

HIDDEN VOICES:
THE LANGUAGE AND LOSSES OF BIRTHMOTHERS

**HIDDEN VOICES:
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By

Heather Pengilley

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AUTHOR: Heather Pengilley, B.A.(McMaster University), B.S.W. (McMaster
University)

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to listen to the grief experience of birthmothers and the role language plays in the grieving process. First, research and analysis of the distinctive features of birthmothers' grief were briefly summarized. The research suggested that birthmothers experiences of grief are marginalized and disenfranchised. Further, birthmothers experience multiple and ongoing losses because of their relinquishment. To examine how birthmothers' understand and describe their experiences of losing a child through adoption this study conducted a content analysis of four internet sites that facilitate birthmothers' voices. The voices collected suggest that the language used by adoption professionals and mainstream society contribute to a birthmothers' experience of disenfranchised grief. Finally, this paper concluded with future recommendations made by birthmothers. The recommendations included, "respectful adoption language" that included the voices of birthmothers, educations to prevent regret, providing birthmothers with an original registration of live birth, prevention of exploitation and the New South Wales Model.

PROLOGUE

My interest in the study of birthmothers has a personal origin. In January 1995 I discovered I was pregnant and at that moment I became a mother. Sadly my motherhood came with the immediate understanding that I would not parent the little one growing within me. This awareness shattered my spirit and immediately sent me into deep grieving. Despite my sorrow I fully embraced my role as a mother and chose to bond completely with my baby. Each day of my pregnancy I was in awe of my body and the life it was knitting together. Like many new mothers I read books on pregnancy, carefully considered possible names, talked to my baby and celebrated every developmental milestone that we achieved together. For nine months I shared my body, heart and spirit with my child.

In October 1995 two births took place. On a sweat and blood soaked delivery table my son entered the world and two days later I was reborn as a birthmother. The second birth was not celebrated but rather talked about in hushed tones. I learned very quickly that people did not know how to respond to my grief. Some people promised me that “things will get better”, others claimed “you’ll have more children”, while most looked at me sadly and awkwardly failed to find any words. Within weeks of losing my son I began to silence myself because I found people’s well-meaning but inappropriate comments too painful to bear.

For years I have been silent and shared my motherhood and birthmotherhood with only close friends and family that I trust. My silence ended when I was reunited with my son and his family almost two years ago. This reunion was an answer to my

prayers but brought with it many new challenges and blessings. One of the challenges I have faced for eight years is finding a language to communicate my loss and role as a birthmother. I have found that the language used in my internal dialogue and with other birthmothers, to be very different from the language I use with others.

Upon entering the MSW program I planned to write my thesis on a specific issue faced by some birthmothers. However, within weeks of entering the program professors and fellow students began to challenge the language I used to describe adoption, my loss, and my motherhood. The inquisitive and well-meaning comments of my peers left me feeling isolated, misunderstood, and oppressed, so once again I retreated into silence. With the silence came clarity – I realized that my thesis could not argue a single point until it argued for a language that represented and honoured birthmothers and their experiences of loss.

Mid-way through the spring semester I began research on the distinctive features of birthmothers' grief. What I found was a legion of women who would not be silent about their loss and birthmotherhood. As I read through academic articles, online forums and personal testimonies I realized that the way I described adoption and loss was also the way many other birthmothers described adoption and loss. Similarly, testimony after testimony revealed pain from well-meaning statements and “respectful adoption language” that did not reflect them. The candor and wisdom of many birthmothers helped me to better understand my reactions to language and therefore helped to end my silence.

Dedicated to

My mom, who has loved me perfectly through it all, and through beautiful example has taught me how to mother.

My son, who has taught me about the healing power of love, loss, and restoration.

And to my son's mother, who has blessed me with her encouragement and by embracing me into her family.

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INTRODUCTION

Historically, birthparents have been the most neglected party in the adoption triangle, both in the literature and in practice (Logan, 1996). The invisibility of birthparents is not only apparent in literature and practice, but also in our communities. Gritter (2000) explains that most of us know birthmothers but are unaware that we do because we only know them in other roles and capacities. So why do many birthmothers maintain very low profiles and what can we learn by listening to their stories?

The purpose of this paper is to examine the grief experience of birthmothers and the role language plays in the grieving process. It will be argued that the language used by adoption professionals and mainstream society, contribute to a birthmothers' experience of disenfranchised grief. Further, this paper explores the language used by birthmothers to express their birthmotherhood and unique grief. For example, throughout this paper I will refer to birthmothers as "women who have lost their children through adoption". I use this expression because it is the language used by birthmothers (and this is part of my language as well) to "resist" traditional adoption language that is based upon the myths of choice and 'child as gift'. As well, this expression reflects that a birthmother's relinquishment is not a one-time act but rather an ongoing process.

To accomplish the goals of this paper some relevant bodies of literature are reviewed. First, research and analysis of the distinctive features of birthmothers' grief are briefly summarized. Second, some conceptual ideas about language and 'self-

naming' are elaborated upon and discussed. Finally, future recommendations will be discussed.

METHODOLOGY

This section of the paper will first discuss the methodological backdrop of a feminist approach applied to the study. Second, how the research was gathered will be identified. Finally, the study's strengths and limitations will be examined.

Radical Feminist Approach

This research project was rooted in a radical feminist methodological framework. I chose to work within this framework for a number of reasons. First, feminist methodology uses a gender based perspective that informs social interactions. Secondly, feminist methodology often challenges traditional knowledge founded on quantitative methods of study (Neuman, 1997). Finally, feminist methodology encourages research that promotes the advancement in women's value and position in society (Neysmith, 1995). Feminist methodology best suited this study because the above assumptions helped value and to facilitate the voices of birthmothers.

Radical feminist O'Brien argues that men become alienated from their seed after copulation while women play the central role of productive and reproductive labour for the gestational period. O'Brien claims that, as a result, men attempt to control and appropriate what they have been alienated from by trying to control women and children under the rule of family and therefore paternity (Knuttila, & Kubik, 2000). A radical feminist approach would therefore support the argument that current adoption language is founded on the patriarchal view of the family and women's fertility. Additionally, a radical feminist approach recognizes and honours the reproductive role and power of

birthmothers. This paper uses a radical feminist perspective to analyse the findings because this study is attempting to facilitate the voices of birthmothers (rather than the dominant voice of Western patriarchal society) and return some control to this disenfranchised group.

This approach also attempts to analyze and reduce power relations based on gender, ability, sexual orientation and class. Instead, feminist methodology attempts to give a voice to the excluded and silenced. Neysmith (1995) explains that feminist research attempts to do this by “incorporating the experiences of a variety of groups who were traditionally excluded”. Because a birthmother’s role in the adoption triad is often one of irrelevance (Gritter, 2000), feminist methodology can help to uncover the silenced voices and roles of birthmothers.

Narrative Approach as a Method of Inquiry

Narrative approach explores the stories one has about their lives and relationships. Further, this approach explores the effects, meaning and context in which one has formed and authored one’s stories (Morgan, 2000). Narrative approach therefore views individuals as the experts of their own lives. In this study, birthmothers’ voices reveal their experiences of loss as lifelong, and disenfranchised. From a narrative perspective this can be understood as an ‘alternative’ story, different from the dominant story of ‘normal’ grief (that is time limited and with limited support from society). This approach fit beautifully with this study because it legitimized the voices and stories of birthmothers

while encouraging birthmothers to be viewed as full status participants in adoption pre and post relinquishment.

Narrative approach asserts that the “person is not the problem, but the problem is the problem” (Morgan, 2000). Morgan (2000) explains that externalization recognizes that problems are constructed in cultural contexts such as power relations of gender, disadvantage, class and race. This study was conducted with a narrative approach because it supported the argument that a birthmothers’ grief is not pathological but rather unique from other forms of grief. For example, in this study many of the women expressed a need to redefine their title. Some preferred the title ‘first mother’, while others preferred ‘lifemother’. According to narrative approach, birthmothers redefine their title as a way to address socially constructed language they experience as problematic.

Another reason that this study used a narrative approach is because it is a non-invasive method of investigation that honours birthmothers by viewing them as sources of wisdom and clarity. Finally, this approach was used because listening to each birthmother describe her loss in her own words challenges the power relations partially responsible for silencing many women who have lost their children to adoption.

Research Gathering

Historically, birthparents have been the most neglected party in the literature written about adoption (Logan, 1996). Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative research project is to identify and honour how birthmothers understand and describe their

experiences of losing a child through adoption. This study sought to accomplish this goal by conducting a content analysis of four internet sites that facilitate birthmothers' voices.

The duration of this study is 10 months (September 2002 to July 2003). During this period of time I visited adoption related sites in hopes of identifying a few that facilitated the stories and voices of birthmothers. In the end I selected lifemothers.com, adoptionforums.com, exiledmothers.com, and voices.com. These sites were chosen because while in the public domain, their content was written by birthmothers for birthmothers. As well, the stated purposes of these sites are to provide support to women who had lost their children. Further, all four sites established that they were not a place for potential adoptive parents to advertise themselves, therefore making these sites a safe place for birthmothers voices to be expressed. Consequently, the dialogues located on these sites were candid and uncensored thoughts of birthmothers at various stages of healing and life. Finally I chose these sites because they boldly addressed the grief associated with, and ambiguous nature of birthmotherhood.

To analyze the voices found on the four selected sites I chose to use content analysis. Babbie (1995) defines this form of analysis as a coding operation where communication (oral, written, or other) is coded or classified according to a conceptual framework. Content analysis is especially well suited to study communication and is often helpful in answering a classic question in communication research: "Who says what, to whom, why, how, and with what effect?" (Babbie, 1995:307).

As I set out to code the testimonies of women I was faced with the decision of focusing on 'depth' or 'specificity' (Babbie, 1995). In the pursuit of 'depth' I chose to

code the ‘latent content’ located on the four birthmothers’ sites. This meant that I sought to identify the underlying meaning and themes discussed by birthmothers versus noting the number of times the word ‘regret’ or ‘loss’ was mentioned. Latent content analysis was employed in an attempt to identify the hidden voices of birthmothers. Community developers Slim and Thompson (1995) argue that there are hidden but important voices in every community. Within the adoption community the voices of birthparents are frequently silenced or denied. They explain,

The collective voice of any community tends towards generalizations, simplifications or half-truths and is dominated by the loudest voices... the community view will tend to concentrate on the concerns of the wealthy, the political elite, and the social and religious leaders. (Slim & Thompson, 1995:5)

It is for this reason that I have chosen to examine only the ‘hidden voices’ of birthmothers. Further, I have used latent content analysis to ensure that a wide range of birthmothers’ voices are heard rather than referring only to a few birthmothers who have professionally published. Slim and Thompson (1995) claim that listening to individual voices “acts as a counterpoint to generalizations” and that individual testimonies reveal the experiences of a hidden group while “countering the bias of those who speak for or ignore them” (Slim and Thompson, 1995:5). This exemplifies the goal of my research – to facilitate the testimonies and experiences of birthmothers while deconstructing mainstream society’s view of, and language for, birthmothers.

To ensure that the method of my analysis and examination of language used within the adoption community was rigorous, I regularly checked evolving birthmother language with my thesis advisor (who is also an adoptive parent) and an adoptive parent

(my son's mother). This rigorous dialogue ensured that the language presented in future considerations honours both adoptive and birthparents.

Strengths and Limitations of Methodology

There are a number of strengths to content analysis. First, this form of analysis enables one to study processes occurring over time (Babbie, 1995). In this study this enabled the author to review correspondence and forums that have taken place over a number of years and through various stages of birthmotherhood.

It is also unobtrusive and rarely has any effect on the subject being studied (Babbie, 1995). This therefore helped to reduce the impact of my (the author's) 'insider' knowledge. It is important to note that within this paper I will refer to an 'insider' as a member of an oppressed group and an 'outsider' as a non-member (Narayan, 1988). For example, examining written communication between birthmothers placed me in the role of observer rather than comrade. The result was that discussions unravelled naturally between birthmothers without the influence of this study's objectives.

A major weakness of latent content analysis is its reliability. Because this form of analysis does not focus on visible surface content (like repeated words) it is a more subjective process. This however is also the strength because the researcher can move beyond semantics and identify the emotional or spiritual message encrypted in a birthmother's passage. Babbie (1995) argues that reliability can be strengthened in content analysis by recoding observations numerous times. I attempted to do this by

coding (noting themes) the testimonies of birthmothers at two separate occasions, four months apart.

An additional limitation of content analysis is that it does not provide an opportunity for researchers to clarify participant's statements. Additionally, the testimonies gathered by the researcher provide only snapshots of birthmothers' lives. Kirby and McKenna (1989) go on to argue that even with these 'snapshots' a researcher can only analyze a "frame or record outside of it's living context" (Kirby and McKenna, 1989:84). My research therefore focuses on 'snapshots' of grief in birthmothers' lives. The result is a truncated version of the emotional and mental health of birthmothers versus a larger picture of how grief is incorporated into their entire life. When reviewing this research this needs to be kept in mind.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review is to identify how birthmothers have been defined, understood and therefore frequently excluded from adoption language and adoption policy. This review will begin by exploring key historical points that have influenced the way birthmothers are defined. Secondly this section of the paper will explore a number of seminal studies that have contributed to the understanding of the distinct grief of birthmothers. By examining the unique grief of birthmother's the author hopes to identify why there is a need for birthmother's voices to be included in adoption practice and policy.

Emerging Stories of Loss: A Brief History

Because birthparents have been the most neglected party in the adoption triad (Logan, 1996), the loss experienced by birthmothers has been unrecognized, unexplored, and misunderstood. The introduction of closed adoption policy proves this assumption.

Melina and Roszia's The Open Adoption Experience clearly outlines key historical points in adoption history that have profoundly impacted birthmothers. For example, Melina and Roszia (1993) note that in the 1930s Canada and the United States introduced laws that "closed" adoptions. Proponents for confidential (closed) adoptions asserted that secrecy would allow the birthmother a "fresh start" free from the stigma and shame of promiscuity (Melina & Roszia, 1993). They note that because of the limited understanding at that time of loss and grief, adoption practitioners did not realize that by

breaking with their pasts, birthmother were experiencing significant losses. Not only did birthmothers lose the chance to know and raise their offspring, but they also lost the chance to know what became of their children. Consequently, the denial of their pasts deprived birthmothers of the opportunity to grieve and resolve their losses (Melina & Roszia, 1993).

Melina and Roszia (1993) note that by the 1960s and 1970s some birthmothers began to speak out about their experiences and how adoption had wounded them. At the same time psychiatrists began to explore loss and grief. For example, Dr. John Bowlby (1986) and Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross (1969) separately published theories on death and dying. In their research they found that individuals experience grief when facing a loss and that if one fails to grieve, it can lead to both short and long-term emotional discomfort and possibly serious emotional problems (Melina & Roszia, 1993).

Bowley and Kubler-Ross' research on grief and loss transformed the way professionals understood grieving and consequently this began to change the way birthmothers were treated (Melina & Roszia, 1993). Professionals began to recognize that adoption practices inhibited birthmothers' grief process because their loss was so ambiguous. Additionally, professionals began to understand that the practice of closed adoption asked birthmothers to pretend that their past (pregnancies) didn't exist and hence these women were not being given the chance to resolve their losses. With this shift in professional understanding, hospital practices surrounding birthmothers began to change. Health care professionals began to recognize that these women needed to see their babies after birth to experience the end of her pregnancy and to say "good-bye"

(Melina & Roszia, 1993). Although these changes provided birthmother with some recognition, they still did not acknowledge or provide insight into the distinctive qualities of grief experienced by birthmothers.

The notion of birthmothers saying “good-bye” to their children was further supported by Sibling and Speedlin’s 1983 book Dear Birthmother. This book promoted the practice of birthmothers writing to their children explaining the reasons for relinquishment. The authors explain that the letters helped birthmothers to say “good-bye” to the children they were losing to adoption therefore enabling them to move on to their mourning (cited in Melina & Roszia, 1993). Additionally the letters helped the next generation of birthmothers because as adoptive parents began to read the letters they became less fearful of birthparents, increasingly saw them as trustworthy, and began to see the benefits of minimal contact (and therefore ‘openness’) with birthfamilies. Although there was increased understanding of the need for relinquishing mothers to say “goodbye” to their children, helping professionals had little understanding of the grief these women experienced.

An Invisible Legion: The Scope

While much has been studied and written about adoptees and adoptive parents, surprisingly little research has been conducted in the area of birthmothers. This lack of research makes it difficult to identify how many women are birthmothers and how their experiences of relinquishment have impacted their mental health status. Birthmother Judy Kelly (1999) notes that traditionally birthmothers have constituted “an invisible,

marginalized group of women whose cloak of invisibility is woven by secrets, lies and shame”. She goes on to explain,

We are a multitude of sisters, mothers, grandmothers, great-grandmothers, aunts, nieces, cousins, neighbours, and co-workers. We are educators, students, physicians, office clerks, salespersons, lawyers, accountants, tellers, beauticians – from all walks of life, all income levels, all ages. Although we may stand side-by-side, we are unseen by each other and unseen by society (Kelly, 1999).

It is this invisibility that makes it difficult to identify how many women become birthmothers in Ontario each year. One way to calculate this statistic is by identifying the domestic adoption rate under the age of one, but this is seldom published. The 1990 National Adoption Study (Sobol and Daley, 1993) noted that in 1981, 3467 (2736 public, 781 private) children under that age of one were adopted. In 1997 the Ontario Adoption Council reported that 839 (562 public, 277 private) children under the age of one were adopted (personal communication, October 22, 2002). These statistics suggest that each year fewer women become birthmothers, however, with the creation of each new birthmothers comes the growth of this social group.

Despite the falling number of women that relinquish their children for adoption, each year some women still chose this option in Ontario. It is therefore important to examine the impact relinquishment has on these women. Because there has been little research conducted on birthmother trauma and their mental health status it is difficult to conclude what percentage of birthmothers have been negatively impacted by relinquishment, the adoption process and the language used within adoption.

How Birthmothers' Grief Has Been Described

A theme in the limited literature on birthmothers is grief. This section of the paper will focus on how different researchers have framed the grief experience of birthmothers in various ways. Winkler and van Keppel (1982) presented a paper at the Third Australian Adoption Conference. In their article the authors compared the loss of a child through adoption to other loss experience and uncovered its two distinguishing features. They found that birthmothers commonly feel responsible for the decision to place their children and therefore experience their loss as self-inflicted. Consequently they experience feelings of guilt, shame and powerlessness. They suggested that the second feature of birthmothers' grief was that the child is lost to the mother but lives on therefore creating a lack of finality to the loss. These two features are not only distinctive to birthmothers' grief but they are also what make resolution of grief exceptionally difficult (cited in Robinson, 2000).

Winkler and van Keppel (1984) conducted a study of 213 women who had lost their first child through adoption. The study revealed that the effects of the loss were negative and long lasting. All respondents reported a sense of loss that did not decrease with time while half of the respondents reported an increase in the sense of loss over time (cited in Robinson, 2000).

In 1986 Condon published his article, Psychological disability in women who relinquish a baby for adoption. This paper reported on a study that found that relinquishment places birthmothers at a high risk of psychological (and possibly physical) disability. He found the enduring effects of relinquishment to include chronic grief

reactions, guilt, anger, sadness and depression. Forty nine percent of the respondents of this study reported that they suffered from depression post-relinquishment (Condon, 1986). This finding led Condon to contrast relinquishment experiences to perinatal bereavement.

The results suggested that relinquishment experiences are distinguished by four crucial psychological aspects. Firstly, most relinquishing mothers feel that the relinquishment is their only option despite society's belief that it is voluntary. Secondly, the relinquished child continues to exist, is inaccessible but the possibility for reunion remains. Condon (1986) compared the part of a birthmother's experience to that of individuals who have family members "missing in action" during and after wartime. He asserts that for both groups, reunion fantasies make it impossible to "say goodbye". Thirdly, a lack of knowledge about the relinquished child allows for birthmothers to develop a range of disturbing fantasies such as the child being ill, unhappy or hating their birth families. Condon (1986) proposes that these fantasies are created by birthmothers' feelings of guilt. Finally, he found that birthmothers believe that uncaring bureaucracies block any effort they make to acquire knowledge about their child. Condon therefore defines the grief experienced by birthmothers as distinctively different from perinatal grief.

Another major finding in Condon's study was that there are enduring effects of relinquishment on the birthmother. He noted that these effects included chronic grief reactions, guilt, anger, sadness and depression. Forty nine percent of the respondents of this study reported that they suffered from depression post-relinquishment (Condon,

1986). He also noted that more than half of the respondents reported that their anger had increased since the time of relinquishment.

Condon's findings have been supported by later studies. For example, in a 1993 study, Wells reported that the psychological and behavioral pathologies associated with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) are found amongst birthmothers. She found that relinquishment caused trauma, and that this trauma was often lifelong. Further, 100% of the respondents (300 birthmothers) reported that the relinquishment had impacted their mental health negatively. In this study Wells (1993) noted that the PTSD symptoms reported by respondents included; avoidance, drug and alcohol abuse, splitting themselves off from trauma, psychogenic amnesia, precocious sexual activity, pain and "intense psychological distress" surrounding anniversaries or events associated with the trauma, recurrent dreams and nightmares, psychic numbing, and impaired family relationships. Wells' findings suggested that the trauma of losing a child to adoption could cause a relinquishing mother to suffer from PTSD. Wells therefore defines the relinquishing mothers' grief as similar to PTSD.

In a study by Logan (1996) all participating birthmothers were identified as experiencing intermittent depression, guilt, anger, sadness, and grief. Further, 89% described their depression as significant. She found that the long-term mental health implications of relinquishment are severe. Interestingly Logan uncovered that a greater percentage of birthmothers suffering from depression were referred by their GPs to specialist psychiatric services than the general population. She therefore began to question if there is a higher incidence of mental illness amongst birthmothers or if these

women are being “inappropriately pathologized and constructed as mentally ill, victims of a patriarchal society which pathologizes women who fail to conform to society’s expectations” (Logan, 1996:622). She therefore questions the definition of birthmothers’ grief as pathological.

Weinreb and Konstam (1996) found that the act of relinquishing a child for adoption has profound psychological effects, (prolonged feelings of loss, grief and psychological pain, on the birthmother. All birthmothers in this study reported feelings of sadness and mild to moderate depression. Weinreb and Konstam (1996) also found that the occurrence of depression was significantly greater among birthmothers (49.9%) than in the general population of women (10%).

DeSimone (1996) identified seven social and psychological factors that contribute to birthmothers’ unresolved grief: 1) absence of social recognition regarding the loss, 2) lack of opportunity to express feelings about relinquishment, 3) perceived absence of social support from family and friends, 4) feelings of guilt and shame regarding the decision to relinquish, 5) uncertainty about the loss because the child continues to exist, 6) the perception that family, friends or professionals were a coercive force for relinquishment, and 7) involvement in search behavior. DeSimone’s study also indicated that reunions between birthmother and child had varying impacts on the birthmothers. Many relinquishing mothers found that reunion helped to bring grief resolution but others noted that reunion intensified their grief process as inexperienced grief was uncovered (DeSimone, 1996). DeSimone therefore defines the grief of birthmothers as unresolved.

In her Master's thesis, Robinson (1996) proposes that when women lose their children to adoption that their grief becomes disenfranchised. By disenfranchised she means that birthmothers are cut off from social supports and therefore have few opportunities to express and resolve their feelings and grief. Robinson (1996) found that post-relinquishment, family and friends not only avoided birthmothers but also avoided any mention of the pregnancy or the lost child. This lack of recognition is also on a societal level. For example, there is generally no formal announcement of birth and adoption of a child. Further there are no rituals to recognize a birthmother's loss and consequently she is not given an opportunity to express her grief publicly. This absence of ritual also does not delimit the period of mourning therefore many birthmothers are never surrounded by their community and often feel their grief has no ending (Robinson, 1996). Robinson therefore defines the grief of relinquishing mothers as disenfranchised.

In 1997, Robinson presented her paper Grief Associated with the Loss of Children to Adoption at the Sixth Australian Adoption Conference. Many arguments within Robinson's paper were based upon Wordon's book Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy. For example, Wordon argued that mourning is necessary to re-establish equilibrium and that there are several necessary tasks involved in grief work. Robinson (1997) argued that birthmothers are often unable to complete Wordon's first task of "experiencing the pain of loss" because they are not given the opportunity to express their grief. She goes on to claim that these opportunities do not exist because many birthmothers are in hiding and because birthmothers are continually told to "move on" and "get over it". In short

many relinquishing mothers have not “experienced the pain of the loss (of their child)” because society has not acknowledged or supported their grief.

According to Wordon, another task in grief work is to adjust to the environment from which the lost person is missing. Robinson (1997) argues that birthmothers are often unable to accomplish this task because society fails to recognize a child’s position in a first mother’s life. Birthmothers’ inability to work through Wordon’s grief work “tasks” is important because, as Wordon warns, “when the pain of grief is avoided or suppressed depression can follow”. This assertion may provide great insight into why birthmothers commonly struggle with depression.

Kelly (1999) examined the long-term impact of relinquishment on birthmothers in her Master’s thesis. She explores the marginalization of birthmothers and proposes that it contributes to their grief experience. For example, she explains that relinquishing mothers have the “frequent necessity to perform a kind of doublethink/doublespeak in order to translate their experiences into acceptable and understandable terms” for the general public (Kelly, 1999). One birthmother in Kelly’s study struggles with the idea of choice,

What decision? There was no decision. The word decision doesn’t apply to relinquishing a child. In fact, the word reflects the prejudice of society toward birthmothers. We are suppose to be unfeeling, inhuman trash who “decide” to give up our children because our life would be more fun, less expensive, and easier without them. That’s hogwash. No mother in the world, human or animal, would “decide” to give up her baby. It isn’t normal or natural. It wouldn’t happen if mothers had the power to decide. It only happens when they don’t (Kelly, 1999:23).

Kelly notes that birthmothers are continually under the strain of translating their experiences for society and that they can only be truly understood and speak freely within

the margins. She observes that in the language of birthmothers, they did not relinquish or surrender their children to adoption but rather they “lost” their children to adoption. Kelly proposes that as long as birthmothers’ experiences are misrepresented by language, their marginalization will continue and subsequently their grief may be exacerbated (Kelly, 1999). Kelly therefore defines the grief of relinquishing mothers as marginalized and social constructed by inappropriate language.

In his book Lifegivers: Framing the Birthparents Experience in Open Adoption, adoption practitioner Gritter (2000) argues that a birthmother’s grief not only includes the standard dynamics and phases of classic grief but that it also includes aspects that are unique to the experience of birthmothers.

Gritter (2000) argues that the first challenge a birthmother faces is defining her idiosyncratic loss. He goes on to note that as a birthmother tries to define her loss typically she uncovers that her loss is a combination of many losses. He goes on to argue that there are several common losses. The first loss is the loss of interaction. When a woman relinquishes her child she loses the joy of daily and unlimited access to her child. As well she loses the opportunity to create a shared history with her child (Gritter, 2000).

Loss of family structure is the second loss noted by Gritter (2000). He explains that when a woman relinquishes her child she not only loses that child but also her sense of clarity about the composition of her current and future family. For example, when asked how many children she has, how should she answer this question? This question

reveals that each birthmother has lost someone who filled a distinct place in the structure of her family, in terms of gender and birth order.

The third loss experienced by birthmothers is the loss of a role or status in life (Gritter, 2000). A birthmother goes from being a child's only mother to a lesser status of "birthmother". She is no longer the daily caregiver affectionately referred to as Mom, and consequently she loses a treasured and intimate role in her child's life.

The loss of acknowledgement as a lifegiver is another loss. He notes that there is seldom any public announcement or celebration of a birthmother's feminine triumph in giving birth to a beautiful baby. Gritter (2000) explains, "what feels to her like an event of a lifetime gathers only hushed attention". Further, many birthmothers are surprised and hurt when they hear the importance of the genetic connection belittled, as so often happens in adoption communities (Gritter, 2000).

The loss of control is the final one identified. The shift of authority that takes place in the adoption process can be very painful for a birthmother. Gritter (2000:112) explains, "early in the adoption process, she was powerful and much attended to, but with the signing of a few documents her importance vanishes". A birthmother quickly goes from highly courted to ignored and this is something she will grieve.

After defining the many losses faced by birthmothers, Gritter (2000) goes on to note six dimensions that make a birthmother's loss unique. First, the loss is more oriented to the future than to the past. Additionally the loss is routinely underestimated. Thirdly a birthmother's loss is ongoing. As her child moves through each developmental stage, she must grieve new losses. The loss is also self-inflicted in some ways. Gritter

(2000) notes that outsiders typically perceive the adoption decision as voluntary and therefore have little sympathy. However, “birthparents experience a strong element of necessity that compel them to consider this anguishing decision” (Gritter, 2000:114). The fifth factor that makes a birthmother’s grief unique is that it is a loss that presents a paradoxical upside. For example, because of relinquishment a woman may be able to continue her education, travel or improve her economic status (because she is free of a dependant). Gritter (2000) notes that enjoying these gains can create guilt as a birthmother may worry that her gain is at the expense of the child. Further, “the gains available through adoption do not neutralize or erase the losses; gains and losses coexist side by side a equally valid dynamics” (Gritter, 2000).

Finally, the loss of adoption for the birthmother is largely uncharted territory. Gritter (2000) explains that the grief experienced by birthmothers is mostly undescribed as past birthmothers have maintained low profiles. Further, many within the adoption community are determined to portray adoption in positive terms; consequently discussions of the downside of adoption and the pain of birthparents are uncommon. Gritter (2000) argues this silence creates an information gap that reinforces a birthmother’s pain and feelings of isolation.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Despite the emergence of open adoption, the language used within adoption practice and policy remains anything but open! How language is used within the adoption community quickly reveals how adoption is currently defined, and by whom. Historically adoption had been presented as a way to ‘provide a home for a child’ but today adoption has become the way to find ‘a child for a home’. This section of the paper will primarily look at how birthmothers are spoken of and the language used by birthmothers to resist this form of social constructionism. It will be argued that contemporary language has confined birthmothers to their biological function. Additionally, it will be argued that ‘respectful adoption language’ has been constructed by professionals to serve the interest of the primary clients, adoptive parents.

The Impact of Market Forces on the Definitions

In 1997 the Ontario Adoption Council reported that 839 (562 public, 277 private) children under the age of one were adopted (personal communication, October 22, 2002). Each year there is a declining availability of infants for adoption. At the same time infertility rates have risen (Freundlich, 2000) leading to an imbalance of supply and demand. Freundlich (2000) argues that the growing number of people hoping to adopt a baby are forced into an increasingly competitive environment, and in accordance with general economic principles, the costs of adoption have risen. What has resulted is the birth of the adoption industry (this term refers to the transfer of a child from one family to

another, based on the economic principle of supply and demand) that is financed by potential and current adoptive parents.

Within the adoption industry there are specific roles for each member of the adoption triad. Birthmothers are the creators and providers of the ‘product’, adoptees are the coveted ‘product’ or ‘commodity’, and potential adoptive parents are the ‘consumers’. As well, adoption professionals (such as lawyers and social workers) play the role of ‘broker’ and serve a primary client – the paying client. This market analysis provides important insight into how the practice of adoption has become about finding ‘children for homes’. This section of the paper will seek to explore why the adoption industry has transformed adoption into an adult centered practice that attempts to remedy infertility.

The Introduction of Money

In the 1930s and 1940s adoption agencies accepted donations from grateful adoptive parents who had adopted from them. The introduction of adoption fees began in the 1940s and was met by much controversy. By the 1970s infant adoption services were no longer being defined in social services terms but rather, they were being defined as consumer-oriented (Freundlich, 2000). For example, during this time the United Way discontinued their financial support of infant adoption programs. Freundlich (2000) explains the rationale for this decision was:

that prospective adoptive parents were the primary clients of those services; their incomes exceeded the income level of clients typically served by non-profit organizations; and consequently, prospective adoptive parents could cover the cost of services through the payments of fees (Freundlich, 2000: 22).

With the introduction of fees came the creation of the “gray market”. Within this market lawyers and other adoption professionals collect fees for their services but do not seek to profit directly from adoption transactions (Freundlich, 2000). The gray market has helped to define adoption as an adult centered practice (dealing with the social problem of infertility) that serves paying potential adoptive parents.

It is both frightening and significant that money may have the ability to disempower birthparents and their decision- making regarding the adoption option. When money becomes involved in the adoption process the relationship between birthmother and potential adoptive parents can become skewed. Gritter (1999) explains:

When a prospective adoptive family ‘invests’ in a prospective birthparent, they expect a return on their investment... In complementary fashion, birthparents can easily feel indebted and trapped by their financial dependence on the prospective adoptive parents. The financial support may add to their reluctance to change their course, even if they feel the right thing is to set aside the adoption intentions. Predictably, the cessation of support when the adoptive arrangements are complete can also add to the birthparent’s feeling of being used and dropped. Another worrisome possibility is that expectant birthparents may exploit the desperation of prospective adoptive parents by misleading them about their intentions (Gritter, 1999:10).

The Role of Power

Many have argued that birthmothers hold great power over potential adoptive parents because these women “control the availability of the ‘desired commodity’” (Freundlich, 2000). However, Romanchik (1996) argues that birthmothers rarely feel empowered in the adoption process because they are facing a crisis pregnancy and that “adoptive parents, because they usually bring greater social and financial advantages

compared to those of most birthparents, hold greater power with adoption service providers” (Romanchik, 1996)

Power is not only based on money, but it can also on social status. Under this concept of power, potential adoptive parents are likely to hold greater influence in the triad than birthmothers are. Freundlich (2000) argues that although adoptive parents lack the power to overcome biology, they possess interpersonal power founded on “superior education and social advantage”. Further, the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute conducted a study that found that the general public perceives adoptive parents more positively than birthparents (Freundlich, 2000). Simply put, potential adoptive parents have greater social support than birthmothers do and this gives them tremendous power in the adoption industry.

Who Bears the ‘Cost’?

As the costs associated with adopting an infant increase each year, the burden of these costs continues to fall on prospective adoptive parents (Freundlich, 2000). As a result, many are beginning to ask if the adoption process is victimizing prospective adoptive parents. Some argue that increasing adoption fees are exploitative, as desperate infertile couples may be willing to pay any fee required. Another perspective noted by Freundlich (2000) is that prospective adoptive parents have created a competitive environment in which higher fees can be charged. She argues that individuals who adopt in Canada tend to be relatively affluent and therefore willing to pay any level of fees if it means that they can adopt a baby who meets their age, race and health preferences.

The literature not only talks about how much adoption costs adoptive parents, but it also about the financial risks that potential adoptive parents take when they explore the adoption option. In the United States in 1993, some insurance companies began to offer ‘adoption cancellation’ insurance (Freundlich, 2000). This form of insurance reimburses expenses incurred for arranged adoption and “seeks to protect prospective adoptive parents from financial losses when the investment they have made does not yield the anticipated benefit of a baby” (Freundlich, 2000). This form of insurance signals a market response to the growing financial burden imposed on prospective adoptive parents. Further, this response proves that the adoption market responds to the demands of adoptive parents.

In all of the discussions of financial risk however, birthparents are not mentioned. This is not because birthparents are immune to the financial costs of adoption, but rather because they are not viewed as consumers in the adoption industry. Guaranteed costs to birthmothers include those for maternity clothes, prenatal vitamins, appropriate nutrition and possible lost income or schooling due to time taken off pre and post pregnancy. Additionally, some birthmothers pursue counseling to deal with their loss. In some cases adoptive parents will cover the cost of this counseling during pregnancy and for a few months post-natally. However, a multitude of researchers have uncovered that birthmothers experience long-term mental health implications due to their relinquishment (Condon, 1986; DeSimone, 1996; Kelly, 1999; Logan, 1996; Robinson, 1996; Wells, 1993). This means that many birthmothers may be faced with long-term financial costs due to their use of counseling or medications. Another reason that the costs to

birthmothers are not mentioned in a market analysis of adoption is because these costs are not incurred by the consumers, and therefore these costs do not drive up the expense of running the adoption industry. Market forces define what constitutes a cost in the adoption market – consequently market forces invalidate the costs incurred by birthmothers.

Commodification

Another ‘cost’ created by the adoption industry is the commodification of infants. As adoption is increasingly recognized as a market transaction, we ethically need to become concerned with the impact this has on children. Freundlich (2000) argues that the question has become: whether infants have been transformed into commodities, rated on the basis of age, race, gender, health, physical attractiveness, or other desired characteristics, and available to those who are able to pay the highest fee (Freundlich, 2000). When infants are treated like commodities they are de facto dehumanized. This dehumanization defines infant adoption as a service for affluent adults versus a service for children.

It is important to note at this point that throughout the literature on the commodification of children, there is no mention of the commodification of birthmothers, their wombs or their work. It could be argued that the commodification of birthmothers is not discussed in the literature because to do so would mean recognizing the market value of these women. Society and the adoption industry are currently resisting this shift because it would mean returning power to an oppressed group of producers that are

needed to sustain an already dwindling supply. In Australia, the adoption market has openly been defined as hurtful and exploitative to birthmothers, and as a result the adoption rate has dropped as low as three to four adoptions per year (<http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au>). This trend serves as a warning to the North American adoption market – recognizing the commodification of birthmothers can lead to the collapse of the market.

The Language Used to Define Adoption

The Importance of Self-Naming

Gritter is an adoption practitioner and birthparent advocate who acknowledges that adoption language and practice commonly fail to represent and honor the voices of birthparents. He argues;

If we carry out a system that delights adoptive parents and works for most of the children, but in the process destroys birthparents – where is the joy? Who can call that sort of outcome satisfactory? When will we learn that we are all in this together and that diminishing any one of us diminishes us all? We are never made larger by permitting others to be made smaller. The effort to elevate the status of birthparents need not in anyway detract from the importance of adoptive parents. (<http://www.lifemothers.com>)

Friere argues that dialogue is a vital part of education. Further, he talks about authentic thought and eventual liberation being achieved by using the oppressed's dialogue;

The teacher's thinking is authenticated only by the authenticity of the student's thinking. The teacher cannot think for her student, nor can she impose her thought on them. Authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about reality does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication (Friere, 1970:57).

The adoption community must therefore stop defining birthmother's and their loss. Instead, if birthmothers' voices and dialogues are acknowledged, not only will birthmothers find some liberation, but the entire adoption community will be strengthened.

Further, if we hope to elevate the status of birthparents and create respectful adoption practice and language, we must first begin by listening to the voices of birthmothers. Friere explains, "critical and liberating dialogue, which presupposes action, must be carried on with the oppressed... attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects..."

(http://www.sonoma.edu/users/d/daniels/Friere_summary.html).

In short, the language of birthmother's can no longer be ignored if we hope to claim that adoption language is non-oppressive.

Defining Adoptive Parents and Adoptees

Within the literature adoptive parents are referred to as 'adoptive parents'. However outside of the literature this group has demanded that they simply be called 'parents'. It is argued that the prefix of 'adopted' reinforces the stigma of infertility and implies that the child is not 'their own'. (<http://www.familyhelper.net/ad/adteach.html>). Further, the child is stigmatized by the term 'adoptee' or by being referred to unnecessarily as 'adopted'. It had been suggested that when adoption is to be acknowledged, one should refer to it as "the way someone arrived into a family, not as a condition or disability". For example, it is better to say "Sam was adopted" rather than

“Sam is adopted” (<http://www.familyhelper.net/ad/adteach.html>). Adoptive parents claim despite biological origins that their adopted children are their own and hence should be referred to as their children, not as their ‘adopted children’. This language is appropriate, as family should not be defined by how it was formed.

In her article, Speaking Positively: Using Respectful Adoption Language, Johnson states, “the reality is that adoption is a method of joining a family, just as birth...but the impact of adoption must be acknowledged” (cited in http://www.r2press.com/a_few_words_in_adoption.htm). Johnson’s argument provides much needed defense and support of adoptive families. At the same time it fails to recognize and respect the third participants in the adoption triad. Johnson fails to discuss the ‘connections’ in adoption. Birthmother and social worker Brenda Romanchik (http://www.r2press.com/a_few_words_in_adoption.htm) argues that Johnson does not acknowledge the fact that when children are relinquished into their adoptive family, that they bring with them another family that they are connected to by birth. Romanchik continues by arguing that this connection exists regardless of whether or not a child’s birth family is known. She claims that a child carries these connections in their cells, in their temperaments, talents, and the way they laugh (http://www.r2press.com/a_few_words_in_adoption.htm). Johnson’s argument does not acknowledge and honor all of the connections in an adopted person’s life. In short, her arguments promote the exclusion of birthparents as a means of supporting and creating adoptive families.

The Titles Used to Define Birthmothers

Historically birthmothers have been defined in many ways. For example, in the past crisis pregnancies have been described as ‘illegitimate’ and the infants described as ‘bastards’. Over time the ‘fallen women’ became the ‘unmarried mother’ who became the ‘birthmother’ (www.adoptioncrossroads.org). With the recent introduction of “respectful adoption language” birthparents were asked not to refer to themselves as ‘natural parents’ or ‘first parents’. It was argued that such terms implied that adoptive parents were unnatural and secondary parents. Although this is a fair argument many birthmothers continue to refer to themselves as “first mothers”. They claim that the term “first” refers only to the fact that they are first chronologically (<http://www.lifemothers.com>). Birthmother Skye Hardwick explains why she sees herself as a first mother;

I was the first one to know of your existence. I was the first to hear your tiny heartbeat, and I was the first to see traces of you during the ultrasound. I was the first to pat you when you were squirming and needed comfort...I was the first to embrace you, and I was the first to speak tenderly to you...and I was the first to shed tears over letting you go...I was the first, but not the last, to lay down her heart for the sake of yours. Yes my child, I may not have all your “firsts”, but I am the First. I am your First Mother (<http://www.adopting.org/Skye/FirstMother.html>).

Many birthparents are not comfortable with being called biological or birthparents. This is reflected not only in the alternate terms they use to identify themselves but by how they deconstruct the term “birthmother”. For example, birthmother Diane Turski argues that “birthmother” is a euphemism for “incubator” or “breeder” that further attempts to break the bond between mother and child. She goes on to claim that “birth” terms (i.e. birthfather, birthsibling) are not appropriate because only

the woman gives birth to the child (<http://www.adoptioncrossroad.org/>). Further, many birthmothers have expressed that they find the prefix of “birth” oppressive as they view themselves simply as mothers (who are not parenting) (<http://www.nebula.on.ca/canbmothers/position.htm>).

Romanchik has also proposed that the term ‘birthmother’ can be used in coercive ways. For example, it is not uncommon for professionals or hopeful adoptive parents to refer to a mother considering adoption for her baby, as a birthmother or as ‘their birthmother’ (http://www.r2press.com/a_few_words_in_adoption.htm). This is an interesting and evocative use of the term because a woman does not become a birthmother until she has relinquished her rights to parent her child. Further, many expecting mothers have stated that being given the title ‘birthmother’ before their adoption was final felt like a subtle form of coercion (http://www.r2press.com/a_few_words_in_adoption.htm). Romanchik also noted that prospective adoptive parents ‘matched’ to a ‘birthmother’ may find it harder to accept that mother’s decision to parent her child (rather than relinquish), if they believe her to be ‘their birthmother’ (www.r2press.com/a_few_words_in_adoption.htm). Therefore, prematurely labelling a woman as a birthmother certainly does not serve that woman, and possible does not serve the prospective adoptive parents.

Sometimes it is not the title given to birthmothers that invalidates them but rather the title that is taken from them. Many adoptive and birthmothers have been identified by others as something other than a “real mother”. Birthmother Cynthia Runyon recalls, “the social worker brought in my baby boy’s blank birth certificate and told me to sign

it... that it would be filled out later for his REAL parents”

(http://www.exiledmothers.com/losing_or_babies/cynthis.html). Birthmother and advocate Skye Hardwick further explains the inappropriate use of the word “real”;

Whether you are a birthparent or an adoptive mother, we have both cringed as someone implied that we are not a “real mother”. An adoptive mother may hear, “So aren’t you afraid her ‘real mother’ will come looking for her?” A birthmother hears, “a ‘real mother’ changes diapers and ...” It is not the act of birthing a child that makes me a mother, nor the act of signing an adoption decree that makes you a mother – for it is our love that makes us mothers. Becoming a mother is not merely one event; it is a series of events founded on a continuous commitment. (<http://lifemothers.com/different.html>)

So why does society and the adoption industry continue to ignore the language birthmothers (I will continue to use this term for the sake of consistency and clarity) use to define themselves? A radical feminist would argue that the practice and language of adoption punishes single women for their fertility while seeking to treat deserving but infertile women (who are most often married). The practice of adoption could therefore be framed as a punishment for original mothers who have failed to conform to the patriarchal North American definition of motherhood. But society’s disapproval of birthmothers does not end there. Rather, language is used to silence and marginalize them. By referring to original mothers as birthmothers, they are reminded that society and the adoption industry has no use for them after they have “birthed” the child. Further, if society were to begin to recognize that original mothers are more than biological mothers then as a society we would have to question if the practice is exploitive and if it is the solution (for infertility, illegitimacy and promiscuity) for which it has been promoted.

The Phrases Used to Influence Birthmothers

Certain phrases within adoption practice and policy are commonly used but have been described by many birthmothers as dismissive, coercive, and disrespectful of their role and loss. For example, it is not uncommon to hear phrases like, “if you love your baby...”, “in the best interest of the baby”, “the gift of love”, an “unselfish sacrifice”, and the “ultimate gift for a childless couple”. Many birthmothers have spoken against the notion of “child as gift”;

The doctor told me that I would be giving a precious gift to a couple who could not have a baby, that I would be a savior in their eyes... GAG ME. That is furthest from the truth` anyone who has relinquished/lost a child to adoption is fully entitled to their pain. (Decision, <http://www.adoptionforums.com/t104249>)

Why are the adoptive parents getting a blessing, but the birthparents viewed as either poor or doing something so wonderful for the people we hardly know? I did this for my daughter. For HER to have the life I thought she deserved to have that I could not. Not for me, not for them, not for anyone but for her. (Momof2, <http://www.adoptionforums.com/t11.html>)

We were not looking to complete your family, but to complete the lives of our children. We do not give our children as gifts to you, but give you as a gift to our children. (Skye Hardwick, <http://www.lifemothers.com/whoweare.html>)

Another comments intended to affirm birthmothers is “your child is happy now, you did the right thing” (<http://www.adoptionforums.com/t11.html>). Unfortunately such a remark seldom has the effect of affirming a woman but rather it often silences her.

Birthmother Courtney Frey elaborates;

I used to think that something was wrong with me when, for several years every time I mentioned anything about my birthson I hear this response, “Well, he’s happy and loved and in a good place and that’s what matters most”. It was as if everyone around me NEEDED ME to move on....my being at all emotional or talkative about the “Subject” was uncomfortable for them. (<http://www.adoptionforums.com/t11.html>)

The idea of relinquishing a child as an “unselfish sacrifice” has created varied responses from birthmothers. Some birthmothers expressed that when adoption is primarily presented as the “selfless” option that little attention is given to the emotional costs of relinquishing. Birthmother, Kay Russell explains, “I chose adoption for my daughter, before she was born, because no one told me it was going to be so traumatic - only that it was ‘wonderful’ and ‘selfless’ for me to choose adoption (http://www.exiledmothers.com/losing_our_babies/kay.html). Russell is not alone in her experience. A birthmother named Bryony recounts how she was first exposed to the idea of adoption as the “selfless” option;

They (the instructors of a pre-natal class for unwed mothers) stressed adoption as the “unselfish” thing to do but did not talk about any of the emotional consequences of giving birth – the mother/child bond or the trauma of separation. (http://www.exiledmothers.com/losing_our_babies/bryony.html).

Birthmother Skye Hardwick notes that she dislikes “selfless” rhetoric because it polarizes the issue. She states;

Was I really selfless in placing Emily? To be selfless in placing my daughter implies that I would have been selfish in keeping my daughter, right? You see, it is dangerous to put such a label on parenting choices: Selfless and Selfish. Can a woman really be selfish for desiring to parent a child who grew in her womb, and came through her body? Isn't it only natural for a woman to want to parent a child she bore? Yes it is. (<http://www.lifemothers.com/beyondselfless.html>)

She moves on to argue that the word “selfless” does not reflect the ambiguous nature of relinquishment. Instead, Skye expresses the need to remove the word from discussions surrounding birthmothers.

Calling a birthmother “selfless”, no matter how well intentioned, is a set up for failure. She may be left wondering is she is horrible for the feelings of relief after relinquishment and the struggle with guilt in moving forward with her life... Bottom line: As a birthmother, I was not selfless, heroic, brave, angelic, or

saint-like when I made the choice to place my daughter Emily for adoption. I made the choice because at that given time in my life, I felt that was best for both my daughter and I. Call me what I am. I am not selfless; I am a mother (<http://www.lifemothers.com/beyondselfless.html>).

Although these phrases appear and may be well intentioned they are value laden and CAN harm birthmothers. The Canadian Council of Natural Mothers (formally known as the Canadian Council of Birthmothers) argues that phrases like these demote the birthmother to a lesser and invisible status of not being ‘in the best interests of the baby’ (www.nebula.on.ca/canbmothers). Further, these statements imply that women facing crisis pregnancy are selfish for wanting to love and raise their children.

Saints, Sinners and Suppliers

Another word for “selfless” could be “saintly”. Gritter (2000) notes that for years “irrelevance is the outcome the (adoption) system has long produced most capably” (2000: 43). Further, this discounting of birthparents begins with a finding of difference. He proposes that there are three ways that birthparents are set apart – as sinners, suppliers and saints. Gritter therefore argues that it does not serve birthmothers to refer to them as saintly or selfless. He explains that saintly, sacrificial talk sets up “another distinction, another way that birthparents are set apart and subjected to unusual expectations” (2000: 47). Consequently, even when distinctions are intended to be positive they create distance between people and can place great pressure on one to live up to a title they themselves do not recognize or identify with.

The idea of a birthmother as a “sinner” is reflected in the history of the language used to describe women facing crisis pregnancy. Gritter (2000) explains that historically

birthmothers were judged as moral failures that had stayed from community standards. Today this idea persists but in a subtler form. Gritter (2000:45) noted that, the “descriptive words have evolved from ‘sinner’ to ‘emotionally sick’ to the contemporary ‘dysfunctional’”. The belief that birthmothers are dysfunctional is communicated in a common well-meaning statement that is repeatedly made to birthmothers when they disclose their role. When people innocently comment, “wow, I could never do that”, they set birthmothers apart and define them as abnormal. This message is not missed by birthmothers.

Most people I have told say, “wow I could never do that”, or “you are one of the most unselfish people I know.” For the first year and a half after the adoption I felt like I was the most self centered person in the world because I was willing to let someone else take over all of the smelly diapers and night-time feedings and all the crying. (Brwneyedgrl321, <http://www.adoptionforums.com/t108393.html>)

Although it is probably, in most cases, meant as a compliment, the implications of, “I could NEVER do a thing like THAT”, is that others would love their children too much too be able to do what we did, or that their emotions are somehow more delicate and real than ours, and therefore they would not be able to handle the strain. (Sharon Murphy, <http://www.adoptionforums.com/t101791.html>)

I HATE the comment, “Oh that was so wonderful of you, I could never do that”. It totally implies that you have done something wrong or at the very least “abnormal”. I think a lot of birthparents’ pain comes from the sudden drop in the stature from “expectant parent” (who is revered, respected, loved and cared for) to “birthparent” who are reviled, loathed and feared, usually by the same people who used to think she was so wonderful. (strosnstars, <http://www.adoptionforums.com/t101791.html>)

A market analysis of adoption (as mentioned earlier) suggests that birthmothers can be viewed as “suppliers”. It could be argued that any language aimed at distancing a birthmother from her offspring is founded on the market analysis of her as merely a biological supplier. Birthmothers can be seen resisting this classification when they

argue for a language that represents their relationship, rather than simply their genetic connection to their relinquished child. For example, Skye Hardwick does not identify herself as a birthmother, but rather as a lifemother. She explains the reasoning behind her use of this term;

‘Life’ in lifemother represents the choice we made to carry our pregnancies to term, and taking care of our expecting bodies.... ‘Life’ represents the continuous role we have in our children’s lives – even if our adoptions are closed, we will always pray for, and think about our beloved children (www.lifemothers.com)

Respectful Adoption Language?

In 1979, social worker Marrietta Spencer wrote an article entitled The Terminology of Adoption. Spencer’s work laid the foundation for Pat Johnson’s work on Positive Adoption Language (PAL). In her article Johnson argues that professionals should avoid using terms like, ‘putting up for adoption’, ‘adopting out’, ‘giving up’, ‘surrendering’, or ‘relinquishing’. Johnson argued that birthmothers make responsible well-informed decisions and hence professionals should use terms like, ‘placing for adoption’, ‘making an adoption plan’, or (better) ‘choose adoption’ (cited in www.familyhelper.net/ad/adteach.htm). At first glance this language can appear respectful of birthmothers. As well, many adoptive parents are comfortable with this language because it affirms the process by which they attained their children. However what this language subtly implies is that when birthmothers’ ‘choose’ to place their child up for adoption then adoptive parents ‘rescue’ children from mothers who have ‘logically’ but ‘responsibly’ rejected their children. In short, this language promotes the ‘myth of choice’ when in reality many birthmothers feel that they have no choice and that they lose their children.

They told me lies, sweet child of me.
They said I couldn't care for thee.
They said you'd be better off away.
They said I'd understand some day.
They said I had no other choice.
They wouldn't let my hope have voice.
(<http://207.198.64.222/voices/poetry/birthparents/linda/index.html>)

When I brought up adoption in the doctor's office their faces totally lit up. They said they had this one couple in mind the whole time, even though this was the first time I had brought it up. They immediately began telling me wonderful things about this couple... I remember feeling very quickly locked into it, and seeing no way out. (Mary Rigotti,
http://www.exiledmothers.com/losing_our_babies/mary.html)

I was told "it was in the best thing for my baby" and that "if I cared for my baby, I would give him/her up." I was not told that I had other options, and I was too young and submissive to question "the experts"... they stressed adoption as the "unselfish" thing to do. (Bryony Lake,
http://www.exiledmothers.com/losing_our_babies/bryony.html)

The greatest weakness in Johnson's 'positive adoption language' is not the actually language she promotes, but rather the fact that she did not include the voices of birthmothers in the "language". If she had she would have discovered that birthmothers often adjust their language according to their audience. For example, when asked by someone in mainstream society, most birthmothers claim that they 'relinquished' or 'surrendered' their children to adoption. However, when birthmothers speak amongst themselves, they talk about 'losing their children to adoption' (www.nebula.on.ca/canbmothers). For example, in her article Not By Choice, birthmother Karen Wilson-Buterbaugh explains many birthmothers describe their 'choice' to place their child for adoption as a result of coercion (circumstantial, emotional, economic, cultural, societal, or social) that led to 'surrender' and loss (<http://www.adoptioncrossroads.org/NotByChoice.html>). The language of 'surrender'

and 'loss' reveals emotional perspectives that have not reached the formal definitions of adoption used in practice and policy. Further by not including the voices of birthmothers Johnson can be seen to be confirming birthmothers as objects, unable and unworthy of inclusion and therefore further oppressing them.

Responding to Misconceptions and Hard Questions

One of the roles that many birthmothers find themselves in is that of educator. Each time a woman shares the story of losing her child through adoption she educates the listener simply by who she is (an average woman not a stereotype) and the language she uses to tell her story. But this can be a difficult and unwelcome role. As one birthmother put it, "I get so nervous about sharing my story because I'm not always up for the education that always has to go with it (<http://www.adoptionforums.com>).

A common misconception that birthmothers fight against is the notion that birthmothers move on and that with each day they think less about the baby they 'gave up for adoption'. This idea is based upon the traditional understanding of grief that suggests it dissipates with time. However the distinctive features of birthmothers' grief and the testimonies of birthmothers tell us otherwise. As one birthmother put it, "Decades have not erased the love I have for you, Child of my heart... missing in adoption" (Jana, <http://207.189.64.222/voices/poetry/birthparents/jana/index.html>). Another birthmother explains, "not a day goes by that my thoughts are not on my son that I lost in adoption, it is especially hard around his birthday, I am forever wondering how he is and what he is

doing” (Decision, <http://adoptionforums.com/t102606.html>). Many more birthmothers describe their daily loss;

I have thought of my birthdaughter so many times during the last nineteen years it is incredible. I really felt as if a piece of my heart was missing. Her birthdays were so hard on me!! I truly missed her VERY much. (sspete, <http://www.adoptionforums.com/t102606.html>)

Not a day goes by that we don't think of our lost children. The cost of someone's joy is the never ending pain we endure each and every day. The holidays are empty, and we think of each and every accomplishment our child makes in their growing years... the tears never dry and the heart ache never ends. (LadyDyan1, <http://www.adoptionforums.com/t102606.html>)

Birthmother Country Frey explains that not only do birthmothers think of their lost children daily, but the healing from the loss is a daily journey. She explains;

Birthmother healing has a beginning, but the myth about healing is that it has an end. We spend the rest of our lives going through this journey of birthmotherhood... we recover, year after year, and wounds are healed, yes, but healing - real healing - takes a life-time. (<http://www.adoptionforums.com/t11.html>)

Another misconception that birthmothers fight against is the assumption that they are not birthmothers. You cannot identify a birthmother by the color of her hair, her marital status, the number of children she is parenting, or by the friends she keeps. Rather she can only be identified by her own admission. Consequently, she must learn to answer questions that communicate the belief that she is not “one of them”. One woman recounts some of the questions that are hard for her to answer because she is a birthmother;

No one told me that I would dread being asked, simple questions such as: “Do you have any children?” “Is this your first child?” “Oh, this is your first pregnancy? Let me tell you all about labor!” “If you had a little girl/boy, what would you name her/him?” “Can you believe so and so gave up her own flesh and blood for adoption?” (Skye Hardwick, <http://lifemothers.com/noone.html>)

Why the Loss Is Ignored

Despite recent research society still fails to recognize birthmothers' grief for a number of reasons. First, there is a strong belief that pregnancy is a consequence of one's actions and that a woman "chooses" adoption. Custer (1993) notes that society demands, "you got yourself into this situation live with the consequences". This theme of individual responsibility is reinforced by the informal "policy of secrecy and shame" that silences women by telling them that they must bear the consequences for their promiscuous behavior by losing their children to adoption.

The second reason relates to the patriarchal structure of society. According to Saulnier (1996) "society is psychologically structured on male needs, that to maintain that order women's needs are subjugated, and that the fabric of society must be fundamentally altered if women's needs are to be recognized".

Thirdly, Shawyer defines adoption as a form of punishment for women; Adoption is a violent act, a political act of aggression towards a woman who has supposedly offended the sexual mores by committing the unforgivable act of not suppressing her sexuality, and therefore not keeping it for trading purposes through traditional marriage... the crime is a grave one, for she threatens the very fabric of our society. The penalty is severe. She is stripped of her child by a variety of subtle and not so subtle maneuvers and then brutally abandoned (Shawyer, 1979).

Shawyer argues that society punishes some single women for their fertility and legitimizing other women as mothers based on their marital status. Understanding this

patriarchal assumption is not difficult to understand why North American society (which is dominantly patriarchal) is not quick to embrace birthmothers or recognize the unique aspects of their grief.

Finally, society fails to recognize birthmothers' grief because adoption has been promoted for decades as a solution to infertility and promiscuity (Melina & Roszia, 1993). By promoting adoption as a “win-win” solution for all member of the adoption triad this tends to silence birthmothers and invalidate their grief.

FUTURE RECCOMENDATIONS

One may ask when will the voices of birthmothers be heard by the adoption community and therefore integrated into adoption policy. First, society needs to address the framing of motherhood in patriarchal terms. For example, Jones (1993) notes that in Western societies, adulthood, marriage, and independent financial resources are a prerequisite for motherhood. If a pregnant woman lacks these requirements she is outside of the norm, and therefore, outside of the societal margins of the ‘acceptable’. Jones (1993) asserts that the only way such women could re-enter ‘normal’ society was by concealing her pregnancy and relinquishing her child. But how do we challenge this policy of secrecy and shame while also recognizing birthmothers’ experiences of grief and loss?

This section of the paper will present suggestions for reform that stem from a feminist perspective as they challenge the patriarchal definition of motherhood that excludes birthmothers. I support all of the following recommendations because they seek to promote the status of birthmothers by recognizing, acknowledging and supporting their “motherhood”, language and experiences of loss.

Language

Throughout this paper many birthmothers have spoken about against the words and phrases used to define them. Based upon their voices I make the following recommendations for future practice and policy. First, when working with birthmothers

it is important to use the title they use to refer to themselves, be it ‘natural mother’, ‘first mother’, ‘original mother’, ‘birthmother’, or ‘lifemother’. Currently within Ontario adoption policy birthmothers are referred to as ‘birthmothers’. Although many relinquishing mothers are comfortable with this term many others are not. Hence, my second proposal for reform is that birthmothers be referred to as ‘lifemothers’ in the Ontario adoption policy. I suggest this reform because it is a neutral term created by birthmothers that does not do any violence to the integrity of their voices. Further, this term acknowledges the ongoing role many birthmothers play in their relinquished children’s lives.

Another recommendation for reform is to remove the phrase “in the best interests of the child” from practice and Ontario adoption policy. Although this phrase appears well intentioned it is value laden and can harm birthmothers. Further, this phrase has the potential to define poor or single (birthparents and potential adoptive) parents as not in the best interests of a child. The Canadian Council of Natural Mothers argues that this phrase demotes the natural mother to a lesser and invisible status of not being ‘in the best interests of the baby’ (<http://www.nebula.on.ca/canbmothers/position.htm>). Further, this statement overtly implies that women facing crisis pregnancy are selfish for wanting to love and raise their children. I suggest removing this phrase from policy because birthmothers have challenged it and because this phrase can be oppressive and coercive. An alternative to the phrase “in the best interests of the child” could be “child centered”.

The recommendation of modifying “respectful adoption language” and phrases has a number of strengths. First, it is anti-oppressive practice to honor all of the voices in

adoption. By incorporating the language used by birthmothers in policy and practice their voices are honored and they are less likely to be marginalized. Using the language of birthmothers also forces those involved in the adoption industry to recognize the value of birthmothers pre and postnatally. Further, by using neutral terms like ‘lifemother’, women who relinquish their children are not simply reduced to their biological function.

Educating to Prevent Regret

Birthmother Heather Lowe produced a booklet entitled, What You Should Know If You are Considering Adoption for Your Baby

(<http://www.hslowe.tripod.com/BOOKLET>). Lowe explains that the goal of this booklet is to help women facing crisis pregnancy make informed decision for themselves and their children while preventing them from later proclaiming, “if only I had known”. Using the voices of other birthmothers, Lowe uncovers the most common regrets of birthparents. For example, many birthparents say “I wish I would have known that society dislikes and fears birthparents”, “I wish I would have know that open adoption agreements are not legally enforceable”, “I wish I would have know that professionals who say they are there to help you are in actuality serving the real clients, the prospective adoptive parents”, and “I wish I would have known that the effects of adoption are so far reaching” (<http://www.hslowe.com/BOOKLET.pdf>).

Lowe’s booklet dares to talk about the regrets and consequences of relinquishment that policy ignores and fails to address. Sadly, Ontario adoption policy does not ensure that women considering adoption are educated about the emotional and

psychological consequences of relinquishment. For example, Ontario policy does not require a woman placing her child up for adoption to receive any counseling surrounding this choice. Lowe's booklet could therefore be a model for exploring the possible emotional consequences a relinquishing mother may face.

Lowe's booklet has both strengths and weaknesses. To begin, there are very few adoption brochures that are written by birthmothers and her booklet incorporates the voices of many birthmothers. Another strength of Lowe's booklet is that it fearlessly addresses the pain of adoption and does not make empty promises like, "with time the pain will go away". Additionally, this booklet addresses women facing crisis pregnancy as mothers rather than as birthmothers. This approach is respectful and does not try to coerce women into relinquishing their children.

It can be argued that Lowe's booklet serves only to warn women of the pain that adoption can create and fails to provide them with resources to pursue this option. The booklet also fails to address how children can benefit from adoption. Another weakness of Lowe's booklet is that it does not include all of the voices from within the adoption triad. This is a weakness because women considering the adoption option need to hear how potential adoptive mothers view adoption so that they can make an informed decision. Despite the weaknesses of Lowe's booklet it remains an excellent resource for women facing crisis pregnancy because it provides insight into the secret emotional lives of birthmothers. I therefore propose that this booklet (or another written by, and containing the voices of birthmothers) be used in counseling women facing crisis pregnancy.

Original Registration of Live Birth

The Canadian Council of Natural Mothers (CCNM) argues that the original registration of live birth (a.k.a. the original birth certificate) should be available without restriction to both adoptive persons and natural mothers. I agree with this recommendation for reform because CCNM bases its proposal on the following argument;

The first mother who gave birth to her baby surrendered for adoption is the only person who gave birth to the baby. The original registration of birth and the information it contains is confirmation and validation to the first mother of that birth. To deny the mother this record of confirmation is to deny the reality of the birth to her and society (<http://www.nebula.on.ca/canbmothers/position.htm>).

Sealing original registrations of birth to legally make children ‘born as if to...’ does not acknowledge a child’s original genealogy nor acknowledge the role that only birthmothers play – to bear and deliver the child. As well, sealing original registrations causes difficulty in accessing important birth family information and could enhance shame of origin for children. Some argue that sealing original registrations of birth and producing secondary birth certificates (listing the adoptive mother as the one who bore the child) is a practice that marginalizes and dismisses birthmothers.

Radical feminist, Catharine MacKinnon claims that family and kinship rules and sexual mores guarantee reproductive ownership and sexual access and control to men as a group. MacKinnon also argues that law has made male dominance invisible and legitimate and that equality will therefore require change (cited in Knuttila & Kubik, 2000). Current policy surrounding original registration of birth is clearly patriarchal.

Ironically, adoptive parents and adoptees can access the original registration of birth and yet we fail to provide birthmothers with the same record even though she alone delivered the child. By denying birthmothers this record, full ownership of the child is granted to the adoptive family who fits the patriarchal model of family. However, by denying birthmothers' the original registration of birth, they are also being denied a record of a very important event in their life.

Confidentiality

The promise of confidentiality to birthmothers has been proposed as the reason for withholding adoption records and information from birthmothers. However, the Canadian Council of Natural Mothers notes that in all provinces and territories the consent forms that birthparents sign make no mention of confidentiality (<http://www.nebula.on.ca/canbmothers/position.htm>). Ironically many adoption orders and registries (for example) supply adoptive parents and adoptees with the adoptee's birth name. Because the birth surname is typically the same as the birthmothers, one could question if promised confidentiality exists. By releasing the surname a birthmother's confidentiality is compromised. Consequently, birthmothers often have the least amount of information and yet they are told that it is because of them that confidentiality exists.

CCNM argues that the myth of promised confidentiality blames the first mother and makes her responsible for closed adoption records. They go on to argue that "confidentiality" is a part of the punishment and price paid by first mothers. CCNM argues that confidentiality is;

not a reward for losing their babies. It is dehumanizing to label all first mothers as wanting protection from their own children. It also creates a distorted unnecessary barrier between first mothers and their children lost to adoption (<http://www.nebula.on.ca/canbmothers/position.htm>).

The recommendation of abolishing confidentiality is very controversial. Firstly, it does not consider the need for secrecy in some cases. For example if a child had been apprehended, becomes a ward of the state and then placed for adoption, one could argue that confidentiality is necessary for security reasons. Secondly, some birthmothers do not want to be identified and by abolishing confidentiality these women would need to make special arrangements to not be identified. This could cause these women to be labeled in a negative way and could increase the adoptee's sense of abandonment.

The argument for abolishing confidentiality is that it would encourage open adoption and make birthmothers and adoptees more accessible to one another. Further, this recommendation appears to equalize power within the adoption triad, as it would provide birthmothers with information that is currently available to only adoptive parents and adoptees. Therefore it is evident that there needs to be some research into how these various interests can be taken into consideration.

Preventing Exploitation

Birthmother, Kathy M. Lewis (1999) made a number of recommendations for reform in adoption policy in her master's thesis and below I list the recommendations that I support. First, the birth mother's counsellor must remain her advocate. To ensure this happens, Lewis recommends that two different counsellors represent the adoptive and

birthparents (Lewis, 1999). This helps to decrease the conflict of interest a counsellor would encounter if representing both parties.

Second, Lewis recommends that long-term counselling be available to all members of the adoption triad. She argues that long-term counselling recognizes the life-long impact of the adoption decision (Lewis, 1999). Further, this form of counselling acknowledges that various issues may be raised across one's life span that are related to the adoption experience. Help should be available when needed over the long-term.

Lewis does an excellent job of identifying aspects of adoption practice that fail birthmothers. Her recommendations also identify the long-term impact adoption has on birthmothers. Her recommendation of long-term counseling recognizes that grieving the loss of a child to adoption is a life-long process. This recommendation therefore normalizes the grief experience.

The New South Wales Model

A model for adoption policy and practice reform can be found in the New-South Wales, Australia's Adoption Act 2000. Firstly, this state policy uses the language of birthmothers by referring to them as "natural mothers". Secondly, the Adoption Act 2000 contains policies designed to protect the 'best interest of mother and child' and is designed to help mothers keep and raise their children. For example, under this Act, the period of time before consent can be given has been extended from three to thirty days after the birth of the child. Further, "the order of adoption cannot be made before the expiration of a further 30 day revocation period". The 60-day period is believed to

enable adoption counseling for the mother and to enable greater consideration for the most appropriate caring arrangement of the child

([http://parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/web/phweb.nsf/frames/1?open&tab=bills&body=/prod/parlment/nswbill.nsf/\\$\\$searchtemplatedefault](http://parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/web/phweb.nsf/frames/1?open&tab=bills&body=/prod/parlment/nswbill.nsf/$$searchtemplatedefault)).

The Adoption Act 2000 also mandates that a mother considering adoption must be given written information outlining all local services and alternatives to adoption.

Additionally, a mother must be given written information about the short and long-term emotional consequences (including potential traumatic psychological implications for herself and her child) of relinquishment

([http://parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/web/phweb.nsf/frames/1?open&tab=bills&body=/prod/parlment/nswbill.nsf/\\$\\$searchtemplatedefault](http://parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/web/phweb.nsf/frames/1?open&tab=bills&body=/prod/parlment/nswbill.nsf/$$searchtemplatedefault)).

According to the Adoption Bill 2000, “an adoption plan can contain provision for such matters as exchange of information between the parties about a child's development and important events in the child's life, the means and nature of continuing contact between the parties and ways to foster the child's cultural identity”

(www.parliament.nsw.gov.au). As well, the court is required to take any adoption plan into account in making an adoption order (clause 90) and if the potential adoptive and birthparents register an adoption plan it has effect as if it were part of the adoption order ([http://parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/web/phweb.nsf/frames/1?open&tab=bills&body=/prod/parlment/nswbill.nsf/\\$\\$searchtemplatedefault](http://parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/web/phweb.nsf/frames/1?open&tab=bills&body=/prod/parlment/nswbill.nsf/$$searchtemplatedefault)). In short, the Adoption Bill 2000 promotes openness and honesty by legalizing adoption agreements.

The New South Wales model has many strengths. First, it is focused on family preservation (keeping mother and baby together) and therefore recognizes alternative models of family. Secondly, it recognizes that historically birthmothers have not been educated on the risks to themselves and their children should they choose adoption for their children. The Adoption Act 2000 in some ways acts as an advocate for birthmothers as it ensures that they are educated about the short and long-term risks of adoption. This approach therefore addresses the less attractive side of adoption – the family who loses a child. Thirdly, by extending the period before consent can be given and the period for revoking consent, the policy recognizes that birthmothers often need recovery time before such a major decision can be made final. This again recognizes birthmothers' experiences as a number of birthmothers have described themselves as “under the influence” of pain or trauma when they signed consent forms.

Future Research

There is a desperate need for future research on birthmothers. The literature on adoption would benefit greatly from a longitudinal study on birthmothers and the lifetime impact of relinquishment. For example, how does relinquishing a child impact a birthmother's later relationships with herself, her partner, and her subsequent children. As well, one could examine the impact of relinquishment on birthsiblings. Further, it would be interesting to examine if birthmothers experiences of adoption and loss vary with the type of adoption (open, closed, semi-open) they are involved in.

CONCLUSION

This research has sought to listen to the grief experience of birthmothers and the role language plays in the grieving process. First, research and analysis of the distinctive features of birthmothers' grief were briefly summarized. It was then argued that the language used by adoption professionals and mainstream society, contribute to a birthmothers' experience of disenfranchised grief. This paper then examined how birthmothers respond to and redefine common words and phrases used within the adoption community. What was revealed is that birthmothers have constructed a language to express their role, grief and the fact that relinquishment is not a one-time act but rather an ongoing process. Finally, this paper concluded with future recommendations made by birthmothers.

Researching and writing this paper has been not only an academic challenge, but a spiritual and an emotional challenge for me. The testimonies of lifemothers have normalized my experiences of loss and grief and have warned me of approaching losses (such as my role of grandmother to my relinquished son's potential children). I have once again found my way out of silence and it is my hope that this paper may be a tool for helping other lifemothers out of their silence. Further, I hope that this paper will help to create awareness and empathy for the losses that birthmothers face throughout their lives and experiences with adoption. With this awareness may birthmothers find freedom from the policy of secrecy and shame.

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