are more important. Nonetheless, it is clear too that biological relatedness with the birth family is more than a set of rediscovered relationships. Adoptees and birth families, in this group of participants, persist with the relationship regardless of the level of satisfaction attained.

Chapter 7. Conclusions, Reflections & Connections

The limitations of this study highlight the opportunity for further investigation into the experiences and perceptions of the wider birth family network and also the adoptive family network to uncover their interpretation of the relationship experience. Additionally, research into current reunion practices within relevant Government Departments is imperative to formulate appropriate strategies in which to provide assistance for the next wave of reunion experiences, that of children conceived with the assistance of gamete or sperm donors and their biological parents. Tracking the experiences of donor children through longitudinal studies will provide insight into how individual relationships evolve over time as well as expanding upon the nature/nurture debate surrounding reunion satisfaction[1].

As the journey of this thesis draws to a close, I feel it is important to leave the last words to the participants and I hope that this paper has been thought-provoking and insightful while going some way toward providing understanding of the labyrinth of post-reunion relationships. Sometimes as theorists it is easy to step back from the emotional content of such personal narratives and categorise and pathologise these experiences into neat and tidy little boxes. The discursive nature of these narratives has illuminated the diverse and complex implications of post-reunion stories that are, as unique as the people who live with it.

Jane           I'd say I've immersed in my birth family less than half – 30% easily. I
               think you always are on the outer and that's how it is. I think if you
               met your natural family as a little person and there was that basic
               nurturing stuff then you could do it, you could easily get into that

---

[1] I would speculate that the emotional investment by donors cannot be compared to a relinquishing birth parent in adoption reunion due to the complexities around the choice to donate, as opposed to the choice or perceived "lack of choice" in adoption. Donors choose to donate tissue and body fluid on the assumption that a child may result and probably don't consider themselves a birth parent.

family more. It is never quite satisfying, you probably get this idea of how it could have been because they [birth siblings] connect so much better than I do, its that whole history thing. It leaves me feeling dissatisfied all the time. Like you are part of the family but not really.

## Appendix A

### BLOOD TIES: The Labyrinth of Family Membership in long term Adoption Reunion

### INFORMATION SHEET

My name is Julee Browning and I am conducting research for my Masters Degree in Social Anthropology at Massey University, Albany campus in Auckland. This research is being undertaken primarily to gain an understanding of how adoptees of European descent born prior to 1976 in closed "stranger" adoptions who have been in regular contact with their birth families for more than ten years identify themselves within the birth family.

You are invited to take part in this research and share your experience of integration into your birth family. The nature of the study will proceed with a private one to one interview with the researcher commencing with an open discussion based on some general questions as a starting point.

It is envisaged that the discussion will take no more than two hours and will be conducted at a mutually agreed place suitable for audio-taping and privacy. You will have the opportunity to review the tape transcripts and comment on the content and by mutual agreement, discuss changes you wish to make. You will have the option of receiving a copy of the Thesis chapter that includes your input. Should you wish to take part in this research, please contact me on 4190 802 or email juleeab@ihug.co.nz.

The discussion details and audio-tapes will remain confidential and names will either be changed to retain anonymity or excluded from the final report. You are guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality at all times. You have the option to have the tape returned to you or destroyed at the completion of the study.

You will have the right to decline to answer any question or request that the tape recorder be turned off. You may withdraw from the project at any time prior to the drafting of the thesis. Should you wish to contact an Adoption Counsellor to discuss any concerns that may arise as a result of participating in the research, a list of voluntary Adoption Counsellors provided by Child, Youth and Family is attached.

As required by Massey University guidelines, two Supervisors have been appointed. Dr Graeme MacRae and Dr Grant Duncan are available for you to contact should you have any questions on 09 414 0800.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee, ALB Protocol 04/022. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact myself, my supervisors or Associate Professor Kerry Chamberlain, Chair, Massey University Campus Human Ethics Committee: Albany, telephone 09 414 0800 extension 9078, email humanethicsalb@massey.ac.nz.

Thank you for your participation.

## BLOOD TIES:
### The labyrinth of family membership in long term adoption reunion

## Interview Question Guide

Preliminary questions:

A)  How long (in years) since reuniting with your birth parents?
B)  What is the frequency of your contact with your birth relatives?
C)  Which of your birth relatives have you and haven't you met?
D)  What is the frequency of contact with birth relatives other than your birth parents?
E)  In terms of geography, how far away does your birth family live from you?
F)  Who found whom?

Questions:

1.  When you located your birth family, did you anticipate gaining a family or a second family?
2.  Reflecting upon your reunion expectations in relation to being part of your birth family, have your expectations been met?
3.  What, if any, obligations do you consider yourself to have to your birth family eg. Do you exchange Christmas presents, birthday presents, attend family gatherings? Did you forsee the inclusion or exclusion of possible siblings, grandparents etc?
4.  How do you envision the role of your birth family in your life? As family, extended family, someone I know, a friend or not really anyone to be included in a meaningful way?
5.  Did you anticipate any consequences for your adoptive family? How has this effected them?
6.  How do you perceive yourself within your birth family? A visiting outsider, family member, daughter/son? How would you prefer it to be?
7.  In relation to family membership, how do you identify yourself? Adopted sibling, birth daughter/son or something else?
8.  In terms of identity, how has reunion changed how you see yourself?
9.  Have you attended birth family (and extended birth family) gatherings, weddings, funerals, Christmas gatherings? How do you feel about participating or not participating in these gatherings?
10. Is it important to you to be publicly acknowledged by your birth family, ie in their last will and testament, in public notices (ie. Family Notices in the NZ Herald)?
11. What is your perception of acceptance into your birth family by extended family members ie. Siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles etc?
12. How are you introduced to people by your birth family and how do you feel about it? How do you introduce your birth family to others? Have you encountered any problems in this area?
13. Are there any other things you would like to tell me about?
14. Do you have any questions?

**Appendix C**

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**BLOOD TIES:**
**The labyrinth of family membership in long term adoption reunion**

**INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

</div>

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I understand I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time prior to the drafting of the thesis.

I agree to provide information to the researcher on the understanding that my name will not be used without my permission.
(The information will be used only for this research and publications arising from this research project).

I wish/do not wish to have my tapes returned to me. (Tapes not returned will be destroyed).

I agree/do not agree to the discussion being audio taped.

I also understand that I have the right to ask for the audio-tape to be turned off at any time during the interview and to decline to answer any particular question.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Signed: _____

Full Name (printed): _____

Date: _____

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