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The experience of adoptive parents in adoption reunion relationships:

A qualitative study

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Abstract

The issues experienced by adoptive parents when faced with an adult child's searching or reunion relationship with birth families, how adoptive parents place themselves within this process, and factors that influence their experience at this time are explored in a qualitative study of 21 adoptive parents. Themes derived from semi-structured interviews are discussed, and implications for clinical practice and future research are suggested.

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Attitudes towards adoption have varied in line with changing views on other social issues, namely family composition, sexuality, fertility and reproduction. In the 1960s and early 1970s, when adoption rates were at their highest in Australia, adoption was seen as a solution to perceived problems. It 'helped' young mothers to deal with the shame of having a child that they were too young or poor (or both) to look after, and provided a family for couples struggling with childlessness and the desire to parent (Robinson, 2000). The adoption practices of the time ensured privacy and anonymity, in the belief that this would enable the individuals involved to get on with life.

As adoption peaked in Australia, research exploring longitudinal effects of adoption was beginning to surface. Several studies observed that adopted children and adolescents were over-represented in clinical populations (Jaffee & Fanshel, 1970; Raynor, 1980; Schechter, 1960) and that mental health issues were emerging for mothers who had relinquished their babies (Winkler & van Keppel, 1984). As these effects became more widely known and debated, the moral, social and psychological value of adoption was questioned. The rights of adopted people to know their genealogical background and the rights of birth mothers were recognised and fought for. This awareness raising informed legislative changes which made it legally possible for both adult adoptees[1] and birth parents to obtain identifying information about either party and to initiate contact with the other. These legislative changes banished anonymity for all involved in an adoption.   Potential complications arose for birth parents who had not disclosed their earlier

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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.

pregnancy and relinquishment to current partners or immediate family; for adoptees who were not aware that they were adopted; and for adoptive parents who had trusted assurances of privacy.

The most significant and important effect of the revised Act has been to facilitate search and contact between birthparents and adoptees. The literature has been unanimous in its support for search and contact as a means of addressing needs long expressed by both birth mothers and adopted people (Anderson, 1989; Howe & Feast, 2000; Winkler Brown, van Keppel, & Blanchard, 1988). However, very little work has explored the experience of adoptive parents facing their adult child's reunion with a birthparent. While many clinicians and adoption workers have commented on adoptive parents and their 'place' and observed experience in reunions, and their contribution to the reunion process has been noted (e.g. Affleck & Steed, 2001), they have been under-represented in formal research in this area. That is, any discussion of adoption reunion is based on the experience of adoptees and birth mothers, with only occasional reference to adoptive parents.

Motivation for Searching

The research is fairly consistent in its appraisal of adoptees' motivation to seek information and/or reunion with a birthparent. Adoptee motivation can be seen as falling broadly into themes of resolving genealogical bewilderment (Sants, 1964), accessing birth history, and using this information to sort through identity issues. Anderson (1989) challenges the belief that the desire to search reflects pathology or dissatisfaction and argues, using a model of personal growth, that searching acknowledges the influence of being adopted on an adoptee and enables her to move through a process of accessing information required to make sense of this and emerge with adoption issues resolved.

While some adopted people never feel the need to seek out information or make contact, there are also factors that prevent or postpone searching by adoptees, including fear of hurting the adoptive parents, feeling divided and disloyal, fearing an adverse reaction from the birth family, concern that contact may raise old wounds, and fear of the unknown (Anderson, 1989; Campbell, Silverman & Patti, 1991; Sachdev, 1992; Strauss, 1994).

For birthmothers, the primary motivation in accessing information or participating in a reunion is to seek reassurance as to the adoptee's welfare and well-being. Silvermann, Campbell, Patti & Style (1988) conclude that birthmothers' motivation, whether they initiate the search or are sought by the adoptee, is directed toward establishing a relationship with their children, learning of their child's well being, coming to a sense of resolution, letting the child know they were loved, and explaining relinquishment.

The Reunion Process

Consistent with earlier work on adoptive families and adjustment, Affleck & Steed (2001) found that the degree of support from the adoptive family was important to adoptees negotiating their reunion relationships. Adoptees who felt that their adoptive families were supportive of reunion included their adoptive families in the reunion relationship. For example, they allowed their birth and adoptive families to meet and have some form of contact. Adoptees who felt that their adoptive families were not supportive felt compelled to withhold information about the reunion and ignore their adoptive parents' objections. These adoptees proceeded with the reunion at the risk of being estranged by their adoptive family. Alternatively they described abandoning or limiting the reunion process to avoid conflict and protect their adoptive parents. These results largely concur with those of Howe & Feast (2000) who found that the majority of searching adoptees assessed their adoptive parents as being supportive of the decision to search, and those who chose not to tell their parents had experienced adoption as a taboo subject in their family.

They also argue that while the adoptees' intense interest in the birth parent may make the idea of reunion highly emotional for adoptive parents, reunion does not necessarily translate into a long term filial relationship between birth parent and the adopted person.

In an attempt to understand the process of reunion, Moran (1994) posits that the reunion relationship has four emotional stages including paralysis, emotional eruption, mourning and grieving of the various losses inherent and finally, resolution and self acceptance. While she limits her application of the model to adoptees in reunion it is likely to relate both to birthparents and adoptive parents.

In a similar attempt to understand the process of reunion, Modell (1997) explored how adoptees and birthparents make sense of one another in their lives. She raises the notion of fictive and real kinship. In our western culture, biological kinship is seen as superior and real whereas adoptive kinship is regarded as fictive. Thus a primary task for ongoing reunion relationships is the negotiation of an appropriate kinship relationship and associated affective behaviours. It is likely that the kinship relationship defined by reunion participants will effect how adoptive parents in turn experience their role and place.

The Present Study

As previously mentioned, this review of search and reunion research has not detailed studies on adoptive parents because, if it has been done, it is not accessible in the usual literature. Adoptive parents are discussed only in terms of how they might support the search and reunion process for their child. On the other hand, clinicians have recorded adoptive parents' experiences, noting that adoptive parents experience a range of emotions when their adopted child begins to search for information or undertakes reunion. Not surprisingly, adoptive parents often feel like the neglected party in the reunion process with their feelings and needs left unacknowledged (Marburg, 1998; McColm, 1994). They express anxiety about 'losing their child' and question

whether their parent-child relationship will be compromised and can withstand the introduction

of the birthparent (Brodzinsky, 1990; Mann, 1998, 2000; Silverman, Campbell, Patti, & Style,

1994). In addition, adoptive parents express concern that their parenting will be judged and their

worthiness reassessed. They also articulate protective concerns for their child, questioning their

child's readiness for and ability to cope with contact, and wondering how their child's birth

family will treat the adoptee. In addition adoptees experience divided loyalties when embarking

on a search and present concerns about the impact of the search on their adoptive parents (Perls &

Markham, 2000).

Given these observations, the inclusion of adoptive parents as a research focus when

examining adoption reunions is warranted. The whole area of adoption reunions would be better

served with a broader grasp of the needs and experiences of all those effected by reunion

relationships - including adoptive parents. Thus the general aim of this research was to explore

how adoptive parents experienced their adult adopted children's involvement in a search and/or

reunion process. More specifically, we sought to explore: a) the range of issues experienced by

adoptive parents when faced with an adult child's searching or reunion relationship; b) how

adoptive parents place themselves within this process; and (c) factors that influence their

experience at this time.

<div align="center">Method</div>

Participants

Participants included adoptive parents whose adopted children were at least 18 years of age

and had participated in a reunion with at least one of their biological parents. Twenty one

adoptive parents, including one couple, participated in the study. Sixteen adoptive mothers and

five adoptive fathers were involved. Their ages ranged from 50 years through to 83 years with an

average age of 61 years.

Four adoptive parents had one adopted child, 13 had two adopted children, four had three adopted children. Twenty six of these adoptees had participated in an adoption reunion of some duration. Eighteen were involved in some form of ongoing contact with their birth parent/s; six had had an initial face to face meeting with a birth parent and no further contact at the time of interview; for two adoptees, the birth parents had passed away following a period of some contact after an initial meeting. Seventeen reunions were initiated by adult adoptees, and nine by birth parents. Only one adoptee had participated in a reunion with both her birthparents. Adopted children ranged in age from 19 years to 51 years. Six overseas adoptions were represented.

Participants were recruited with the support of an adoption support agency based in Perth, Western Australia, who circulated information about the research to its national newsletter audience. This audience included other adoption support agencies who in turn distributed the notice in their publications.

Materials and Procedure

A semi-structured interview schedule was used as a guide in conducting interviews of between one and two hours duration. The schedule included basic demographic items, focus items relating to how the search and reunion came to be known to the adoptive parent, whether searches were adoptee or birthparent initiated, adoptive parents' involvement in searches, adoptive parents' roles in searches and reunions, and how adoptive parents reacted to and experienced their child's searching and reunion. The schedule also included prompt items which were used as required to facilitate discussion of the original focus items.

Prospective participants were given written information about the study. Those interested in participating discussed the written information and any questions with the interviewer and completed a consent form. Interviews were conducted one-to-one. Participants were asked to share how they experienced their adult adopted child's reunion with their birth parent/s. The

interview schedule was used as required for prompting and maintaining focus. Any details that seemed particularly significant for participants were explored further. Each interview was recorded on audio cassette and transcribed verbatim. After transcription, each tape was erased. All interviewing and transcribing was completed by the first author.

Data Analysis

Using the method detailed by J.A. Smith (1995) and used by Affleck and Steed (2001), theme analysis was carried out. The first transcript was read and studied in detail several times. This resulted in two sets of annotation. One set noted any interesting or seemingly significant comments, summaries of possible connections and early interpretations. The second set extended the first by identifying and naming emergent themes. As clusters of themes emerged, major or core themes were identified. These clustered themes were modified following re-reading and further analysis.

This process was repeated with the next four transcripts. Every cluster of themes was compared and contrasted to produce a distinct list of master themes. This primary phase of the analysis was carried out by the first author and verified by the second author who acted as an objective peer. Then the remaining transcripts were analysed by coding these master themes beside the text. Any previously unidentified instances were also noted. The data for each master theme were gathered and explored to arrive at a coherent and consistent concept. During this process there was frequent discussion between the researchers, ensuring that the participants' material was presented as accurately as possible.

<div align="center">Results and Discussion</div>

Data analysis revealed a number of themes covering a broad range of responses and issues for adoptive parents during a reunion process. Not all themes applied to all participants but there was agreement across the major themes identified. The results are presented and discussed under

these major themes: fear of losing their child, entitlement and role definition, revisiting infertility, responses to the birth mother, lack of recognition of needs, and consciousness/awareness raising of adoption issues. Issues relating to each theme are described and discussed. Then we explore how the process of reunion seems to have unfolded for this group of adoptive parents and the factors that appear to influence their experience at this time.

<u>Fear of losing their child</u>

The most salient theme to emerge related to participants' fear that the adoptee's involvement in reunion would mark the end of their parent-child relationship with the adoptee. Participants feared that the adoptee would reappraise them as inadequate or no longer necessary given the presence of the birth mother. For some participants, this fear manifested itself as concern that the adoptee would be physically or emotionally 'taken' by a birth relative.

While participants reported that this fear had always been present at some level, they all identified search and reunion as its most powerful triggers. As searching and/or reunion became imminent, participants were compelled to confront the "essential fact", as it was described by one participant, that their child was not "really" theirs, thereby illustrating society's conditional acceptance of adoptive parenthood and its relegation to non real or fictive kinship (Modell, 1997). This experience was described by one participant:

> *It was a fear that was always there lurking in the background. The fear that I was never going to be the real mother, and then when J searched, well it was confirmation of this fundamental fact. She is not blood of my blood, flesh of my flesh. I could never be her real mother. I am her mum. But I will never be the one who gave her the breath of life.*

As with this adoptive mother, many other participants also commented that reunion marked the juncture at which their failings and inadequacies as parents would be revealed in the eyes of both the birth mother family and also by their adopted child. Many participants believed that a

possible outcome of search and reunion would be the realisation for the adoptee that the adoptive family was not as interesting, beautiful, wealthy or good as the birth family. They feared that the adoptee might withdraw from the adoptive family.

This was seen as different to being 'taken' by a birth relative. While participants knew that the birthmother would not physically take the adoptee, there was a sense that birth relatives would actively entice the adoptee into believing that the birth family was the adoptee's real family. This closely paralleled adoptive parents' experience early in adoption when they feared that their child's "birth family or welfare authorities would come and take the baby away". This particular anxiety seemed more pronounced for participants where the search was initiated by the birth mother rather than the adoptee.

Some participants described a fundamental change in their relationship and grieving for what their parent-child relationship had been. Somehow the adoptee's searching signalled the 'end of an era' as expressed by this mother:

> *When she started her searching, well for me that marked the end of things. She was no longer the little girl who needed only me and her father, now she needed something else that we could never give her.*

Despite feeling this way, this mother and the majority of participants, withheld expressing their fears and continued in their role of supporting the adoptee. As one participant stated:

> *We would celebrate her joy at each discovery, each new bit of information, and shared her excitement as she got closer to meeting her mother and brother but at night I would cry and shake in fear and despair.*

Where participants did reveal their fear of losing their child, this was expressed as overt resentment and anger directed towards the search process or the birth family rather than overt antagonism toward the adoptee.

This fear of losing their child seemed especially overwhelming for adoptive mothers. It is difficult to know whether this reflects a sense of disconnection by adoptive fathers, a greater difficulty in articulating this loss or whether the fear of losing their child is simply not a primary experience for them. This difference may be explained by the fact that the fathers sampled here adopted during the 1950s and 1960s when fertility issues and parenting concerns were seen as mainly women's business.

Entitlement, Identity as Parent, and Role Definition

Another key theme which seems to connect a number of other themes and experiences is identified here as entitlement (as described by J. Smith, 1997) or the adoptive parents' conviction of their right to parent their adopted child. Reunion prompted participants' questioning of their worthiness and entitlement to have ever parented the adoptee. They reported feeling that their merit as parents, their suitability, was not established and accepted with the completion of their formal assessment (as prospective adoptive parents). Rather, they felt that they were under close and constant scrutiny and that they had less room for erring than non-adoptive parents. Many reported that adoptive parents somehow have to prove their worth and right to parent and that whilst biological parents have permission to be 'good enough', adoptive parents must be close to perfection. One adoptive mother described the following:

> *I felt very much like I was on the stand. She (the birth mother) was going to meet the baby she had given up. I was conscious of wanting her to be pleased with me, that I had done a good job with her baby. Somehow in my mind this became important, I needed her stamp of approval.*

This struggle with entitlement was expressed in a number of ways including feeling a sense of competition with birth parents; feeling threatened; feeling judged as a parent by others, that is, by both non-adoptive parents and the child's birth parents; feeling the need to qualify the parent-

child connection - "she is our child, she is, but there is always a part of her that is about her other mother". The effect of this struggle was a thwarted sense of self efficacy and competence as a parent and, as discussed above, fearing they would lose their child.

In his commentary on adoptive parenting, J. Smith (1997) proposes that entitlement seems to be mediated by a number of factors such as participants' resolution of infertility issues including mourning the loss of the couple's opportunity to raise their biological child, addressing how and whether adoption is the right option for the couple, acknowledgement of, and preparation for how to deal with, the differences between biological and adoptive parenthood; and dealing with societal views toward adoption and parenthood. As noted in the introduction to this discussion virtually all of these factors emerged as themes in the current study. Our data also suggests that it is probably more realistic to think of entitlement in terms of degrees rather than absolutes. Participants revealed the dual experience of feeling the adoptee was their child, knowing they were the parent and also knowing that they were not. Many participants regularly qualified this position seemingly for themselves as much as others. For example, one participant stated: "I am her mum, I was there for everything, always will be, but I am not her mother and that will always be there too''. Such comments suggest that entitlement merges with adoptive parents' identity as a parent. While entitlement can be seen as a preceding and a necessary factor for identity as a parent, search and reunion prompt a review of these issues.

For some parents the notion of identity as a parent was expressed in terms of questions about role definition given that there are no guidelines for how to practically and emotionally handle their child's participation in searching and contact with their birth parents. These participants added that within non-adoptive families there was probably nothing that came close to calling into question core and fundamental ties the way that reunion did in adoptive families, as stated by this adoptive father:

We have friends who tried to help but I don't think they could really understand what the

reunion was about for us. They would say "hey come on, you've raised him from birth, he is

your son, nothing will change that" . But they did not have to accept that M has two sets of

parents, while their kids only have one. So which dad was I, the real one or the other one.

You see that's how people talk, "oh he's looking for his real parents", well what does that

make me and L?

As participants felt their parental identity and role being called into question, they expressed

a sense of being exposed, of entering unknown territory, insecurity and inadequacy. Some

participants described facing the challenge of renegotiating parental identity to accommodate the

physical presence of the birth parent and acknowledged that identity as a parent was an evolving

rather than a static phenomenon.

Revisiting Infertility

For both adoptive fathers and mothers in this sample, the process of reunion rekindled

grief around their infertility. Participants talked about the lack of opportunity to address the

losses of infertility at the time prior to adoption. For many, the practices at the time made it a fait

accompli that following a period of not conceiving a married couple would adopt. One adoptive

mother talked about her pain when her doctor confirmed a miscarriage and in the same meeting

organised the adoption of her daughter. This 76 year old woman recalls that "I never cried for

that baby that was not inside me".

Like this mother, many participants talked about not having grieved for their never-to-be-

born child/ren. Social awareness and mores at the time did not allow discussion of issues such as

childlessness. Participants described needing to either turn solely to their partner or to not

acknowledge their pain at all. Furthermore, at the point of adopting a child, the need to mourn

was seen as uncalled-for because the couple now had a child. This is not dissimilar to the

experience of birth mothers at the time of relinquishment. In their overview of adoption in Australia, Marshall & McDonald (2001, p.100) also note the parallels between the experience of relinquishing mothers and that of many adoptive parents. "While relinquishing mothers suffered in silence their pain and anguish, adoptive parents who had suffered through infertility …were also left to suffer silently the pain and humiliation of this loss."

Interestingly, while reunion and contact consistently elicited participants' grief about their infertility, participants expressed feeling guilty about dwelling on their sadness given that a direct outcome of their infertility was their adopted child. Participants felt that to dwell on their losses could be seen as dissatisfaction with their child and family. In addition, because of their commitment to be emotionally available to their child/ren, the majority of participants felt that while infertility issues were revisited there was little opportunity to resolve them.

The rekindling of reproductive losses experienced by these participants is consistent with earlier adoption literature which cites infertility as a key issue for adoptive parents (Brebner, Sharp & Stone, 1985; Brodzinsky, 1990; Janus, 1997; J. Smith, 1997); adoptive parents "must be free" of the impact of infertility in order to assume identity as parents. However, more realistically, recent work acknowledges that adjusting to infertility is a lifelong process for adoptive parents (Spiers, 1997). Treating infertility as a life span issue recognises that there may be different triggers which can reawaken experiences for adoptive parents, for example, an adoptive child's pregnancy, and as noted in this study, search and reunion.

Responses to the birthmother.

The majority of the current respondents found themselves reassessing their understanding and feelings toward their child's birth parents and in particular the birth mother. Participants remembered experiencing a number of mixed feelings toward the birth mother at adoption including a sense of gratitude and respect, and feeling like they were doing the right thing for the

birth mother. However, as one adoptive mother put it:

I never for once considered how she felt losing her baby. She lost her little boy. I never

thought of it like that and now that I do think of it like that I feel the deepest compassion for

her and I wish I could go back and hold that 16 year old girl. She must have been terrified

and so alone and I just never thought of that.

To acknowledge the pain of the birth parent left some adoptive parents feeling they were

responsible in some way. Adoptive parents found this a difficult experience because they felt that

there was no adequate way to address what occurred. Participants did not expect to feel this

during reunion and found that the experience challenged their personal position and also

broadened their social awareness. Somehow at the interface of their greatest fear - losing their

child and reconnecting with the pain of their lost child (the unborn biological child) - they

connected with the birthmother.

A smaller number of participants found themselves unable to empathise at all with birth

family members during and following reunion. For these participants, reunion re-enforced their

position that adoption was the best solution for all concerned and that there was no need to revisit

the past. Interestingly, the five participants expressing this view experienced reunions which were

initiated by birth parents rather than adoptees. These adoptive parents expressed a great deal of

resentment toward the initiating birth mother, as noted in this adoptive father's comment:

She had no right to come in and turn his world upside down. If she had any sense of what

being a parent was about, she would have waited for him to come to her. But she was selfish,

she pushed him beyond his limits, he was only just 18 and she ruined his final year of school.

Recognition of needs and the right to feel

Both adoptive mothers and fathers expressed feeling that they needed to keep their reactions

and experiences during their child's search and/or reunion guarded and private. Virtually all

participants voiced their fear that the adoptee would become aware of their inner turmoil and that this would be wrong. Reunion was seen as a critical life stage for the adoptee which participants believed required that they put their own needs and reactions secondary. However, clinical evidence and emerging research (Howe & Feast, 2000) reveal that adoptees are indeed sensitive to their adoptive parents' responses and that this in turn affects their own process during reunion.

Participants felt that adoption reunions were talked about as being in the domain of the two parties involved in the direct reunion. For example, any media portrayals of reunions focus on birth family members and the adoptee. Adoptive parents felt divided in their responses to this, claiming to understand that this was indeed the case but also feeling somewhat resentful by the lack of consideration to their needs and their involvement in the life of the adoptee.

Several participants who had accessed counselling and support services during their child's reunion found that the experience contributed to their sense of isolation because the services focussed totally on how best to support the adoptee. One adoptive mother who sought counselling prior to meeting birth family members recalls the sessions as giving her information about her daughter's and the birthmother's probable reactions and how critical it was for her "as the neutral party to remain solid".

Raising consciousness/awareness of adoption practices

Many participants found themselves revisiting their "naïve understanding of what adoption was and what being an adoptive family was going to be like" when they first adopted. As suggested by this adoptive father, many adoptive parents did not understand adoption as being anything other than a form of creating a family. Hence at reunion, when faced with their fear of losing their child, their struggle with entitlement and the reawakening of earlier losses, many adoptive parents experienced a sense of despair and confusion, but also an emerging awareness for some that they were in fact part of something much bigger than they initially believed. That

is, while reprocessing of certain adoption issues continued at a personal level approximately two thirds of our sample also found themselves becoming more cognisant of the contextual factors surrounding adoption practice at the time of adoption and currently.

Some participants suggested that they were ill-prepared, if at all, for the issues they would face as adoptive parents, namely, the issues that emerged as their children negotiated identity in late adolescence and participated in reunion. Robinson (2000, p.162) in her discussion on adoption and loss, states that in more recent times, both birth and adoptive parents consider that they were "duped by a legislative system which guaranteed adoption would provide the answer to their problems but did not address the core psychological issues that adoption could not resolve and which it is now seen to have created". Certainly, this sub-group of participants would concur with this position.

In addition, participants found themselves questioning the messages about adoptive parents and the nature of adoption. As expressed by one mother:

Suddenly I become a stealer of babies. I didn't steal anyone's baby. I don't want to be and I don't deserve to be put in a position where I have to justify my relationship with my daughter. I did nothing wrong but to be cursed with infertility. I am not a bad person and yet I am made to feel that wanting a child and loving her makes me a criminal.

In writing on adoption ethics, Jordan (1997) argues that social discourse on adoptive parenting and the sanctioning of one parent as true or real (the birth parent as the real, natural parent) creates a win or lose contest with significant emotional consequences for adoptees, their adoptive parents and birth parents. As suggested by the mother in the above quote, no one actually wins this contest. Rather, setting up either party as good or bad only maintains their pain.

Generally, however, the majority of participants found themselves becoming more aware of issues to do with relinquishment, the socio-political context in which it occurred, and the personal

issues faced by birth parents. However, the effect of this burgeoning awareness and empathy was not always greater resolution or clarity. In fact, many participants reported greater confusion and dissonance with making sense of their own responses to the reunion process. One participant described feeling "split". She explained that she had experienced a surge of fear and anxiety, strong questioning of her role, contribution and worth as a mother. She had been forced to face issues she had thought she had "finished with". Simultaneously, she found herself feeling compassion and empathy for birth families and facing their needs with as much interest as she faced her own.

Process of reunion for adoptive parents

Most participants in this sample indicated that they expected that their adopted child would one day try to find information about their birth family and possibly seek contact. All but two participants agreed that searching and reunion were important processes for adoptees.

When searching was instigated by the adoptee, the initial reaction for the majority of participants included numbness, apprehension and a sense of needing to be poised for what was about to occur. In response, several parents simply went about assisting the adoptee with the search; that is, helping with research, finding documents and accessing records. Another group of adoptive parents immersed themselves in search and reunion literature in an attempt to "get a grip on what was about to happen". Some participants did both.

The purpose of activity at this stage seemed twofold. First, immersion in the process facilitated understanding of what the adoptee was going through and wanted to achieve from reunion. Second, it seemed important for adoptive parents to find a place for themselves in the search and reunion process. Doing something practical enabled them to feel helpful at a time when many voiced feeling quite despairing and helpless. It provided some context for discussing reunion issues with the adoptee. In addition, participants' 'busy-ness' at this early stage helped

them keep a check on their emotions, as described by this mother:

> *I was stunned, absolutely dumbfounded, when he started pulling out his papers and getting*
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> *forms from the department. I spent a lot of time helping him fill in forms and lodge his*
>
> *application and we talked a lot about it but the period is fuzzy in my mind. I think I was in*
>
> *shock and just operating on auto pilot.*

As the search progressed, adoptive parents seemed to reach a point of becoming quite overwhelmed with their own emotional response. They were conscious of not showing this to the adoptees believing that it was not appropriate to do so and that this would only burden them. However, participants reported that they believed that at some level the adoptees were aware of what was going on, that there were instances of parent and child becoming awkward around one another. One participant stated:

> *In the beginning he would tell us each little bit of news but as it got closer to meeting her, he*
>
> *seemed to pull back and he would start any conversation about her with 'You know you're*
>
> *my folks, don't you. You don't need to worry about H'.*

Such comments then led to adoptive parents trying to minimise their reaction and reassure their child/ren that they "were cool with it". They expressed feeling guilty for creating the concern in their child but felt helpless to deal differently about the situation unfolding before them.

As adoptees' searching proceeded to contact with their birth parents, participants' fear that they were about to lose their child and that their parent-child relationship would change irrevocably escalated. The emotional process noted here for adoptive parents corresponds to Moran's (1994) observation of adoptees' emotional responses during reunion, encompassing paralysis, emotional eruption, and grieving.

Impending contact also heightened adoptive parents' concerns for the adoptees' welfare. In addition, contact also intensified adoptive parents' sense of being in competition with the birth

mother. This was especially so for adoptive parents who also met their child's birth mother.

When reunion relationships proceeded relatively positively for the adoptee, and the adoptive parents felt they were in fact maintaining, not losing, their connection with their child, adoptive parents seemed to move beyond fears of losing the child but continued with their struggles around entitlement. A feature at this time was the experience that they would need to qualify their parental role in order to accommodate their child's emerging relationship with their birth mother. This became a significant difficulty for adoptive parents given that there is no model or guide for accommodating a second set of parents.

Where reunion relationships created distress for the adoptee, adoptive parents articulated anger and resentment at the birth parent. They blamed her for failing their child and where they may have previously reflected increasing empathy toward birth mothers generally, the child's own birth mother was excluded from this. Some participants used their child's experience as evidence that perhaps all birth family members would be as disruptive.

The issue of ongoing contact was negotiated and experienced in relation to the quality of the reunion relationship, the impact on the adoptee and the ongoing involvement and relationship between adoptive parent and adoptee. Even for those participants with the 'best' scenarios - ongoing positive contact between the birth parent and adoptee, and ongoing positive relationship between the adoptive family and adoptee, many of the emotional responses and struggles discussed earlier continued.

The process observed in participants was somewhat different when birthmothers initiated the reunion process. In these instances, adoptive parents initially experienced shock, anger and resentment at the birth mother. They reported greater ambivalence and conflict about the utility of searching and reunion. These parents articulated anger over the timing of the search and felt out of control about what was happening. In addition, they reported greater concerns for their

children's welfare and capacity to handle the search than parents whose children initiated search and reunion. This tension, anger and concern were a feature throughout the reunion process regardless of outcome. These parents seemed to take longer to 'come around' and adjust in some way to their child's reunion.

Several adoptive parents experienced significant qualitative shifts in their relationships with their child. These parents reported that their parent-child relationship was stronger and that despite some ongoing "niggles" parents seemed to feel more comfortable with their child's reunion relationship. As would be expected this was more so when relationships were seen as positive for the adoptee.

In discussing the effect of their experience of search and reunion on their marital relationships, a number of participants felt that their relationship was strengthened by the process of coming together to deal with issues that were emerging. Other participants described being chastised by their partner because of their involvement in, and encouragement of, the search. This seemed more prevalent when participants described differing awareness of adoption issues between themselves and their partner, differing emotional connection between one parent and the searching adoptee, or where participants described disproportionate motivation to adopt. These participants described feeling isolated and under pressure to withhold their responses.

Factors Influencing Reunion Experiences for Adoptive Parents

Adoptee versus birthmother initiated searches. Differences were observed in participants' experience of resentment toward the birth mother and sense of control depending on who initiated the search. Adoptee-initiated searches generally did not shock adoptive parents and were seen as being in the control of the adoptee and adoptive family. In these instances, searching was seen as an internal need for the adoptee and was regarded as very important. When searches were initiated by the birth mother they were regarded as external and imposed.

Intercountry versus local adoptions. Only a small number of overseas adoptions were represented in this sample. Of this group only one can be considered an intercountry adoption. The other five overseas adoptions were British adoptions where the families then migrated to Perth. For the true intercountry adoption (from an Asian country), issues of culture and needing to face the socio-political context that led to the adoptee's abandonment were salient. Whilst these issues had been discussed in the adoptive family, the reality of the adoptee travelling back to Vietnam seemed to intensify a number of feelings for the adoptive mother, namely her concerns for her child's welfare, her fear of losing the child and her sense of being out of control. Similar experiences were also noted for two of the British adoptions when adoptees travelled back to Britain to meet birth relatives.

Participation in counseling. Some degree of participation in counseling or support groups and/or reading adoption literature seemed to help adoptive parents create a framework to understand the reunion process. However, participants did not find that either counseling and support or reading popular adoption literature fully identified or dealt with their needs. While the process of developing a different understanding of adoption and a broader appreciation of the issues involved was seen as beneficial and helpful overall, there was little available which addressed adoptive parents' common experiences during search and reunion.

Adoptees' motivation/expectations and timing of search. It seems that where the adoptee searched at a time of high personal distress and expressed high expectations for contact as an outcome of their search, the adoptive parent found the reunion experience more distressing and felt more helpless. One mother who did not accept the adoptees' need for reunion expressed a great deal of anger with, and concern for, her daughter. Primarily she felt that reunions had been "set up as the answer to all of her problems. It (the reunion) was a disaster and she was left in more of a mess than she began with".

In this instance the adoptive mother felt that her daughter's adoption had been cast as a cause for difficulties she was having at the time she embarked on reunion. She felt she was not emotionally ready for the reunion, a concern voiced by several participants. While these parents continued to offer practical support with the reunion they withheld their hesitations; they experienced concerns for their child's mental health, risk of self-harm, and estrangement.

Outcome of search and reunion relationship. Reunion outcomes did not alter adoptive parents' fear of losing their child, their struggle with entitlement and identity, or their reprocessing of adoption issues. The best predictor of how adoptive parents resolve some of their experiences around reunion was linked to the reunion outcome being what the adoptee wants. That is, regardless of whether the adoptee maintained contact with the birth parent, adoptive parents resolved their concerns and emotional dilemmas more readily if the reunion outcome matched their child's expectations.

Some participants did state that they were relieved when contact did not continue but that this soon shifted to concern for the adoptee and their unmet or frustrated hopes. Where adoptees felt dissatisfied with reunion or where adoptive parents observed the adoptee struggling with the process, they expressed feeling helpless. Many parents reported feeling like they were "stuck on the sidelines watching my kid get pummelled on the oval".

Where a reunion relationship did continue, participants reported ongoing "mini threats" to their sense of self as the adoptee's parents but that this eased as the relationship between birth parent and adoptee seemed to define itself and the adoptee's life returned to normal.

Adoptive parents' relationship with their child. The adoptive parents' relationship with their child seems to be an important determinant of their experiences during reunion. Parents who reported an open and positive relationship with their children seemed to resolve their reunion experiences more readily and with a more intact sense of self. These parents found it easier to

create a role for themselves in the reunion process and seemed more convinced and trusting of their fundamental connection to their children. These relationships were characterised by ongoing openness about adoption issues and for several participants this enabled reunion to be seen "as just another thing we had to deal with".

Life span developments. Another important factor effecting adoptive parents' experiences following initial contact and during ongoing reunion relationships related to the impact of other life span issues. Following the initial search and reunion adoptive parents found themselves having to create some sort of space for the adoptee's 'new' relationship. It was during this time that many participants found themselves feeling more settled, that is, their fears of losing the child had allayed somewhat.

As significant events emerged in the life of the adoptee, such as, marriage or pregnancy, the implications at a practical level of accommodating the birth parent emerged. Adoptive parents described having made cognitive space for the inclusion of the birth parents in their child's life during the earlier stages of the reunion process but that they then had to face practical tasks like considering how to include birth family members in graduations, wedding parties, negotiation of grandparent roles. This often sparked some of the earlier experiences of being threatened by the birth parents' increasing presence in the extended family network and the difficulty of negotiating a role which suited the adoptee and the birth parent and also felt comfortable for the adoptive family. Modell's (1997) work on roles in reunion relationships clarified the need for birth parent and adoptee to negotiate the most appropriate kinship model upon which to develop their relationship. The current findings suggest that the need to develop an appropriate kinship model/role is relevant to adoptive parents as they renegotiate and qualify aspects of their identity as parents, their parent-child relationship and, where relevant, their relationship with the adoptees' birth family.

General Discussion

Before summarising the results several limitations of the study should be noted. The current sample was restricted both in number and composition in that adoptive fathers and intercountry adoptions were under-represented. In addition, a number of participants had been actively involved in adoption counselling. Many were referred by other respondents who had found the process of sharing their story cathartic and validating. It is possible that the study captured the interest of a group of parents who had reached a point of resolution about their child's reunion.

This study cannot be seen as fully describing the experiences of adoptive parents involved in intercountry reunion. While it would seem plausible to expect that intercountry adoption reunions would elicit similar responses from adoptive parents it is probable that there are distinct experiences for these parents. Given that the majority of current adoptions in this state are intercountry, it would be helpful for researchers to explore the reunion experiences of those involved in such adoptions.

A further limitation relates to matching adoptees' experience with their adoptive parents. In the current study, adoptees' responses and actions were presented as seen through the eyes of their adoptive parents. While this is an important part of adoptive parents' experiences during reunion - to try to make sense of and respond to the adoptee - the conclusions drawn by parents cannot be assumed to represent the adoptees' actual experience. A three way study exploring a given reunion from the point of view of birth parents, adoptees and their adoptive parents would also add significantly to our understanding of this experience.

Despite these limitations the qualitative design and theme analysis applied in this exploratory study produced results which can be regarded as a valid base for clinical and research recommendations. While several themes were identified and discussed, they are best considered as interactive and connected elements rather than discrete themes that exist independently.

The major finding of this study is that adoptive parents experience very real and significant psychological responses as their adopted child engages in searching and a reunion relationship. With regard to the range of issues experienced by adoptive parents during an adoptee's search and reunion, the fear of losing the child seems primary and underpins other themes such as entitlement and identity as a parent. This fear of loss - of the child, of their parental role, of their value and identity, and the fear of being cast as less than the birth parent, was experienced by every participant in the sample, as overwhelming. This is likely to reflect the fact that there are no frameworks for negotiating reunions, and that reunions make present the formerly absent birth parent (this cannot be said of current adoption practice but was the case for this sample).

It follows that adoptive parents struggle with entitlement during this search and reunion process. Participants' questioning of their right to claim parental status of their child unreservedly, reflects the social discourse that positions birth parents as natural or real parents. In the face of this it is difficult to create an alternative view of parenting that is regarded as equally natural and real. The effects for adoptive parents included self-doubt, not trusting their parent-child relationship, feeling threatened and in competition with the birth parent, and a re-examination of early adoption-related issues.

The principal adoption-related issue to be revisited was infertility and the loss of a biological child, which many of these adoptive parents had not mourned. Fertility issues were revisited regardless of whether participants felt they had resolved the issue prior to adoption. This response is consistent with current clinical commentary, which maintains that a couple's childlessness is likely to be a lifespan issue revisited as triggers such as reunion emerge.

Adoptive parents observed that the reunion process often prompted an "awareness raising" of adoption-related issues and practices. Participants described becoming aware of contextual factors for adoption practice both recently and at the time they themselves adopted. They noted

greater personal empathy for birth parents and struggled to accommodate their re-worked understanding of adoption issues with their own personal story and how they made sense of reunion.

Clinical implications

Current findings have implications for both clinical intervention with adoptive parents facing reunion and psycho-educational initiatives with pre-adoptive and early adoptive parents. Support services would do well to engage with adoptive parents over and beyond what is suggested in terms of 'how to respond to' and support adoptees and birth parents. That is, adoptive parents need to be engaged as clients in their own right and be provided with opportunities to express and deal with their own emerging experiences.

It would be useful to explore coping strategies that facilitate adoptive parents' resolution of their struggles with entitlement and identity as a parent. This is likely to require both cognitive restructuring and strategies to encourage emotional release. Clinical attention to adoptive parents' development of a framework that reduces the sense of competition with the birth parent would seem relevant and helpful for all parties. Birth and adoptive parents have distinct roles and positions in the life of the adoptee, and an exploration and clarification of those would be helpful.

In terms of the re-emergence of fertility issues, it may be appropriate to re-conceptualise infertility as a lifespan issue. This may effectively give adoptive parents permission to explore their grief around infertility. This seems especially important for parents who adopted twenty or thirty years ago when the pain of infertility was less likely to have been acknowledged, socially or professionally. Current work in the area of infertility and childlessness does treat infertility as a life span issue (Spiers, 1997) hence a younger cohort of adoptive parents might not find this such a salient issue.

It would also be useful for clinicians and other adoption workers to promote adoptive

parents' awareness of search and reunion, its significance to adoptees and birth parents, and the noted impact of reunion for all three parties. Perhaps agencies who are involved in searches could invite adoptive parents to seminars in which these issues are discussed. In addition, while prospective adoptive parents may not need to consider reunion for many years, it would be helpful if the salient issues were flagged early in the parents' preparation.

Conclusions

Popular and professional views on the subject of adoptive parents, their place in reunions and the worth of their experiences range between denying the existence of any experience for adoptive parents and positioning this experience as outside the domain of reunions. To counter this attitude, this study's objective was to explore how adoptive parents made sense of and experienced their adopted children's reunion. The current findings suggest that there are clear psychological processes and emotional responses for adoptive parents as their children proceed with search and reunion. Adoptive parents are confronted with enormous challenges regardless of the outcome or how they feel about their child's right to have contact with the birth family.

While the body of research examining adoption reunions generally is limited, the inclusion of adoptive parents has been almost non-existent. Further studies exploring all aspects of searching and adoption reunions, and including all parties, are to be encouraged. It is only as we understand the experiences of all members of the adoption triangle that we will be able to provide the support that they need.

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