Running head: ONGOING ADOPTION REUNIONS

Expectations and Experiences of Participants in Ongoing Adoption Reunion

Relationships:A Qualitative Study

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Abstract of Contents

This article describes the expectations, responses to unmet expectations, and factors that influence adoption reunion outcomes. Themes derived for interviews with 10 adult adoptees and 10 birth mothers who had each experienced an adoption reunion beyond an initial face-to-face meeting are reported.

Abstract

Three aspects of ongoing adoption reunions were investigated: participants'

expectations, participants' responses to unmet expectations, and factors that

influence the reunion outcome. Participants were 10 adult adoptees[1] and 10 birth

mothers who had each experienced an adoption reunion beyond an initial face-to-

face meeting. A qualitative phenomenological and interactionist approach was

taken. A semi-structured interview was conducted and data analysed thematically.

Numerous themes were identified including expectations regarding the model of

relationship, the definition of mother, and whether or not desires are understood as

rights. Responses to unmet expectations fell into three categories: one party

reducing her expectations, withdrawing, or understanding the other's behaviour as

pathological. Conceptualisation of the reunion as either the acquisition of

something external or as an internal process of personal growth is discussed.

Implications of the findings are presented, including their appropriateness to clinical

work with populations other than adoption reunion participants.

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[1] This paper uses the terms: adoptee to refer to an adopted person, of any age; birth parent to refer to biological parents, either mother or father; and adoptive parents for those who adopted a child. To reduce clumsiness of language, the feminine pronoun is used for adoptees, rather than he or she, his or her. Reference to all adoptees as feminine also protects the confidentiality of participants. Even direct quotes in the Results and Discussion section have been altered, where appropriate, to the feminine form to prevent any identification of participants.

Expectations and Experiences of Participants in Ongoing Adoption Reunion

Relationships: A Qualitative Study

Although adoption of children has existed in some form for thousands of

years it was not until the 1970s and 1980s that concern was expressed about its

long-term consequences. While secrecy was considered to be of utmost

importance in earlier adoption arrangements it was later recognised that lack of

information for adoptees about their original parents prevents satisfactory identity

formation and contributes to the well documented problems of adoptees *(Kirk,*

1964; Sorosky, Baran, & Pannor, 1975). After lobbying by professionals and those

involved in adoption, changes in the law were made that made it legally possible

for adult adoptees and birth parents to obtain both general and identifying

information about the other, and to make contact. These changes have had huge

ramifications, probably the greatest of which is the possibility of reunion. Such a

reunion, while offering the freedom for birth parents and adoptees to find their "lost"

family also carries potential threat whereby "secrets" may be disclosed.

Consequently the thought of reunion evokes a myriad of mixed emotions, and is

driven by a wide diversity of motives.

Adoptees' Motives for Searching

Dissatisfaction with the adoptive parents was originally thought to be a

motivating factor related to adoptees searching *(Sorosky et al., 1975; Triseliotis,*

1973). However, more recent research has found that the vast majority of adoptees

who search have positive relationships with the adoptive parents *(Pacheco & Eme,*

1993) or that the quality of adoptive relationships (either positive or negative) is not

associated with a decision to search *(Sachdev, 1992)*.

In fact, the most common reasons for searching given by adoptees are related to four themes: "Genealogical bewilderment" (adoptees' need for historical connection to resolve identity issues, *Sants, 1964)*, a need for information *(Schechter & Bertocci, 1990),* a need to reduce stigma *(March, 1995)*, and a desire to assure the birth parents of the adoptees' well-being *(Sachdev, 1992).*

Reflecting on his experience as an adoptee, Andersen *(1989)* suggests that adoptees' reasons for searching fall into three broad categories of which searchers are not usually consciously aware. The first category, the search as adventure, is when the adoptee wants to share future experiences and she has a naïve view that it will be easy to continue the severed relationship. The second and third categories are both considered as search as therapy, as they have an underlying therapeutic intent of achieving personal change. Andersen identifies two models of therapeutic search: the medical and psychological trauma model.

Andersen *(1989)* outlines the components of the medical (deficiency) model that are implicit in this understanding of the search. "Adoptees: (1) need to take something into themselves; (2) this something is external; (3) the process is relatively passive and (4) resolution is complete (i.e. cure)" *(p. 626).* In the second therapeutic model, the psychological (trauma) model, the adoptee is considered to have suffered a traumatic experience related to separation from the biological family and "transplantation" to the adoptive family. "The salient characteristics of this model are (1) the adoptee suffers from a psychological trauma; (2) the problem is internal; (3) treatment is an active process; and (4) resolution is incomplete" (Andersen, 1989, p. 630). Implicit in the psychological model is that all searches are therapeutic. The three models of search are not mutually exclusive, but usually one is dominant.

Catalysts for actually initiating the search are commonly related to one of two significant changes in the adoptee's life: Life cycle transition, particularly pregnancy or birth *(Campbell, Silverman, & Patti, 1991),* or a disruptive change in the relationship with the adoptive parents, such as the adoptive parents' death or divorce, or their estrangement from the adoptee *(Kowal & Schilling, 1985).*

Birth Mothers' Motives for Searching

There is far less information in the literature about birth parents' motives for searching than about the motives of adoptees. In a large-scale study Silverman, Campbell, Patti, and Style *(1988)* found that mothers' searches were motivated by a desire to: (a) establish a relationship with the child, (b) gain information about the child's well being, (c) find inner peace or healing, (d) tell the child of their love, and (e) explain the circumstances of the surrender. While some considered searching after a life transition, such as a divorce, most decided to search when they realised that finding the child was a real possibility.

Modell *(1997)* contends that there are few definitive findings in regard to reasons for the search. What has been conclusive is that (a) more birth mothers than birth fathers undertake the search, (b) those birth mothers who do search are aware of the cultural prohibitions on them for searching, and consequently (c) most birth mothers who search seek social support for their quest, often from self-help search groups. Modell's study found that birth mothers were looking for a more permanent attachment than were the adoptees. She asserts that the traditional model of "true" kinship involving blood ties provides some legitimacy to birth mothers for their search.

Although both adoptees and birth mothers have their specific emphases in the reasons for searching, there seems to be a common underlying motivating

factor, namely an underlying desire to reconnect with the person who is, in fact, part of their reality - a part that has been hitherto largely denied, in regard to both its actual existence and to its degree of importance.

Adoption Reunions

Although healing and gains in self-esteem are widely reported in both adoptees and birth mothers *(Campbell et al., 1991; Silverman et al., 1988)* there is no consistent pattern to positive adoption reunion relationships *(Sachdev, 1992).* While some have a difficult start but grow positively, others begin with euphoria and deteriorate. In addition, reunion participants may bring differing expectations regarding the nature of their future relationship.

Since the usual elements of a parental relationship are missing Modell *(1997)* suggests that reunion participants must borrow from other relationship models with which they are familiar. For example, she found that adoptees are more likely to use a friendship model than are the birth parents while birth parents are more likely to adopt a romantic intimacy model. Modell also found that participants of most ongoing relationships had tested the parent-child model. Although it met the needs for acceptance, love and responsibility, the parent-child model did not fit in regard to differences in "parent" and "child" stages, age difference, or their lack of a shared history. A model that was more acceptable to Modell's participants was described as an aunt-like model, in which the birth mother is conceptualised as a "relative in general rather than a parent in particular" *(p. 58).*

The Present Study

Research suggests that the majority of reunion participants consider the event to be a worthwhile experience, regardless of the outcome. This evidence has

been accrued largely from studies with a quantitative focus concerned mainly with

reasons for the search, ratings of the degree of satisfaction with the reunion, and

identification of effects of the reunion. In addition, the vast majority of adoption

research has focused on the perspective of adoptees, almost to the exclusion of

the other parties. The notable exception is Modell's *(1997)* qualitative research,

which used open-ended interviews with adoptees and birth mothers. This work has

brought reunion literature to a new stage in that it acknowledges and begins to

explore the depth and complexity of ongoing adoption reunions. It is the only study

that particularly required that the reunions studied had endured beyond the initial

encounter.

Similar to Modell's *(1997)* work the present study was designed to further

explore the processes involved in adoption reunions and the meanings attached to

the reunion relationship. In particular we sought to elaborate on Sachdev's work

(1992) in which two crucial factors in ongoing reunions were identified: participants'

unrealistic expectations (including the nature of the relationship) and participants'

ability to modify those expectations. A phenomenological and interactionist

approach *(as described by Smith, 1995)* was chosen since it provides considerable

opportunity to develop an understanding of aspects that are significant to the

individual participants. That is, the data obtained from such a study are likely to

fully reflect the complexity and richness of adoption reunion experiences.

While it is recognized that a small proportion of birth fathers participate in

adoption reunions, we sought to build on the existing literature related to reunions

involving birth mothers. Consequently the specific aims of the current study were

to: (a) explore the expectations of adoptees and birth mothers in ongoing adoption

reunions; (b) explore adoptees' and birth mothers' responses to unmet

expectations; and (c) explore factors that influence the reunion outcome.

Method

Participants

Participants were persons of at least 18 years of age who had experienced

an adoption reunion that continued beyond the initial face-to-face meeting.

Theoretical sampling as described by Mason *(1996)* was used to select 20

participants: 10 adoptees and 10 birth mothers, of whom only two were mother-

child dyads. Seventeen females and three males were involved. The adoptees' age

range was from 21 to 41 and the birth mothers' age range was from 42 to 55 years

old. Sixteen participants were involved in active reunion relationships at the time of

the interview; two had had the other party cease contact, but were hoping to

resume; one was about to resume a relationship after a ten year period of no

contact; and one had ceased contact for the present time. The duration of reunion

relationships experienced ranged from nine months to10 years.

Participants were sought through an adoption support agency based in

Perth, Western Australia, via both its discussion groups and its newsletter.

However, participants were not limited to members of that organization.

Materials

A semi-structured interview schedule was used as a guide in an interview of

approximately one hour's duration. The schedule included a demographic section,

a lead question requesting an overview of the reunion relationship, and three other

questions relating to expectations. The interview schedule also provided additional

questions that had been specifically formulated to prompt discussion of the original

four questions, should that be required.

Procedure

After being provided with written information about the study and signing a consent form interviews were conducted at mutually convenient venues, usually the interviewee's home. The interview involved the participants telling their reunion stories, with the schedule available to the interviewer for prompting, if necessary. Events that were particularly meaningful for the participants were explored. Interviews were recorded on audiotape and transcribed verbatim. To control for interviewer effects, all interviews were conducted and transcribed by the first author. Although all care was taken to remain unbiased, it is acknowledged that she is an adoptive mother who fully supports reunions.

Analysis

Theme analysis was undertaken using the method described by Smith *(1995).* The first transcript was studied in detail, many times. Two sets of annotation were developed, each documented in the margins of the transcript, beside the associated text, paragraph by paragraph. The first set of annotations noted anything particularly interesting or significant that was disclosed: summaries, possible associations or connections, or initial interpretations. The second set of annotations identified themes emerging from the first set.

From these two sets of information, the emerging themes were clustered and linked, and major themes identified. A cyclical process was used, with themes altered and refined as analysis proceeded. This process was repeated with the next four transcripts. All the lists of themes were compared to produce a single master list of themes, consolidated and refined from the five interviews. The subsequent transcripts were then analysed, coding the master themes beside the text. Previously unidentified exemplars were also noted. The data for each theme

were gathered together, and each theme explored and examined to obtain a coherent, consistent concept.

Results and Discussion

The results are presented and discussed under the broad headings of expectations and related themes, responses to unmet expectations, and factors that influenced the reunion outcome.

Expectations and Related Themes

The degree to which adoptees and birth parents were aware of their expectations was variable. While some reported that they had explored their expectations prior to reunion, others were not aware of their existence until they were obliged to confront them and make them explicit. Expectations unique to birth mothers are best conceptualised in terms of "reclaiming the child" and "rights", while those pertaining exclusively to adoptees can be described in terms of "wanting a fairy god mother" and "acquiring a missing element". Issues affecting both parties related to "models of relationship" and "definition of mother".

Reclaiming the child. The theme amongst birth mothers of reclaiming the child is exemplified by one comment "there was no way I was going to let him get away again." Several women commented that, although it was not logical, they actually expected a baby. Others had assumed that their children would automatically want to be involved in their lives. They had given little thought to the possibility that the adoptees might not share this desire or that a second mother might present some complications for the young adoptee. This might manifest, for example, in the adoptee having difficulty explaining the relationship to a stranger, a difficulty that the birth mother found shocking and confusing:

I was a mess, definitely. Because I never for a minute

expected her to have that reaction. Because I had this

fantasy, not that I thought it was a fantasy at the time. If she

was my child, she would want to have me in her life. And I

never entertained for a minute that that wouldn't be the case.

In several cases the adoptees showed considerably less interest in the

relationship and the birth mothers often gave greatly and received little during this

period. Thus some birth mothers experienced great personal pain and

demonstrated extreme patience with their respective adoptees, apparently driven

by a strong determination not to be separated again from their children. As one

birth mother said: "I wouldn't have spent five years tip-toeing around anyone else.

So it has been quite difficult. I have worked at not frightening her off, and not

offending her. I just hover around on the edge – better this than nothing."

Rights. While several adoptees spoke of their right as adults to make

choices without pressure from their birth mother, the issue of rights was far more

significant for birth mothers.

Many of the birth mothers had received counselling or had undertaken

personal development courses during which they had addressed issues

concerning the relinquishment of their child. As a result, they had resolved most of

the issues of grief and guilt, and often perceived themselves (probably correctly) as

having been victimized by the societal standards of the time and by the

bureaucratic system. With this change came a strong sense of their rights having

been violated and a determination to reclaim the right of reunion with their child.

This strength and determination probably underpins the persistence of the birth

mothers in reunion relationships in which the adoptee is showing less enthusiasm

and interest. These birth mothers made emphatic statements such as: "I *am* the mother" which seemed to imply the real or rightful mother. One birth mother's comments illustrate this notion:

> I now feel that it is my right. You see I never thought that it
>
> was my right. When she was taken I had no say. I was
>
> treated totally as not a person. But I do now. And that is so
>
> empowering, to think that I do have that right, she is my
>
> daughter. Once she was back, she was back and that was it,
>
> she would never go again. She wouldn't have got away,
>
> because I would have tracked her down. And I think she has
>
> always known that as well.

It would seem likely that reunion relationships would be fraught with difficulties when expectations and desires are expressed in terms of rights. When rights such as these are being claimed, it is easy for the right of one to be experienced by the other as a demand, and for the situation to be perceived as one in which there is little room for negotiation.

In contrast, other birth mothers maintained a strong belief that, in relinquishing the child, they had given up any right to a relationship with the adoptee. A major component of the belief was loyalty and appreciation to the adoptive parents; it would be unfair to rescind the agreement that had been made at the time of the relinquishment. It is notable that these birth mothers actively participated in very satisfactory ongoing reunion relationships and enjoyed good relationships with the respective adoptive parents.

The birth mothers who considered that they had a right to a relationship with the adoptee seemed to regard their rights as primary and as taking precedence

over the rights of others. The birth mothers who considered that they had forgone

any right to a relationship with the child seemed to accord priority to the adoptive

parents and regard their own relationship with the adoptee as secondary. Neither

group of birth mothers conceptualised their role as equal and complementary to

that of the adoptive parents. In addition, neither group appeared to distinguish

between a right to make themselves known and to offer contact and a right to an

ongoing relationship. In both situations, the right of the (adult) adoptees to make

their own choices about these relationships seems to have been overlooked, or at

least, minimized.

     A fairy god mother. Rather naive expectations were held by some of the

adoptees who had wanted a literal "fairy god mother" and had envisaged being

"happy ever after" subsequent to the reunion meeting. A response from one

adoptee was that, at the initial meeting with her birth mother, she had thought "I'm

found; I'm saved; I'm rescued" and her feeling of euphoria had been such that she

perceived the reunion as a "cure all" for all of her life's problems. She later found

that the latter concept was not in fact the case. Similarly, another adoptee reported

that her initial expectations had been quite unrealistic and commented "I was

looking for this kind of fairy godmother who was going to fix everything and she

was going to be perfect. But she wasn't there." Both of these examples fit

Andersen's *(1989)* medical model of the search in that they sought something

external to themselves, to be applied as a cure, in a relatively passive process.

     Acquiring a missing element. The notion of feeling incomplete in their

adoptive situations was frequently expressed by adoptees. Missing elements

included affection and nurturing, siblings or perhaps extended family (aunts,

uncles, grandparents), and especially someone who had physical similarities to the

adoptee. In this sense, regardless of the success of the adoption itself, there were adoptees who sought to literally "fill a gap."

> My (adoptive) mother was very nice. We had a great
>
> childhood, like going on holidays. We did all the groovy
>
> things. But she couldn't show emotion, but I was a child who
>
> really needed that. Whereas my birth mother is a person who
>
> shows that, she is always giving you a kiss and cuddle…. I
>
> got the bit I was looking for, that was missing. I am the lucky
>
> one compared with my brothers (biological children of the
>
> adoptive parents).

Model of relationship. Contrary to the findings of Sachdev *(1992)* and Modell *(1997),* the majority of participants in this study were actively seeking a mother-child relationship at the time of interview: 9 of the 10 birth mothers and 5 of the 10 adoptees. However, consistent with Modell's results was the finding that more birth mothers than adoptees sought a mother-child relationship (Sachdev surveyed adoptees only). Some participants reported that, although they had not explicitly considered the issue, they had originally expected a reunion relationship that had the nature of a friendship, but the relationship had developed to a more intimate mother-child style.

The importance of both participants seeking a similar model of relationship became increasingly apparent throughout the study. However, the issue usually had not been considered, prior to the research interview. Although some adoptees were aware that they wanted or did not want a mother, they had not considered how that would manifest in a relationship. Similarly, although birth mothers made emphatic statements such as "she is my daughter and she belongs in my life,

every bit as much as my other children" or "I am the birth mother, and no one can take that from me; but I am not her mum," no conceptualisation of the model of relationship that would encompass those respective beliefs had been considered.

Definition of mother. Connected to the model of relationship is the definition of mother. Some participants used the word in terms of a strictly biological definition ("I am the mother"); others regarded a mother as the person who had performed the ongoing role, who had "done the mothering." While generally these two functions of mother are performed by the same person, for adoptees, each component has been performed by a different person.

Problems arose when individuals considered only one of the two components as the full definition, and did not take cognizance of the other. A common method of acknowledging the difference between the two components was the use of the terms mother and mum respectively for definitions (1) and (2) above. However, this was not acceptable to everyone.

Amongst adoptees who wanted a mother there were those who wanted to be held, nurtured, loved and adored and others who clearly wanted to be treated and respected as an adult. One adoptee expressed with considerable energy her opinion that birth mothers need to know how mothers of *adult* children act, and that the birth mothers ought to act accordingly.

Range of Experience. It is interesting to note how similar experiences can be perceived very differently. For example, one adoptee disclosed that, once she met her birth family, she wanted "to be sucked in to the family by them" and fortunately the family obliged. She was the center of attention and a lot of affection was displayed by the birth family. Another adoptee used the same terminology to describe the feeling, but in this case the experience caused resentment.

On the weekend that I met them I met all the aunties and uncles, and they said it was so good to meet me and so good to have me back, sort of thing. It was sort of a bit presumptuous, moving a bit quick, trying to suck me into the family…. And we were walking along and my birth mother wanted to hold my hand. I said: I don't want to hold your hand, go away!... It is confusing as hell. Mum, mother, who is that?

Similar differences were observed with regard to nomenclature of extended birth family members. Some adoptees considered the use of terms such as "your brother" (aunt, grandfather, or cousin) to be inappropriate and presumptuous whereas other adoptees welcomed the use of those terms and regarded them as an indication of acceptance of themselves into the family.

Responses to Unmet Expectations

In relationships in which the participants' original expectations were somewhat unrealistic, the individuals usually modified them when the reality of the situation became apparent. Of all the individuals interviewed, few had actually verbalized their expectations to the other party. This is probably not surprising, given the intensity and difficulties of a reunion relationship. Various responses to unmet expectations emerged. These can be conceptualised in terms of reducing expectations, withdrawing, and pathologising the other's behaviour.

One party reduces her expectations. When the two parties had expectations that were different in terms of degree (such as in relation to frequency of phone calls or meeting, intimacy in the relationship, or involvement with extended family), it was common for the person who wanted "more" to manage with "less." This situation is similar to the findings of Modell *(1997)* in that it was the birth mothers

more frequently than the adoptees who decided to constrain themselves in order to enable the relationship to continue.

One party withdraws. If the individual who wanted more either did not notice or was determined to convince the other to meet their needs, and therefore did not reduce the expectations, a theme of withdrawal by the other party emerged. Although the person who withdrew was more often the adoptee, it was sometimes the birth mother. In both cases, demands were not appreciated and tended to work against the person making them.

Pathologise the other's behaviour. This response to unmet expectations was evident in the responses from some birth mothers who wanted more from the relationship that did the adoptee. The ascribed pathology often involved the concept that the adoptee did actually want the same degree of involvement in the relationship as the birth mother wanted, but the adoptee was somehow unable to acknowledge the desire. It was expressed in terms of statements about the adoptee, such as "She wanted me there, but she wasn't ready to be honest and face it." When an adoptee had less time available for her birth mother than the birth mother had planned, the mother commented "There was a huge desire to commit but she would pull back, with the fear of it. So she would restrict the time we had together." Another birth mother attributed the adoptee's reticence in the relationship to the adoptee having experienced an early childhood that was rather socially isolated. The birth mother speculated that the adoptee would treat all people in a distant manner. When pathologising was used in response to unmet expectations, the notion that the adoptee may simply not want a deep, intimate, close relationship with her birth mother was simply not entertained.

As a result of their framework of understanding, these birth mothers tend to respond in a more positive manner to the adoptees' rather discouraging behaviour, believing the behaviour to be part of an archetypal pattern, not as rejecting of the birth mothers personally. This framework also allows the birth mothers some hope that the level of contact and intimacy will increase after the adoptees have ceased the denial and addressed their issues related to adoption.

Factors that Influence the Reunion Outcome

When inviting comment regarding factors which influence the reunion outcome several themes emerged. The preparatory role played by support groups, the pace of the initial phase of the reunion, geographical distance, the role of the adoptive family, the importance of empathy and nature of the adoptee's process were all cited as being important.

The role of support groups and preparation. Sixteen of the 20 participants were associated with an adoption support organization. As well as assisting with the search process, the organization provides counselling, literature related to adoption issues, and professionally facilitated support groups that allow contact between all parties involved in adoption. Many participants mentioned the benefit of the information that they obtained either from literature or group meetings, and the value of the vicarious learning that had occurred. Hearing about the experiences of the other party at the open groups was identified as extremely advantageous, as it engendered understanding and empathy. Individuals who had experienced major difficulties in the reunion relationship found the support and information provided by the counselling and group meetings to be particularly helpful.

While some had attended group sessions prior to the reunion, the majority had joined the support group after the initial meeting or even after cessation of the reunion relationship. There were also several instances cited by people in very satisfactory reunions in which a particular situation was eased by knowledge in regard to that particular issue. For example, a young adoptee who had attended the support group for several years used her knowledge about birth mothers to buffer her hurt and disappointment when her birth mother could not supply her with details of the adoptee's birth. The adoptee acknowledged her disappointment but said that she was enabled to perceive the situation as less of a personal affront (such as "my birth wasn't a very important event to her") as she knew several other birth mothers who were unable to remember the period around the birth and relinquishment, a situation which troubled them greatly.

For most participants, any intentional or self-educative preparation for the reunion was minimal. Of the 14 respondents who described their reunion relationships in an extremely positive manner, nine had almost no preparation prior to the reunion. Furthermore, all four participants who had never had any contact with a support group, nor any counselling in regard to reunion or adoption issues, reported exceptionally successful reunions. These individuals (two adoptees and two birth mothers) had had similar expectations to the other party and had encountered only a few minor problems. It would seem that preparation is not essential for a reunion relationship to be maintained and that when the expectations are similar, the reunion can progress satisfactorily with little outside influence. However, when there are difficulties, the advice and knowledge gained from the support organization was invaluable to those involved. Even in

satisfactory reunions, the knowledge gained was beneficial, assisting people to cope with disappointments.

Pace of initial phase of the reunion. The time period between initial contact and an actual face-to-face meeting was identified as having an impact on the reunion outcome. Several satisfying ongoing relationships had evolved from reunions that had occurred with only a day or two between the initial contact and the meeting. Nevertheless, every person who had a longer period involving phone calls and/or letters prior to a face-to-face meeting, commented on the value of that situation. Letters in particular were valued as a medium whereby both the "hard questions" could be asked and deep emotions could be expressed. The individuals thought that they would have had greater difficulty in addressing these issues in a face-to-face situation and that, having dealt with them prior to meeting, the way was clear for the reunion to develop to the next stage, unfettered. For many, the letters enabled them to establish trust, honesty and intimacy in the relationship, prior to actually meeting.

Interestingly, in all four of the situations in which the reunion relationship had ceased for a period or was currently not in operation, the participants had had no preparation and a face-to-face meeting had occurred almost immediately after initial contact was made.

Geographical distance. Some geographical distance between the place of residence of the adoptee and that of the birth mother was frequently regarded, in retrospect, as a positive factor, because the relationship was forced to develop slowly. Therefore, these participants reported the same benefits (trust, honesty and intimacy in the relationship), as did those who deliberately chose a slower rate of development of the relationship.

Even after the initial meeting, the distance prevented "living in each other's pockets" and perhaps one person feeling overwhelmed. As the relationship developed, however, those who wanted to integrate the other into their everyday lives often found the distance to be increasingly frustrating.

However, distance was not always regarded as a positive factor. One adoptee graphically described her experience.

> I passed out with pain. And I used to get these big knots in
>
> my stomach, on parting particularly. My whole body would
>
> just scream out for her, very painful. I would try any devious
>
> means I could to come to Perth or have her come to me. Yes,
>
> physical closeness was vital and it was depriving to not have
>
> it. And it physically hurt.

After two years of reunion, this particular adoptee had decided to move to live closer to her birth mother, in order to relieve the pain. Those whose birth mother or relinquished child was interstate or overseas also regarded the distance as a great disadvantage and restrictive of the relationship.

Role of adoptive family. The degree of support for the reunion from the adoptive parents was often cited as a factor that influenced the reunion outcome. The families of the birth mothers were usually less threatened by the reunion and had less direct impact on the ongoing relationship.

Adoptees who perceived that they had full support from the adoptive parents were appreciative of that, and reported that their relationship with the adoptive parents was strengthened as a result of the process of reunion. For example, one adoptee and her adoptive mother provided mutual support for each other during the search and especially during the initial phase of the reunion. The adoptee

considered her adoptive mother to be a part of the reunion and it was of paramount importance to her that her birth mother show interest in, and want to meet, her adoptive mother. Fortunately, the birth mother was interested and the reunion relationship proceeded satisfactorily.

In situations in which the adoptive family was not supportive of the reunion, the adoptee was forced into a range of dissatisfying situations: (a) to be dishonest with the adoptive parents in order to avoid conflict and upset, (b) to ignore the adoptive parents' objections and risk estrangement or strained relationships, or (c) to abandon or severely restrict the degree of involvement in the reunion in order to protect the adoptive parents and to maintain harmonious relationships with them. The effect on the adoptees' relationships with their adoptive parents tended to be negative in all of these situations.

Some adoptees expressed a strong need for their adoptive parents' support in relation to the reunion, especially in the early stages. Reassurance from the adoptee sometimes, but not always, enabled the adoptive parents to manage their anxiety for the sake of the adoptee. As stated by one adoptee: "My (adoptive) mother wanted me to be happy. If I wanted to be in a reunion, she would support me."

The role of empathy. Integral to all of these themes and patterns of interaction is the presence or lack of empathy. When one party is determined to have what is perceived as an absolute need and right met, empathy is unlikely to be present. This applies whether the need is to have the relationship continue, to have the relationship operate in the desired style or to be acknowledged as the mother or child of the other.

In reunion relationships that included the birth and adoptive mothers having some contact, it was necessary that they each had some understanding of the other's situation. One birth mother, who was endeavouring to create a friendship with, and to reassure, the anxious adoptive mother, was asked by the adoptive mother how she could possibly have given up a child. This adoptive mother demonstrated no empathy with the birth mother about her torment and grief in regard to the relinquishment. The birth mother felt judged and hurt, but continued to maintain a relationship.

Conceptualisation of reunion as an external or internal process. As the data were analysed, several themes became evident that seemed to relate to Andersen's *(1989)* two models of therapeutic search. Understanding of the reunion as an event that was either a fairly passive acquisition of an external component or as an active, internal process of personal growth emerged as factors that influenced the reunion relationship.

An excellent example of an internal process was provided by an adoptee who, although her birth mother had died, proceeded with a reunion with her aunts, uncles and cousins. The adoptee had gained as much information and material evidence (jewellery, photographs, any memorabilia) as possible about the birth mother from which she had formed a clear conceptualisation of her birth mother. She then "reached inside herself" and made a strong connection: "They have given me enough of my mother to allow me to connect with her." The adoptee "changed forever," gaining a strong sense of self and the ability to regard herself as a worthwhile person.

An example of an external process is provided by another adoptee whose birth mother had also died. In spite of a very rewarding relationship with her birth

sister she was unable to find solace because she had been searching for a mother who would provide the nurturing, affection and acceptance that she had not experienced from her adoptive mother. Consequently she still "feels like an orphan."

Several of the birth mothers had progressed in their conceptualisation of the reunion, from it being understood as a purely external process to it also involving an internal process. The mothers had achieved a state of "having been made whole again" that would exist, regardless of whether the reunion relationship continued. For one birth mother in particular, who was estranged from her child for a period of time, this shift in her understanding of her situation enabled her to cease feeling desperate for, and needy of, the adoptee's physical presence. She no longer endeavoured to demand the adoptee's attention, nor to try to manipulate proceedings. "I have her in my heart, and nothing can take that away." She stated that her desire remained to have an ongoing reunion relationship, but she knew she could survive without it, and survive as a well adjusted, well functioning person.

Summary of Findings

Before summarising the findings it is noted that participants in this study were selected by theoretical sampling and that they are not necessarily representative of the wider population of individuals who have been involved in adoption reunion relationships. It seems probable that people who are experiencing satisfying reunions or who are hopeful of a relationship being resumed, rather than those whose relationships have ceased, are more likely to offer to participate. This same group is also more likely to be accessible through adoption support groups. Nevertheless, the qualitative research design and

analysis methodology of Smith *(1995)* has been applied rigorously and the results can be considered as an authentic basis for practice and research recommendations.

Although presented in discreet sections the themes outlined above interact with each other. Thus it is difficult to make authoritative statements about which are primary and which are secondary. As expected, it was found that if the expectations of each person match those of the other party, the relationship is likely to be highly satisfactory to both participants and to be able to continue. Adoptees seem to have a wider range of expectations than do birth mothers, in regard to the degree of intensity and intimacy in the relationship, the degree of integration into each other's everyday lives and the model of relationship sought. Adoptees who have unrealistic expectations, such as obtaining a perfect fairy god mother, or acquiring a particular missing component, are more vulnerable to disappointment and to having difficult reunion relationships. Similarly, birth mothers who expect to reclaim their child and who consider it as their right to have an ongoing relationship with the adoptee, also experienced difficulties.

Expectations relating to the style of relationship sought are complicated by the lack of an ideal model of relationship and differing definitions of mother. Overall, participants who have expectations that are general rather than specific and who are willing to modify their expectations tend to have more satisfactory reunion relationships. When participants' expectations are incongruent, the difference is often a matter of degree. In these situations, it is usually the person who expects more (more frequently the birth mother) who accommodates by accepting less. If this modification does not occur, the participant who wants less

often feels overwhelmed and withdraws to some extent. It seems that the overall pace of the relationship needs to be set by the person who wants the least.

Several factors were identified as having a positive influence on reunion relationships. These factors are (a) information and vicarious learning gained from a support organization and its group meetings; (b) a slower development of the relationship, using letters and phone calls, prior to the initial face-to-face meeting; (c) support for the reunion relationship from the adoptive family; (d) demonstration of empathy towards the other parties; and (e) the participants' conceptualisation of the reunion process as involving an internal process of personal growth in addition to the acquisition of an external element.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

These findings have implications for both social work and psychological practice. Clearly there is a need to work with reunion participants, both prior to reunion and during ongoing reunions. As well as attention to some of the specific issues, explicit exploration of possible relationship models and of conceptualisations of the reunion process may prove particularly beneficial to reunion participants. It would also be useful for clinicians to promote awareness that, for adoptees, the two components of the definition of mother (physically giving birth and doing the mothering) have each been performed by a different person. Neither role has supremacy, they are complementary. It may be appropriate to examine a possible distinction between a right to make oneself known and to offer contact, and a right to an ongoing relationship. The importance of empathy towards the other parties throughout the process needs to be emphasized.

The reported benefits derived from support group attendance highlight the need to provide such forums where vicarious learning and information sharing can

take place. Although this need is recognised for birth parents and adoptees, the results of this study suggest that adoptive parents would also benefit from such sharing of experience. In the authors' experience the meeting of all members of the adoption circle together is less than satisfactory, but it is clear that adoptive parents need support. Thus the establishment of separate groups for these people is recommended. As well as support groups there is a need for education for all members of the circle in both the preparatory stages and after the reunion when expectations are being modified and mutually satisfactory relationships are being negotiated.

The body of literature relating to ongoing adoption reunions is extremely small. While further research is warranted in all aspects, knowledge of the internal psychological processes that take place in satisfactory reunions would be particularly useful. Qualitative research would be appropriate for gaining insight into the individual meanings ascribed and to the complexity of these difficult relationships. To date, it seems to have been a combination of (a) serendipity in regard to the matching of expectations, (b) the sheer tenacity of participants, and sometimes (c) support from adoption organizations, that has enabled reunion relationships to be forged and maintained. To enhance the probability that future reunions between dislocated parties are successful ongoing research and practical support are of utmost importance.

Conclusions

Adoption reunion relationships are fraught with difficulties because: (a) they are associated with a unique set of beliefs and experiences relating to the adoption, in which each participant brings her own set of expectations to the reunion relationship; (b) there is little societal support for the existence of the

relationship; (c) the relationship evolves from a situation that was usually tainted with a sense of stigma or shame; (d) some level of anxiety is likely to be experienced by extended family members, especially the adoptive family, creating additional pressure on participants; and (e) there is no ideal model of relationship for the participants to emulate. Ongoing adoption reunions are almost unchartered territory and, in many ways, it is amazing that any are maintained.

Despite these difficulties, consistent with previous research, the findings of this study indicate that the desire for connection and relationship between biological parents and children is so great that many ongoing reunion relationships are being forged out of the maze of experiences. As practitioners our task is to provide greater understanding of the processes involved and support for all parties.

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