THE STRANGER WHO BORE ME:

ADOPTEE-BIRTH MOTHER INTERACTIONS

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BY

KAREN RUTH AVEY MARCH, M.A.

A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies

in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

McMaster University

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ABSTRACT


This study examines the long-term effects of adoption

reunion.  The main focus is on adoptees who have searched, made

contact with their birth mothers and encountered a reunion experience.

Intensive, open-ended interviews with a randomly-selected sample of

sixty adoptees indicate that search and reunion have little connection

to the adoptee's dissatisfaction with his/her adoption outcome or his/

her adoptive parent-child bonds.  In fact, a large number hide their

search and reunion from their adoptive parents because they do not want

these significant others to think that they are unhappy with their

adoptive status.  The desire to reunite is more likely to be

precipitated by some life-crisis event that raises the adoptive role-

identity to a prominent position in the adoptee's salience hierarchy.

Consideration of the meaning of that role-identity leads the adoptee

to resolve the ambiguities that he/she encounters because of his/her

lack of knowledge about his/her biological origins.  Reunion contact

resolves this sense of uncertainty because.it provides the missing

background information that the adoptee needs for a consistent

presentation of self in social interaction.  Reunion contact with the

birth mother is not a necessity for satisfactory reunion outcome.

The adoptee possesses a strong vocabulary of motives that he/she uses

to account for his/her reunion outcome and to integrate his/her

background information as a part of his/her positive self-concept.

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# INTRODUCTION

This study examines the topic of adoption reunions. Adoption reunions occur when an adoptee and his/her birth parent(s) meet one another many years after the adoption takes place. In modern Western society, secrecy sustains the adoption procedure. Government legislation seals all adoption records and keeps all identifying information confidential. A large number of adoptees contest this practice because they believe that this lack of background information produces doubt over their identity. Many conduct searches and establish reunion contact despite the legal restrictions held against them. These actions undermine the institution of adoption in modern Western society and the closed record system that supports it.

Research on search and reunion indicates that secrecy produces ambiguity over the adoptee's social position and serious personal doubts about his/her true identity (Triseliotis, 1973: 165). One questions, however, whether reunion resolves the identity issues that stem from non-disclosure or whether it merely reflects "one of the many searches for meaning that all people must take as they proceed through the life cycle" (Andrews, 1979: 59). The answer to this question heightens our knowledge of the adoption process and enhances our understanding of identity. The answer to this question provides a major focus for this research study.

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Identity is a social product created and shaped through the process of social interaction. Adoption produces a unique procedure for individuals in our society to define themselves, their significant others, their interaction patterns and their position in their own social world. The emotional impact of meeting birth relatives and discovering new information about self forces adoptees to reassess these definitions. This process of reassessment offers an incredible testing-ground for many of the social theories that focus on the development, structure and maintenance of identity. This study concentrates on that process as it affects the identity of reunited adult adoptees.

The study appears in _eight_ chapters. _Chapter I_ outlines the historical development of the institution of adoption in Ontario, Canada. Over the years, Canadians have developed a more open attitude toward the issues of sexual freedom, illegitimacy and human rights. These changes set the stage for adoption reunion. Yet, because non-disclosure still supports the institution of adoption in our society, adoptees who seek reunion encounter a 'psycho-pathological view' that labels their searching behaviour as deviant, maladjusted and socially unacceptable (Haime & Timms, 1985: 50). This view maintains the adoptive process and its demand for a closed record system.

Research on search and reunion indicates that most searching adoptees have an "overall, healthy adult adjustment" to their adoptive situation (Sorosky et. al., 1974: 204). These findings reveal the need for a less pathological theory that represents the social reality of searching adoptees. _Chapter II_ offers the symbolic interactionist

theoretical approach as a more comprehensive theory for the analysis

of these social phenomena.  This theory of social life possesses

analytical concepts that view reunion as a 'normal' response to an

adoptive situation that denies adoptees access to background information

that others in their society readily possess.

Chapter III is the methodology chapter.  This study employs face-

to face interaction in its data collection.  "Face-to-faceness has the

irreplaceable character of non-reflectivity and immediacy that furnishes

the fullest possibility of truly entering the life, mind and definitions

of the other" (Lofland, 1974: 2).  The "highly explosive circumstances

of search and reunion", however, require a sensitivity of judgement and

understanding that must be continually confronted and reflected upon

(Stoneman et. al., 1980: 3).  Chapter III raises the importance that

this issue holds for the examination of reunion and for other research

projects of this type.

The remaining chapters present the research data.  Chapter IV

outlines the search process, the types of adoptees who search, and

their motives for searching.  Reunion experiences and reunion outcome

appear in Chapter V.  Chapter VI examines the impact of reunion on the

adoptee's identity and the effect of reunion outcome on the adoptee's

self-concept.  Chapter VII discusses reunion from the perspectives of

the other members of the adoption triangle.  Eight (8) birth parents

and four (4) adoptive parents responded to this study.  Even though this

sample is too small to generalize to other adoptive parents and birth

parents, these respondents offer an interesting analysis of reunion

outcome.  Chapter VIII connects these seven preceding chapters in terms

of the effects that reunion creates for the adoptee's identity, the
interrelationship of all three members of the adoption triangle, and,
the social institution of adoption in modern Western society. It
examines the contributions that this study makes to the scientific
research on adoption and the implications that it presents for the
understanding of identity as a social construct that continually
grows and develops throughout a person's life career.

CHAPTER I - THE SOCIAL INSTITUTION OF ADOPTION IN CANADA

AND THE RISE OF SELF-HELP SEARCH GROUPS

## Introduction

This chapter describes the social institution of adoption in

Canada and the rise of self-help search groups. The chapter is

divided into three sections. Section I outlines the historical

development of adoption in the province of Ontario, Canada. Section

II examines the growth of self-help search groups for adoptees and

the rise of the Canadian organization known as Parent Finders. The

subjects in this study are members of the Hamilton, Ontario chapter

of that organization. Parent Finders publically legitimizes the

adoptee's 'need' to know and supports his/her searching activity.

Section III reviews the research literature on search and reunion and

its support for the claims that these self-help search groups make.

All of these sections reveal a growing acceptance and understanding of

the idea that secrecy inhibits the development of a harmonious and

coherent identity structure for adoptees because it denies them the

opportunity to fully integrate their genealogy as a part of their self-

concept.

## I: The Formal Regulation of Adoption in the Province of Ontario, Canada

Adoption is the "institutionalized practice through which an

individual belonging by birth to one kinship group acquires new kinship

ties that are socially defined as equivalent to the congenital ties"

(Weinstein, 1968: 95). Although all cultures practice adoption, the adoptive process reflects a society's social structure and the functions that adoption performs for the maintenance of that social structure (Benet, 1976: 14). Simple, pre-literate societies use informal, open adoption arrangements whereby a child is 'given' to another group member but maintains his/her original kinship ties. This system, however, becomes impractical in a higly-complex, industrialized and urbanized country like Canada. In such societies, adoption occurs primarily as a way of matching childless couples and children who need parental care. State agents arrange the adoption procedure and mediate between the biological parents, the adoptive parents and the child. These state agents legally restrict all records of the adoption procedure in their attempt to integrate the adoptee more fully into the adoptive family system.

Canadians originally used an informal adoption process until the middle part of the 1920's when social reformers applied the situation of European orphans from the First World War to help advertise the plight of Canadian orphans who also lacked good adoptive placements (Davenport, 1984; Lemon, 1959). These social reformers emphasized the disparities that existed in adoptive procedures across the country and the lack of legal protection that adoptees experienced at that time. Legislators, therefore, enacted a series of statutes designed to standardize the process of adoption in Canada.

These statutes differ slightly from province to province in Canada because the British North America Act of 1867 gives each province individual responsibility for its own social welfare policies. This causes many discrepancies in the enactment of adoption procedures

and much confusion in the study of adoption rates, adoption standards and the disclosure of background information (Johannasson, 1965: 515; Hepworth, 1980: 130-132; Garber, 1985: 207). All jurisdictions, however, maintain the secrecy clause that guarantees anonymity for all three members of the adoption triangle. Secrecy contrives to make the adoptee "both in law and in fact a complete member of the adoptive family with the same rights and privileges that entail a natural child" (Foster, 1973: 35).

Because Canadian society, like all societies, continually adjusts its social structure to match the social attitudes of its members, the institution of adoption has recently experienced considerable stress over this secrecy requirement. In the past twenty years,

> ...five trends emerged that have a decided impact on the adoption issues we confront today. These are: a declining birth rate; changing sexual mores, increasing concern about the rights of minority groups, mounting interest in personal genealogy, and an increased tendency to view the courts as the final arbiter of all disputes. (Watson, 1979: 13)

These five trends have produced a more open and accepting attitude toward the idea of non-disclosure (Benet, 1974: 13). That attitude gains considerable support from the lobby activities of self-help search groups that publically promote an open-record system (Harrington, 1978: 49). These groups claim that non-disclosure stigmatizes the adoption process and produces an adoptive status that,

> ...carries with it social disgrace, disapproval, and legally sanctioned discrimination that, in effect, deny first-class citizenship to adopted persons. Only adoptees are denied their genealogy by law. Likewise, only adopted citizens are issued a birth certificate that represents a legalized fraud. (Small, 1979: 43)

Many others (including many adoptees) argue that an open-record system radically changes the institution of adoption into a "kind of permanent foster care" in which the adoptive parents act as "full-time" babysitters" (Andrews, 1979: 15). These people believe that "no person has a legal or inherent right to any information respecting their backgrounds and origins save what their parents voluntarily choose to impart" (Zeilinger, 1979: 45). Proponents of this view see disclosure as a threat to the stability and sanctity of the adoptive family system. Open records merely "ignore the adoptee's need for membership in a family to be settled" and cast "seeds of doubt and confusion" about the "adoptee's unambiguous membership in the adoptive family" (Foster, 1979: 37).

These arguments are hypothetical for the large number of adoptees who search and reunite despite the legal restrictions that are held against them (Foster, 1979: 35). The government of Ontario officially recognized this fact when it established a voluntary Adoption Disclosure Register through its Child Welfare Act of 1978. That Register failed, however, because it facilitated reunion only if all three members of the adoption triangle agreed to disclosure (Ontario Ministry of Community & Social Services, 1981: 7). Adoptees without their adoptive parents' consent could not register and only registered birth parents and adoptees could reunite. Consequently, "from June 1979 to September 1985, the Voluntary Disclosure Register in Ontario received registrations from 5,341 adult adoptees and 2,635 birth parents with only 342 matches" (Garber, 1985: 55). This figure represents a very small proportion of the adult adoptees in Ontario

who express a desire for reunion (Garber, 1985: 55).

In 1983, this situation prompted an adult adoptee, Mrs.
Elizabeth Ferguson, to make a formal application to the County
Court to have the contents of her adoption file released to her.
The judge in that case, Judge Killeen, ruled against this adoptee
because "her need was not compelling; nor was there authority in the
Act to allow her request" (Garber, 1985: 1). This judge noted that
the Child Welfare Act of 1978 made no provision for the type of
background information that could be legally released to adoptees or
the circumstances for release. The Ontario Court of Appeal's support
of Killeen's ruling led the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social
Services to send a directive to its fifty Children's Aid Societies
stating that it would now only release adoption information through
the Adoption Disclosure Register. Many of these Children's Aid
Societies requested more explicit guidelines about the type of
background information that their agency should, itself, release.
This reaction caused great uncertainty among the general public over
the possible release/non-release of background information. Many
adoptees and birth parents feared that they might lose future access
to their background information. Others worried about unsolicited
contact or public exposure. Demands for additional background
information increased noticeably for all three members of the adoption
triangle.

The Ontario legislature intensified this public concern with
its 1984 release of a Consultation Paper on its proposed revisions of
the Child Welfare Act of 1978. That proposal included a section that

prevented the release of non-identifying information to adoptive

parents as well as adult adoptees (Bill 77, Section 157: 124-125).

Dr. Rober Elgie, the Ontario Minister of Community and Social

Services, recognized the new controversy that this proposal produced.

He appointed Dr. Ralph Garber, D.S.W. to examine the issue of an

open-record system in Ontario and offer recommendations that would

satisfy the interests of all three members of the adoption triangle.

Dr. Garber's report supports an open-record system for adult

adoptees in Ontario. Garber (1985: 41) notes, however, that "because

the information in the original birth certificate has been withheld

for at least the childhood period of the adoptee, its revelation may

be a source of upset". He, therefore, advises that the release of any

background information be accompanied by mandatory counselling. The

extent of that counselling depends upon the type of background informa-

tion revealed and the counsellor's assessment of the adoptee's overall

acceptance of that information. Under Garber's scheme, the Adoption

Reunion Register becomes a means to establish contact, arrange a reunion

meeting and, upon the request of one party, make a "reasonable and

discrete search for those not registered" (Sweeney, 1986: 4).

Ontario legislators observed that Garber's proposal seemed

"particularly controversial and problemmatic when applied retroactively"

to birth parents who expect continued confidentiality (Sweeney, 1986:

5). They established a 'semi-active' provincial disclosure register

that uses local Children's Aid Societies or adoption agencies to conduct

confidential searches for adult adoptees and match adoptees and birth

parents who mutually register. The agency ensures the birth parents'

anonymity by gaining their permission before any identifying background

information is released to the adoptee. Identifying information
may be released, however, "in certain cases where, after a search
has been conducted for a reasonable length of time, the person whose
consent was required cannot be located" (Sweeney, 1986: 10). In this
way, the Ontario government's new Adoption Reunion Register balances
the adoptee's 'need to know' against the 'need for privacy and
confidentiality' that it originally promised the birth parents
(Sweeney, 1986: 15).

The Ontario legislature enacted these ammendments to their
Child Welfare Act on July 6, 1987. Until that time, searching adoptees
used the more unobtrusive methods available to them. These adoptees
opposed both the normative constraints and the legal restrictions
that their society held against disclosure. The results of their
searching behaviour provided Garber (1985) and Sweeney (1986) with a
major part of the data that they used in their assessment of an open-
records system in Ontario. This population's consolidated searching
efforts served as the prime impetus for the implementation of
legislative change. Their searching activities became prominent,
however, due to the concentrated efforts of self-help search groups
that promoted and articulated the concept of adoption reunion as a
natural outgrowth of non-disclosure.

II: The Impact of Self-Help Search Groups

In 1954, Jean Paton published a study entitled, The Adopted Break
Silence. This study examines the responses that 40 adult adoptees give
about their adoptive experience. These adoptees centre their assessment
of adoption on their ambivalent feelings over the separation between
their biological and socio-cultural inheritance and their attempts to

synthesize the two into some type of unified whole (Paton, 1954: 11).

Nineteen of these adoptees resolved this ambivalence by effecting a

reunion with their birth relatives. Their experiences led Paton to

the conclusion that search and reunion instinctively evolve from a

closed adoptive system that denies adoptees the opportunity to

incorporate their unknown biological parents as a part of their

identity.

Professionals in the adoption field generally ignored Paton's

study at that time because an increasingly growing number of adoptable

infants led them into more pressing and immediate research questions

(Davenport, 1984: 18). They focused on such issues as the dilemma of

adoptive parent-child relations (Dinitz et. al., 1954; Kadushin, 1966;

Kirk, 1959; 1962; 1964), the selection of successful adoptive placements

(Gochros, 1967; Hicks, 1969; Kohlsaat & Johnson, 1954) and satisfactory

adoption outcome (Bohman, 1970; Jaffee & Fanshel, 1970; Kadushin &

Seidl, 1971). Paton's impact occurred in her formation of the self-

help search organization known as Orphan Voyage. This organization

provides searching adoptees with a common, articulate voice for the

expression of their concerns over their missing genealogy.

Following Paton's theme, Florence Fisher founded the Adoptee's

Liberty Movement Association (ALMA) in 1973. Her book, The Search for

Florence Fisher, brought media attention to the movement and stimulated

more public interest in the issue of disclosure (Fisher, 1973). Fisher's

intimate description of her own twenty-year search for her birth parents

personalized and humanized the topic of reunion. The organization's

political lobbying activities added to this public attention and

advertised the need for more information on the adoptee's biological

roots.

Today, affiliated chapters of Orphan Voyage and ALMA exist throughout the United States. Several splinter groups such as Yesterday's Children, Concerned United Birthparents (CUB), the Adoption Identity Movement (AIM) and Heritage Incorporated represent the interests of these other members of the adoption triangle. All of these organizations advocate an open-record system. All provide assistance with search and reunion. Each maintains a registry of names that are used to match searchers. Each provides intermediates to assist in reunion contact. These organizations believe that minor adoptees need the guidance of a single set of parents until they reach adulthood. They therefore require this group to obtain their adoptive parents' permission to register for reunion.

Other countries exhibit similar types of self-help search groups. The National Organization for Reunion of Child and Parent (NORCAP) and Contact are the two major search organizations in the United Kingdom. Australia houses the head office of Jigsaw International, while New Zealand supports its branch office. All of these self-help search groups support their members in the process of search and reunion. The majority lobby for an open-records system in their district. Their continued growth and development legitimizes the adoptee's demand for more identifying background information and his/her desire for reunion contact.

The largest and most active self-help search group in Canada is Parent Finders. This group started in 1976 in British Columbia. Today, it operates as a national lobby group for twenty-two subgroups across the country. Eight of these major subgroups exist in Ontario.

Parent Finders is a member of the American Adoption
Association. This association serves as an umbrella group for
over 200 adoption organizations across the world. Like all search
organizations, Parent Finders lobbies for a more open system of
adoption and supports the concept of a national reunion registry.
It lists its three primary goals as,

> The ability to promote a feeling of openness and
> understanding in the minds of the general public
> around the whole concept of adoption and its effects
> on the members of the triangle; to give each other
> mutual support and aid in the search for biological
> families and to seek changes in existing legislation
> surrounding the sealed records of adoption.
> (Thompson, 1979: 13)

Parent Finders is a non-profit organization staffed by
volunteers. It does not actively recruit members or force attendance.
The groups hold meetings once a month. Thus, even though the majority
of members are adoptees in search, adoptive parents, social workers,
birth parents, foster children and reunited adoptees often attend
meetings. This enlarges the scope of Parent Finders influence and its
knowledge of the adoptive process. Their continued rise in membership
validates their searching activity and the adoptee's expressed 'need'
for reunion contact (Garber, 1985; Thompson, 1979).

Like other searching adoptees, Parent Finders adoptees define
their 'need' for reunion contact as a direct reaction to the secrecy
that surrounds their adoptive status. They want to 'fill in' the
missing gaps that their lack of background information creates for
them. They claim that the events of their birth and relinquishment
remove the doubts and uncertainties that their unanswered questions

raise. Research studies on search and reunion substantiate this definition of the adoptive situation. These studies define the adoptee's quest as a 'quest for identity' (Sorosky et. al., 1978). The next section of this chapter examines that body of literature and its relevance for the focus proposed in this particular research study.

III: <u>Past Research Studies on Search and Reunion, Identity and Reunion Contact</u>

Research studies on search and reunion support the hypothesis that secrecy produces great uncertainty for adoptees who must deny the fact that they have "two sets of parents - one highly inaccessible" to them (Flynn, 1979: 3). This uncertainty affects the adoptee's identity, self-image and perception of reality because it questions the source of his/her existence as a human being (Haimes & Timms, 1985: 51; Harrington, 1980: 37). In the first research study completed on search and reunion, Triseliotis (1973) found, for example, that neither vindictiveness nor poor adjustment to the adoptive family situation casused searching behaviour. Rather, his sample of <u>70</u> searching adoptees believed that their missing genealogy would help them understand themselves and their social situation more clearly. Their comments led Triseliotis (1973: 157) to the conclusion that, as long as secrecy prevails, adoptees will demonstrate some preoccupation with their origins and the identity of their biological parents.

Sorosky et. al. (1974) observed similar research results. The searching adoptees in their study noted that their birth parents played a role in their development as human beings. However, because the secrecy clause in their adoption contract denied them a full account

of that role, they experienced 'gaps' in their identity that they could not explain to self or others. Their search attempts reflected their need to 'fill in' these gaps. Sorosky et. al. (1974: 204), therefore, observed that "the desire for background information is ubiquitious to all adoptees but can become a burning issue to some" who decide to effect reunion. These researchers (1974: 205) advised modern Western society to reconsider "the degree to which an adoptee is able to resolve questions about his/her identity without having more complete information on the birth parents and without the opportunity of a reunion" experience.

Other research studies based themselves on these two original studies (Haimes & Timms, 1985; Simpson et. al., 1981; Sobol & Cardiff, 1983; Sorosky et. al., 1978; Stoneman et. al., 1980; Thompson et. al., 1978). Like these two previous studies, their research findings isolated identity issues as the prime motivation for search. Like these other two studies, their research data indicated a wide range of adoptees who search. These research studies also dispelled the idea that only poorly adjusted, unstable or neurotic adoptees searched. In fact, these researchers noted that searching adoptees fell along a continuum ranging from little or no interest in search to an almost total preoccupation with reunion (Sobol & Cardiff, 1983: 480; Simpson et. al., 1981: 432). The adoptee's position on that continuum correlated with,

> ...a traumatic adoption revelation; a lack of information
> about birth parents; strained adoptive family relationships;
> poor self-concept and personal adjustment; the experiencing
> of stressful life events; and, a belief that having been
> adopted made one feel different and incomplete. (Sobol &
> Cardiff, 1983: 478)

Yet, regardless of their position on this continuum, all adoptees expressed a desire for a more complete genealogy and knowledge of the events surrounding their conception, birth and relinquishment (Haimes & Timms, 1985: 51).

These studies on search and reunion provide a firm foundation for the study of reunion outcome. Their concentration on searchers limits that analysis, however. The number of actual reunions in these studies is very small. Of the 70 adoptees in Triseliotis' (1973) study, for example, only 11 experience reunion. Seven of these 11 adoptees reunited with birth siblings rather than birth parents. This type of reunion situation mars the consistent analysis of the reported reunion findings (Sorosky et. al., 1974: 199).

Other researchers report similar difficulties over their access to large numbers of reunited adoptees. Thompson et. al. (1978) found that only 11 of their 133 research respondents achieved a reunion during the course of their study. Simpson et. al. (1981: 427) note that of the "41 genetic searches initiated and completed by a public agency between June 1977 and December 1978", only 12 made reunion contact. Stoneman et. al. (1980) also report that they were only able to find a sample of 20 reunited adoptees for their research project. This study's sample of 60 reunited adoptees supplies a much larger scope for analysis than those studies that have preceded it.

Past studies on search and reunion also concern adoptees who seek search assistance primarily from social service agencies. Yet, self-help search organizations facilitate a large number of reunion

matches. Researchers on search and reunion observe that the majority of their subjects attempted independent searches before they approached the social service agency for assistance (Simpson et. al., 1981: 432; Sorosky et. al., 1974: 198; Triseliotis, 1973: 6). An adoptee's involvement in a self-help search group is a relevant factor that should be considered in the analysis of reunion outcome. This study responds to this area of interest by taking a randomly-selected sample from the Hamilton chapter of Parent Finders.

These previous studies on search and reunion also demonstrate little analysis on the long-term effects of reunion outcome. None of the 11 reunited adoptees in Triseliotis' (1973) study, for example, formed meaningful, long-lasting relationships with their birth relatives. Only 4 of the 11 reunited adoptees in Sorosky et. al.'s (1974) study maintained reunion contact. The others were either "disillusioned or disappointed" or had to detach themselves from a birth mother who demanded a parent-child relationship that they could not reciprocate (Sorosky et. al., 1974: 203). Yet, none of the adoptees in these studies regretted their reunion. It helped them accept their present condition and circumstances with greater equanimity because their genealogical questions had finally been answered (Triseliotis, 1973: 160; Sorosky et. al., 1974: 203).

Thompson et. al. (1979: 14) note that the "feeling of non-existence prior to adoption" disappears once the adoptee removes his/her doubts and uncertainties over his/her genealogy. This factor causes difficulty in the assessment of reunion outcome because, despite their search findings, adoptees express great satisfaction from this information. They believe, in addition, that their birth parents

experience positive results from their contact. However, the greatest change occurred in their adoptive parent-child relationship. They felt closer to their adoptive parents after reunion because their background information let them place their lives into a more realistic social context.

Stoneman et. al. (1980: 14) observe considerable adjustment in search expectations once reunion contact occurs. These researchers asked a sample of 20 reunited adoptees to describe their initial reaction to their reunion and, then, their present feelings. Half of this sample had experienced their reunion at least two years prior to their involvement in this research study. Twelve (60%) of these adoptees spoke positively about their first reunion meeting and used words like "wonderful", "happy", "excited" and "relieved". The remainder wrote in negative terms and used such words as "disappointed and bitter", "numb", "cheated" and "having fantasies destroyed". These responses indicate that the reunion is far from ideal. Yet, none of these adoptees regretted their reunion. Knowledge of their genealogy made them feel more complete because they could integrate that information more fully into their identity.

These assessments of reunion outcome concur with the findings of other researchers who report that the adoptee gains a deep sense of confidence and personal security as he/she gains further knowledge of his/her genetic heritage (Simpson et. al., 1981: 432; Sobol & Cardiff, 1983: 483; Haimes & Timms, 1985: 51). Adoptees describe themselves as more content with themselves, more satisfied and reassured

with their lives, more tolerant of other people, more mature in
their outlook and more at peace and settled within themselves
after their reunion occurs. Their background information 'fills
in' the missing gaps in their identity and places them within a
firmer social context. This body of literature does not, however,
explain how this process evolves or the types of adjustments that
are required for the adoptee to full integrate this new information
as a part of his/her identity. This study responds to that lack
by concentrating on the impact of reunion on the identity of adult
adoptees and the long-term effects of post-reunion contact.

In many ways, this study repeats the questions that other
studies on search and reunion raise. It examines the adoptee's
decision to search, his/her reasons for wanting to search and his/
her initial reaction to reunion contact. The issue of reunion is,
however, a relatively new area of interest in the field of adoption
research. The repetition of this type of information increases the
very limited knowledge that is available on this topic.

This study also contains some of the limitations evinced by
other research studies on search and reunion. It examines a small
sample of reunited adoptees (60). It explores personal, retroactive
accounts of the search and reunion process. It does not contain a
control group of non-searching, non-reunited adoptees. Its strength
lies in the fact that the sample is randomly-selected from a list of
reunited adoptees who are members of a self-help search group. This
permits a comparison between the findings of studies on adoptees who
seek help from social service agencies and those who take searching
action on their own. This type of information offers a unique source

of data for the analysis of adoption and adoption reunion that
can also be used in other fields of research that question the
structure of identity. The next chapter outlines this issue
more fully and its relevance for the data found in this research
study.

## Conclusion

This chapter describes the growth and development of adoption
as a viable social institution in modern Canadian society. That
institution bases itself on a contractual agreement that guarantees
confidentiality to all three members of the adoption triangle. This
policy of non-disclosure denies the adoptee access to information
about his/her genetic roots and biological background. Adoptees who
desire this type of information frequently join self-help search
organizations that provide them with search techniques and emotional
support. These organizations form significant lobby groups that
advocate an open-record system. Their successful search activities
have led the social service agencies, government bodies and legal
institutions in the province of Ontario, Canada to take a "more open
approach to disclosing adoption information, including the opening
of birth records to adult adoptees" who desire reunion (Sweeney, 1986:1).

Research on search and reunion indicates that there is little
to fear from reunion contact. "The adoptee's need to know is a normal
and natural piece of the adoption phenmenon and is not restricted to
those adoptees who have had unhappy adoptive experiences" (Thompson et.
al., 1978: 30). Reunion contact produces satisfaction because it lets
adoptees integrate their genetic background into their identity
structure. It 'fills in' the identity gaps that the requirement

secrecy produce. These studies are vague and imprecise about the manner in which that process evolves. This study responds to this lack of information. It examines the way in which reunited adoptees assimilate their genealogy as a part of self. It concentrates on the stability, maintenance and alteration of the adoptee's identity after reunion and the long-term effects of reunion contact.

CHAPTER II - IDENTITY, ADOPTION AND THE DESIRE FOR REUNION

## Introduction

This chapter examines the relationship between non-disclosure, identity and the need for reunion. Our society promotes the normative value that secrecy is best for all three members of the adoption triangle (Foster, 1979: 37). Searching adoptees claim that this policy of non-disclosure creates identity issues that can only be solved by an open-record system. Early studies on search and reunion assumed that these searching adoptees used their search to resolve personal identity dysfunctions. This view coincides with the adoptee's motives for search and with his/her apparent disregard for the secrecy clause enclosed in the adoption contract (Hiscott, 1977: 22). These studies found that, like adoptees in general, searchers represent a cross-section of their society (Thompson et. al., 1978: 10). Only a small number of them used their search to resolve emotional problems. These findings refuted the 'psycho-pathological view' that guided these research studies (Haimes & Timms, 1985: 50). Section I of this chapter examines that view and the very limited picture that it offers for the study of the search and reunion process.

Section II responds to the call for a more 'psycho-social'

model of identity that can be used to assess the dynamics of search

and reunion in a more accurate form (Haimes & Timms, 1985: 85). It

offers the symbolic interactionist theoretical approach as a more

global perspective for the analysis of this social process and its

impact on the institution of adoption in modern Western society. Its

concepts of significant others, identity salience and motive talk

present an opportunity for a more extensive examination of the effects

of reunion for all three members of the adoption triangle. The basic

tenets of the symbolic interactionist theoretical approach and its

significance for the examination of search, reunion and reunion outcome

appear in this section.

I: The Psycho-pathological View, Identity and Search and Reunion

In our society, "adoption is not classed as a cultural item

with 'family' or 'kinship' but with 'welfare services' and 'rehabilitation'

of people in need" (Kirk, 1981: 4). This classification has produced a

great body of technical literature that focuses on the successful

outcome of adoptive placements (Bonham, 1977: 295). These 'follow-up

studies' indicate that the most significant factor in adoption outcome

is the adoptive parents' attitude. Successful adoption outcome results

from the adoptive parents' positive approach toward the child; their

unconditional acceptance of that child; and, their full integration

of that child as a part of the adoptive family system (Kadushin, 1970:

39; Kadushin & Seidl, 1971: 32; Ripple, 1968: 485).

Many of these follow-up studies discuss the considerable
doubt and hesitancy that adoptive parents experience over their
'entitlement' to their adopted child. These uncertainties can
cause difficulty in the development of close adoptive parent-child
bonds (Jaffee & Fanshel, 1970: 317; Dembrowski & Johnson, 1969;
Feigleman & Silverman, 1983). These researchers claim that successful
adoption outcome can only be achieved if the adoptive family "openly
acknowledges its unique status in the community" (Kirk, 1959: 136;
Jaffee & Fanshel, 1972: 218). The adoptive family's inability to
openly acknowledge its difference from biological families increases
the adoptive parents' stress over entitlement and blocks the adoptee's
successful integration into the adoptive family structure.

This body of literature supports the psycho-pathological view
that the absence of a biological tie between parent and child causes
stress in that very significant role relationship. Thus, even though
these follow-up studies report a high success rate in adoption outcome
(Kadushin, 1971: 39), they perpetuate the idea that adoptive families
are separate and different than biological families. Their concentra-
tion on the possible negative effects of adoption pre-define adoptive
families as 'high-risk' cases for family breakdown and psychological
dysfunction (Kadushin, 1966: 37). As such, they categorize adoptive
families for more intensive examination, more social assistance and
more institutional services (Kirk, 1981: 4). Searching behaviour gets
labelled as symptommatic of unsuccessful adoption outcome because it

the normative value of non-disclosure that our society promotes
for the adoptive family system.

Other areas of research support this image of the dysfunctional
adoptive family system. For example, clinical studies on adopted
children "reveal a fifteen to thirty per cent incidence of adoptees
in the psychiatric population, which far exceeds the two per cent
incidence in the general census" (Weider, 1977: 1; Humphrey &
Ounstead, 1973: 600; Schecter, 1969; 1970; Tousseing, 1962; 1971).
However, since few accurate statistics exist on the exact number
of adoptees in the general population, these statistics have an
imprecise base for comparison (Jonassohn, 1965: 515; Hepburn, 1980:
135; Garber, 1985: 70). The majority of these clinical studies also
make global generalizations that are based on small clinical
caseloads (Offord et. al., 1969: 110). In contrast, those studies
conducted at large institutions generally include data "which differs
markedly from one another in terms of age range, socioeconomic level
of the patient group and geographical location" (Simon & Senturia,
1966: 859). Such observations indicate that the proportion of adoptees
who suffer psychological difficulties due to their adoptive status is
much smaller than these studies portray.

The noticeable number of adoptees who seek clinical care is
important to the psycho-pathological view because these figures support
the hypothesis that adoption is a "precipitating factor or even the
primary factor in the multiple causation model" leading to psychiatric
problems in the adoptee (Lawton & Gross, 1964: 640). These clinical
studies are significant because, unlike the outcome studies which

focus on the adoptive parents or the dysfunctional adoptive family

system, these studies focus on the adopted child. That focus

centres on the difficulties that occur in the identity formation

of minor adoptees.

These clinical studies claim that adoption is a major factor

in the development of a disordered or maladjusted identity in the

adopted child (Schecter, 1960: 55; Tousseing, 1971: 324). They

believe that "for the child who has either no knowledge of his natural

parents or only uncertain knowledge of them...the resulting state of

confusion and uncertainty...fundamentally undermines his security

and affects his mental health" (Sants, 1964: 133; Dukette, 1962;

Goldstein et. al., 1973; Schecter, 1969; Schwartz, 1970; Tousseing,

1971; Weider, 1977). According to this perspective, many adoptees

become so obsessed about their adoptive status that they think that

all of their troubles will be solved if they find a solution to this

one issue (Clothier, 1943: 222; Sants, 1964: 133; Tousseing, 1971:

323). Proponents of this view consider searching behaviour as an

example of this obsession and treat it as a symptom of the adoptee's

disturbed state of mind (Moss & Moss, 1975: 388).

Comparative research studies on adoption question this view.

They reveal, for example, that adopted children show no significant

differences in their severity of illness when clinical symptoms are

compared between emotionally disturbed adopted children and emotionally

disturbed non-adopted children (Offord et. al., 1979: 113; Sweeny et.

al., 1963: 349). In fact, comparative studies of non-adopted children

and adopted children indicate that adoption does not necessarily

result in emotional disturbances in the adopted child (Mikawa et. al.,

1969: 278). These findings support the observation that the disproportionate number of adoptees in these studies results more from the fact that the data are taken primarily from adoptees who are involved in psychiatric institutions, family counselling sessions or private psychoanalysis (Braden, 1979: 486; Krugman, 1964: 350; Sorosky et. al., 1975) rather than from the "95.6 percent of non-relative adoptive children who are not referred for help" (Kadushin, 1977: 39; Krugman, 1964: 350).

These clinical studies are important because they directed the first studies that were completed on search and reunion. The psycho-pathological view appealed to these researchers because it focused on the issues of identity, identity conflict and the adoptee's concern with his/her birth relatives' identity (Sorosky et. al., 1975). These issues coincided with the types of identity concerns that searching adoptees used to explain their behaviour. In addition, the psycho-pathological view presented a viable explanation or rationale for the adoptee's defiance of their society's norm against disclosure in adoption. The psycho-pathological view offered these researchers a legitimate model that considered both the institutional structure of the adoptive process and the psychological effects that this process created for those individuals who were involved in search and reunion.

The research findings in these early studies contradicted the psycho-pathological view that guided them. Although these researchers discovered a small number of searching adoptees who exhibited some psychological instability, they could not significantly correlate

searching behaviour with dysfunctional identity structure, adoption

breakdown or a rejection of the adoptive parent-child bonds

(McWhinnie, 1969: 267; Thompson et. al., 1979: 15; Triseliotis, 1973:

159). In fact, the majority of the adoptees in these research

studies had successfully adjusted to their adoptive situation

(Sorosky et. al., 1974: 203). Their search behaviour merely

demonstrated their awareness that their birth parents played some

role in their development as human beings (Sobol & Cardiff, 1983:

478). These adoptees used their search results to build a stronger

base for their self-concept because they could now understand the

exact role that their birth parents had played in their development

(Haimes & Timms, 1985: 9; Stoneman et. al., 1980: 15). The psycho-

pathological view offered an insufficient analysis of the various

attitudes, feelings and expectations that these adoptees

experienced during their search and reunion process. These researchers

needed a more comprehensive theoretical approach that would let them

consider these social processes more fully (Sorosky et. al., 1978;

Haimes & Timms, 1985).

Haimes and Timms (1985: 88) suggest that a "psycho-social

model of identity" assesses the process of search and reunion more

appropriately than the psycho-pathological view. They (1985: 76) note

that "adoption is a social arrangement rather than a natural process

happening to the individual". Searching adoptees are resolving the

marginal status that arises from their position in the adoption triangle.

They are searching for their "social identity-that is, their ability to

place themselves in their own and in the life-histories of others"
(Haimes & Timms, 1985: 73). This social identity is based upon
the "ability to ask, without censure, about one's story and to ask
others about their part in one's story" (Haimes & Timms, 1985:
50). Thus, search and reunion demonstrate the adoptees' "desire
to correct that part of their lives which gives them a marginal
identity, that is, their ignorance about certain key people and
events in their lives" (Haimes & Timms, 1985: 50).

This thesis offers the symbolic interactionist theoretical
perspective as the 'psycho-social model of identity' that Haimes
and Timms desire. This approach possesses the concepts and ideas
required for the analysis of the wide range of social experiences
that adoptees encounter from their adoptive status and, in
consequence of their involvement in search and reunion. These concepts
can also be used in an analysis of the effects that reunion produce
for all three members of the adoption triangle. As such, it lets us
examine the implications of search and reunion for the institution of
adoption in modern Western society. The basic tenets of that approach,
its concepts, and, its viability for the study of identity, search and
adoption reunion appear in the following section of this chapter.

II: <u>The Symbolic Interactionist Theoretical Approach, Search and Reunion</u>

      a) <u>Self, Identity and Social Interaction</u>

An essential component of the symbolic interactionist approach
is the belief that <u>self</u> and <u>identity</u> are social products that take
their character and form from the symbols and meanings that arise out
of social interaction. Individuals develop a self and become conscious
of self by applying to self the words and meanings that they derive

from others. The terms, labels, descriptions and attitudes (i.e.

meanings) that others apply to the individual and, that the

individual applies to self, define that individual as a separate

object to be acted upon. These definitions constitute the

individual's own personal identity. Thus, one's identity becomes

more complex and diversified as one's universe of social experience

unfolds and expands.

Individuals organize their own personal world around their

objects. However, because humans have the capacity for reflective

thought, they also organize their actions in particular ways.

Objects vary in meaning based on the action and orientation of others

towards them. New forms and new meanings emerge through the process

of social interaction with others. Thus, the meaning of objects

changes across space and time. However, since possession of a self

means "being the object of your own actions and making indications

to self that are used in direct action" (Blumer, 1969: 12), different

social contexts elicit different meanings or definitions of self.

Individuals think of themselves, view themselves and act toward

themselves as separate objects with particular social characteristics,

behaviour traits and peculiarities of action.

Individuals become human because they are defined and recognized

as human. They become 'good', 'cruel', 'beautiful' or 'poor' in the

same way. They incorporate these social definitions as part of their

self-definition. Regular and consistent interaction with others

support and validate this self-definition. Each interaction that the

individual experiences either sustains or negates the identity
that he/she projects. Individuals, therefore, envisage their
identity presentation before they perform that identity before a
particular audience. That 'imagining' leads them to present
different parts of self to different types of people and modify
their behaviour to conform to the social situation that they
encounter.

Identity, as understood from this perspective, is not
static. As such, the symbolic interactionist approach permits a
more extensive and universal analysis of identity, identity change
and identity conflict than the psycho-pathological approach. The
psycho-pathological approach isolates search to the problems of
identity formation in young adoptees (Sorosky et. al., 1975: 18).
In contrast, the symbolic interactionist approach claims that
interest in search can change according to the meaning that adoption,
search and reunion hold for the adoptees' identity presentation
during particular social interactions and/or at certain points in
their life. With this approach, the processes of search and reunion
can signify difficulties in adoptive parent-child bonding or defensive
reactions to bad adoptive situations but, they are not necessary
requirements for searching behaviour. Rather, search and reunion
become situational responses to social stimuli that evolve through
social interaction. These situational responses alter the meaning
that search and reunion hold for the adoptee and stimulate his/her
interest in search. That meaning may be so strongly altered that the
adoptee decides to reunite. This factor explains the great variety of
adoptees who appear in research studies and their diverse interest in
reunion contact.

b) <u>Significant and Generalized Others, Self and Identity</u>

People possess a stable sense of personal identity, however, that also governs their behaviour and keeps them from acting indiscriminately or without purpose. This personal identity grows out of the common experiences that are encountered throughout their life. "The consistency of all such experiences enables each person to integrate them into a unit, a whole which is also treated as a distinct entity by other people" (Shibutani, 1961: 217). Thus, individuals form self-judgments which govern their past definitions and future actions as well as their current definition of the situation. This factor contributes to the formation of a self-concept that is uniform and harmonious as well as one that is innovative and variable. This self-concept encompasses "all of the individual's cognitions and emotions relating to the self" (Rosenburg, 1981: 596). Thus, adoptees integrate their adoptive status as a part of their self-concept. The impact that the adoptive status holds for that self-concept depends greatly upon the meaning that others apply to it.

There are two types of 'others' who are crucial to the formation of one's self-concept. These are one's <u>significant</u> and one's <u>generalized</u> others. Significant others are "those individuals who take on importance to the individual, those whom the individual desires to impress, who might be those he respects, those he wants acceptance from, those he fears, or those with whom he identifies" (Charon, 1979: 66). Significant others typically represent the primary agents of socialization (i.e. parents, family). These people instill the child with their normative values. Teachers, friends,

religious advisors, or, even, television idols can represent significant others. These significant others are important because children model themselves on the basis of the significant other's perceived reaction to them. They form identities that are consistent with these perceptions.

The adoptive parents represent the major set of significant others for adoptees because they perform the parent role. This factor explains the importance that adoption outcome studies place on the adoptive parents' unconditional acceptance of their adopted children. The birth parents also act as a set of significant others because they provide the adoptee with his/her genetic heritage. Adoptees experience difficulty integrating this set of significant others as a part of their self-concept because the birth parents' absence denies them the opportunity to mutually interact. Adoptees obtain their birth parents' perceived reaction to them from the descriptions that others provide. These descriptions lead to doubt and uncertainty because there is little tangible evidence to sustain them.

Many of the adoptee's perceptions come from his/her generalized others. Gradually, as children mature, they develop the capacity to take the role of several others simultaneously. They view their own behaviour from numerous perspectives at the same time. They form a generalized other. This generalized other represents the common fund of universal symbols and meanings that are shared by the group or community to which the individual belongs (Hewitt, 1979: 60). The individual internalizes these symbols and meanings as part of self. By

internalizing the group's attitudes, the individual adopts its

customs, laws, social patterns and rules of behaviour. Thus,

the generalized other provides a form of control over the

individual and his/her social behaviour. It serves as the

"perspective from which to define objects even when one is

separated from the group and thus gives continuity to one's

actions from a variety of situations that one encounters" (Lauder

& Handel, 1977: 382). The individual achieves a social status

and a sense of location relative to the group from the perspective

of this generalized other. It is only when individuals are able to

take the attitudes of this generalized other towards themselves that

they acquire a fully developed self.

Our society holds a negative stereotype of birth parents due

to their relinquishment of their birth children to others (Benet, 1976:

14; Garber, 1985: 15-16). This stereotype serves as one of the main

reasons for non-disclosure in adoption (Garber, 1985: 15; Sweeney, 1986:

1). Although recent social changes have lessened the impact of this

stereotype, as members of their community, adoptees internalize its

values. They recognize the normative constraints that are held against

birth parents and against search and reunion contact. They apply

these attitudes toward their adoptive status and their searching

behaviour. Their positive self-concept greatly depends upon their

ability to integrate these attitudes as an acceptable part of their

identity. They must reconcile this breach of these community norms

before they can accept search and reunion. For this to occur, they

must change the meaning that adoption holds for them. These types of

changes occur when they experience changes in the definition of their

adoptive situation.

c) <u>Definition of the Situation, Social Interaction and
Role-Identities</u>

The meaning of objects lie in the field of past experience.

New meanings emerge in the social act. Social interaction is,

however, continually negotiated. Individuals construct lines of

action by making indications to self and others. Others accept

these lines of action only if they are intelligible to them. Thus,

individuals base their behaviour on their <u>definition of the</u>

<u>situation</u>, that is, upon the "organization of perception in which

they assemble objects, meanings and others in social space and time

and act toward them in a coherent organized way" (Hewitt, 1979: 123).

It is this "social process that creates and upholds rules not the

rules that create and uphold social life" (Blumer, 1969: 18). This

process of negotiated action explains the great diversity and

originality that stems from the various members of our society.

This perceptive ability allows individuals to vary their

behaviour to fit their definition of the situation. In this way,

social roles also become interactive. Individuals construct <u>role-</u>

<u>identities</u> that they bring to every social interaction. These role-

identities consist of "the character and the role that each individual

devises for himself as an occupant of a particular role-position"

(McCall & Simmons, 1968: 67). Individuals adjust their performance of

these role-identities to correspond with their self-concept and

achieve the best presentation of self possible (McCall & Simmons,

1968: 68; Goffman, 1959).

People legitimize their role-identities through consistent role

performance and the regular role-support "accorded to an actor
by his audience for his claims concerning his identity" (McCall
& Simmons, 1968: 72). They weigh, assess and evaluate this role-
support in terms of their own personal meaning system. Their
definition of the situation determines the value and the use of
each particular role-identity that they possess. As a result,
there is "always some tension between the fostered reality of
one's identity and discrepant impressions garnered from the
external world" (McCall & Simmons, 1968: 74). This discrepancy
lets individuals manipulate their role performance to fit their
own definition of the situation.

These concepts of role-identity and role performance are
important to the analysis of search and reunion because adoptees
try to maintain a positive self-concept at the same time as they
break the normative constraints that their society holds against
disclosure. With this approach, the adoptee's interest in his/her
birth parents' identity becomes one of many potential responses
that he/she may take to counterbalance his/her adoptive status. If,
for example, adoptees maintain a role-identity that encompasses
their satisfactory role performance as 'adoptee', they may desire
a search and reunion. However, if something hampers that role
performance, they may try to resolve the issue through searching
behaviour. Their attempts at resolution depend upon their definition
of their adoptive situation and their personal appraisal of their
role performance as adoptees. In a similar fashion, their acceptance
or rejection of reunion outcome and their adjustments to the
reunion situation will greatly depend upon their ability to maintain

satisfactory role performance as 'reunited adoptees'. Their

overall definition of their search and reunion situation will,

however, reveal itself through the vocabulary of motives that they

use to account for their involvement/non-involvement in the search

and reunion process.

d) <u>Accounts, Motive Talk and Satisfactory Role Performance</u>

Individuals form a vocabulary of motives that explain their

actions to self and others who encounter their behaviour. These

"motives are accepted justifications for present, future or past

progress or acts" (Mills, 1940: 904). One's vocabulary of motives

explains one's relationships, one's social position, one's dreams

and goals, and so forth. Every individual in society relies on

"<u>motive talk</u>" to explain the causal connections between acts and

objects" (Hewitt, 1979: 43). They question others on their motives,

impute motives to unexplained behaviour, respond to requests about

others' personal motivation and, contemplate their own motives before

they take action. This motive talk corresponds with the individual's

view of the group's normative rules and customary values for, it is

only in this way that his/her behaviour will be positively assessed

by others. A person's vocabulary of motives also depicts a fairly

concise picture of his/her society's rules and expectations, his/her

assimilation of those rules and his/her position relative to the group.

Two types of motive talk focus on the links that exist between

the individual, his/her actions, the definition of the situation and

identity. These are <u>disclaimers</u> and <u>accounts</u>. Disclaimers are verbal

devices that protect people from negative sanctions before they can be applied. Thus, people will say, "I'm not prejudiced but..." or, "Before I say this remember...". Such disclaimers let people discount their objectionable acts by renouncing personal responsibility for these acts before they actually occur.

Accounts serve the same function as disclaimers but they can be applied either before or after the act. People use two types of accounts to deny responsibility for their actions. These are justifications and excuses. Excuses acknowledge that the action is undesireable or wrong but. that it is also inevitable. Thus, people admit that their conduct is questionable but they blame someone or something else for their behaviour. In contrast, people use justifications when they accept responsibility for their behaviour but deny that their act is offensive to others.

The concept of motive talk offers a distinctive device for the analysis of search, reunion and reunion outcome. Individuals form a vocabulary of motives that corresponds with their social expectations, their definition of the situation and their own personal meaning system. A close examination of the adoptee's motive talk should, therefore, indicate his/her own personal view of his/her adoptive role-identity and the social status that it gives him/her. Their accounts of their search and reunion activities, their original search expectations and their relative satisfaction over reunion outcome should also reveal the impact that these social processes make on their adoptive role-identity and their role performance when they enact the role-identity of adoptee. The significant impact of the search and reunion process on the adoptee's

self-concept, however, greatly depends on the important position
that this role-identity holds for him/her and the organization of
his/her social world.

### e) Role-Identity Prominence and Salience Hierarchies

Because modern Western society is very complex and diversified,
individuals in our society encounter a variety of social situations
and occupy numerous social roles throughout their life course. They,
therefore, maintain several different role-identities that can be
brought to any social interaction and experience an inordinate amount
of successful/unsuccessful role performances. These role-identities
form a "hierarchy of prominence" whereby the individual tries to work
into each interaction the role performance that is the most important
and the most socially rewarding to him/her. Each role-identity
occupies a position in that hierarchy of prominence on the basis of
the types of social benefits that it offers the individual. However,
since social interactions continually shift in terms of their audience
composition and audience response, a number of role-identities may be
called upon at one time. People, therefore, also construct a "salience
hierarchy" of role-identities that they perfer to perform. In this
way, each individual tries to control social interaction and maintain
the best presentation of self that he/she possibly can.

These salience hierarchies are very flexible and versatile.
A role-identity's position of salience depends on five factors.
These are:

> (1) its prominence; (2) its need of support; the
> person's need or desire for the kinds and amounts
> of (3) intrinsic and (4) extrinsic gratification
> ordinarily gained through its performance; and

(5) the perceived degree of opportunity for its
profitable enactment in the present circumstances.
(McCall & Simmons, 1968: 84-85)

This salience hierarchy of role-identities shifts each time
the person encounters one of these five factors. A subordinate role-
identity can take the position of a more prominent one and new role-
identities can monopolize future interactions. People maintain a
stable identity structure because their older, more familiar and
socially rewarding role-identities occupy very strong positions of
prominence in this salience hierarchy.

A research model based on this approach views the adoptive
role-identity as one of many role-identities that adoptees can bring
to their social interactions. That role-identity can occupy various
positions in the adoptee's salience hierarchy depending upon the
meaning that it holds for his/her presentation of self. This factor
explains the inability of past research studies to categorize
searching adoptees on the basis of the typical sociological classifi-
cations of age cohort, education background, occupational level or
individual identity dysfunction. The adoptive role-identity holds
different meanings for different adoptees at different times in their
lives. This interest in search and reunion corresponds with their
perception of their adoptive role-identity and how that role-identity
currently affects their presentation of self in social interaction.

   f) Presentation of Self, the Adoptive Role-Identity and the
      Process of Stigmatization

Since each particular role-identity is subject to use regardless
of its position in an individual's salience hierarchy, each individual

possesses limited control over the role-identity that he/she

presents. The social interaction process may require him/her to

use a role-identity that offers low status or social prestige and,

which presents limited options for a satisfactory role performance.

These types of role-identities expose the individual to public

disgrace or social disapproval because they possess social

characteristics or attributes that are unacceptable to others. The

individual tends to place these types of role-identities in a low

position of prominence because their role performance offers him/her

few social rewards. By doing this, however, the individual places

himself/herself in a discreditable position whereby others may

discover these 'unacceptable' social characteristics and set him/

her apart from the group.

Goffman (1963) describes a process of stigmatization that

separates individuals from the rest of their society. The

stigmatized person is,

> ...an individual who might have been received easily
> in ordinary social intercourse (but who) possesses a
> trait that can obtrude itself upon attention and turn
> those of us whom he meets away from him, breaking the
> claim that his other attributes have on us. He possesses
> ...an undesired differentness from what we had anticipated.

The effects of this process of stigmatization vary greatly depending

upon the physical or social characteristics that define that person's

'perceived imperfection'. It can, for example, obtrude itself into

every social interaction that the person encounters or, it can lie

dormant for great periods of time. However, anyone who experiences

the process of stigmatization is set apart by "those who do not depart

negatively from the particular expectations at issue (i.e. we 'normals')"

(Goffman, 1963: 5).

Our society regards "adoptive kinship...as inferior to consanguiel kinship, a 'second best' decided upon last" (Kirk, 1981: 23; Miall, 1986: 1987). Chapter I of this study outlines the formal stigmatization process that the members of the adoption triangle encounter due to the institutionalization of adoption in modern Western society. That process takes the members of the adoption triangle and sets them "apart from the mainstream of their society" (Kirk, 1981: 24). It provides them with a social stigma that they internalize as a part of their self-concept. For adoptees, that social stigma manifests itself in their adoptive role-identity and through their satisfactory/unsatisfactory role performance as 'adoptees'.

The code of secrecy in the adoption contract emphasizes this process of stigmatization by regulating the adoptee's access to background information that others easily possess. This is the stigma trait that obtrudes itself upon the attention of others. This is the stigma trait that places adoptees in a discreditable position when they are required to give others information about self that they cannot supply. This stigma trait can lie dormant for great periods of time depending upon the prominent position that the adoptive role-identity holds in the adoptee's salience hierarchy.

Goffman (1963: 6) notes, however, that, because stigmatized people experience the same generalized other as 'normals', they hold the same belief about their stigma that others hold. Their desire to be accepted by others motivates them to attempt to be as like 'normals' as possible. In some cases, they try to correct or repair

the objective basis upon which their stigma rests. Yet,
"where such repair is possible, what often results is not
the acquisition of a fully normal status, but a transformation
of self from someone with a particular blemish into someone with
a record of having corrected a particular blemish" (Goffman, 1963:
9). This process of transformation entails a period of adaptation
and a re-alignment of the role-identity salience hierarchy.

A model based on the process of stigmatization views search
and reunion as the adoptee's attempt to normalize self by gaining
access to information that others deny him/her. Thus, adoptees
experience a process of stigmatization both for not knowing their
genetic background (i.e. unlike 'we normals') and, then, for seeking
access to that background information (i.e. searching). The lit-
erature on adoption, search and adoption reunion emphasizes the
stress that this lack of background information places on adoptees
who express the 'need to know' (Sorosky et. al., 1975; 1978). Yet,
a large number of people in our society demonstrate an inordinate
amount of interest in their genealogy. The recent trends of
exploring family histories and of constructing family trees support
the claim that non-adoptees also express the 'need to know'. These
others are, however, rarely labelled as maladjusted, dysfunctional
or psychologically disturbed. Adoptees are set apart because they
must obtain legal permission before they can access this type of
background information. Their quest appears more obvious and earnest
because they act against the normative sanctions that support a major
institutional structure in modern Western society.

g) A 'Psycho-Social' Model of Identity, Search and Reunion

The concepts that are listed in the above sub-sections provide the basic tenets of the 'psycho-social' model that Haimes and Timms (1985: 89) request for the study of search and reunion. This psycho-social model views searching behaviour as a typical response to the stigmatization process that adoptees encounter through their adoptive status and the rule of secrecy that the adoptive process imposes on the members of the adoption triangle. Search and reunion symbolize the adoptee's attempt to normalize self by gaining access to and controlling the information about self that others easily possess. This normalization attempt primarily occurs when adoptees find that their adoptive status becomes so problemmatic for a satisfactory presentation of self that they must find some way to resolve it. That adoptive status is reflected by the unsuccessful/successful role performance that the adoptee enacts through his/her adoptive role-identity.

This model of search and reunion explains the diversity of research data that other researchers found when they examined the adoptee's search motivations, search expectations and satisfaction with search outcome. The adoptive status holds a different meaning for each individual adoptee. He/she defines his/her own adoptive situation in an individual way. Some adoptees require an immediate resolution of their missing background information, while others rarely express the 'need to know'. Many, on the other hand, may find that, at certain times in their lives, their adoptive role-identity becomes so prominent that they are forced to search. Each follows his/her own

course of action and each experiences the search and reunion process

in his/her own particular way. That process depends on the meaning

that the adoptive status holds for the adoptee and the position

of prominence that his/her adoptive role-identity occupies.

This psycho-social model of identity takes us beyond the

psycho-pathological view and its research focus on identity

dysfunction, inadequate identity formation or poor adoptive parent-

child bonding. The concepts offered by the symbolic interactionist

approach permit an analysis of search outcome, identity

transformation and post reunion contact that allows for the distinc-

tive characteristics and exclusive categories that past researchers

on search and reunion have found. These concepts can also be

transferred to the other members of the adoption triangle and their

concerns over search and reunion. This model gives us a more

complete and comprehensive format for the analysis of the search

and reunion process and its implications for the institution of

adoption in modern Western society.

Conclusion

Past research studies on search and reunion use a psycho-

pathological model to examine the adoptee's 'need to know' his/her

genetic heritage. Proponents of this view believe that searching

behaviour signifies an inadequate identity structure and/or poor

adoption outcome. They support their belief with the findings of

adoption outcome studies and the observations of clinical studies

conducted on minor adoptees who exhibit servere emotional disorders.

This model agrees with the general community attitude that defines

the adoptive family as separate from the norm and the institutional

restrictions against the disclosure of identifving information for all three members of the adoption triangle. Section I of this chapter examines this psycho-pathological view and its implications for the study of search and reunion outcome.

The findings of these studies on search and reunion fail to support the psycho-pathological view that originally guided them. Only a small percentage of searching adoptees are maladjusted and view their reunion as a solution to their life problems. The majoritv are extremely satisfied with their adoption outcome and use their search as a means of answering questions about self that onlv their background information can provide. These types of research findings reveal the need for a 'psvcho-social' model of identitv that can assess the search and reunion process more accuratelv (Haimes & Timms, 1985: 89).

Section II of this chapter describes a psvcho-social model of identity based on the concepts contained in the svmbolic interactionist theoretical perspective. This model explains the process of search and reunion in a less pathological wav. The concepts of self, significant and generalized others, role-identitv and social stigma offer a more global approach to the analvsis of identitv, search and reunion that is less value-oriented and prejudicial. The following chapters in this research study demonstrate how these concepts effectively examine the manv complex issues that adoptees encounter as they experience the social processes of search and reunion.

CHAPTER III - THE METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES INVOLVED IN THE

STUDY OF ADOPTION REUNION

## Introduction

This chapter examines the methodological issues that arose
during the course of this research study. It appears in <u>three</u>
sections. <u>Section I</u> describes the method that this researcher used
to gain a more sympathetic understanding of her research subjects'
world. This understanding developed a feeling of trust and rapport
between the researcher and the reunited adoptees who were interviewed
for this study and aided her in the analysis of that interview data.

<u>Section II</u> outlines the construction of the semi-structured
interview questionnaire. This research project concerns a randomly-
selected sample of reunited adoptees who are members of a self-help
search group. Methods of sample collection, sample contact and positive
contact response are also outlined in this section.

Research on adoption reunions, however, stimulates controversy
merely from the sensitive issues that it sets out to explore. The
topic of confidentiality and anonymity flows into many major areas of
the adoptee's life. Some of these reunited adoptees, therefore, objected
to the method of contact used in this study. <u>Section III</u> examines their
concerns and the implication that this issue holds for the overall
structure of this research topic.

I: <u>The Development of a Sympathetic Understanding Toward Search</u>

   <u>and Reunion</u>

   This study focuses more on the subjective meaning of human

behaviour than on its objective cause or purpose.  This researcher,

therefore, used an eclectic approach in her attempt to gain a

closer understanding of her subjects' social world and the symbols

that composed that world (Williamson et. al., 1977: 200).  This type

of approach yields a theory of social life that is constant with the

reality that the subjects under study express (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

It concentrates on the process of human behaviour from the viewpoint

of those people who experience that process.  This requires a "direct

examination of the empirical social world" of the subjects under study

and discourages the use of large sections of quantitative analysis

that mask or limit the subjects' opportunity to give their own

explanation of their own unique social situation (Blumer, 1969: 47).

Thus, wherever possible, this researcher uses the subjects' own words

to exemplify the analysis of data in this study.  The tables and

percentages that appear in these chapters merely provide the reader

with a blueprint outline of the complete picture that these subjects,

themselves, describe.

   In my attempt to more fully understand the thoughts, actions

and experiences of adoptees who search and reunite, I immersed myself

as much as possible in the topic.  I observed two meetings of the

Legislative Committee of Ontario which, at the time of this research

project, was revising the Child Welfare Act of 1978 and the issue of

disclosure. I watched two CBC programs on adoption and adoption

reunion. I read several autobiographical accounts of personal

searches (Fisher, 1973; Marcus, 1981; McCluen, 1978; Paton, 1954;

Redmond & Sleightholm, 1982). I accompanied two adoptees as they

conducted their search; observed one adoptee's initial reunion

meeting; and, attended three contact calls to birth relatives.

I sat through a discussion group meeting of reunited birth mothers

and observed a panel discussion of reunited adoptees, their birth

mothers and adoptive parents. In this way, I tried to "get inside

the defining process of the actor in order to define his action" from

his own personal perspective (Blumer, 1969: 16) rather than impose

my own.

To maximize this process of understanding, I included a period

of participant observation at Parent Finders meetings in my research

strategy. The process of participant observation increases the

researcher's ability to understand the social world from the research

subjects' perspective. It uses,

> ...a flexible procedure in which the scholar shifts from
> one to another line of inquiry, adopts new points of
> observation as his study progresses, moves in new directions
> previously unthought of, and changes his recognition of what
> are relevant data as he acquires more information and better
> understanding. (Blumer, 1969: 4)

Thus, participant observation becomes a process of discovery whereby

the researcher acts as a neophyte who learns the meanings that constitute

the subject's own social world.

The field literature outlines several problems that are

encountered in "entering the field", "gaining access through brokers",

and "developing trust and rapport" (Douglas, 1976; Shaffir et. al., 1980).

The initial stages of this research project revealed little

difficulty for me. Parent ⌐inders hold meetings that are open

to the public. Non-members who are interested in search and

reunion frequently attend these open meetings. The group also

sends members to engage in panel discussions and give talks to

various organizations. Thus, when I contacted the Toronto and

Hamilton groups to arrange a meeting to discuss my research study,

I was told to "just come, mingle with the members and see what

happens" (Fieldnotes, March 18, 1984: 1). When I arrived, I found

that the members easily accepted my presence. I, therefore,

attended Parent Finders meetings in both Toronto and Hamilton for

the entire period of my research and data collection. This period

lasted for 15 months from April 1, 1984 to July 31, 1985.

Like other organizations where people express sensitivity

about their membership due to a stigmatizing trait (e.g. Alcoholic

Anonymous), Parent Finders guarantees its members anonymity and

confidentiality. They only use first names and do not press for

personal identifying information. I also assumed this approach.

Members who expressed concern about my presence were reassured by

either myself or the Parent Finders Executive members that academic

ethics prevented me from revealing any confidential information to

others. I constantly stressed my concern for the members' personal

anonymity and confidentiality. This helped me build a level of trust

and rapport with the groups. Thus, for example, when a young man

questionned my research practices, the following dialogue ensued:

Man: "You know, I'm beginning to feel very closed off
     to you now."

Researcher: "Why do you say that?"

Man: "I don't know.  Perhaps because I'm thinking,
     'Why is she asking all of these questions?
     Is everything I say going to appear in print
     somewhere?'"

Researcher: "That's a reasonable assumption.  But, even if
            what you said was going to be included in my
            study, it would all be completely confidential.
            And, if you wanted me to omit anything that you
            told me then you can just let me know.  I can't
            even include you if you don't want me to.  So,
            if you told me that you don't want me to include
            anything in my fieldnotes, then, I would respect
            your wishes.  Do you want me to do that?

Man: "No, that's okay.  I feel better about it now.  But,
     you can't blame me for being suspicious.  At least, I'm
     being honest about that.  But, if everything is secret,
     I guess I'm okay about it." (Fieldnotes, July 3, 1984,
     p. 22)

Parent Finders groups meet once a month.  In between those

meetings, volunteers answer questions about the organization and

assist other members in search.  It was during these time periods that

I accompanied adoptees during the search process.  The majority of the

members appeared enthusiastic and willing to help me in my collection of

research data.  They defined this project as a means to publicize and

legitimate their concerns about adoption, search and adoption reunion.

As one member observed,

     It's great that you're doing this.  We need it.  We can
     tell the story but no one will listen because we don't
     have the letters after our names.  But, you do.  They will
     listen to you.  (Fieldnotes, Aug. 5, 1984, p. 6)

This definition of my role as researcher made my presence more acceptable to these adoptees. They let me ask more probing and personal questions than they let other members ask because, as one member observed,

> I can be comfortable with you. Like, I know that I can say things and you aren't shocked. I also know that nobody else will hear about it either. (Fieldnotes, October 12, 1984)

This period of participant observation served primarily as an exploratory stage of research where I sensitized myself to the issues and concerns that searching adoptees express. However, because I continued these observations during the course of my data collection, I continually compared, checked and assessed my interview data with current happenings at Parent Finders meetings. This helped me evaluate the accuracy of the retroactive accounts of search and reunion that the respondents gave in their interview sessions. It also let me evaluate the distinction between search expectation and reunion outcome.

Every Parent Finders meeting consists of a formal session where reunited adoptees tell the group about their search and reunion experiences. On rare occassions, one of these adoptees will bring a birth relative or adoptive parent to the meeting "to show the group" or "tell their part of the story" (Fieldnotes, Sept. 7, 1984, p. 12). When this formal session ends, the members divide themselves into smaller groups where more experienced members help them with their search. Adoptees also socialize with other members at this time. I frequently used this informal time period to talk with members about

their personal concerns and interests in adoption, search and
reunion.

The formal part of the meeting gave me a strong understanding
of the motivations, expectations and personal doubts that searching
adoptees encounter. The following section from my fieldnotes (July
3, 1984, p. 9) indicates the search path that most adoptees experience:

> I found my birth mother within a month of joining
> Parent Finders. (The audience gasps.) But, I have
> been looking much longer on my own without any help.
> (Many people in the audience nod their heads in
> agreement.) I guess it really started in 1980 when
> I had my daughter. I was really angry. You see, I
> had this reaction to my epidural and they kept saying,
> "How could she be so stupid." It was almost as if I
> wasn't there. As if I wasn't real or anything. They
> kept saying it. And, I got angry. Because they were
> right. I should have known.
>
> So, I sent away for my background information. And, I
> got two paragraphs. And, I was so thankful for that
> little bit. (People laugh.) I read these two paragraphs
> for over two years. It was all that I felt that I was
> entitled to have. And, I found out that my birth father
> was Jewish. And, it made sense to me. I had done a minor
> in Jewish history at university and I guess this explained
> my attraction and affinity to it because I was raised as an
> Irish Catholic. I never could understand why I was
> interested in that topic. Now, I knew.
>
> Then, my adoptive mother had a stroke about a year ago.
> And, she wanted to know what I wanted in the will because
> I hadn't asked for anything. I have four brothers who are
> her biological children and I always believed in myself
> that her children were the real heirs. So, I told her that
> I wanted my adoption papers. She got so upset that I thought
> that she would have another stroke. (People nod and shake
> their heads sympathetically.) It took me another nine
> months to get them from her. By this time, I was very angry.
> I felt that I had a right to know and I couldn't understand
> why my mother didn't want to help me. We finally talked it
> all out. And, it turns out that her biggest fear was
> conversion. She knew about the Jewish part. (She laughs.)
> It is all so crazy, really.

The formal presentation of these types of stories gave me a
strong understanding of the process of stigmatization that adoptees
encounter throughout their life course. This adoptee expresses anger
because her adoptive status placed her in a life-threatening situation
when she gave birth. She encountered a double victimization process
at that time because others made her responsible for her lack of
knowledge. Her delight in merely receiving two paragraphs of background
information illustrates the great void that these adoptees experience
over their lack of a genetic heritage. This 'new' information becomes
integrated as a part of her self-concept when she uses it to help
explain her interest in Judaism. This adoptee also notes her uncertain
status as an heir to her adoptive parents' estate because she lacks a
biological connection to them. Her adoptive mother's initial reaction
to her request for her adoption papers supports the fear that many
adoptee's express over 'telling' their adoptive parents about their
desire to search. Yet, an open discussion of her needs leads both
parties to a greater understanding of each other and their position in
the adoption triangle. Repeated examples of this type raised my
understanding of the many complex issues that are involved in the process
of adoption as well as the adoptee's ultimate decision to reunite.

A close examination of this type of research material revealed
several recurring themes that were later transferred to the more formal
open-ended interview questionnaire. One is the theme of powerlessness.
As the woman above noted, adoptees frequently encounter negative social
sitautions because they lack knowledge of their background information.
This lack of knowledge affects their presentation of self as capable,

competition.  Thus, their attempt to search and reunite also
includes a desire to control information that it important to
their definition of self as independently functionning members
of their society.

A large number of these adoptees focused on their feelings
of _disconnection_ with others.  These adoptees observed that they
felt separate and apart from others in their society because they
experienced doubts and uncertainties over their 'real' identity.
As one member replied in response to my questions on this issue,

> People who aren't adopted don't seem to understand how
> important it is to be able to know things about
> yourself.  They already know.  They take it for
> granted.  But, adoptees want to know too.  Even birth
> mothers don't have that feeling because they have
> other connections in the world.  Adoptees have only
> themselves.  It is a feeling of isolation never to
> be able to know who you take after or look like.
> That is very important to all of us.  The only
> difference is that only adoptees don't know and others
> do.  (Fieldnotes, Sept. 7, 1984, p. 21)

The issue of _telling_ _others_ about one's search and reunion
provides another major area of concern for these adoptees.  This
issue holds particular relevance for the adoptive parent-child
relationship.  Yet, the decision not to reveal one's search to one's
adoptive parents can seriously affect the dynamics of the search and
reunion process.  This issue arose, for example, during a discussion
between two Executive Parent Finders members as they debated the
case of a searching adoptee because,

> J: "She is leaving us with little to work on because she
> wants to keep her search quiet from her adoptive parents.
> She says that she doesn't want to hurt them with the news.
> They might see it as a rejection.

L: "Well, that's important too.  But, it does make
    her search more difficult.  We are going to have
    to think of other ways to find her birth name if
    she won't ask her adoptive parents for her adoption
    order.  Does she know what hospital she was born in?"

J: "She thinks that she was born in St. Catharines since
    that's where her parents have always lived and, at that
    time, there was only one hospital that took maternity
    cases.  So, it was probably that one."

L: "Good.  Tell her to call up the records department in
    that hospital.  And, tell her to give them some excuse
    like she is doing a survey or something and that she
    would like to know the names of the doctors who delivered
    babies there.  Or, something like that.  Some story to
    get them talking.  And, give them the date of birth and
    then ask them for all the babies and all the names.  Copy
    down any name mentionned.  Even, if it is a boy baby.
    Just tell her to write down everything they say.  And,
    then, bring it all to me and I'll see if I can help her.
    It would be much easier if she would just get the adoption
    order.  But, I understand.  It's really hard to tell your
    adoptive parents." (Fieldnotes, May 3, 1984, p. 3)

This section of my research notes emphasizes the important role
that Parent Finders plays as a resource for search techniques as well
as a support group that aids adoptees through the various stages of
their search and reunion.

The adoptee's hesistancy over revealing his/her search to his/
her adoptive parents represents one of the many fears that adoptees
express during the search process.  A large number of adoptees at these
meetings claimed that they also postponed their search because they
feared "disrupting my birth mother's life"; "opening a can of worms";
or, "finding a really horrible person that I wouldn't like" (Fieldnotes,
July 5, 1985, p. 2; Nov. 8, 1984, p. 6; May 3, 1984, p. 5).  These
fears emerged from the 'secret unknown' that lay behind the anonymity
clause contained in their adoption contract (Fieldnotes, Nov. 8, 1984,
p. 6).

Many of these searching adoptees observed that their
search helped them confront their latent feelings about their
adoptive status and its demand for secrecy. The search process
performed a healing function because it helped them verbalize
and confront those feelings. Thus, one Parent Finders member
stated that,

> I was never angry as a kid. I was happy with my
> parents and I am happy with them now. My search
> has nothing to do with them. But, I realized as
> I searched that there are a lot of things that I
> am angry at my birth parents for. I never realized
> the pain and isolation that I have felt all my life.
> Never feeling a definite part of someone. Being
> different. I think that anger spurred on my search.
> So, I might have hurt someone along the line. The
> point is that if that is what you have to do then
> you do it. Because if you don't, you might never
> resolve anything. (Fieldnotes, July 13, 1984, p. 14)

Such observations sensitized me about the complexity of the
search process and the great demands that non-disclosure places on
the adoptee. These concerns became real to me because they were
attached to real people who faced these issues as a part of their
daily lives. Their continued examples and the great understanding
that I gained from them helped me construct the open-ended interview
questionnaire that I used with the sample of reunited adoptees who
appear in this research study. It assisted me in the analysis of
that interview data because I now possessed a much clearer picture
of the search process from the perspective of those individuals
who experience that process.

II: The Semi-Structured Interview Questionnaire and the Selection of
A Research Sample.

I soon found, during this period of participant observation,
that I needed another approach if I wanted to study reunion. Few reunited

adoptees, adoptive parents and birth parents attend Parent Finders
meetings. However, I wanted to examine the long-term effects of
reunion outcome. I, therefore, decided to conduct open-ended
interviews with adoptees who had been reunited for over a period of
one year. These interviews followed a semi-structured format with
a combination of open and closed questions. A sample of that
questionnaire appears in Appendix A of this study.

Semi-structured interviews suffer from bias because
interviewees frequently distort reality or give the response that
they think the interviewer desires. My participant observation
experience helped me judge and assess the answers that these
reunited adoptees gave to this questionnaire. It also assisted in
the construction of that questionnaire. For example, Question No.
1A in the questionnaire asks, "At what age did you first begin to
think about searching?". Question No. 1B then asks, "At what age
did you first begin to search?". These reunited adoptees answered
these two questions in a similar way as the adoptees at Parent Finders
meetings. Their two corresponding observations about search
postponement support the reliability of the interview responses.

Participant observation also sensitized me to many of the
subtleties of response that might have passed unnoticed in the
interview session (Becker & Geer, 1964: 32). For example, many
adoptees at Parent Finders meetings expressed anger over their status
as 'adopted children' who never achieved full adulthood in their
society (Fieldnotes, April 3, 1984, p. 6; May 4, 1984, p. 5). Although
the interview questionnaire omits this topic, I probed areas where the
issue arose spontaneously during the interview session. This probe

occurred before the next question was asked and after the issue

had been fully explored.  The following interview section exemplifies

this approach:

> Interviewer: "Why was there a difference between the time
> that you decided to search and the time you
> began to search?"
>
> Respondent: "I was trying to get up enough nerve to ask
> my adoptive mother's permission."
>
> Interviewer: "Why? Did you think she'd be upset?"
>
> Respondent: "I don't know.  She was always open about my
> adoption.  But, I think that it was more from
> society.  From other people.  They view you as
> ungrateful if you want to know about your birth
> parents.  And I was afraid that she might think
> that way too.  But, when I asked her to sign the
> papers for the Register, she did.  I wasted all
> of those years getting up my nerve to ask her."
>
> Interviewer: "Does that make you angry?"
>
> Respondent: "Yes.  I was really angry.  Here was my mother.
> She was 90 and living in an old-age home.  I had
> power of attorney for her.  And, I still had to
> go and ask her permission to register.  Because,
> I wanted my search to be legal.  Here I am.  I am
> an adult and a grandmother.  I had charge of her
> property and her bank account and all of her
> medical decisions.  I am a professional woman.
> But, I had to ask my 90 year old mother's permission
> like a little child.  I was really angry.  I still
> am when I think about it.  It's not fair really.
> (Respondent No. 28, female, age 55)

My attendance at Parent Finders meetings also let me obtain a

sample of reunited adoptees that I could interview.  When I mentionned

to the Hamilton Parent Finders president that I was finding difficulty

obtaining access to reunited adoptees, she offered me the group's reunion

file.  I made a presentation to the Hamilton Parent Finders Executive

Board of Directors that outlined the goals and objectives of my research

study.  All of these Board members had previously met me at Parent Finders

meetings. Many had already discussed this research project with me. They, therefore, released the names in their reunion file to me only if I guaranteed the same confidentiality to these reunited adoptees as I had demonstrated at Parent Finders meetings. They removed the names of the adoptee's adoptive parents and his/her birth parents from that list because they believed that only the adoptee had put himself/herself at risk for further contact since only the adoptee had joined their organization. Thus, I agreed to obtain the adoptee's permission to contact these other members of the adoption triangle before I interviewed them (Fieldnotes, Feb. 8, 1985). This agreement led to changes in the original research design. These changes are discussed in the next section of this chapter.

The Hamilton Parent Finders organization claims 313 reunions for the period between June 1976 and January 1985 (See Table 3.1). This averages to 39 reunions a year. Of these reunions, 223 (71%) concern adoptees. The remainder involve birth parents, adoptive parents or foster children as the primary searcher. Twenty-six of these adoptee searches (12%) involve adoptees who live outside the Niagara and Hamilton regions (e.g. Windsor, Manitoba and Australia). This distance factor eliminated 26 cases from the list of adoptees who were possible interviewees.

Sixty names were randomly selected from the remaining 197 names. On March 25, 1985, I mailed 25 introductory letters that explained this research project and requested an interview session. A sample of that letter appears in Appendix B of this report.

The initial response to this letter was very encouraging. Within two weeks, 6 (24%) of these contacted adoptees called to arrange an interview appointment themselves. These reunited adoptees expressed great excitement at the prospect of "telling their own story" (Fieldnotes, March 31, 1985; April 3, 1985; April 6, 1985). Their excitement illustrates the positive attitude that I encountered from the majority of the respondents in this study.

Yet, this contact approach included difficulties. One adoptee cancelled her interview two hours before her appointment because "the idea of being interviewed raised a lot of painful memories that I would like to just forget" (Fieldnotes, May 18, 1985). Nine letters (36%) were returned with "no forwarding address" stamped on the envelope. I feared that anonymity might be broken if I tried to find the adoptee's new address and discarded these respondents from the sample. I, then, drew more names and mailed a new series of letters.

Over a period of six months, 97 names were randomly selected from the original list of 197 adoptees and contact leters sent. Of these letters, 31 (32%) were returned with "no forwarding address". The 67 remaining adoptees (68%) were contacted for an interview session. Only 6 (6%) of these adoptees refused an interview. Two claimed that they could provide little useful information about reunion because their birth mother had rejected them. One stated that she had no personal objection to an interview but her adoptive mother disapproved and she decided to refuse out of respect for her mother's wishes. One adoptee arranged an interview but never arrived for her appointment. When I called a second time, a man answered the

Table 3.1: <u>Number and Types of Completed Searches, 1976 – 1984</u>
<u>for the Hamilton Parent Finders Organization</u>.

| <u>Type of Search</u> | <u>No. of Completed</u><br><u>Searches</u> | <u>Percent of</u><br><u>Completed</u><br><u>Searches</u> |
|---|---|---|
| Adoptee | 223 | 71% |
| Adoptive Parents | 11 | 4% |
| Birth Brothers | 5 | 2% |
| Birth Sisters | 8 | 3% |
| Birth Fathers | 3 | 1% |
| Birth Daughters | 3 | 1% |
| Birth Mothers | 41 | 13% |
| Foster Children | 19 | 6% |
| Total | 313 | 100% |

telephone and replied that, "She doesn't want to be bothered with this stuff" (Fieldnotes, June 17, 1985). I left the matter there. The remaining adoptee had died since the reunion occurred.

Of the 60 interviewed adoptees, two met me in a restaurant because they did not want their family to know about their involvement in the project. One adoptee came to my home. He stated that, "Even though my parents know about my reunion, it is a touchy subject with them and I don't want to remind them of it by having you come to their home and ask me questions." (Fieldnotes, April 12, 1985). Despite these types of requests, the respondents' positive attitude and acceptance toward this research project encouraged me. Twelve (20%) of these reunited adoptees, for example, congratulated me on my choice of a research topic and observed that they would be interested in the outcome so they could compare their own reunion experience to others.

As further contact letters were sent, difficulties began to arise. Eight (13%) of the respondents expressed their disapproval of the contact method used in this study. They believed that Hamilton Parent Finders had broken their anonymity by releasing their names to me without their permission. Yet, none of these eight 'disapproving' adoptees refused to be interviewed. Once I explained the conditions for my access to the reunion file, they responded more positively. Their congeniality and co-operation during their interview session indicated little negative effect from their initial disapproval toward the study. Indeed, these reunited adoptees expressed their anger toward the Hamilton Parent Finders group rather than me or the research

project. They believed that the Hamilton Parent Finders Executive

should have contacted them and requested their permission before

it released their names to me.

I had suggested in my original presentation to the Hamilton

Executive Board members that they personally contact these reunited

adoptees before I sent my letter. None of these members wanted the

responsibility for this task. They claimed that my academic ethics

would satisfy these adoptees. These Executive members spend a great

deal of volunteer time helping adoptees in search. They preferred

to spend their energy "tracking down" contacts for searching adoptees

than adoptees who had already achieved their goal of reunion (Fieldnotes,

Feb. 8, 1985). I, therefore, decided to send contact letters, myself.

These letters were accompanied by a letter from my supervisor clearly

outlining this research study and my qualifications for research (See

Appendix B). The positive response that searching adoptees gave to my

research topic and their continued requests for more information about

reunion contact led me to believe that this contact letter would produce

little negative effect on adoptees who had already experienced the

process of search and reunion.

Each and every field study raises concern over ethical issues

and the manipulation of one's research subjects in an attempt to achieve

one's research goals. Erickson (1965), for example, outlines the

possible harm that research subjects may experience if the researcher

uses covert research techniques. Barnes (1963) describes the delicate

balance that researchers maintain between the authorities that support their research, their research subjects and their own research goals. Roth (1960) observes that researchers frequently mislead both themselves and their subjects because they never fully understand their research goals or their complete research design until the project is finally completed. Each research study entails some risks and each set of research subjects place themselves in danger of betrayal because they lack a complete understanding of the implications of their participation in social research.

Researchers constantly confront these types of risks as the process of data collection unfolds. However, provided that "the methods of dealing with these people are based on an explicit recognition of the ultimate value of each person and his right to self-determination", most researchers consider that they have respected the general guidelines of the code of ethics that are part of any research design (Festinger & Katz, 1953: 89; Shaffir et. al., 1980). The research study becomes "exploitative when the informant gains nothing or actually suffers harm from the research" (Spradley, 1980: 24). This researcher took every possible precaution to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of my research subjects. Their enthusiastic support of this research project indicates the non-exploitative interests that it held. In fact, the eight 'disapproving' adoptees' ultimate decision to be interviewed questions the relative harm that came to them as a result of this contact method. Once they were informed of the research design and the project's goals and the great difficulty that I had in contacting reunited adoptees,

they became more understanding and sympathetic.  To quote one of them,

> When I got your letter, I was really upset.  I
> opened it and I thought, "Oh, my God! Has she
> contacted my birth mother? And, my parents.
> They don't know! Has she seen my file?". And,
> then, I told my husband that now I know how my
> birth mother felt when she got my call. Like,
> you don't know what to do. You feel like you are
> scattered all over the room. And, Parent Finders
> is a reputable organization and they had assured me
> confidentiality. So, I was upset. And, then, I
> phoned you. That put me to rest. When you explained
> things, I relaxed. I recognize the situation that
> you are in. It's like when I had to decide which way
> to contact my birth mother. There really isn't a good
> way, is there? No matter what. If you think that you
> have confidentiality, then, you are shocked to learn
> that someone else has found you out. (Respondent No.
> 24, female, age 30)

These reunited adoptees overcame their initial shock at my

contact method once I explained my research position to them.  They

related that situation to their own attempts to contact their birth

relatives and forgave my 'indiscretion'.  They transferred their anger

onto the Hamilton Parent Finders group who they believed had destroyed

their confidentiality.  Thus, despite their initial 'negative' response

to contact, all of these 'disapproving' adoptees agreed to be interviewed.

Their open and candid attitude during their interview session led me to

believe that their original reaction had positively changed.

III: Gaining Access and Negotiation of Research Bargains

Unable to contact Hamilton Parent Finders when he received his

contact letter, one of these eight 'disapproving' adoptees contacted

the President of another Parent Finders group before he contacted me.

This President had no knowledge of either this researcher or the

research project.  She contacted the Hamilton Parent Finders President

and reprimanded over the breach of confidentiality that had

occurred. She, then, contacted the Presidents of the other

Parent Finders groups in Canada. These people asked the Hamilton

Parent Finders President to explain her actions. Although both

the Hamilton Parent Finders President and I discussed this research

project by telephone with these other group Presidents, some

remained doubtful about the release of this reunion file. It was

impossible for me to meet with them face-to-face and hold a proper

presentation of the issue due to the vast distances involved. The

Hamilton President deeply felt the censure of these other group

Presidents and asked me to stop my interview contacts. I, therefore,

discontinued this phase of the research project. I continued with my

data analysis on the 60 interviewed adoptees, however, because these

reunited adoptees had given me their formal informed consent for

an interview and because the sample was large enough to show

consistent patterns in their interview responses.

This interruption of the interview schedule by the other Parent

Finders Presidents illustrates the difficulty that many researchers

encounter over the problem of bargain maintenance and negotiations

with gatekeepers (Douglas, 1976: 169- 189). Before research begins,

researchers typically form a bargain relationship with specific

gatekeepers who either control access to the research subjects or

guarantee the researcher's credibility and his/her research activities.

That research bargain consists of "an exchange relationship between

the researcher and those studied. In return for providing the

researcher with information, respondents are guaranteed confidentiality

and anonymity, which encourage honest answers to questions"
(Shaffir et. al., 1980: 26). That bargain usually occurs between
the researcher and the gatekeeper before he/she gains access to
the research subjects.

The Hamilton Parent Finders President and the Hamilton
Executive Board of Directors represent the original gatekeepers in
this study. However, few reunited adoptees attend Parent Finders
meetings. Many of these respondents knew nothing about me or my
research project before they were contacted. In addition, few of
them knew the Hamilton Parent Finders President because she had
only held her position for fifteen months. Her personal guarantee
of confidentiality meant little to them. Her 'indiscriminate'
release of names increased their doubts over her management
capabilities and her discretionary powers (Respondent Nos. 29 and
43). I had to strike individual research bargains with each
reunited adoptee who was contacted. In this way, each interviewee
served as his/her own gatekeeper when he/she struck the research
bargain that led to his/her participation in this study. Those
adoptees who met me in restaurants or at my home offer prime examples
of the types of bargain agreements that were made before I could
conduct an interview with them.

The other Parent Finders Presidents claimed that they were
significant gatekeepers who had been ignored when the original research
bargain to release the Hamilton Parent Finders reunion files was agreed
upon. Each Parent Finders group maintains its autonomy and makes
its own policy decisions through its elected Executive Board of

Directors. The Hamilton Board of Directors believed that their decision to release these names to me concerned an autonomous group policy decision. All of the Parent Finders groups, however, form a loosely-connected search network through their association with the main Parent Finders organization in British Columbia and the national search registry that it keeps. These other Parent Finders Presidents, therefore, defined the release of membership names as a major policy decision that required consultation with all Parent Finders groups. They believed that this decision could affect the entire organization if problems over the issue of confidentiality arose. My inability to negotiate a satisfactory research bargain with these other 'gatekeepers' led to my discontinuation of the interview stage in this research study.

Haas and Shaffir (1980: 245) note that the bargain stage of a research project is "more accurately conceptualized as a series of negotiations throughout the research endeavour wherein the researcher continually attempts to secure others' cooperation". The above scenario clearly demonstrates this point. The issue of bargain maintenance and gatekeepers arose once again, however, when I tried to gain access to the reunited adoptee's birth parents and adoptive parents. Unsuccessful attempts to strike successful bargains with these reunited adoptees led to a change in the structure of this research study and the data analysis that evolved from these unsuccessful requests.

Parent Finders defines reunion as "making initial contact with the birth relatives" (Fieldnotes, May 12, 1985). This definition

exists because reunions rarely include all three members of the

adoption triangle as active participants in a long-term reunion

relationship. This fact soon became apparent to me during the

participant observation sessions at Parent Finders meetings.

There are cases of reunion where birth parents and adoptees form

long-term role relationships. There are, however, cases where

the birth parent immediately rejects the adoptee upon contact.

There are cases where the reunion becomes a topic of non-discussion

between the adoptee and his/her adoptive parents. There are cases

where the adoptee immediately rejects the birth parent or discontinues

reunion contact. Reunions take many different forms and patterns of

interaction. This factor was one of the major reasons that the

Hamilton Executive demanded that I ask the reunited adoptee for his/

her permission to interview the other members of the adoption triangle.

I had to negotiate individual bargains with each reunited adoptee

separately if I desired access to these other research subjects.

The majority of these reunited adoptees refused their

permission. They claimed that they wanted to protect either their

birth parents' privacy or their adoptive parents' anonymity. The

eight 'disapproving' adoptees were quite emphatic about this issue.

In fact, their fear over a possible contact with these other members

of the adoption triangle had stimulated their original anger at the

release of their own names to me. Thus, for example, the adoptee

who had contacted the other Parent Finders President observed that,

Table 3.2

Response Given to My Request for an Interview with the Birth
Mother*

| Type of Response | No. of Cases | Percent of Cases |
|---|---|---|
| Permission given | 8 | 13 |
| Refusals/Contact not possible: | | |
|   Birth mother rejects adoptee | 8 | 13 |
|   Birth mother died before reunion | 5 | 9 |
|   Birth mother died after reunion | 2 | 3 |
|   Birth mother rejected by adoptee | 7 | 12 |
|   Limited contact/disengagement | 7 | 12 |
|   Interview is too traumatic | 12 | 20 |
|   Birth mother lives outside the province | 2 | 3 |
|   Reunion is too private | 9 | 15 |
| Total | 60 | 100 |

*rounded to nearest percent

Table 3.3

### Response Given to My Request for an Interview with the Birth Father*

| Type of Response | No. of Cases | Percent of Cases |
|---|---|---|
| Permission given | 4 | 7 |
| Refusals/Contact not possible: | | |
| Birth father rejects adoptee | 2 | 3 |
| Birth father died before reunion | 6 | 10 |
| Birth father died after reunion | 1 | 2 |
| Adoptee still searching | 9 | 15 |
| Adoptee not interested in him | 8 | 13 |
| Reunion is too private | 11 | 18 |
| Birth mother refuses identifying information | 19 | 32 |
| Total | 60 | 100 |

*rounded to nearest percent

> Actually, I am still a little bit upset at Parent
> Finders for giving you my name. They should have
> called me first. But, that is neither here nor
> there now. But, when I read your letter and it
> mentionned my birth mother and my adoptive parents,
> I thought that you had contacted them too. And, I
> thought, "My God, what if she is contacted!" Like,
> when Parent Finders contacted her, she threatened
> to sue them. She was that angry. And, she wanted
> all the records burned. Also, my adoptive father
> doesn't know about all of this. You can see how
> I felt when I got your letter. And, you can see
> why I can't give you their names. (Respondent No.
> 33, male, age 40)

Although the majority of these refusals are not as emphatic

as the one above, these reunited adoptees typically claim that they

cannot reveal their birth mother's name because "an interview would

be too painful and humiliating for her"; "she hasn't told anyone

about my existence and her privacy must be protected"; and, "I

promised that I would never contact her again" (Respondent Nos. 20,

45 and 4 respectively. (See Tables 3.2 and 3.3). These reunited

adoptees willingly discussed all aspects of their reunion experience

with me. They refused, however, to break their birth parents'

confidence. As a result, I only obtained the names of eight birth

mothers and four birth fathers. Of these, six birth mothers and one

birth father consented to an interview session.

I was also denied access to a large number of adoptive parents

(See Table 3.4). Many of the adoptees in this study had waited until

their adoptive parents died before they initiated their search. Hence,

these members were unavailable. Others kept the reunion a secret from

their adoptive parents. They "didn't want to hurt them" or "knew that

the family just couldn't handle the idea" (Respondent Nos. 12 and 60).

Table 3.4

<u>Response Given to My Request for an Interview with the Adoptive</u>
<u>Parents</u>*

| Type of Response | No. of Cases | Percent of Cases |
|---|---|---|
| Permission Given | 8 | 13 |
| Refusals/Contact not possible: | | |
| Adoptive parents not informed | 15 | 25 |
| Adoptive parents died before adoptee searched | 10 | 17 |
| Reunion a non-topic between adoptee and adoptive parents | 8 | 13 |
| Reunion is too private | 9 | 15 |
| Adoptee uncomfortable with the idea of an interview | 5 | 8 |
| Adoptee severed contact with adoptive parents | 3 | 5 |
| Adoptive parents live outside the province | 2 | 3 |
| Total | 60 | 100 |

*rounded to nearest percent

Others claimed that the topic was "too personal and private for them to discuss with a stranger" (Respondent No. 4). I, therefore, only received the names of _eight_ (8) adoptive parents. _Four_ (4) of them agreed to be interviewed.

This small sample size of adoptive parents and reunited birth parents limits the generalizability of this section of data analysis. It offers us an opportunity, however, to cross-check some of the information that the reunited adoptee gave about his/her reunion outcome. It also provides exploratory data for consideration in future studies that involve these other members of the adoption triangle. In particular, the adoptee's protective reaction to my interview request reveals an underlying theme for reunion outcome that rarely appears in the research literature on search and reunion. That theme gradually unfolds as the data analysis slowly reveals itself in the following chapters of this research study.

Conclusion

This chapter outlines the methodological issues inherent in the study of search and reunion. This study suffers from many of the same methodological flaws that appear in other studies of this type. However, the intimate knowledge and understanding that this researcher gained through an intensive participant observation period support the research findings that appear in the following chapters. The study also includes a small sample of birth parents and adoptive parents who provide separate views of reunion outcome for these other members of the adoption triangle.

The selection of a random sample of reunited adoptees who belong to a self-help search organization offers a comparative analysis of research studies based on adoptees who use social service agencies or open-record systems. It does, however, produce serious ramifications for the structure of this study. These adoptees frequently hid their search and reunion from their adoptive parents. Their searches often resulted in immediate rejection or discontinuation of long-term contact. Like all social processes, adoption reunions take on the character of the social actors who are involved in them. The researcher must adjust his/her original research concerns to properly reflect that data that evolves from his/her research attempts.

The issue of anonymity presents a recurring theme throughout this study. The Presidents of other Parent Finders groups expressed concern that the release of names from the Hamilton Parent Finders reunion file might destroy their image as a reliable and professional organization. Some reunited adoptees feared that the researcher's contact attempt had revealed their search to their adoptive parents and/or damaged their birth parent's anonymous position. Access to these other members of the adoption triangle rarely occurred because many respondents worried over the privacy of these members. While these reunited adoptees emphasized and affirmed their 'right to know', they also wished to ensure their own 'privilege of privacy'. This researcher had to continually balance those needs in a series of bargain contracts negotiated with the various gatekeepers that she enountered as her research project progressed from one stage to the next.

CHAPTER IV - DECISION TO SEARCH, SEARCH GOALS AND REUNION

## Introduction

Past studies on reunion concern adoptees who use social
agencies or reunion registries to search (Simpson et. al., 1981:
428). The data in this chapter reveal little significant difference
between the randomly-selected reunited adoptees in this study and the
searchers in other research studies. They merely use alternate routes
to achieve reunion contact. This chapter outlines the search route
that the reunited adoptees in this study used.

The chapter includes <u>six</u> sections. <u>Section I</u> compares the
demographic characteristics of the respondents in this study with the
Hamilton Parent Finders membership. This sample represents the larger
group of adoptees that typically join this self-help search group. As
such, their stories reveal the search and reunion process that the
majority of Parent Finders adoptees encounter. The sample's close
similarity to the adoptees in other research studies indicates that
much of their experience will also resemble that encountered by these
other adoptees.

<u>Section II</u> uses the psycho-pathological view to analyze the
Hamilton Parent Finders sample. These reunited adoptees disagree with
many of the arguments that this view proposes. They offer more immediate
and individual reasons for their searching behaviour. These reasons

appear in <u>Section III</u>. The original reasons for search, however, often provide little incentive for immediate action. Many of these adoptees delayed their search for several years after they first admitted their desire for a reunion. <u>Section IV</u> examines this postponement and its impact on the search process. These adoptees note, for example, that specific life-change events precipitated their concentrated searching behaviour. <u>Section V</u> discusses the significant role that these life-change events play in the search and reunion process.

Section VI completes the chapter. Once the search begins, the adoptee becomes more and more obsessed with the search process. That obsession often led these adoptees into a reunion situation for which they were not prepared. This dilemma over reunion contact forms the basis for much of the data analysis in <u>Chapter V</u>.

Wherever possible, the data analysis in this chapter distinguishes between male and female searchers. There are two reasons for this. First, like the adoptees in other research studies, these reunited adoptees reveal no noticeable patterns of distinction when they are grouped into such traditional sociological categories as age cohort, religion, education, occupation or income. Secondly, the research literature on search and reunion contains a great deal of speculation over the disproportionate number of female adoptees who search. The data analysis in this chapter indicates little significant difference in gender once search begins. Suggested reasons for this phenomenon manifest themselves as the chapter unfolds. These reasons account for the disappearance of this gender distinction in the data

analysis that appears in the remaining chapters of this study.

I: <u>Representativeness of the Hamilton Parent Finders Sample</u>

There are no formal statistics on the number of adoptees who are searching in Ontario or the number of adoptees who have been reunited (Garber, 1985). This study, therefore, uses the Hamilton Parent Finders membership list to examine the representativeness of the sample of reunited adoptees that were interviewed. Ten thousand individuals belonged to the Ontario Parent Finders organization in 1984 (Fieldnotes, June 5, 1985). The Hamilton Parent Finders group claims a total of 1,196 (12%) of these members. However, only 780 (65%) of this group of Hamilton Parent Finders members are adoptees (See Table 4.1). The others represent foster children (5%), birth mothers (25%), birth siblings (4%) and adoptive parents (3%). These <u>780</u> adoptees serve as the primary source of comparison for the sample used in this research study.

The Hamilton Parent Finders organization keeps three types of non-identifying information on its members. These are: gender, age (i.e. date of birth), and geographical location (i.e. address). Of the 780 adoptees on the membership list, 584 (75%) are female and 196 (25%) are male. This ratio corresponds with the high proportion of female searchers reported in other studies on search and reunion. These figures negate Sobol's and Cardiff's (1983: 482) hypothesis, however. These researchers observed that larger numbers of women appear in these studies because they are more prone to volunteer than men when requests are made for research subjects. The matching ratios of male to female

Table 4.1:

<u>Hamilton Parent Finders Membership List, June 1976 to January, 1985</u>

| Type of Searcher | Female | | Male | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Adoptees | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % |
| Adoptees | 584 | 62.0 | 196 | 75.0 | 780 | 65.0 |
| Foster Children | 22 | 2.0 | 25 | 9.0 | 47 | 5.0 |
| Birth Mothers | 229 | 25.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 229 | 25.0 |
| Birth Fathers | 0 | 0.0 | 15 | 6.0 | 15 | 1.0 |
| Birth Siblings | 35 | 4.0 | 25 | 6.0 | 50 | 4.0 |
| Birth Children * | 19 | 2.0 | 2 | 0.8 | 21 | 2.0 |
| Birth Grandparents | 5 | 0.5 | 2 | 0.8 | 7 | 0.5 |
| Birth Aunts | 6 | 0.5 | 0 | 0.0 | 6 | 0.4 |
| Birth Uncles | 0 | 0.0 | 2 | 0.8 | 2 | 0.1 |
| Adoptive Parents | 35 | 4.0 | 4 | 1.6 | 39 | 3.0 |
| Total | 935 | 100.0 | 261 | 100.0 | 1196 | 100.0 |

\* These birth children represent children who have been raised by a birth parent but through circumstances such as divorce have lost contact with the other birth parent and are searching for him/her.

Parent Finders searchers support the authenticity of this gender

distinction.

A similar proportion of males (22%) and females (79%)

appears on the Hamilton Parent Finders reunion list (See Table 4.2).

Even though more female adoptees search, male adoptees seem to get

just as involved in their search once it begins. If this were not

true, then, the percentage of male reunions would be much smaller.

This pattern of search outcome suggests that some other factor occurs

before search that compels female adoptees to seek reunion. These

issues become more relevant as the data analysis in this study continues.

Table 4.2 also supports the claim that interest in search

manifests itself at any period in an adoptee's life (Schecter, 1964: 45;

Simpson et. al., 1981: 429). The most noticeable gaps in the Hamilton

Parent Finders membership list occur for those adoptees born before

1940 and after 1969. The stigmatized status assigned to adoptees in

the early part of this century and the strong community attitudes

against search probably contribute to the small number of members born

before 1940 (Benet, 1976: 14; Lemon, 1959). The legal position held

by those adoptees born after 1969 explains the other. As the time of

this study, the date for the age of majority was 1969.

Table 4.3 indicates the extent of the influence held by this

self-help search group. The Hamilton Parent Finders group was the

only Parent Finders chapter in the Niagara region for almost ten years.

In addition, other groups send adoptees to Hamilton to search because

the search must take place in the municipality where the adoption was

finalized. The participation of adoptees who are living in such

Table 4.2

Age Range Reported for Hamilton Parent Finders Adoptees, June 1976 to January 1985*

| | Reunited Adoptees | | | | Non-Reunited Adoptees | | | | Total Adoptees | | | | | |
| | Male | | Female | | Male | | Female | | Male | | Female | | Total | |
| | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % |
| Date of Birth | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1900 to 1920 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 5 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 6 | 1 | 8 | 2 |
| 1921 to 1930 | 3 | 8 | 10 | 6 | 10 | 9 | 16 | 4 | 13 | 9 | 26 | 5 | 39 | 5 |
| 1931 to 1940 | 3 | 8 | 12 | 7 | 13 | 12 | 42 | 12 | 16 | 11 | 54 | 10 | 70 | 10 |
| 1941 to 1950 | 18 | 44 | 64 | 40 | 26 | 23 | 92 | 26 | 44 | 28 | 156 | 30 | 200 | 30 |
| 1951 to 1960 | 12 | 30 | 57 | 35 | 46 | 41 | 139 | 39 | 58 | 38 | 196 | 38 | 254 | 38 |
| 1961 to 1970 | 4 | 10 | 18 | 11 | 15 | 13 | 63 | 18 | 19 | 13 | 81 | 16 | 100 | 15 |
| Total | 40 | 100 | 162 | 100 | 112 | 100 | 357 | 100 | 152 | 100 | 519 | 100 | 671 | 100 |

*rounded to nearest percent

**99 people were eliminated from these calculations because they had no date of birth listed

Table 4.3

## Geographical Districts Encompassed by the Hamilton Parent Finders

## Membership, 1976 to 1985*

| Geographical Locale | Membership List | | Sample | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | No. | % | No. | % |
| Ancaster, Dundas area | 37 | 5 | 5 | 8 |
| Brantford area | 29 | 4 | 3 | 5 |
| Burlington-Oakville | 89 | 10 | 8 | 14 |
| Grimsby-Stoney Creek | 40 | 5 | 2 | 3 |
| Guelph | 19 | 3 | 2 | 3 |
| Haldimand-Norfolk | 26 | 3 | 2 | 3 |
| Hamilton | 268 | 34 | 22 | 37 |
| Kingston-Ottawa | 14 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| Kitchener-Waterloo | 33 | 4 | 1 | 2 |
| London | 19 | 3 | 2 | 3 |
| Niagara | 36 | 5 | 4 | 7 |
| St. Catharines | 45 | 6 | 4 | 7 |
| Toronto | 42 | 5 | 2 | 3 |
| Welland | 19 | 2 | 3 | 5 |
| Windsor area | 11 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Other Provinces | 33 | 4 | 0 | 0 |
| United States | 16 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| Europe | 4 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 780 | 100 | 60 | 100 |

*Rounded to the nearest percent

rural districts as Haldimand-Norfolk (26 or 3%), Guelph (19 or 3%)

and Kitchener-Waterloo (33 or 4%) also support the suggestion that

a rural-urban split is non-existent. Like the process of adoption,

the process of searching represents the population at large and

cannot be limited to any specific social cateory or type (Garber,

1985: 17).

Many of these 'out of town' members drive long distances to

get to meetings or seek volunteer search assistance. A large number

willingly involve themselves in extreme or unconventional activities

in their search for further identifying information. One member,

for example, received a telephone bill of $250.00 for an afternoon's

search that entailed several long-distance calls to a Western province

(Fieldnotes, May 6, 1984, p. 1). Another asked a friend to go through

church records during her summer vacation in London, England (Fieldnotes,

Sept. 6, 1984, p. 17). A third spent several afternoons "drinking

tea" with elderly people at various nursing homes in the area in hope

that one of them might mention the identifying information that she was

seeking (Fieldnotes, May 3, 1984, p. 20). Thus, searchers take many

steps to achieve their goal of reunion. Their membership in the Hamilton

Parent Finders search organization is merely one of the many stages that

they experience during their process of search and reunion.

. The 60 reunited adoptees in this study reflect the composition of

the Hamilton Parent Finders reunion list. Sixteen (27%) are male and 44

(74%) are female (See Table 4.4). Their age range extends from 20 to 59

years. Their median age is 34. Thirty-nine (65%) are married, 12 (20%)

are single, and 9 (15%) are divorced, separatec or widowed (See Table

Table 4.4

## <u>Gender, Age and Marital Status of Hamilton Parent Finders Sample *</u>

| | Single | | | Married | | | Separated Divorced or Widowed | | | Total | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Age | Male No. % | Female No. % | Total No. % | Male No. % | Female No. % | Total No. % | Male No. % | Female No. % | Total No. % | Male No. % | Female No. % | Total No. % |
| 20 - 29 | 5 100 | 4 58 | 9 76 | 1 11 | 10 33 | 11 28 | 1 50 | 1 15 | 2 22 | 7 44 | 15 34 | 22 37 |
| 30 - 39 | 0 0 | 1 14 | 1 8 | 5 56 | 8 27 | 13 33 | 1 50 | 3 42 | 4 44 | 6 38 | 12 27 | 18 30 |
| 40 - 49 | 0 0 | 2 28 | 2 16 | 2 22 | 7 23 | 9 23 | 0 0 | 2 28 | 2 22 | 2 12 | 11 25 | 13 22 |
| 50 - 59 | 0 0 | 0 0 | 0 0 | 1 11 | 5 17 | 6 16 | 0 0 | 1 15 | 1 12 | 1 6 | 6 14 | 7 12 |
| Total | 5 100 | 7 100 | 12 100 | 9 100 | 30 100 | 39 100 | 2 100 | 7 100 | 9 100 | 16 100 | 44 100 | 60 100 |

*Rounded to nearest percent

Table 4.5

## Education Level by Geneder of Hamilton Parent Finders Sample

| Grade Level Achieved | Male | | Female | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % |
| Did not graduate secondary school | 2 | 12 | 10 | 23 | 12 | 20 |
| Graduated secondary school only | 2 | 12 | 13 | 30 | 15 | 25 |
| Some trade or business school | 3 | 19 | 7 | 16 | 10 | 17 |
| Graduated trade or business school | 1 | 7 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 3 |
| Some college or university | 4 | 24 | 5 | 11 | 9 | 15 |
| Graduated college or university | 3 | 19 | 6 | 14 | 9 | 15 |
| Obtained post-graduate or professional degree | 1 | 7 | 2 | 4 | 3 | 5 |
| Total | 16 | 100 | 44 | 100 | 60 | 100 |

*Rounded to nearest percent

4.5). Only 22 (37%) live within the city limits of Hamilton (See

Table 4.3). Eighteen (20%) are Anglican, 15 (25%) are Roman

Catholic and 8 (11%) are United Church members. Forty (67%) never

resided outside the district where they were raised. These findings

concur with other research studies that note that searching adoptees

"represent a cross-section of current society" (Thompson et. al.,

1978: 10; Simpson et. al., 1981: 429; Sobol & Cardiff, 1983: 479).

Their common bond of adoption provides their major link as a distinct

sociological group (Garber, 1985: 17).

The median level of education for these respondents is grade

twelve. Thirty-three (55%), however, received some post-secondary

training (See Table 4.5). Nineteen (30%) engage in managerial

occupations, 14 (23%) work at clerical or sales positions and 16 (27%)

are housewives (See Table 4.6). This large number of "clerical/sales"

and "housewife" positions reflects the pre-dominance of female

respondents in the sample. Their education/employment pattern, however,

corresponds with the reports of other researchers who note that

searching adoptees "represent a well-educated group having either

completed (36%) or attended (18%) post-secondary educational programs"

(Simpson et. al., 1981: 429) with "over 70% working in Professional/

Executive and Business/Commercial occupations" (Thompson et. al., 1978:

10).

The strong correlation that exists between the respondents'

socio-economic characteristics and those found for searching adoptees

in other studies reveals the great similarity between those

Table 4.6

Occupational Status by Gender of Hamilton Parent

Finders Sample*

| Occupation | Male | | Female | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % |
| professional | 2 | 12 | 6 | 14 | 8 | 12 |
| proprietor/<br>manager or official<br>large firm | 1 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| semi-professional | 1 | 7 | 3 | 11 | 4 | 6 |
| proprietor/<br>manager or official<br>small firm | 3 | 18 | 3 | 7 | 6 | 10 |
| clerical/sales | 2 | 12 | 12 | 27 | 14 | 23 |
| skilled | 1 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| semi-skilled | 2 | 12 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 4 |
| unskilled | 1 | 7 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 4 |
| housewife | 0 | 0 | 16 | 36 | 16 | 27 |
| student | 3 | 18 | 3 | 7 | 6 | 10 |
| Total | 16 | 100 | 44 | 100 | 60 | 100 |

*rounded to nearest percent

adoptees who use social service agencies or open-record systems
and those who use self-help search organizations (Sobol & Cardiff,
1983: 479). Thus, the reunited adoptees in this study typify the
'average' adoptee who searches and reunites. Their search and
reunion experiences can, therefore, be generalized to the larger
population of adoptees who engage in these social processes.

II: <u>The Hamilton Parent Finders Sample's Support for the Psycho-
Pathological View</u>

The psycho-pathological view claims that inadequate adoptive
parent-child bonding stimulates the adoptee's desire for reunion.
Question Nos. 52 to 62 in the open-ended interview questionnaire
raised this issue with the adoptees in this study (See Appendix A).
These reunited adoptees, however, report little discontent with the
process of their adoption or dissatisfaction with their adoptive
experience. They believe that their adoptive parent-child bonds are
similar to biological parent-child bonds and are strong enough to
sustain their sense of belonging within the adoptive family system.
They view their search and reunion as separate from their adoptive
parent-child relationship and note that other factors such as
generation gaps or dysfunctional family dynamics play more significant
roles in their ties with their adoptive parents than adoption plays.
As one adoptee states,

> My search had nothing to do with my parents. My
> relationship with them is difficult because of them.
> Like, they are both alcoholics and that overrides
> everything. And, finding my real mother will never
> change that. (Respondent No. 44, female, age 29)

Another notes,

> I am physically totally different than anybody else
> in my family so I think that I needed to identify with
> someone else physically. And, my adoptive mother and I
> are emotionally very different. But, these aren't things
> that I would fault my adoptive mother for. She just
> doesn't understand me at that level because we are so
> different. It happens. Even in biological families.
> (Respondent No. 11, female, age 38)

A third maintains that,

> My mom was 40 when she adopted me. And, I think that she
> was too old. Like, when I grew up and I was 10 and she
> was 50. We didn't have anything in common. But, I have
> always felt accepted. Like, I don't feel wanted by my
> adoptive mother now but that has more to do with her
> boyfriend than me. He is very important to her so I feel
> pushed away. And, even though I have two natural brothers
> older than me who are hers I don't think that they were
> ever treated any differently. (Respondent No. 10, female,
> age 23)

These adoptees claim that their adoptive parent-child bonds arise

from the many years of parental care and family interaction that they

encountered as they grew to maturity. Fifty (33%) of these reunited

adoptees report, for example, that their adoption was finalized between

the first and second year of life. They believe that this time of

finalization results from the rules of the adoption agency rather than

any doubts on their adoptive parents' part. Twenty-one (35%) note that

they were placed with their adoptive parents as 'newborns' while 27

(45%) were placed during their first year. Thus, 24 (40%) state that

they have "always felt like my adoptive parents' child" and 12 (20%)

report that their "adoptive parents are the only parents that I have

ever known". These findings support other research studies that

observe little connection between inadequate or defective adoptive

parent-child bonding and desire to search and reunite (Thompson et.

al., 1978: 18; Haimes & Timms, 1985: 83). As one of these adoptees

aptly replied,

> What can I say? My adoptive parents are my parents.
> The search could never change that. They are the
> ones who played with me and loved me and put the
> clothes on my back. I never thought of them as
> anything else but my parents. And, they did more
> for me than my natural mother or father. They
> did nothing. Only my birth mother has certain
> spots to fill in. That's all. That's why I
> searched. I certainly didn't need another
> mother or father. (Respondent No. 27, female, age 21)

Proponents of the psych-pathological also argue that the event of 'telling' leads to an inadequate identity formation in young adoptees. They encounter full knowledge of their adoptive status at the same time as they must integrate themselves as a part of the adoptive family system. These 'mixed' messages cause a state of confusion in the minds of young adoptees who try to resolve this ambivalent feeling by searching for their birth parents. Researchers who support this view advise adoptive parents to delay 'telling' until adoptees are older and can fully accept themselves as members of the adoptive family (Schecter, 1966: 177; Tousseing, 1962: 61; Weider, 1977: 18).

These reunited adoptees report few traumatic incidents over the issue of 'telling'. Thirty-two (53%) cannot remember being told of their adoption because their adoptive parents had raised them with that knowledge (See Table 4.7). Male adoptees learned of their adoption at a later age but, both genders report similar types of 'telling' reactions (See Table 4.8). Only a small number report significant memories of their 'telling' experience. These adoptees note that this life-crisis event became part of their personal biography and, as such,

Table 4.7

### Age that Respondent Learned of Adoptive Status*

| Age Told of Adoption | Male No. | % | Female No. | % | Total No. | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Always knew-from birth | 9 | 56 | 23 | 52 | 32 | 53 |
| 2 to 5 years | 1 | 7 | 6 | 14 | 7 | 12 |
| 6 to 10 years | 3 | 18 | 7 | 16 | 10 | 17 |
| 11 to 14 years | 2 | 12 | 3 | 6 | 5 | 8 |
| Never officially told | 1 | 7 | 5 | 12 | 6 | 10 |
| Total | 16 | 100 | 44 | 100 | 60 | 100 |

*rounded to nearest percent

Table 4.8

## Adoptee's Reported Response to Learning of Adoptive Status *

| Reaction to `Telling' | Male | | Female | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % |
| Can't remember | 10 | 64 | 34 | 77 | 44 | 73 |
| Casual, Friendly | 1 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Traumatic, felt rejected | 2 | 12 | 4 | 9 | 6 | 10 |
| Humiliated, felt different | 0 | 0 | 4 | 9 | 4 | 6 |
| Loved, felt wanted or `chosen' | 1 | 6 | 2 | 5 | 3 | 5 |
| Knew it was secret — felt a stigma | 2 | 12 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 4 |
| Total | 16 | 100 | 44 | 100 | 60 | 100 |

*Rounded to nearest percent

was integrated into their self-concept. Thus, the majority of

these adoptees claim that,

>It wasn't a big issue. They told me that I was
>adopted. And, they told me that I was chosen and,
>I thought, "That's nice. I'm special.". Basically,
>it was just a part of me. You know, being adopted.
>(Respondent No. 47, male, age 42)

or,

>Being adopted was just a part of me. My mother read
>us a little story about adoption as soon as I was old
>enough to read stories to. She was very open about it.
>So was my adoptive father. Neither one of them had
>ever been openly sensitive about it. It was no secret.
>I never thought that there was anything strange about it.
>It was just curiosity about my background that made me
>search. (Respondent No. 29, female, age 44)

Those adoptees who describe 'traumatic telling' experiences

also fail to correlate this significant life-crisis event with their

desire to search. One of the adoptees who learned of her adoption

at a later age reports, for example, that,

>I didn't know that I was adopted until I was around twelve.
>We were at a social gathering and someone said, "Oh, you're
>the adopted one.". And, the whole room went silent. I
>remember because as soon as she said it I knew that it was
>true. Because a whole bunch of different events that had
>taken place in my life just seemed to fall into place once
>she said it. Anyway, we went home and my mother told me
>the truth. But, I think that it was more that my mother
>couldn't find the right time to tell me. It was still over
>forty years before I searched. I was satisfied with what I
>had. I didn't search for anything but information. I thought
>that my children and my grandchildren had a right to know that.
>(Respondent No. 52, female, age 53)

Another adoptee who describes a very traumatic telling event

notes more devastating effects on her self-concept but fails to link

this event with her searching behaviour. She states that,

> They didn't tell me that I was adopted until I was
> thirteen. I had an older brother from my adoptive
> father's first marriage. I think that they were
> afraid that he would tell me so they did. And, I
> had no idea. No idea at all. And, I was around it
> all of my life. I had heard all of my life that my
> brother was blonde and I was dark and we don't look
> a bit alike. But, it never occurred to me that I
> was adopted. I was shocked. I didn't go out of the
> house for two weeks. I felt terrible. It was
> devastating. I resented them terribly for not telling
> me. I went through a really rebellious stage after
> that. But, I didn't think of searching. I didn't do
> that until a long time later. (Respondent No. 17,
> female, age 36)

These quotes question the validity of those researchers who

advise 'telling' the adoptee at a much later age. The above adoptees

note that their late 'telling' experience forced them to reorganize

and restructure past events into a new social context that affected

their definition of self. The first adoptee states that the effects

of late telling were minimal for her because this event helped her

understand past social situations more fully. The second adoptee

experienced considerable emotional shock because she had never

considered the possibility of adoption. She had to completely re-define

self from a different perspective. Neither adoptee, however, links

their 'telling' experience to their searching behaviour or their desire

for reunion contact with their birth mother.

Even though these reunited adoptees do not view their search

as a symptom of poor adoptive parent-child bonding or negative adoption

outcome, they realize that others in their society define it in this

fashion. Nine (15%) spontaneously observed, for example, that they

did not search for another family to replace their adoptive family.

Another 7 (12%) noted that they were not looking for 'another

mother'. These comments frequently arose in the interview session

before the topics of adoptive families or the issues of 'telling'

were raised. Thus, these adoptees consistently maintained that their

search was separate from their adoption outcome. They claimed that,

> I was very happy with my adoptive family. I was
> very close to my mother and I have a brother that
> spoiled me rotten. I really didn't need another
> family. The reason for the search was to find a
> piece that I felt was missing. And, even just
> getting the background information and knowing that
> it was a nice family and not a prison inmate or some
> such thing made me happy. You see, it was for me that
> I searched. Not because of them. (Respondent No. 11,
> female, age 35)

and,

> I don't think that I needed to search except for my
> background information. I had my own mother and she
> was good enough. Because I had had such a good life.
> And, a good mother. So, you don't need anything else.
> I just wanted some information for myself and my
> children and my grandchildren. (Respondent No. 41,
> female, age 60)

This assessment of the adoptive family system was confirmed

by these adoptees when they answered the questions, "Do you think that

adoptive families are different than biological families?" and "Do you

think that your experience of being raised as an adopted child was

different than the experience of being raised as a biological child?"

(Question Nos. 61 and 62). Only 36 (60%) of these adoptees replied,

"Yes" to the question of difference between adoptive and biological

families (See Table 4.9). Of these 36 responses, 11 observed that

society defined them as different from the norm. They claimed that,

Table 4.9

Ways That Respondents Think that Adoptive Families are Different
Than Biological Families *

| Ways Different | Male | | Female | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % |
| More love & understanding in adoptive families | 1 | 11 | 2 | 7 | 3 | 8 |
| Adoptive parents have to prove themselves | 0 | 0 | 2 | 7 | 2 | 5 |
| Adoptive parents really want children | 0 | 0 | 2 | 7 | 2 | 5 |
| Adoptive children are not the biological children | 3 | 34 | 7 | 27 | 10 | 29 |
| Adoptive parents can't understand adopted children | 1 | 11 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 5 |
| Adoptive parents try harder as parents | 1 | 11 | 3 | 13 | 4 | 11 |
| Society sees us as different | 2 | 22 | 9 | 33 | 11 | 32 |
| No difference - my personal experience was a unique one | 1 | 11 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 5 |
| Total | 9 | 100 | 27 | 100 | 36 | 100 |

*rounded to nearest percent

In the eyes of society these children are born in a
different way. Plus the fact that some kind people
come along and pick up these little waifs and we
should be grateful. And, other people are waiting
for you to go wrong. For the bad blood to show up.
My parents, now, they never gave me that message.
I was like their own child. This is just something
that I learned from others. My mother is a typical
mother. There is no problem there. She thinks that
she raised the most perfect children imaginable.
(Respondent No. 43, female, age 49)

The question of child-rearing drew similar types of responses.

Thirty-six (60%) of these adoptees replied that there was "no

difference" in the way that they were raised (See Table 4.10). Eight

stated that they could not answer because they did not know what it

was like to be raised as a biological child. Three (5%) remarked

that they "felt out of place" because their society labelled them

as separate from biological families. Thus, these reunited adoptees

typically observed that,

I had a good family life. It was certainly a lot
better than a lot of other families. Like, I have
a friend who is the biological daughter and her
mother treats her the same way that my mother treats
me. So, where is the difference, really? (Respondent
No. 16, female, age 31)

and,

Your adoptive parents are your parents. They treat you
as any other child. And, from day to day, you are their
child. And, they treat you that way. At least, that was
my experience. (Respondent, No. 13, female, age 45)

It is only due to the process of adoption that any differences arise

because,

Society looks at you differently. You see, the issue of
adoption is a recurrent theme in you life. And, you must
deal with it at specific times and in different places.
But, it's not a family thing. Your family and the way you
behave with one another. It's the same as any other.
(Respondent No. 2, female, age 20)

Table 4.10

## Adoptee's Assessment of His/Her Personal Experience of
## Being Raised as an Adopted Child*

| Personal Experience | Male No. | Male % | Female No. | Female % | Total No. | Total % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| no difference | 11 | 69 | 25 | 56 | 36 | 60 |
| adoptive parents were 'too old' | 2 | 12 | 4 | 9 | 6 | 10 |
| adoptive parents were too protective | 1 | 7 | 2 | 4 | 3 | 5 |
| adoptive parents never understood me | 0 | 0 | 4 | 9 | 4 | 7 |
| adoption sets one apart from others | 0 | 0 | 3 | 7 | 3 | 5 |
| can't answer | 2 | 12 | 6 | 15 | 8 | 13 |
| Total | 16 | 100 | 44 | 100 | 60 | 100 |

*rounded to nearest percent

These response patterns support the claim that these reunited adoptees possess strong adoptive parent-child bonds and experience satisfactory adoption outcome. Their descriptions of their adoptive families and their childhood experiences indicate that, like the searching adoptees found in other research studies, their search was not motivated by a psycho-pathological 'need' to resolve any emotional problems that arose from their adoptive family situation (Triseliotis, 1973: 157). Some appear very content with their adoptive family relationships while others express considerable dissatisfaction. None, however, define their adoptive parent-child bonds or negative adoption outcome as a prime motivating factor for their search and reunion.

Yet, these reunited adoptees realize that their adoptive staus sets them apart from others in their society who are not adopted. They are also very aware that their society defines searching behaviour as symptommatic of poor adoptive-child bonding and negative adoption outcome. Their repeated disclaimers of any connection between their adoptive family structure and searching behaviour exemplify this awareness. Their acceptance of this definition of the situation, therefore, implies an acceptance of the idea that they are, in some way, maladjusted, discontent or emotionally disturbed as a result of their adoptive experience. They require a less negative vocabulary of motives to explain their search if they are to sustain a positive self-concept and protect the adoptive parent-child bonds that are so important to them. This motive talk focuses on the process of stigmatization that they experience as adoptees who are denied access to information that others in their society easily possess.

III: <u>A More Acceptable Motive for Search and Reunion</u>

Simpson et. al. (1981: 430) list four major sources of motivation for the adoptee's desire to search. These are:

> (a) the desire for more genetic information about their parents; (b) the desire for more in-depth information about their background or 'roots'; (c) the desire to satisfy what they, the adopted adults, defined as a natural/normal 'curiosity'; and, (d) the desire for information that they can pass on to their children.

The reunited adoptees in this study also list these four major sources of motivation for their desire to search (See Table 4.11). In their response to the question, "Why did you want to search?", 14 (11%) wanted more genetic information about their birth parents; 18 (13%) desired more in-depth information about their background or 'roots'; 41 (30%) needed to satisfy their natural/normal 'curiosity'; and, 12 (9%) wished for facts that they could pass on to their children. The adoptees in this study provide the typical reasons for search and reunion that are found in other research studies on this topic (Haimes & Timms, 1985: 52-53; Sorosky et. al., 1974: 204; Thompson et. al., 1978: 21). Their responses to this question also match the more informal statements that they gave to explain their searching behaviour during the interview session before this question was asked. They, therefore, responded with such comments as,

> Everybody has a sense of their roots that they would like to know. I have my adoptive family and that's my roots as far as I grew up with. But, when you get older, I think that you like to know exactly the situation of where you came from and maybe what it would have been like if you had stayed in that situation. I guess I was just curious about that. (Respondent No. 22, male, age 35)

Table 4.11

## Reasons Given for Desire to Search *

| Reason Given | First Response | | | | | | Second Response | | | | | | Third Response | | | | | | Total Response | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Male | | Female | | Total | | Male | | Female | | Total | | Male | | Female | | Total | | Male | | Female | | Total | |
| | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % |
| Genealogical Curiosity | 4 | 25 | 11 | 25 | 15 | 25 | 6 | 40 | 15 | 45 | 21 | 44 | 2 | 20 | 3 | 17 | 5 | 18 | 12 | 27 | 29 | 31 | 41 | 30 |
| Medical History | 1 | 7 | 6 | 13 | 7 | 12 | 2 | 13 | 8 | 24 | 10 | 21 | 1 | 10 | 5 | 28 | 6 | 21 | 4 | 8 | 19 | 20 | 23 | 17 |
| Who Do I look Like | 6 | 37 | 12 | 27 | 18 | 32 | 2 | 13 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 6 | 1 | 10 | 4 | 22 | 5 | 18 | 6 | 13 | 17 | 18 | 26 | 19 |
| More In-depth Information about `Roots' | 0 | 0 | 9 | 20 | 9 | 15 | 1 | 7 | 2 | 6 | 3 | 6 | 2 | 20 | 2 | 1 | 4 | 14 | 3 | 7 | 13 | 14 | 16 | 12 |
| Out of Place in Adoptive Family | 2 | 12 | 2 | 5 | 3 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 10 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 4 | 3 | 7 | 2 | 2 | 5 | 4 |
| Want to Meet and Talk with Birth Mother | 3 | 19 | 4 | 10 | 7 | 10 | 4 | 27 | 7 | 21 | 11 | 23 | 2 | 20 | 4 | 22 | 7 | 25 | 13 | 29 | 15 | 15 | 25 | 18 |
| Totals | 16 | 100 | 44 | 100 | 60 | 100 | 15 | 100 | 33 | 100 | 48 | 100 | 10 | 100 | 18 | 100 | 28 | 100 | 41 | 100 | 95 | 100 | 136 | 100 |

*Rounded of to nearest percent

and,

> It's probably something only someone who is
> adopted would know. But, there is definitely an
> emptiness in you. It's a part of you that you
> never know. And, it's hard to explain but it's
> actually like walking around with part of you
> missing. (Respondent No. 50, female, age 31)

and,

> It was like there was a vacuum there and I think
> that maybe what I was doing was trying to get some
> information and fill in that gap. That vacuum was
> that I was unrelated to people. I didn't have any
> ties or connections to anyone in this world other
> than myself. My adoptive parents. Even my wife
> and children. It's different somehow. I think that
> I was looking for an anchor. It's hard to explain.
> (Respondent No. 31, male, age 30)

and,

> You want something that is biologically yours. I
> never grew up feeling insecure or anything but it
> was just a piece that was missing. Like, you hear
> all the kids at school talking about their cousins
> and you talk about yours but you also know that those
> people aren't your cousins. Not really. And, you
> feel a bit on the outside. And, it's not like I'm
> dropping my adoptive family or anything. It's just
> where they are. And, getting all of the questions
> answered. Like I said, biology does count for
> something. (Respondent No. 11, female, age 35)

This motive talk moves the search into a more personal and
private domain and away from the realm of adoptive parent-child bonding
or adoption outcome. These adoptees note that their adoption separates
them from a close association with their biological ties and the
genetic information that these ties provide. The close intimate bonds
that they establish with their adoptive parents, their spouses and their
own biological children operate on a different basis and assume other
significant positions in the organization of their social world. They
suffer 'identity gaps' because they lack the biological connections

that others in their society possess.

The significance of this need for a biological connection becomes more emphatic when these adoptees try to explain the source of their physical characteristics and/or emotional temperament. Twenty-six (19%) of the responses given for the desire to search fall under the heading "Wanted to Know Who Do I Look Like?" and 25 (18%) fall under the category, "Had to Meet the Birth Mother" (See Table 4.11). These reunited adoptees frequently observed that their physical attributes were a puzzle to them before their reunion. Thus, one adoptee noted that she wanted to search because,

> I think that it would be nice to know who you look like.
> Like, my oldest son looks just like his dad and my
> youngest looks more like me. And, where did that come
> from? That really bothered me. So, it would be nice to
> know where your character and personality and looks are
> from. Like, you just didn't grow in a garden.
> (Respondent No. 32, female, age 38)

Another observed that,

> In a lot of people, there is this need to know, "Why do
> I look the way I do? Where do I get my characteristics
> from?" And, these things most people take for granted
> because they can get the answers whenever they want.
> Without asking. Like, there's my grandmother and there's
> my grandfather and she does this and he does that. And,
> she's like this and he's like that. There is a thing
> called roots. And, I would like to know where I got my
> nose. And, where did I get my teeth? But, adoptees who
> ask are told that it's wrong. (Respondent No. 20, male,
> age 40)

This need to answer the question, "Who Do I Look Like?" extends much further than finding the source of one's physical appearance or character traits. It provides tangible evidence of one's biological connection to others and produces a sense of normalcy about self. This factor explains the failure of 'matching' as a means of fully integrating adoptees into the adoptive family system (Feigleman &

Silverman, 1984). It is the adoptive status that sets adoptees

apart from others not their physical appearance. Thus, one

'matched' adoptee remarks,

> I wanted to know where my looks come from. And, in
> a way, that's crazy because my adoptive mother and I
> look so much alike. It seems so weird because we
> look so closely alike that you couldn't even tell
> that I was adopted. Everyone was always surprised
> when they found out. In fact, at one time, I
> wondered if she was lying to me about it or not.
> But, I still wanted to know where I get my looks
> from. Funny, eh? (Respondent No. 35, male, age 21)

Questions about the source of one's physical appearance or one's

character traits raise questions about one's connections to others.

An inability to answer these questions raises further questions about

the reasons for this lack of information. It isolates and sets one

apart. Thus, even though this adoptee and his adoptive mother

physically resemble each other, she is not the 'source' of those

particular physical characteristics. He cannot account for their

source. It is this account that provides him with the connection

that he needs to gain acceptance as a 'normal' person who controls

access to that information (Goffman, 1963: 74). Thus, the question,

"Who Do I Look Like?" symbolizes the social stigma that he carries.

It reinforces his sense of powerlessness over self because his adoptive

status denies him the background information that others so easily

possess.

Face-to-face contact with one's birth mother provides

undeniable proof that this biological connection exists. The responses

in this category, therefore, correspond significantly with the

responses given to the category, "Had to Meet the Birth Mother".

These adoptees believe that meeting the birth mother clearly
"establishes her existence as a real person" (Respondent No. 3).
It is the "only way that you can be certain the background
information is true and correct" (Respondent No. 43). They could
see with their "own eyes" the source of their genetic heritage
(Respondent No. 4) and personally determine the birth mother's
emotional temperament and character traits (Respondent No. 2).
These experiences establish the adoptee's biological connection to
others and give him/her the same background information that 'normal'
members of their society possess (Respondent Nos. 9, 11 and 40).

Like the searching adoptees in other studies, these reunited
adoptees found that their adoptive status placed them in a position
of doubt and uncertainty over their identity because it denied them
knowledge of their genealogy (Sobol & Cardiff, 1983: 483). This
more personal and intimate vocabulary of motives let them define
their desire for reunion as a reasonable reaction to an unfair
institutional structure that demanded secrecy over their background
information. This view of their adoptive situation removed the label
of maladjustment or negative adoption outcome that the psycho-
pathological view applied. Few of these adoptees found, however,
that these 'new' motives were strong enough for them to confront the
normative constraints that their society held toward reunion, or break
the legal restrictions that it had established over disclosure of
their background information. The majority postponed their search
for many years after they first expressed that desire. The following
section outlines the implications that this postponement had for the

Table 4.12

Relationship Between Age. Gender and Searching Activity *

| | Age Begin to Think About Searching | | | | | | Age Begin to Search | | | | | |
| | Male | | Female | | Total | | Male | | Female | | Total | |
| | No. | % | No. | % | No | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| zero** | 2 | 12 | 12 | 27 | 14 | 23 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 1 to 9 | 1 | 6 | 3 | 6 | 4 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 10 to 19 | 7 | 44 | 13 | 30 | 20 | 34 | 3 | 19 | 5 | 12 | 8 | 13 |
| 20 to 29 | 3 | 19 | 8 | 18 | 11 | 18 | 8 | 50 | 11 | 25 | 19 | 32 |
| 30 to 39 | 3 | 19 | 6 | 14 | 9 | 15 | 4 | 25 | 16 | 37 | 20 | 33 |
| 40 to 49 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 9 | 20 | 9 | 15 |
| 50 ro 59 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 5 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 6 | 3 | 6 | 4 | 7 |
| Totals | 16 | 100 | 44 | 100 | 60 | 100 | 16 | 100 | 44 | 100 | 60 | 100 |

*Rounded to the nearest percentage
** zero indicates subject remembers always wanting to search

search route that these adoptees eventually took.

IV: <u>Desire, Postponement and Ultimate Decision to Search</u>

Table 4.13 shows that the majority of the adoptees in this study initiated their search many years after they first thought about the possibility of search and reunion. Even though 14 (23%) of these adoptees stated that they had always wanted to search and 20 (34%) claimed that their desire for search arose during adolescence, only 8 (13%) initiated their search before the age of twenty (See Tables 4.12 and 4.13). Those adoptees who initiated their search during adolescence made fragmentary and undirected search attempts (Respondent Nos. 14, 27, 31 and 44). They generally took the search path of the young man who reported that,

> I started to search when I was a teenager. It was
> just curiosity the first time that I looked. I did
> it on my own. I just had an idea and I went to the
> Children's Aid office and asked them. I think that
> I probably told them that I was going to search.
> When they know that they aren't going to give you
> any information. Especially, if you just walk in
> off the street. I didn't know any better. I put
> it off for another ten years after that. You know,
> thinking about it but never seriously doing anything.
> (Respondent No. 14, male, age 34)

These types of search attempts contrast with those of other adoptees (17 or 28%) who delayed their search for more than twenty years after they first expressed the desire. The sample's overally searching activities, however, concur with other research findings which report that adoptees frequently make search attempts of "varying degrees of intensity with relatively limited success" before they take directed searching action (Simpson et. al., 1981: 482; Sobol & Cardiff, 1983: 433). A concise analysis of the search and

Table 4.13

## Years Difference Between Thought and Action ***

| | Male | | Female | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % |
| Zero | 5 | 31 | 9 | 20 | 14 | 23 |
| 1 to 9 | 6 | 38 | 11 | 25 | 17 | 28 |
| 10 to 19 | 3 | 19 | 9 | 20 | 12 | 21 |
| 20 to 29 | 2 | 12 | 15 | 35 | 17 | 28 |
| 30 to 39 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 40 to 49 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 50 to 59 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Totals | 16 | 100 | 44 | 100 | 60 | 100 |

***zero indicates that as soon as consciously considered seraching subject
took immediate action

reunion process, therefore, requires an examination of the reasons

for delay or postponement of search as well as the motivations

behind that search.

Question 1C in the open-ended interview questionnaire asked,

"Why do you think that you waited until you were XX years of age to

search when you began to think about searching earlier?" (See

Appendix A). Seventeen of the responses (15%) to this question

stated that the adoptee was "too young" to search when he/she first

expressed that desire. This data reflects the fact that 38 (64%)

of the respondents claimed that they first thought of searching before

they reached the age of majority (See Table 4.12). It also supports

the findings of other researchers who note that young adoptees

experience an inordinate interest in their genealogical background

as they struggle to form their adult identity (Sants, 1964: 134;

Tousseing, 1962: 65). Thoughts of search may, at that time, merely

symbolize the transition stage into adulthood rather than an immediate

desire for search and reunion contact.

Nineteen (17%) of the responses to Question 1C indicate that

"life kept getting in the way" (Respondent No. 20). These adoptees

realized that a search demanded time and energy away from their other

commitments. Some noted that their previous half-hearted and

undirected search attempts had shown them the type of personal

involvement that they needed to effectively fulfil their desire. Many

recognized that their search outcome could require a deep emotional

commitment that they were, as yet, unprepared to take. Since the

lack of background information rarely obstruct  the adoptee's ability

to lead a full and productive life (Triseliotis, 1973: 172-173;

Table 4.14

## Reason Given for Postponement of Search **

| Reason Given | First Response | | Second Response | | Third Response | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | No. | % * | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % |
| Too Young | 12 | 20 | 2 | 5 | 3 | 19 | 17 | 15 |
| Don't know | 10 | 17 | 9 | 24 | 2 | 12 | 21 | 18 |
| Other Things in Life | 12 | 20 | 4 | 11 | 3 | 19 | 19 | 17 |
| Fear, Concern, Apprehension | 26 | 43 | 22 | 60 | 8 | 50 | 56 | 50 |
| Total | 60 | 100 | 37 | 100 | 16 | 100 | 113 | 100 |

*Rounded to nearest decimal point

** These patterns are consistent for both gender and age cohort

Sorosky et. al., 1974; 1978), other, more immediate demands

can supercede that desire. Many of these reunited adoptees

observed, for example, that marriage, children and occupational

advancement took precedence over their search. To quote one

respondent,

> I don't think that I was ready when I was 18 or 19 or
> even 20. And, then the next ten years I was so busy
> with my life. I was on the go for ten years straight.
> I just didn't stop. My life was constantly changing
> in that ten years. I had my son. I got a job. I
> really didn't have time to look for her. And, I really
> didn't want to take the time because I knew that it would
> probably involve a lot of time and I just didn't have any.
> So, that's mainly why. But, when I was turning 32, I had
> all the time in the world. You know, I wasn't working.
> And, I thought that I would do it because maybe next year
> I wouldn't have the time again. (Respondent No. 3, female,
> age 34)

Another adoptee replied,

> I thought about it off and on throughout my life but I
> never really did too much about it. I don't know why.
> I had done some searching on my own and it really looked
> like a dead end street. You know, "What do you do?
> Where do you go?" That sort of thing. And, then we got
> married and had our children and our grandchildren. Until
> one day I decided that if I was going to do it that I should
> do it. (Respondent No. 48, male, age 54)

Like the adoptees in other research studies, these reunited

adoptees note that their search was not a prominent issue that

required immediate resolution (Haimes & Timms, 1985: 51; Simpson et.

al., 1981: 432). They had lived in this state of uncertainty for most

of their life. They tended to postpone their search until they felt

that the "time was right" (Respondent No. 41). This sense of "timing"

explains the large percentage of female adoptees who delayed their

search for over 20 years. Women in our society spend a great amount of

their time and energy tending to family concerns (Luxton, 1980). The

intensity of these demands may extend over many years of child-

bearing and child-rearing (Luxton, 1980: 1). Although this view

constrasts sharply with the observation that more female than male

adoptees search, this issue is explored more fully in the next

section of this chapter.

Twenty-one (19%) of the responses to Question 10 focus on

the adoptee's 'ignorance' about search. These adoptees "didn't

have the first idea about how to do it"; "had never heard of

anything like Parent Finders before I joined" or, "thought that

the book had been closed forever on the subject and couldn't be

opened again" (Respondent Nos. 11, 9 and 6 respectively). Despite

the recent publicity over search and reunion, many of these reunited

adoptees possessed little prior knowledge of effective search

techniques before they contacted Parent Finders. Others believed

that they were the only adoptee who held such ideas. The normative

sanctions against search activity discouraged them from an overt

expression of their desire for more background information and

distanced them from others who might give them assistance. Thus,

it was not until these adoptees gained a more positive acceptance of

their 'need to know' that they began to search effectively. As one

adoptee replied,

> There was no place for me to go to search. I hadn't
> the foggiest idea of how to go about it. I didn't
> think that I should for one thing. And, I thought
> that I was alone in these thoughts. That this was a
> bad thing to do. Disrespectful of my parents. But,
> when I found that there were many others out there
> who would like to search, I didn't feel guilty about
> wanting to do it. (Respondent No. 26, female, age 49)

The reasons that these adoptees give to explain the postponement

factors of 'timing', 'ignorance' and being 'too young' reveal

many of the personal doubts and uncertainties that these adoptees

encountered as they grappled with the ultimate decision that

changed their 'desire' into a 'reality'. These doubts and

uncertainties become more emphatic, however, when they discuss

their search and reunion <u>fears</u>. Fifty-six (50%) of the responses

that these reunited adoptees gave to explain their delay in search

focus on the issue of fear as a major search deterrant (See Table

4.15). These fears are all closely interconnected. They also

closely match the arguments that our society uses to support secrecy

in adoption (Benet, 1974: 17: Garber, 1985: 21-22). As members of

their society, adoptees internalize the customary values and social

sanctions that are held against search and reunion. These normative

constraints focus primarily on the negative effects of reunion

outcome (Garber, 1985: 23). Thus, the adoptees in this study delayed

their search because they feared that they would uncover disagreeable

or unpleasant background information (8 or 14%). They worried about

disrupting the birth mother's life or her current family relationships

(7 or 13%). They were concerned that others would view them as

'abnormal', 'ungrateful' or maladjusted' (8 or 14%). A large number,

therefore, explained their search delay in the following way:

> You might say that I was a little bit scared about
> what I might find out. That I might not like it.
> But, hoping that I would be happy with it. And,
> there is always the fear that...okay, say, you find
> them and meet them and, say, she's married and she's
> got children. Like, how are you going to handle it?
> And, they also might reject her because of that. It's
> a very touchy thing. You never know what you are
> going to find. (Respondent No. 48, male, age 59)

Table 4.15

### Postponement of Search and Respondent's Expressed Fear Over Search Outcome **

| Expressed Fear | First Response | | Second Response | | Third Response | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % |
| Fear of Rejection | 2 | 8 | 3 | 14 | 1 | 12 | 6 | 11 |
| Fear of Unknown | 3 | 12 | 1 | 5 | 4 | 50 | 8 | 14 |
| Fear of Hurting Adoptive Parents | 9 | 35 | 3 | 14 | 2 | 26 | 14 | 25 |
| Fear of Breaking Society's Norms | 5 | 18 | 3 | 14 | 0 | 0 | 8 | 14 |
| Fear of Disrupting Birth Mother's Life | 3 | 12 | 4 | 18 | 0 | 0 | 7 | 13 |
| Fear of Search Itself | 4 | 15 | 8 | 35 | 1 | 12 | 13 | 23 |
| Total | 26 | 100 | 22 | 100 | 8 | 100 | 56 | 100 |

* Rounded to nearest percent

**This general patern is consistent for both sexes and all age cohorts

and,

> I think that I wanted some reassurance that the
> curiosity that I had wasn't abnormal. My adoptive
> parents were good about my questions but I was
> sometimes nervous to ask. I think that probably I
> felt that it would appear ungrateful to them or to
> anyone else. I always wanted to make the semblance
> of normalness. I had to be sure for myself that it
> was okay to search. (Respondent No. 18, female, age 24)

Many of the arguments against disclosure concentrate on

search and reunion as a 'rejection' of the adoptive parents

(Andrews, 1979: 15: Garber, 1985: 14: Zeilinger, 1979: 45). Although

the adoptees in this study do not personally define their search in

this way, they are aware that others do. Fourteen (25%) of their

'fear' responses, therefore, focus on their "fear of hurting the

adoptive parents" by searching. This fear was so significant that

10 (17%) of these reunited adoptees waited for their adoptive parents

to die before they initiated concentrated searching action (See Table

3.4). Fifteen others (25%) searched without telling their adoptive

parents about their activities. These two types of adoptees claimed

that,

> I think that I was waiting for my parents to die.
> And, then, I realized that if I waited much longer
> that she might be dead too and the search would be
> useless. So, I decided to do it without them knowing.
> That way, I could do my search and find out what I
> wanted and not hurt my adoptive mother. (Respondent
> No. 28, female, age 55)

or,

> I wouldn't do anything as long as my mother and father
> were still living. I didn't want to hurt them. I know
> that they wouldn't have taken kindly to it. So, I didn't
> do anything until they died. My mother was very insecure
> about my adoption. And, I know that if I had ever
> approached her about it she would have thought that I
> didn't have any feelings for her anymore. And, that's not
> the case. I just wanted to know something about the person
> who gave me birth. (Respondent No. 34, female, age 55)

This fear over the adoptive parents' reaction to search demonstrates the limited sense of entitlement that many adoptive parents experience over their adopted child (Jaffee & Fanshel, 1970; Kirk, 1962; Feigleman & Silverman, 1983). Adoptees receive this message from their adoptive parents and transfer it to the search situation. Many of these reunited adoptees supported this fear over their adoptive parents' view of their search as "hurtful", "rejecting" or a personal failure" (Respondent Nos. 2, 19 and 21) with specific examples. They stated that,

> This shows how threatened my adoptive mother was
> over the whole thing. Years before she had given
> our adoption papers to a lawyer and on their death
> those adoption papers were to be destroyed. And,
> when my mother and father died, they were destroyed.
> She just wouldn't let me have those papers. They
> were hers and that's all there was to it.
> (Respondent No. 48, female, age 39)

and,

> I was never bothered by the fact that I was adopted.
> I had been able to talk about it quite openly. But,
> I did have the feeling instilled in me that you didn't
> go looking. I would say that I got that from my
> parents. I had always been told by them that this was
> the worst thing that I could ever do and that I would
> be causing a lot of people a lot of problems. So, it
> was a real mental turmoil for me to go through when I
> thought of doing it. (Respondent No. 25, female, age 36)

and,

> I remember when I was growing up that the subject was
> hush-hush. Once I asked her why she didn't have any
> kids of her own and she just said, "That's something
> that we don't talk about." So, it was all kept inside
> of me. And, once, my girlfriends's mother asked me if
> I had ever thought of looking. And, I said, "No, why
> should I? Because I am happy where I am and everything
> is okay." My mother told me later that she was glad
> that I didn't want to look. So, I took that as a
> message that I shouldn't. (Respondent No. 56, female,
> age 25)

Examples of this type reveal the great risks that many

of these reunited adoptees took when they established themselves

as serious searchers. A large number jeopardized their strong

adoptive parent-child bonds which they effected reunion. They

endangered their position in the adoptive family system for an

unfamiliar and mysterious connection with their biological parents.

The responses of "Fear of the Unknown" and "Fear of the Search,

Itself" demonstrate this concern over the decision to search. For example,

eight (14%) of these reunited adoptees delayed their search

because they were afraid of what their search would reveal while

13 (23%) claimed that they were afraid of searching because they

were uncertain of the search's end. These adoptees believed that

they "could find just about anything" (Respondent Nos. 11, 14 and

29). Until they prepared themselves to accept any possiblity at

the end of their search, they could not initiate concentrated

search action. These adoptees report that,

> I had to get prepared. I didn't know what I was going
> to find. I might find a prostitute or an alocholic.
> A down and outer. Or, I might find someone who had
> pulled their lives together. And, I had to prepare
> myself to accept anything. Then, you can face what you
> get. (Respondent No. 20, male, age 40)

and,

> I had to get over the attitude that I might be opening
> up something that I wish I hadn't gotten myself into.
> Like, I might find a real mess. Or, I might find
> someone on skid row. Just someone that I might have
> to worry about that would be a real drain on me. Not
> financially, you know. An unpleasant situation that
> I would wish that I didn't know about. (Respondent
> No. 29, female, age 44)

and,

> I envisioned all kinds of things.  I wondered,
> "Is she rich?" "Is she poor?" "Is she a drunk?"
> I prepared myself that if she was a lonely old
> drunk in a room that I had to deal with that.
> I knew that was a possibility.  Or, also someone
> who might cling on to  me for help.  There are so
> many directions to go.  She could be anything or
> anybody.  (Respondent No. 50, female, age 31)

The lack of recent communication with or receipt of updated

background information on the adoptee's birth family forced these

adoptees to contemplate the full range of search and reunion outcomes

that they could likely experience (Garber, 1985: 36).  They knew

the negative stereotype that birth mothers in our society endure

(Brent, 1976: 6; Garber, 1985: 14).  Others frequently reminded them

of this stereotype and reinforced this image as a possible reunion

scenario (Respondent Nos. 1, 18, 60).  This reinforcement came from

family members, social service professionals and society in general.

Thus, one adoptee observed,

> To say that you are adopted is to also say that you
> are illegitimate.  Now, it's different because young
> girls keep their babies all the time.  But, before if
> you said that you were illegitimate that meant something
> bad.  Like, to have a child and not be married was a crime.
> And, so, when you said you wanted to search, everyone
> wondered why you wanted to find this terrible person.  You
> really got the idea that you shouldn't do it.  (Respondent
> No. 22, male, age 35)

Another adoptee noted that her husband continually cautionned

her about searching because,

> He was very concerned.  I remember when I told him about
> it, he was very upset.  He wasn't angry.  He was just very
> concerned because he felt that it could lead to a lot of
> hurt and a lot of problems and he suggested that I leave it
> alone.  Because I couldn't tell what I might find.
> (Respondent No. 25, female, age 36)

A third noted that both she and several other adoptees received

this message from the social workers that they contacted for more

background information. She states that,

> There was this social worker that I had when I
> went to get my information. A lot of people at
> Parent Finders got the same kind of reaction.
> Anyway, the first thing she said was, "Well, you
> know your mother wasn't married, don't you?" Well,
> hey, we kinda figured that. Usually that's why
> people were given up. But, then, she went into all
> the rotten things that I might find. Like, when
> someone like that does something like that, then,
> you really wonder. (Respondent No. 16, female, age 41)

These experiences with others reinforced the fears that many

of these reunited adoptees expressed over the possibility of a poor

search and reunion outcome. They had to 'neutralize' this type of

reunion scenario before they could take concentrated search action.

For some, an introduction to the emotional support at Parent Finders

was adequate (Respondent Nos. 2 and 45). Others required much

stronger inducements. The multi-dimensional quality of their search

fears and the uncertainty of positive reunion contact left many of

them at an impasse between 'desire' and 'action' for a great many

years. Their initial reasons for searching (i.e. genetic curiosity;

a sense of disconnection from others) rarely seemed strong enough

motives to justify the great risks that search entailed for them.

They required a more powerful and more urgent vocabulary of motives

to account for their searching behaviour. The majority of the

reunited adoptees in this study found that vocabulary of motives as

the result of a life-crisis event.

V: <u>The Impact of a Life-Crisis Event and the Desire to Search</u>

Research on search and reunion indicates that the majority of searching adoptees experience a life-crisis event prior to their search (Sobol & Cardiff, 1983: 480; Sorosky et. al., 1974: 204; Thompson et. al., 1978: 21). Fifty (83%) of these reunited adoptees also report that a life-crisis event influenced their decision to search (See Table 4.16). These events include marriage or engagement (12 or 20%); pregnancy and/or the birth of a child (14 or 23%); and, serious medical illness (8 or 13%). More female adoptees (12) report the influence of pregnancy and/or the birth of a child than do male adoptees (2). These data support the claim that "women have a greater proclivity to search because of their closer awareness of the biological link between generations through their own pregnancies" (Sobol & Cardiff, 1983: 482). Yet, many of the female adoptees in this study noted that pregnancy and/or the birth of a child merely reinforced their interest in search. These life-change events did not, by themselves, motivate directed searching action. Several female adoptee in the last section, for example, found that childbirth and child-rearing frequently delayed their search. Even though a life-crisis or life-change event may raise the adoptee's awareness of his/her adoptive status and the meaning that it holds for him/her, it takes a <u>specific</u> life-crisis event to alter that meaning to such an extent that the adoptee takes searching action that leads to reunion contact. It is this change in the adoptee's definition of his/her adoptive status and its impact on the organization of his/her social

Table 4.16    Type of Life-Crisis Even Experienced Prior to Search *

| Type of Event | Male | | Female | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % |
| Pregnancy/birth of child | 2 | 12 | 12 | 27 | 14 | 23 |
| Marriage/engagement | 3 | 19 | 9 | 20 | 12 | 20 |
| Death of Parent, spouse, sibling | 0 | 0 | 0 | 20 | 9 | 15 |
| Serious illness | 2 | 12 | 6 | 14 | 8 | 13 |
| Turned 18/search legal | 3 | 19 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 7 |
| Job change/graduated religions conversion | 3 | 19 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 5 |
| No event | 3 | 19 | 7 | 16 | 10 | 17 |
| Total | 16 | 100 | 44 | 100 | 60 | 100 |

*Rounded to nearest percent

world that initiates a search.  Thus, for example, one adoptee

observed that,

> Different things would happen and I would think about
> it.  Like, one time I was on vacation and I had this
> friend and she teased me about being adopted and I
> wanted to search.  But, then, I was only around 11 or
> 12.  And, also, especially at baby showers or gatherings
> of people and the subject would come up and some people
> would be unfavourable to unwed mothers or adoption and
> searching and it would get me thinking on the subject.
> And, then, again, when I had my children.  And, they
> were growing up.  I saw that they were all different
> individuals and I wondered where they got their
> characteristics from.  As much as they looked and acted
> like their dad and me, I could still pick out things that
> were apart from us.  And, I would wonder where they got it
> from.  But, it was really this heart problem that spurred
> me on.  The doctor asked me about my family history and I
> said that I was adopted and his response was negative.  Like,
> "That's not going to help me.  I need this information."  So,
> that's when I decided to search.  (Respondent No. 26, female,
> age 53)

Many of the female adoptees in this study described the effects

of pregnancy and childbirth on their desire to search and its

reinforcement of the "continuity of life through the generations that

their adoption represented" (Sorosky et. al., 1974: 20).  Those who

used this life-crisis event as their prime motive for search claim,

however, that their lack of background information became a predominant

issue for them at this time because it affected their idealized

performance of the role-identity of 'mother'.  They found, for example,

that,

> The thing that really motivated me to search was when I was
> pregnant for my oldest child.  And, I went to the doctor and
> I realized that I was bringing a life into the world and I
> had no medical information.  And, my parents wouldn't give it
> to me because they didn't have it either.  And, all of a sudden,
> I started to worry about whether I had anything heritary that
> would affect my baby.  (Respondent No. 55, female, age 39)

and,

> When my son was a baby, he had to go to Sick Kids
> and get all these tests. And, when they asked for
> background information and I obviously don't have
> any...Across his sheet, in big, red letters, they
> wrote, "Mother Adopted". It really bothered me.
> I felt that my kid was being labelled because of
> me. (Respondent No. 32, female, age 38)

The role of 'mother' represents a major status for women

in our society (Stoneman et. al., 1980: 4; Miall, 1985; 1986). As

such, the role-identity of 'mother' generally occupies a prominent

position in a woman's salience hierarchy of role-identities. These

female adoptees believe that their missing background information

adversely affected their children's health and well-being and, as

a result, their idealized role performance as 'good' mothers. Others

reinforced this belief when they demanded background information

from them. Thus, this life-crisis event of childbirth and/or pregnancy

altered the meaning that their adoptive status held for them, their

positive self-concept and their presentation of self. Search offered

them a viable opportunity to resolve this dilemma and counterbalance

the missing information that their adoptive status produced.

The adoptees in this study who report that other significant

life-crisis events motivated them to search also note the strong

connection between their adoptive status and the idealized performance

of prominent role-identities. One adoptee, for example, stated that

his engagement stimulated his search because,

> It was basically for my wife's benefit. When we got
> engaged, she asked me questions about me and my background
> and my adoption. I knew that she would marry me even if
> I didn't search. But, for our peace of mind. Hers and
> mine. Like, she should really know what she was getting
> into. I decided to do it. (Respondent No. 7, male, age 24)

This adoptee believed that a search would alleviate the stress that

his adoptive status placed on his role performance as 'husband' because it would eliminate the doubts and uncertainties that his future wife expressed over his missing background information.

Several other adoptees claimed that their adoptive status affected their idealized role performance of 'patient' for, in order for their doctors to help them achieve good health, they needed specific hereditary information. Thus, one adoptee decided to search because,

> There's been so many medical problems that it overrode everything. And, doctors and medical students always ask about your family background. And, when you say that you are adopted, they ask, "What difference does that make?". They don't understand. You see, if they're not involved themselves, they don't realize that adoptees can't get this information. I've had residents say that to me. And, I haven't got any. Nothing. No family history. And, they think it's my fault. (Respondent No. 16, female, age 41)

These types of responses reveal the significant relationship that exists between one's adoptive status and the successful enactment of other, more prominent role-identities. Life-crisis events such as marriage or the birth of a child can accentuate this relationship so dramatically that it motivates the adoptee to search. The impact of that life-crisis event depends greatly on the role-identity that it affects and the postion that it holds in the adoptee's salience hierarchy. Thus, for example, one adoptee observed that his role-identity as a "true Christian" would be considerably enhanced if he reunited all of his various family members. He replied that,

> I think that I always wanted to search. But, when I
> became a Christian, it got stronger. At that point,
> you start to think more about family and where they
> are headed in terms of their life. And, in yours.
> And, this is also part of my family and I wanted to
> tell them about me. And, to complete our families
> together. (Respondent No. 14, male, age 34)

Nine (15%) of the adoptees in this study report that the

the death of a family member stimulated their search. This life-

crisis event emphasized their adoptee's connection to another

'family' that remained unknown. Search offered them the opportunity

to re-establish these other 'family' ties. As one adoptee remarked,

> I was going through a lot of emotions at that time
> because I had a brother that had been killed just
> the summer before and I was aching for a family
> relationship. I needed a brother. Not someone
> that was going to wrap their arms around me. I
> needed to know that I still had family somewhere.
> A brother or sister maybe. Someone that I was
> related to because I had lost one. I don't know
> but death does something to you. Especially, when
> it is sudden and accidental. Even though he was
> four years younger and his biological parents are
> my adoptive parents. I missed him a lot and I guess
> that I was looking for some replacement (Respondent
> No. 15, female, age 38)

Search and reunion gave this woman an opportunity to maintain her role-

identity of 'sister' by transferring this type of role relationship

to the unknown members of her birth family.

Four of the adoptees in this category report that the life-crisis

event of 'death' involved the death of an adoptive parent. This event

set these adoptees 'free' to search without fear of hurting their strong

adoptive parent-child bonds. These adoptees replied that,

> I didn't think that it was quite the right thing to do
> as long as my mother and father were alive. I didn't
> want to hurt their feelings. They raised me. They were
> my parents. But, I don't think they would have understood.
> When they had both died, I was free to search without fear of

hurting them. (Respondent No. 12, female, age 52)

and,

> I think that my mother would not have accepted it.
> It made me find searching difficult because she
> would never accept that adoptees might need to
> know their birth parents. And, I would have
> found it very difficult to do it if she had been
> living. Her death made it easier for me to decide
> to search. (Respondent No. 13, female, age 46)

These types of statements describe a major reason for delay in

search and a prime risk factor in reunion outcome (See Section III).

The adoptive parents' death eliminates this threat and lets the

adoptee maintain the idealized role performance of 'loyal' son or

daughter at the same time as he/she renews his/her biological ties

with the birth parents.

The life-crisis event of "death of a family member" raises

another significant issue for the study of search and reunion. Only

female adoptees (7 or 12%) responded to this category (See Table 4.16).

In contrast, only male adoptees (3 or 19%) reported that such life-

crisis events as job change, graduation or religious conversion

affected their desire to search. Since "women's work is rooted in

the intense and important relationships of the family" (Luxton, 1980:

1), drastic changes in the family structure are more likely to

emphasize the meaning that their adoptive status holds for them and

their idealized performance of these types of role-identities. Men,

on the other hand, experience "more opportunities to gain feelings of

personal worth and achievement through work and career" (Thompson et.

al., 1978: 22). Life-crisis events in these areas are, therefore,

more likely to provoke thoughts of search and reunion for men when

their adoptive status begins to influence the idealized

performance of these other, more prominent role-identities.

However, one's genealogy relates more closely to family concerns

and family structure than to those issues that arise in the paid

labour force. Women are, therefore, much more likely to encounter

difficulties over the lack of background information that their

adoptive status demands. This factor may account for the dispro-

portionate number of female adoptees who search. The life-crisis

events that they encounter may act as stronger motivations for

concentrated searching action.

VI: _Search Obsession and the Realization of One's Goal_

These gender differences disappear once the search becomes

activated (See Table 4.17). Once these adoptees decided to search,

they proceeded very quickly to a reunion. Over half (38 or 64%)

found their birth mother in less than six months time. Nine (15%)

discovered their birth mother's identity within twenty-four hours.

Fourteen (23%) completed their search within a week. These searches

progressed so quickly because,

> It became an obsession. Even though I didn't expect to
> get so involved. It kind of took me over. I just ignored
> everything for about eight weeks. My husband looked after
> things while I just ignored everybody. I was so absorbed.
> (Respondent No. 48, female, age 39)

and,

> Once I got started, I couldn't stop. Like, I had this bee
> in my bonnet to find her and that was it. But, I was
> prepared to do the work too. But, I knew that it got hold
> of me and I just couldn't stop. (Respondent No. 45, female,
> age 29)

This obsession with search begins after the adoptee starts to

gather and fit together the bits and pieces of information that form

Table 4.17

Length of Time the Search Progressed Before the Birth Mother Was Identified *

| Length of Search | Male | | Female | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % |
| less than 24 hours | 4 | 25 | 5 | 11 | 9 | 15 |
| less than 1 week | 4 | 25 | 10 | 23 | 14 | 23 |
| 1 week to 1 month | 2 | 13 | 4 | 9 | 6 | 10 |
| less than 6 months | 3 | 18 | 6 | 14 | 9 | 15 |
| 6 months to 1 year | 1 | 6 | 6 | 14 | 7 | 12 |
| 1 to 2 years | 2 | 13 | 6 | 14 | 8 | 13 |
| 2 to 5 years | 0 | 0 | 5 | 11 | 5 | 8 |
| 5 to 10 years | 0 | 0 | 2 | 4 | 2 | 4 |
| Total | 16 | 100 | 44 | 100 | 60 | 100 |

*Rounded to nearest percent

his/her genetic background. It develops from the adoptees'

ability to finally answer the questions that their missing

background information raises for them. They find that the

search process becomes,

> ...a kind of puzzle. It was extremely interesting.
> I was finding out about all of these people and
> placing them together and connecting them into a
> total picture in which I was also a part. I became
> more excited as each piece of information was gained.
> I found it all very interesting. Putting it all
> together to tell a whole story. I was high all the
> time. (Respondent No. 43, female, age 49)

This process of 'gathering the bits and pieces' becomes

important for the adoptee because it establishes his/her connection

to others in his/her society and his/her existence as a human being.

It gives him/her,

> ...that part of myself that I didn't know. My beginning.
> It's so elemental but when you are adopted you sometimes
> feel like you were hatched. There is no information about
> that aspect of your life. It's mystifying. And, I was
> getting answers. About what and who and how it all happened.
> How it all came about. Like, I have a beginning and I know
> that I'll have an end. I wasn't hatched. (Respondent No. 9,
> female, age 33)

This obsession with search is so strong that many adoptees

who had originally only desired background information found that,

> I was one of the adoptees who always said, "Why would
> you want to do it?" Because these people that raised
> you are your family. But, it was really funny that when
> I decided to do it that I went almost crazy to have it
> done. Like, it had to be done quickly. And, not for
> the surgery which was the reason that I started. But,
> for me. Once I got started on it, I couldn't quit. I
> got very involved in it. Almost like an obsession.
> (Respondent No. 24, female, age 30)

As a result of that obsession, these 'background information'

adoptees (Triseliotis, 1973) found that,

> Even though I was just curious about her, the more
> information that I found, the more curious I got and
> the more curious that I got, the more I wanted to find.
> And, every bit of additional information that I got
> made me more determined to find her and meet her.
> (Respondent No. 33, male, age 42)

This obession during the search process manifests itself through the various search stages that these adoptees experience. The 'pre-search' stage involves their expression of a desire to search (See Section III). Once they decide to search, they must obtain their non-identifying background information from the Children's Aid society or the adoption agency that negotiated their adoption. This is the first stage in the search process. They take this background information and match it with the birth name that appears on their adoption order. This 'match' outlines a profile of the birth mother and her family with a surname that directs the search. The picture that is drawn, however, depends upon the range and the extent of the background information that the adoptee receives. Some, for example, obtain two or three lines of information (Respondent No. 2). Others receive three to five pages (Respondent No. 46). Despite the superficial content of much of this background information, these searching adoptees become very excited. It is generally their first contact with information about self that they have always been denied. They react with excitement, curiosity and mixed emotion. To quote one adoptee,

> I was very excited. It was incredible! I thought, "God,
> I'm Irish!" You know, I didn't know what I was. Like,
> I had been told things by my parents but you never know.
> And, here was five pages about myself. And, I thought,
> "This is great." And, I cried. Because I finally got it.
> And, I called my friend. And, she wasn't that interested.
> And, I thought, "How could she not want to know? It's me."
> I was going crazy. It was wonderful to learn about me.
> (Respondent No. 46, female, age 26)

Another adoptee observed that,

> It never occurred to me that I would have another
> name.  So, I was intrigued when I saw it.  I guess
> that my parents had convinced me that I was a total
> non-entity when I came into their life that I never
> thought that I had been named or anything.  I thought
> that my existence began the day that they came to get
> me.  (Respondent No. 25, female, age 36)

These adoptees abandon the normative constraints that their

society places on their access to their background information

when they take this first step in the search process.  They find

that this initial amount of background information lessens their

feelings of difference and their sense of disconnection from others.

Further searching behaviour gives them the opportunity to gain a

full account of their genetic heritage and their beginnings as

human beings.  Given this small taste, they want more.  They have

begun a journey of self-discovery and self-exploration that others

in their society encounter as a part of their daily experience.  Their

obsession with search and the intensity of their reaction to their

'new' background information emphasize the role that their adoptive

status plays for their self-concept and the organization of their

social world.

The search is an intimate act.  It focuses on that part of self

that sets the adoptee apart from the rest of his/her society (i.e. his/

her social stigma).  Thus, the search offers adoptees the sense of

'normalcy' and social acceptance that all stigmatized people desire

(Goffman, 1963: 6).  It dominates the adoptee's thoughts and actions

because each new piece of information helps to neutralize the social

stigma that he/she carries.  Many of these adoptees became so absorbed

that they willingly took "any action that leads to more background information" (Respondent No. 1). For example, those adoptees who could not obtain their adoption order from their adoptive parents approached 'sympathetic' professionals or adoptive family members who "leaked the name" to them (Respondent Nos. 19, 22 and 32). Others searched through their adoptive parents' private papers (Respondent Nos. 2 and 7). Those who possessed limited background information frequently contacted possible birth relatives or former neighbours of the birth family and probed them for more data. These adoptees usually disguised their search by stating that they were completing a family tree and needed information about people who possessed that particular surname. Others checked cemetary plots, church baptismal records, city directories, telephone books, assessment rolls and newspaper files. They took each additional piece of information, tested it for its appropriateness with their other background information and fit it together until they positively identified their birth mother. In this way, "you build yourself up as you go along because each new piece starts to fit in and you get more excited because you find that you are finally reaching an end" (Respondent No. 50). This 'build up' adds to the intensity of the search process. Each time the adoptee reaches a plateau, another piece of information reveals itself thereby adding to his/her biography and his/her story of his/her connection to others in his/her society (Fieldnotes, May 5, 1985; May 7, 1985; May 9, 1985).

The length of search greatly depends upon the type of background information that the adoptee receives and the unique character of the birth family surname. Some searches can last over an hour while others

may take several years. Those adoptees who encounter significant

gaps in their background information or possess a very common family

surname often take extreme search tactics in their attempt to learn

more. One adoptee, for example, "took a job in the records department

where I was born because I believed that I might find my own records"

(Fieldnotes, June 5, 1985, p. 23). Another "spent hours looking

through old university yearbook pictures looking for people who might

fit my background information and who looked like me" (Respondent No.

29). A third went to the birth mother's "old neighbourhood and asked

all the shop merchants if they remembered this person and where she

lived" (Respondent No. 34). A fourth called "every person in the

Toronto telephone directory with the same surname as her birth mother's

and asked these people if they knew anything about her" (Respondent No.

1). Many of these adoptees, therefore, risked both their birth mother's

anonymity in their attempt to achieve more data. They became so

obsessed and preoccupied with their search that they lost sight of the

impact that their actions might have on others in their excitement to

discover more information about self.

Several of these adoptees observe that, in retrospect, they

should have been more discreet. They describe themselves as so "crazy",

"on such a terrific high", "so out of control" and, "not thinking

clearly at that moment" (Respondent Nos. 2, 46, 60 and 42 respectively).

The search "took over" their lives (Respondent No. 43). As one adoptee

aptly describes,

> I was so obsessed that I can't believe it. Like,
> you'd have to be nuts to do this but...the family
> name was a German one. And, I had this map of
> Germany. And, if you phone person-to-person, you
> don't have to pay. So, I phoned as many people with
> this name as I could. All over Germany. I mean, I
> must have made hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of
> phone calls trying to find this person. I felt that
> this was my only hope. You know...no one knows anything
> but maybe this guy does. It was like finding a needle
> in a haystack. But, that's how crazy it got. It was
> an obsession. Like, stupid things like that. Now, I
> think that it was stupid. But, at the time, I didn't
> care. I would have done anything to find out.
> (Respondent No. 10, female, age 23)

This preoccupation with the search process isolates the

adoptee from others and intensifies his/her concern over the meaning

that his/her adoptive status holds for him/her and the organization

of his/her social world. Thus, even though the majority of these

reunited adoptees claim that their husbands, children, close friends

and other family members supported their search, they also found that,

> They, like others, don't really understand what it's
> like. Like, when I came home with my background
> information, they tried to appear excited for me but
> they couldn't understand what all the excitement was
> about. Especially, my husband. He is not close to
> his family and he jokes sometimes about why do I want
> to go looking when he'd be happy to lose some of the
> ones he's got. (Respondent No. 19, female, age 42)

The adoptee's involvement in Parent Finders offers

him/her the social acceptance and understanding of his/her search

actions that others cannot provide. This, in turn, reinforces their

current obsession over their adoptive status and the social stigma

that it carries. These adoptees, therefore, also observe that,

> I found it really easy in that group because everybody
> was adopted. And, if I said something that nobody else
> would understand, they would. For example, when I found
> out my birth name and I called my husband and told him,
> he was happy for me. But, when I called my Parent
> Finders friend, she knew how I felt. Like, it was earth-
> shattering! It wasn't just nice. She was excited for me.
> She just didn't take it calmly. You know, there was a
> natural communication. (Respondent No. 56, female, age 39)

In this way, Parent Finders maintains the adoptee's commitment
to search and reunion because he/she can identify with the other
members' adoption, search and reunion experiences. As one reunited
adoptee who encountered a very long and difficult search process
declares,

> For all those years that I searched there were people
> getting reunions and I wasn't getting anywhere. It was
> really hard. But, it was good to see some find who they
> wanted. And, I just kept contact. Just in case something
> did happen. If I was around there, then, I would be there
> for it. Which is what happened. A member went one of the
> extreme routes to help me and got the answer. (Respondent
> No. 16, female, age 41)

Goffman (1963: 19) observes that the stigmatized person

> ...will find that there are sympathetic others who are
> ready to adopt his standpoint in the world and to share
> with him the feeling that he is human and "essentially"
> normal in spite of appearances and in spite of his own
> self-doubts.

Parent Finders offers searching adoptees a group of 'sympathetic others'
who defend their open expression of their search and reunion concerns.
This group provides its members with emotional support and specific
search tactics that assist them in their quest for further background
information. The group's political commitment to an open-records
system, however, encourages the prospect of reunion contact once the
search is completed. This factor contributes to the change in attitude
expressed by those 'background information adoptees in this study

as they proceeded into a reunion situation. Those 'background information' adoptees who appear in studies conducted on social service agencies or open-record systems, for example, let their search drop once they receive their desired information (Simpson et. al., 1981; Sobol & Cardiff, 1983; Thompson et. al., 1978). In contrast, Parent Finders members experience an emotional commitment to search and a process of continued self-absorption that leads to the desire for reunion contact. That desire for reunion contact, however, forms the basis for the data analysis that appears in the following chapter of this study.

## Conclusion

The reunited adoptees in this study represent the adoptees found in other studies on search and reunion. They span all age cohorts, have a fairly high level of education and, work primarily in Professional/Executive and Clerical/Sales occupations. The corresponding ratio of male-female reunions to male-female searches indicates that, once male adoptees decide to search, their involvement in the search process is just as comprehensive. The male adoptees in this study experience the same search path, use the same search tactics, and demonstrate the same reactions to their search findings as the female respondents. This data support Sobol's and Cardiff's (1983: 482) observation that male and female searchers demonstrate consistent responses "across every category of the searching dimension". As a result, the distinction between male-female respondents disappears for the remainder of the data analysis in this research study.

Like the searching adoptees in other studies, these reunited

adoptees describe their desire to search as an identity issue that stems from an adoptive status that denies them the genetic heritage that others in their society easily possess. Their reasons for search postponement reflect the strong normative constraints and social sanctions that our society places on their public expression of their need to 'fill in' this missing information and the social stigma that their adoptive status holds for them. Their search fears of hurting their adoptive parents or of finding undesireable search and reunion results emphasize their own internalization of these social stereotypes and their personal awareness of the stigma trait that they, themselves, carry. Their latent desire to satisfy their innate curiosity offers them limited justification for breaking their society's rules against disclosure.

These reunited adoptees note, however, that a specific life-crisis event acted as a catalyst that stimulated their concentrated searching activity. This life-crisis event emphasized the unique interconnection that existed between their adoptive status and their idealized performance of other, more prominent role-identities. This life-crisis event provided them with a vocabulary of motives that was strong enough for them to justify the risks that their search entailed. Thus, it was only when the adoptive status infringed on the adoptee's daily presentation of self that the search became imperative. The life-crisis event shifted their definition of the 'need to know' from that of a selfish act motivated by personal desire to that of an unavoidable necessity motivated by the insufficient knowledge that their adoptive status produced.

Once these adoptees made the decision to search, they
became obsessed with the process. The continuous accumulation
of the specific facts and details of their genetic background
produced a period of self-absorption and self-interest as they
integrated this 'new' information as a part of their self-concept.
Their contact with other adoptees at Parent Finders maintained
the excitement and enthusiasm that they experienced. Many of these
adoptees continued their search over long periods of dormancy when
further information was not forthcoming, while others broke their
anonymity to gain access to more data. The search took a dominant
position in their lives as they confronted the meaning that their
adoptive status held for their identity and for the organization of
their social world.

The adoptees in this study stopped their search when they
clearly established the birth mother's identity. At that point,
they faced the decision to contact their birth relatives and attempt
a reunion. All of the adoptees in this study made that decision.
The implications of that decision-making process appear in the next
chapter of this study. That chapter focuses on the possible reunion
outcomes that arise from contact; the type of information that each
party may receive; and, the kind of reunion role relationship that
evolves between birth mother and adoptee.

CHAPTER V - REUNION CONTACT AND BIRTH MOTHER-ADOPTEE INTERACTION

Introduction

      This chapter examines the issue of reunion contact. Search ends for adoptees when they learn their birth mother's identity. The reunion process begins when they contact her. The decision to contact provides the transition between the two. The majority of the adoptees in this study contacted their birth mother as soon as possible after they learned her identity. Section I of this chapter outlines the adoptee's decision over contact and the investment of self that this contact attempt entails.

      Section II describes the reunion situations that the reunited adoptees in this study encountered. Each reunited adoptee confronts the reality of his/her own personal reunion outcome. These reunited adoptees used a vocabulary of motives to explain their reunion to self and others. That vocabulary of motives corresponds with the adoptee's view of his/her adoptive status and the role that it plays for the organization of his/her social world. Section II outlines that vocabulary of motives and its effects on the adoptee's acceptance of his/her own reunion outcome.

      The reunion situations in this study indicate that an ideal type of reunion outcome does not exist. Once contacted, the birth mother becomes an active participant in the reunion process. Only 38 (63%) of these reunited adoptees achieved a face-to-face meeting

with their birth mother. Manv of them expressed shock that she
appeared as a 'stranger' to them. This factor weakened the impact
of their biological connection and increased their sense of social
distance in the 'new' birth mother-adontee relationship. Section
III discusses this issue and its relevance for the institution of
adoption in modern Western society.

I: The Decision to Make Reunion Contact

There is no clear or concise definition of reunion or reunion
outcome in the research literature (Sobol & Cardiff, 1983: 483: Simpson
et. al., 1981: 433). Parent Finders defines reunion as "making contact
with the birth relatives" (Fieldnotes, Mav 5, 1984). Stoneman et. al.
(1980: 8) also agree that "no matter how the search is conducted or
over what period of time, the reunion process actuallv begins with
the initial approach to the birth familv". Adoptees cannot, however,
alwavs guarantee that this contact will be accepted bv their birth
relatives. The reunions in this research studv, therefore, extend
across the full range of contact results that reunited adoptees are
likely to encounter (Thompson et. al., 1979: 15).

The reunited adoptees in this studv experienced their reunion
contact at least one year prior to their interview session (See Table
5.1). Yet, they report little connection between their length of time
since reunion contact and reunion outcome. Rather, the events and
circumstances of their initial contact attempt determined future
contacts and the tvpe of reunion relationship that evolved between
themselves and their birth mother.

Fortv-four (73%) of these adoptees contacted their birth mother

Table 5.1

Number of Years Between Initial Reunion Contact and Interview*

| Number of Years | Male | | Female | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % |
| Between 1 and 2 | 4 | 25 | 12 | 28 | 16 | 27 |
| Between 2 and 3 | 1 | 7 | 5 | 11 | 6 | 10 |
| Between 3 and 4 | 4 | 25 | 5 | 11 | 9 | 15 |
| Between 4 and 5 | 2 | 12 | 9 | 20 | 11 | 18 |
| over 5 years | 5 | 31 | 13 | 30 | 18 | 30 |
| Total | 16 | 100 | 44 | 100 | 60 | 100 |

*rounded to nearest percent

within twenty-four hours after they identified her. Sixteen (27%)

expressed doubts over contact and waited. This waiting period

generally lasted between one and two weeks while these adoptees

considered the full impact of their decision to make contact. The

longest time period between identification and contact was one year.

This adoptee found a birth mother who was critically ill and did not

believe that she should impose herself into the woman's life (Respondent

No. 16). She may have never made contact except the woman's other

daughter searched for her and requested a reunion meeting with the

birth mother. Despite the timing of the various contact attempts in

this study, however, the majority of these adoptees expressed

considerable concern over their birth mother's position and her initial

reaction to their contact. They noted that, once they positively

identified her,

> She became a real person. And, then, I put the brakes
> on. I began to realize what I was doing. What it was
> going to be like for that person. For you to walk into
> her life after thirty years. And, she obviously had
> not wanted to find me or she would have searched. So,
> I had to think about if I really wanted to disrupt her
> life. But, finally, I decided that if I'm going to do
> it, then, I've got to do it. (Respondent No. 24,
> female, age 30)

and,

> When I got information, that was fine. But, I didn't
> know if I wanted to meet the lady. My search, it was
> just for information. And, it was about me. And, it
> was interesting. But, I figured that this lady had
> her own life. It was probably a traumatizing part of
> her life having me. She was young. And, she just
> probably wanted to put the whole thing out of her life.
> She made a mistake. Everyone makes mistakes. And, now,
> she deserved to be left in peace. I really had to think
> about contacting her. (Respondent No. 37, male, age 38)

Once the birth mother is identified, her existence no longer remains hypothetical or abstract. She becomes a reality. The decision to make contact ensures that this reality never fades. Thus, contact renews the "Fear of the Unknown" that initially delayed the decision to search. It recalls the adoptee's original doubts and uncertainties. This stage represents the turning point where anonymity ends, for contact destroys the shelter that the adoption contract provides. The discovery of a "real person instead of a vague outline or image" (Respondent No. 1) reminds the adoptee of the serious consequences of his/her searching activity. In spite of these reservations, however, all of these adoptees contacted their birth mother. They claimed that their 'obsession' over search encouraged them to take this final step. It gave them a frame of reference that helped them anticipate the type of woman that they were likely to meet because they had gathered a considerable amount of background information already. As one adoptee declared,

> There was an excitement and anticipation because I had finally taken that step to find her and that carries over into your reunion meeting. There was apprehension because I didn't know what might happen as a result of my finding her. But, I knew a lot about her from the search. And, I couldn't stop in the middle and not know what the end result would be. I would want to know one way or the other. I had to meet her. (Respondent No. 13, female, age 46)

This excitement over search explains the large number of adoptees in this sample who waited less than twenty-four hours between discovery and contact. The personal investment of self in the search process stimulates the adoptee's need for reunion contact. Thus, even those adoptees who discovered 'negative' background information attempted to meet their birth mother. These adoptees,

Table 5.2

### Reason for Contacting Birth Mother and Requesting a Reunion Meeting*

| Reason for Contact | First Response | | Second Response | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % |
| The search prepared me for contact | 17 | 28 | 6 | 18 | 23 | 24 |
| She had the information I wanted | 3 | 4 | 3 | 8 | 6 | 7 |
| Always wanted to meet her | 13 | 22 | 8 | 23 | 21 | 22 |
| Background info. led me to think she would accept contact | 10 | 17 | 12 | 34 | 22 | 23 |
| Protected myself | 5 | 9 | 1 | 3 | 6 | 7 |
| Had to see what she looked like | 4 | 7 | 4 | 10 | 8 | 8 |
| Had to hear why she relinquished me | 3 | 4 | 1 | 3 | 4 | 4 |
| Birth mother deceased | 5 | 9 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 5 |
| Total | 60 | 100 | 35 | 100 | 95 | 100 |

*rounded to nearest percent

however, set conditions on that contact because,

> I tried to protect myself. The background infor-
> mation wasn't that good so I decided not to give
> her my last name or address in case she tried to
> get too involved. But, I still had to see her.
> Face-to-face. I had to find out who I looked
> like and where I came from. I had come too far
> to back out now. (Respondent No. 5, male, age 24)

The psycho-pathological view claims that searching behaviour

represents the adoptee's neurotic attempt to fulfill his/her childhood

fantasies of his/her 'unknown' birth parents (Clothier, 1943: 230;

Tousseing, 1962; 1971). Meeting the birth mother dissolves these

fantasies. Question No. 22B in the interview questionnaire explores

this issue when it asks the respondents, "When you were a child, what

did you think your birth mother would be like?" (See Appendix A).

Table 5.3 reveals little correlation between childhood fantasies and

the adoptee's decision to contact his/her birth mother. Eight (14%)

report, for example, that they had learned of their adoptive status

in their teens and, as a result, had formed no childhood fantasies of

the birth mother. Nine (16%) "could not remember thinking about her",

while 15 (25%) "never formed a clear picture of her". Seven (11%)

described her as a "blank face" or "vague image". At this time in

their life, the birth mother was unreal to them. They replied,

> I couldn't picture her. Was she fat, skinny, tall,
> short, blonde? You know, you just think of
> characteristics. It was really vague. I kind of
> thought that maybe she'd look like me. (Respondent
> No. 35, male, age 21)

and,

> She never became a personality. My mom would just
> tell me the facts. That she was 25 and worked in a
> munitions plant. Things like that. She was never a
> real person to me. (Respondent No. 43, female, age 39)

Table 5.3

## Childhood Fantasies of Birth Mother*

| Fantasies | Male | | Female | | Total | |
|-----------|------|----|--------|----|-------|----|
| | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % |
| Never thought of her much | 4 | 26 | 11 | 25 | 15 | 25 |
| Can't remember thinking of her | 2 | 12 | 7 | 16 | 9 | 16 |
| Didn't know I was adopted | 2 | 12 | 6 | 14 | 8 | 14 |
| A blank face or shadow | 2 | 12 | 5 | 11 | 7 | 11 |
| Cultured, rich beautiful | 1 | 7 | 4 | 9 | 5 | 8 |
| Young, sad poor | 1 | 7 | 4 | 9 | 5 | 8 |
| Mother's friend or relative | 2 | 12 | 2 | 5 | 4 | 6 |
| Dead | 2 | 12 | 3 | 6 | 5 | 8 |
| Sexually loose, bad, immoral | 0 | 0 | 2 | 5 | 2 | 4 |
| Total | 16 | 100 | 44 | 100 | 60 | 100 |

*rounded to nearest percent

or,

> I never thought of her as a mother-figure. But, as
> a person. I thought that she was the lady who gave
> birth to me and I wanted to know what she looked
> like. I wondered who she was and what her life was
> like. (Respondent No. 30, female, age 29)

Because the search process could change these childhood

images, Question No. 22A asked, "What did you think your birth

mother would be like before you met her?" (See Appendix A). Fourteen

(24%) expected her to be "just like me" (See Table 5.4). Six (10%)

pictured her as a "nice old lady or motherly type". Twenty-five

(42%) "had no idea". In many ways, these adult images match the

adoptee's childhood fantasies. The search process may provide the

adoptee with a considerable amount of background information and

confirmed her existence as a 'real' person, but she still remains a

'vague image' or 'blank face'. These adoptees had to consider the

full range of possible birth mother types and reunion scenarios when

they decided to make reunion contact.

The search process merely establishes the birth mother's

identity and lessens the uncertainty and doubts that the adoptee

experiences over his/her lack of background information. Contact

validates the birth mother's reality. It makes her an active

participant in the reunion process with the power to negotiate reunion

outcome. Her acceptance or rejection of the adoptee's contact sets

the stage for the possibility of future birth mother-adoptee

interactions. The adoptees in this study demonstrate their

awareness of this fact in the method of contact that they use (See

Table 5.4).

Table 5.4

## Adult Expectation of What Birth Mother Will be Like*

| Expectation | Male | | Female | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % |
| Like me | 2 | 13 | 12 | 27 | 14 | 24 |
| No idea | 7 | 43 | 18 | 41 | 25 | 42 |
| Like adoptive family | 2 | 13 | 5 | 10 | 7 | 10 |
| Cultured, rich beautiful | 2 | 13 | 2 | 4 | 4 | 7 |
| Dead | 1 | 6 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| Sexually loose, bad, immoral | 1 | 6 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 3 |
| Nice little old lady | 1 | 6 | 5 | 10 | 6 | 10 |
| Total | 16 | 100 | 44 | 100 | 60 | 100 |

*rounded to nearest percent

Only a small number (11 or 18%) contacted the birth mother themselves. These 'self-contact' adoptees state that they were "too excited" by the discovery of the birth mother's identity to wait for an intermediary to approach her (Respondent Nos. 10, 11 and 30). They also believe that contact is "too personal and important to leave to others" (Respondent No. 1). If their birth mother rejected them, they wanted the opportunity to personally speak with her and discuss their concerns before she severed contact. As one of these adoptees maintained,

> I wasn't sure I'd ever get another chance to talk
> to her again.  And, I wanted to get it all out
> because I thought that this might be the last
> chance for me.  And, I was going to take it.
> (Respondent No. 3, female, age 34)

Ten (17%) used birth relatives as intermediaries. These birth relative contacts occurred during the search process when these adoptees made telephone calls pretending that they were constructing a genealogical chart or trying to find and old school friend. The adoptee's inquiries into the birth mother's past led the birth relative to question the true intent of the telephone call. After these adoptees revealed their identity, the birth relative offered to contact the birth mother for them. This type of contact attempt emphasizes the precarious position that the birth mother holds and the need for more direct guidelines in the area of search (Garber, 1985: 47). Six of these birth relatives did not know of the adoptee's existence before this contact call. The two (4%) adoptees who knocked on their birth mother's door had also accidentally found her during the process of searching for more background information. Both of these birth mothers were extremely hostile. Even though they both later

established contact with the adoptee, this first reunion meeting

remains a sore topic between the two parties.

The majority of these adoptees (26 or 43%) used Parent

Finders intermediaries to contact the birth mother. These adoptees

claim that intermediaries protect the birth mother from the shock

of reunion contact and give her freedom to express her own reunion

concerns to an understanding person. They believe that Parent

Finders presents a more professional approach and, as a result, makes

the birth mother more receptive to contact. They show their respect

for her anonymous position and their consideration of her emotional

state by using an unbiased third party. The following quote summarizes

this issue quite nicely. This reunited adoptee is an active member of

Parent Finders who has effected many contact calls. She states,

> A lot of people think that they're not capable of
> making contact once their search is over because they
> can't be objective at all. There are mixed feelings
> because if there is going to be only one conversation,
> then, people deserve to hear it themselves. On the
> other hand, if you get two emotional people instead of
> one who can be calm and objective and answer questions
> and talk, then, it can turn out bad. It is important
> to have someone who has experience in talking people
> down. The person contacted can be very upset by the
> call. A lot of birth mothers ask what the adoptee
> wants of them. That's very common. And, the adoptee
> takes it wrong. But, I am very honest about everything
> I say and I believe that that comes across. Where the
> adoptee may often begin with one statement and then cross
> it with another. Because, he's emotionally upset. And,
> I know the different kinds of questions that they ask and
> the different things that it helps them to hear. You
> can't minimize the fact that the kind of experience that
> you have in this area helps. (Respondent No. 19, female,
> age 42)

Despite their expressed concern over the impact of contact
on the birth mother, these reunited adoptees reveal little significant
difference between their method of contact and their birth mother's
response. For example, Parent Finders suggests that personal letters
may destroy the birth mother's anonymity if others intercept her mail.
Yet, two adoptees who sent letters reported that their birth mothers
appreciated the time that the letter gave them to absorb the shock
of contact (Respondent Nos. 26 and 55). Neither of these birth
mothers had told their husband or family about their relinquishment.
Both established 'limited' contact with the adoptee. The third birth
mother who received a letter had also hidden her relinquishment. She
telephoned the adoptee and requested no further contact attempts
(Respondent No. 43). Thus, the birth mother's fear of exposure
presents an intervening variable in reunion outcome that she must
personally contemplate. She mediates this concern on the basis of her
current life situation and her own desire for reunion. This issue
plays a dominant role in the next two chapters when the topics of
reunion contact and birth parent-adoptee interaction are explored.

Those adoptees who made their own contact calls experienced
similar types of responses (See Table 5.5). Five birth mothers
accepted immediate contact. Three were suspicious but became more
open as the call proceeded. Three denied any knowledge of the adoptee.
Some of these birth mothers had informed their husbands and families
of their relinquishment before contact while others had not. There is
no relationship between the birth mother's acceptance of the adoptee
and her prior openness about her relinquishment to others, however.

Table 5.5

### Method of Contact and the Adoptee's Assessment of the Birth Mother's Reaction to that Contact*

| Type of Contact | Rejection | | Immediate Acceptance | | Cautious, Wary | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % |
| Personal phone call | 3 | 20 | 5 | 18 | 3 | 21 | 11 | 18 |
| Personal letter | 1 | 7 | 2 | 8 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 5 |
| Through a birth relative | 4 | 26 | 2 | 8 | 4 | 29 | 10 | 17 |
| Newspaper ad | 1 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Adoption Reunion Registry | 0 | 0 | 2 | 8 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 3 |
| Parent Finders | 6 | 40 | 15 | 58 | 7 | 50 | 28 | 47 |
| Birth Mother Deceased | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 8 |
| Total | 15 | 100 | 26 | 100 | 14 | 100 | 60 | 100 |

*rounded to nearest percent

This same pattern appeared for those adoptees who used birth relative intermediaries. Four were rejected immediately. Four others report that their birth mother was wary of their contact. These reports are second-hand, however, because the birth relative established contact while the adoptee was absent. These four 'cautious' birth mothers may have been "pushed into contact" by the birth relative (Respondent No. 36). These four adoptees maintain a friendship with the birth relative, for example, and "a very limited contact with the birth mother" (Respondent No. 9). All four of these 'cautious' birth mothers had kept their relinquishment a secret from others. They may, therefore, distrust the adoptee's guarantee of privacy since he/she broke confidentiality during search. These birth relatives may have played an adversarial role in reunion contact and convinced the birth mother to engage in a birth parent-adoptee interaction process that she did not desire.

The issue of an adversarial role also arises in some of the Parent Finders contact attempts. This researcher noted during her participant observation sessions that an intermediary's contact reports do not always match the actual events of their contact call. One Parent Finders intermediary confided, for example, that,

> I found it very difficult to arrange a meeting for this one adoptee. He so desperately wanted to meet his birth mother and she rejected him immediately when I called. But, I knew him well and I felt that he really, really wanted to meet her. So, I called her a couple of times again and finally convinced her to set up a meeting. I never told him this. He doesn't need to know. So, she set up this meeting and came and then cut off contact immediately. He thinks that she is afraid that her family

will find out about him and doesn't know that
he was rejected. But, at least, he got to meet
her. That's a small comfort to him. (Fieldnotes,
May 12, 1985)

The reunited adoptees in this study who used intermediaries

as contacts generally accepted that person's description of their

birth mother's response to that contact attempt. This description

frequently set the stage for the first reunion meeting and further

attempts to talk with or meet the birth mother. Thus, for example,

these adoptees state that,

The woman who called her from Parent Finders told me
that she was very nice and polite. And, she didn't
deny it. She just said that she had her own life and
I had mine and it was best to leave it like that. I
never bothered her again. Her husband doesn't know.
And, I don't want to intrude. It hurts because you
don't think that you will be rejected. But, I respect
her position. I never tried to contact her again. I
never even went to try and see her, even though I know
where she lives and where she works. I don't want to
intrude. It's over. She decided and I respect her
decision. (Respondent No 6, female, age 40)

or,

The lady from Parent Finders called her and said,
"I'm from Parent Finders and I believe that you had
a child in 1961". And, then, she explained the
situation to her. And, she didn't agree to everything
right away. Because, I guess, she wanted to think it
over. It was a sudden shock after 21 years to know
that all of a sudden your son is calling you. But,
by the end of the call she agreed. And, then, the lady
from Parent Finders called me and told me that she
would be calling me in five minutes. And, she did.
And, that was the start of it. (Respondent No. 7, male,
age 24)

or,

I wouldn't make the call myself. Because, you're so up
You really don't know what you are saying. And, they are
good at it. So, I asked Parent Finders to make the call.
And, they called while I was at work. And, the woman
called me and said, I've just spoken to the happiest

woman in the world." And, of course, I burst into
tears right in the middle of the office. It was
really quite emotional. She was really happy. And,
she kept saying to them, "You've really found my baby."
And, I phoned her that night and we made arrangements
to meet. (Respondent No. 53, female, age 42)

These types of statements demonstrate the powerful role that

an intermediary can play in the birth parent's initial acceptance or

rejection of reunion contact and the adoptee's assessment of his/her

birth parent's response. This is particularly true for those birth

mothers who may be doubtful about contact. These birth mothers may

be convinced to place themselves in a reunion situation that brings

them social embarrassment, emotional pain and/or the possibility of

public disclosure (Stoneman et. al., 1980: 19; Stoneman et. al., 1985).

The reunion outcomes described in the next section of this chapter

reinforce this concern for birth parent-adoptee interaction. Further

studies on the birth parent's view of contact and reunion outcome are,

however, needed to adequately respond to this issue.

Five of the reunited adoptees in this study (8%) found that

their birth mother had died before their search began. These five

adoptees contacted birth relatives for further background information.

Although they encountered a different type of reunion situation, they

appear in this study because they exemplify another facet of the

birth mother-adoptee reunion process. These adoptees report feelings

of 'disappointment', 'resentment' and anger' over their search outcome

(Respondent Nos. 28 and 35). They blame the system of adoption and

their powerless position in the adoption triangle for their delay in

search. This definition of the situation lets them disclaim personal

responsibility for their reunion outcome.

The various contact methods used by the adoptees in this
study demonstrate their recognition and acceptance of the birth
mother's position of anonymity and her fear of disclosure.  It
also demonstrates their own position of vulnerability in reunion.
These adoptees realize that their contact attempt places them in
a precarious situation because the birth mother may deny them.
They use intermediaries to protect self just as much as they use
them to protect the birth mother's anonymity.  The majority of these
adoptees knew their birth mother's name, address and many personal
facts about her past and present life before they made reunion contact.
Several jeopardized her privacy during the search process.  The use
of such intermediate agents as letters, birth relatives and Parent
Finders members distances them from the immediate effects of their
birth mother's initial reaction to their contact.  They receive a
weakened account of her response and protect self from an open
confrontation with any negative reaction that she might demonstrate.

This assessment of the birth mother's powerful position and her
control over reunion outcome becomes apparent when these adoptees
discuss the topic of rejection.  Thirty-five (58%) of these reunited
adoptees defined an  "unsuccessful" reunion as "rejection".  Yet, 51
(83%) never considered that they would be rejected.  Many of them had
met adoptees who had experienced rejection.  Most had discussed
rejection at Parent Finders meetings.  They did not, however, accept
this possibility for their own reunion outcome.  They claimed that,

> I knew that rejection happened. I just never
> thought that it would happen to me. I guess
> I thought that if it did happen that it would be
> because it would affect her personal life and that
> I would understand. I realize now that I would
> have been totally devastated if it had happened.
> I was totally unprepared for it. I don't know if
> I would have been able to handle it if it had
> happened. Thank goodness, it didn't.
> (Respondent No. 47, female, age 42)

This denial of rejection as a possible reunion outcome stems

from the emotional investment of self that these adoptees experienced

during their search (i.e. their 'obsession') and their initial

commitment to search and reunite. Search is difficult to complete

if the adoptee fears negative reunion outcome. These adoptees noted

this fact as they accounted for their reasons for their postponement of

search. They face worse prospects when they attempt contact. Contact

represents the most vulnerable stage in the search and reunion process

because it sets the adoptee up for a 'second' rejection by a person

who, by her act of relinquishment, symbolically rejected him/her once

before. Thus, search and reunion entail a much greater risk than

social sanction from breaking society's norms or hurting the adoptive

parent-child bonds. Adoptees who search put self in jeopardy. These

reunited adoptees excluded rejection as a likely reunion outcome for

themselves because they could not take successful search action if they

accepted this possibility. As these adoptees noted,

> I had a lot to lose. If she had said that she didn't
> want to see me, I would have been devastated. Because,
> I guess, I thought that I was worth knowing. I thought
> that I would be someone special to her. And, if she
> didn't want to accept me then I think that I would have
> been destroyed. I had this thing in my head that, "Of
> course, she would want to see me. How could she not want

me?". So, I guess that it would have been a big
fat blow to me. I was a real gambler because I
would have been emotionally upset if she rejected
me again. So, I had a lot to lose. (Respondent
No. 3, female, age 36)

and,

I hadn't even thought of it. I didn't expect any
relationship either. Like, that was icing on the
cake. That she was nice to me and seemed to care
what happened was important. That meant a lot to
me. And, even at the Children's Aid, they said
that she was a caring person. Like, she wasn't
some tuffy in prison that had babies every year
out of wedlock. I remember that. I remember
feeling excited when I left the Children's Aid
office. Just knowing, "Gee, she cared about me."
That made me feel really good. That she cared
what happened to me. (Respondent No. 23, female
age 37)

and,

I wasn't really afraid of rejection. I kind of
figured that her curiosity would get to her too.
That she would be the same as me in that way. And,
I guess that fortunately for me she was glad that
I found her. Because, I think that all adoptees
feel rejected from day one. Like, mother's just
don't give their kids away. (Respondent No. 44,
female, age 29)

These adoptees reveal their acceptance of the various stereotypes

that surround birth mothers and the soical stigma that accompanies

their social status as adoptees. They use contact intermediaries to

protect themselves from the full impact of meeting this type of birth

mother and being rejected by her.

The adoptees in this study explain the result of their contact

attempt with the same vocabulary of motives that they use to explain

their adoptive status and their initial postponement of search. This

motive talk focuses on the birth mother's position in the adoption

triangle, her privacy, her current life situation, and her fear of

disclosure. As such, it lets these adoptees disclaim any personal

involvement or responsibility for their birth mother's attempts to

deny them. This motive talk matches the vocabulary of motives that

their society gives them for the topics of adoption, disclosure,

search and reunion. It reveals the adoptee's own personal

interna ization of the social values and normative constraints that

his/her society imposes on these types of social actions. The

adoptees in this study manipulate that vocabulary of motives to

obtain an acceptable account of their reunion outcome and protect

self from the full impact of their birth mother adoptee-interactions.

The next two sections of this chapter outline that process more fully.

They discuss the types of reunion outcome encountered by these adoptees

and the effects of birth mother-adoptee interaction.

II: A Description of Reunion Type

The reunions experienced by the adoptees in this study fall

into six broad categories or types. These are: (a) rejection of the

adoptee by the birth mother; (b) limited contact and subsequent

disengagement by the birth mother; (c) limited contact and subsequent

disengagement by the adoptee; (d) conditional acceptance and limited

contact; (e) open contact by both parties; and, (f) birth mother

deceased (See Table 5.6). This section briefly outlines these six

types of reunion outcomes. They are drawn from the adoptee's response

to the question, "How would you describe your present relationship with

your birth mother?" (Question No. 26B. See Appendix A). These reunion

types contrast with the two major types of reunion contact that adoptees

typically encounter at Parent Finders meetings or in the media.

Table 5.6

<u>Type of Reunion Established Between Adoptee and Birth Mother</u> *

| Type of Reunion | Male | | Female | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | <u>No.</u> | <u>%</u> | <u>No.</u> | <u>%</u> | <u>No.</u> | <u>%</u> |
| Rejection by Birth Mother | 1 | 6 | 7 | 16 | 8 | 13 |
| Limited Contact | 3 | 19 | 6 | 14 | 9 | 15 |
| Adoptee rejects Birth Mother | 2 | 13 | 5 | 11 | 7 | 12 |
| Conditional contact | 1 | 6 | 6 | 14 | 7 | 12 |
| Open contact | 8 | 50 | 16 | 36 | 24 | 40 |
| Birth mother Deceased | 1 | 6 | 4 | 9 | 5 | 8 |
| Total | 16 | 100 | 44 | 100 | 60 | 100 |

*rounded to nearest percent

These are either 'rejection' or an 'open' birth mother-adoptee

reunion relationship. A full description of these six reunion

types presents a more complete range of reunion outcomes that

adoptees may encounter.

a) Rejection of the Adoptee by the Birth Mother

Eight (13%) of these reunited adoptees experienced immediate

rejection when their birth mother was contacted. Not one of them

attempted further contact after she denied them. They responded

to her apparent rejection of them by totally disconnecting themselves

from the reunion situation. They explain their withdrawal primarily

as a concern for the birth mother and her stigmatized position in

the adoption triangle. They justify her rejection of them by

referring to her current life situation, her fear of disclosure and

the undue pain and distress that her relinquishment of them caused

her. They state that,

> It was better to stay away. Just to let it lie.
> She's been through a lot. I think that the experience
> of having me had a devastating effect on her. And,
> after her attitude and her reaction when she was
> contacted, there's nothing more there really. I've
> got information that I really needed and she's got her
> life and I've got mine. We should leave it like that.
> (Respondent No. 23, female, age 30)

and,

> There's no sense pushing it. I don't think that she
> could accept it because she is from a different
> generation. And, she had denied it so long. Her
> husband and children don't know. It was too hard for
> her to accept, I guess. (Respondent No. 6, female,
> age 40)

The adoptee's uncontested acceptance of his/her birth mother's

rejection indicates an unwillingness to take further risks with self.

None of these adoptees, for example, went by their birth mother's house or place of employment to view her physical appearance, even though, they all wanted to answer the question, "Who Do I Look Like?". None of them tried a personal contact call. They consoled themselves with the background information that they discovered during their search and "put the event into the back of my mind and continued on with my life" (Respondent No. 43).

Our society promotes a "motherhood myth" that claims that all women want, desire and care for their children (Chodorow, 1978; Miall, 1986; Stoneman et. al., 1980). "The expectation of a woman giving birth is that she will continue on to become a nuturing and caring parent throughout the growth and development of that child" (Stoneman et. al., 1980: 4). The motherhood myth becomes problemmatic for the adoptive situation when birth mothers relinquish their children to the care of strangers. Adoptees receive a "chosen child" message that states that their adoptive parents were so eager to have a child that they sought out and chose that particular adoptee to be their own (Garber, 1985: 12). This "chosen child" message, however, also implies that others must have "given" that child to the adoptive parents who desired him/her. The adoptees in this study remark that,

> In our society, all that stuff about the chosen child.
> It only hides the truth. That someone out there didn't
> choose you. And, in order to cover that, they form
> this romantic ideal of a young mother that had to give
> you up and suffers in silence and still wants you. That
> is the story that you are told. And, that you want to
> believe. When you find out differently. It is really
> disappointing. (Respondent No. 43, female, age 43)

Rejection reinforces the idea that adoptees are, in fact, 'unchosen' and that their contact holds no value for the birth mother.

These 'rejected' adoptees assign a vocabulary of motives to their birth mother's behaviour that makes her rejection of them less personal and subjective. They take the vocabulary of motives that their society uses to explain the birth mother's initial relinquishment of them and transfer it to their reunion situation. In this way, they can define her rejection as a reaction to her stigmatized position in the adoption triangle rather than a denial of them. This motive talk maintains the motherhood myth and masks the unchosen child message that it also contains. It protects these adoptees from the 'devastating' effects that they expected from rejection. Their lack of further contact attempts ensure that this motive talk will remain effective. Thus, even though these adoptees express "disappointment", "frustration" and "regret" over their reunion outcome, they also claim that,

> I didn't see it as a rejection, really. I felt
> sorry for this old lady. Imagine this happening
> to her at that time of her life. And, I've lived
> without this for such a long time that it's not
> something that's going to make me or break me.
> And, my own mother was so good. Like, you don't
> need anybody else after her. I really didn't need
> to meet this lady. I just wanted some information
> for my children and grandchildren. (Respondent No.
> 41, female, age 65)

b) <u>Limited Contact and Disengagement</u>

Nine (15%) of these reunited adoptees experienced 'rejection' in a much more gradual way. Three of these adoptees never met their birth mother but exchanged several letters and telephone calls with

her before she discontinued contact. The remaining six adoptees

met the birth mother at least one time before she disconnected

herself from the reunion situation. None of these adoptees asked

their birth mother for an account of her disengagement. Rather,

they explained her actions by referring to her position in the

adoption triangle, the difficulties involved in her open acknow-

ledgement of her birth mother status and, the painful memories of

her traumatic relinquishment. They state that their birth mother

discontinued contact because,

> I think that she couldn't bring herself to really
> admit me. I think that it really hurt her to have
> to do what she had to do. She already was hurt very
> much by this man that she obviously must have been
> very infatuated with to have gotten pregnant.
> Because she had a good upbringing and was very moral.
> I just think that the whole thing is too hard to
> admit. (Respondent No. 24, female, age 30)

and,

> I think that she cut off contact because she was
> afraid that other people would find out who I was.
> She hadn't told her family. But, she was scared.
> And, I can understand that. She lives in a small
> community and she's lived there all her life. And,
> people might start asking who is this strange person
> coming to visit all the time. (Respondent No. 30,
> female, age 29)

These adoptees use the same vocabulary of motives that the

'rejected' adoptees use to explain their reunion outcome. Their

refusal to ask their birth mother for an account of her disengagement

lets them rationalize their reunion results in a positive way. They

state that they are satisfied with their reunion because the birth

mother "filled in the blanks", "answered all the important questions"

and "serves as a contact person if I ever need her in the future"

(Respondent Nos. 24, 27 and 30 respectively). They justify their own lack of further contact by referring to their birth mother's concern for anonymity and the trauma of her relinquishment. This motive talk reinforces the motherhood myth because it emphasizes the risks that the birth mother took over contact and the value that the adoptee's contact held for her.

Despite these assertions, these 'disengaged' adoptees express stronger emotions over their reunion outcome than those adoptees who were immediately rejected. These emotions arise from the marginal position that they occupy in the reunion situation. Their inability to clearly establish their reunion outcome as an 'acceptance' or a 'rejection' raises the question of whether their birth mother rejected them rather than reunion contact. This fear of a personal rejection explains their failure to ask the birth mother for an account of her disengagement. By refusing to get an account of her behaviour, they can maintain the motive talk that supports the motherhood myth. Thus, these adoptees observe that,

> She accepted me, but she didn't. Which isn't as
> bad as an outright rejection, I guess. But, it
> isn't the same thing as an outright acceptance
> either. She didn't really take the time to be
> with me. Although the fact that she was excited
> was good for me. It's just that she couldn't
> accept me outside. Like, others knowing about
> me. (Respondent No. 56, female, age 39)

or,

> When we met, I gave her a rose. And, she told me
> later that she pressed it. So, that meant that she
> had some feelings for me. Some affinity. But, then,
> every time after I'd call and ask her to meet and she
> would say, "I'll let you know." And, I kept getting
> put off. So, I stopped calling. I really got tired
> of pushing myself on her. She was being rather difficult.
> And, that's how it ended up. (Respondent No. 33, male, age 42)

and,

> I don't see it as a rejection. But, I am very
> disappointed. I sometimes think about phoning
> her but I haven't done it. I guess she wants
> it that way. Like, she knows our address and
> she knows where I live as well as I know where
> she is. And, she did break off contact. I'm
> not going to push myself on her. And, I can
> re-establish contact again if I want. The time
> just isn't right. I guess that I'm stubborn too.
> (Respondent No. 30, female, age 29)

The above references to the fact that, "I'm not going to push myself on her" suggest that the adoptee's own fear of a 'second' rejection makes him/her disengage from reunion contact. This fear explains the strong emotions of "anger", "frustration" and "disappointment" that these adoptees express toward their ambiguous reunion outcome (Respondent Nos. 27, 43, 33 and 56). These adoptees lack an adequate account of a birth mother who accepts and, then, rejects contact. They cannot fully rationalize or justify their birth mother's behaviour toward them. Even though they protect self with the same motive talk that 'rejected' adoptees employ, these 'disengaged' adoptees cannot be certain that this motive talk adequately explains their reunion outcome. Yet, they also fear that a complete account of their birth mother's disengagement may destroy the safeguards that this vocabulary of motives provides.

### c) Rejection of the Birth Mother by the Adoptee

Seven (12%) of the reunited adoptees in this study rejected their birth mother. Three report that their search revealed a birth mother who was "the welfare type", "an alcoholic" and "sexually promiscuous" (Respondent Nos. 35, 56 and 59). These three adoptees refused to contact her because they "only wanted questions answered

and the search did that"; they "couldn't predict the types of

problems that contact might bring"; and, they "could do without

that kind of trouble in my life" (Respondent Nos. 59, 56 and 30

respectively). These adoptees reunited with other birth relatives

who confirmed their negative image of the birth mother. They report

that these 'birth relative' reunions satisfy their need for a

biological connection and provide all the background information

that they require. As one of these adoptees reports,

> I met my birth grandmother and she told me the same
> things that the Children's Aid had told me. And,
> I decided not to contact my birth mother. I really
> didn't want a relationship. I consider this woman
> a friend but she thinks of me as her granddaughter.
> But, she has not replaced anybody. My own parents
> are still in my life. It was just a nice feeling
> to meet her because she bothered to take the time
> to show up. It showed that she cared for me. And,
> to know who you look like and medical information
> and things in your background. It filled in all of
> the blanks for me. I didn't need to meet my birth
> mother for that. (Respondent No. 59, female, age 42)

These adoptees point out that their prime motive for search

was the desire for more background information. Their birth relative

reunions fulfill this need and demonstrate that the "birth family

consists of warm, caring and accepting people" (Respondent No. 56).

Reunion contact with the birth mother serves no purpose for them

because it will not supply them with any further information than they

already possess. These disclaimers protect the adoptee from an open

confrontation with an individual who reflects the negative stereotypes

that birth mothers hold and contradicts the motherhood myth that the

adoptee maintains.

The other four 'rejecting' adoptees discovered similar types of

information about their birth mother. However, they claim that

their obsession with search pushed them into reunion contact. They

observe that,

> You work so hard during the search that you
> would like to see an end product. Not seeing
> her and getting all your background information
> would be like doing a project and not getting
> your final grade. You've put all that time and
> effort into it. And, I think that there are
> questions that only she can answer and that
> requires contact. Like, that's the end product
> of the search for me. (Respondent No. 32, female,
> age 38)

Reunion contact became problemmatic for these four adoptees

when the birth mother exhibited inconsistent and erratic interaction

patterns. She "continually switched from being heart-broken, guilt-

ridden and extremely remorseful to being hostile, belligerent and

totally indifferent and back again" (Respondent No. 10). They could

not trust the information that she gave them or the emotions that

she expressed toward them. They severed contact because,

> There was no reason to continue. Like, if I
> constantly go there and try to get information
> and she refuses to give it to me or acts hostile,
> then, why bother? Like, it wasn't a matter of
> ego. If she didn't open up to me, it was useless.
> It was like banging my head against a wall.
> (Respondent No. 40, female, age 24)

Like the other three 'rejecting' adoptees, these four

adoptees claim that their limited contact with the birth mother

fulfilled their original motive for search (i.e. background

information). This disclaimer lets them disengage from a reunion

contact that becomes a source of discomfort for them. These four

adoptees take greater risks with self than those adoptees who formed

birth relative reunion relationships. They draw limits, however,

on the extent of the risks that they are willing to take. Their

birth mother's changeable and contradictory attitude towards her

relinquishment and her present reunion contact with them disputes

the motherhood myth and reinforces the unchosen child story that

their adoptive status represents. Unlike the other three adoptees

in this category, these four adoptees find no birth relative contacts

that emphasize their value. They, therefore, withdraw totally from

the reunion situation. They disclaim any feelings of rejection or

personal failure for this reunion outcome because,

> I don't know what I expected from contact. I never
> really thought it out, I guess. I wanted information
> on hereditary background. Everything like that. I
> don't think that I ever really said that I wanted to
> meet people. You can think of all those things like,
> "Who Do I Look Like?" but it really wasn't that
> important to me. So, contact really didn't matter
> that much either. (Respondent No. 16, female, age 41)

or,

> If she was a straight lady, I would have made phone
> calls to say hello and maybe drop by a couple of
> times a year. You know, if she wanted me to. But,
> I don't think that I would have still got involved.
> I don't think that I ever wanted to. Because, I've
> got my own life with my girls and my husband. So,
> I don't need to get really involved no matter what
> she had turned out to be like. (Respondent No. 10,
> female, age 23)

d) <u>Conditional Acceptance and Limited Contact</u>

Seven (12%) of the adoptees in this study achieved
conditional acceptance and limited contact with their birth
mother. These birth mothers had kept their relinquishment a
secret from other close family members. Yet, each birth mother
arranged at least one face-to-face meeting with the adoptee. These
meetings lasted from two hours to two days and took place in a hotel
room or the home of a Parent Finders member. At this time, the
birth mother openly communicated details about the adoptee's
biological background and willingly answered any questions that the
adoptee asked of her.

These adoptees express appreciation for their birth mother's
attempt to meet with them. This symbolic gesture demonstrates the
value that their contact holds for her and supports the motherhood
myth that their adoptive status denies. These adoptees view the birth
mother's withdrawal from reunion contact as a reaction to her current
life situation rather than as a personal rejection of them. They
excuse her actions by referring to her stigmatized status, her
expectation of life-long anonymity and her current life situation.
This motive talk lets them balance the idea that there is "someone who
acknowledged that this event actually happened and answered my
questions" (Respondent No. 26) with the fact that "she hasn't told
anyone about me and it's hard to risk telling them now" (Respondent
No. 38). This vocabulary of motives softens any feelings of rejection
that these adoptees experience from their birth mother's conditional
acceptance of them. As one of them notes,

> We have met. I think that she is glad that I
> found her. We have a mutual understanding between
> us and there is a trust bond between us because
> she has other children and they don't know.
> Nobody knows. And, it is a painful thing to her.
> There is a tremendous amount of guilt. She said
> that going through that experience at that time
> you didn't get any sympathy from anybody. And,
> they were told they would never see me again.
> And, I know that there was a lot of caring. But,
> you know, when you are doing something like this
> you always have to respect the other person.
> We're all human and some of us are more scared
> about this than others. (Respondent No. 25,
> female, age 36)

These 'conditional acceptance' adoptees emphasize the great responsibility that they have to maintain confidentiality and sustain the bond of trust that they established with their birth mother. For example, six of the eight adoptees who complained about this research project came from this group. Their birth mother entrusted her anonymity to them. Public disclosure would sever the tenuous bond that they formed with her upon contact and destroy the possibility of future contacts. Acceptance of this responsibility over non-disclosure supports their definition of their reunion outcome and the limited birth mother-adoptee contact that they endure.

Three of the adoptees in this category maintain extended contact with their birth mother under the guise of friendship. Another acts as a volunteer driver for a close family member who needs constant medical treatments. Although these adoptees desire a more open acknowledgement of their status, they accept this type of reunion relationship. They excuse their birth mother's apparent denial of them by referring to her fear of disclosure and the stigmatized status that she holds. Her willingness to engage in this type of subtrefuge validates their sense of value and importance to the birth mother's life. According to one

of these adoptees,

> It's not the best situation. But, we both know
> all about each other's lives. And, knowing her
> and just being able to get the questions answered.
> And, being able to see each other and keep up to
> date. That's enough. And, well, she has a lot to
> lose if people found out. So, I was lucky that
> she wanted to meet me and wasn't afraid to. A lot
> of them are so afraid that meeting you is going to
> totally disrupt their lives that they refuse to do
> it. But, she trusted me and I agreed. And, I'm
> satisfied. (Respondent No. 11, female, age 35)

e) Open Reunion Contact

Twenty-four (40%) of the reunited adoptees in this study

achieved unrestricted and continuous access to their birth mothers.

In all of these cases, the birth mother publically acknowledged the

adoptee as her biological child. Nine of these birth mothers had

kept their relinquishment a secret from their other children. All

of the birth mothers had revealed their birth mother status to their

husbands before they married. This situation compares with the six

'conditional acceptance' birth mothers who kept their relinquishment

hidden from both their husbands and children. The husband-wife

relationship may, therefore, be a more significant issue for reunion

outcome than the parent-child relationship. Stoneman et. al. (1980:

19) found, for example, that two of the reunited birth mothers in their

study curtailed reunion contact because their husbands were uncomfortable

with the birth mother-adoptee relationship. Further examination of all

family members in the reunion process is needed to explore this dynamic

more fully.

These 'open contact' reunions also stand out because these

birth mothers were extremely open about their genetic background, their

relationship with the birth father, and, the events surrounding

their relinquishment. For example, 8 (33%) of these birth mothers

claimed a deep emotional attachment to the birth father; 4 (17%)

stated that he had abused them; and, 5 (21%) had affairs with

married men. In spite of the birth mother-father relationship or

the circumstances of relinquishment, the majority of these birth

mothers gave the adoptee as much background information as she could.

This positive acknowledgement of the adoptee's 'need to know' negated

the unchosen child message implied by their adoptive status and

strengthened the birth mothers' declaration of continued interest and

concern for these adoptees. Their public acceptance of the stigmatized

status of birth mother demonstrated the risks that they willingly took

to maintain reunion contact. This symbolic gesture reinforced the

motherhood myth and supported the idea that they valued their relinquished

children. Thus, these 'open contact' adoptees experienced little need

to rationalize or excuse their reunion outcome with the same vocabulary

of motives that the other reunited adoptees used.

These 'open contact' reunions can be divided into three major

types of reunion based on the role-relationship that emerged from the

birth mother-adoptee interaction process. These are: 'duty' (7 or 29%),

'friendship' (12 or 46%), and 'parent-child' (6 or 25%). Seven of these

adoptees maintain reunion contact with their birth mother out of a

'sense of duty' to her. These adoptees discovered a birth mother "so

different from me in her upbringing and her lifestyle that it is hard

to find a common ground" for contact (Respondent No. 49). Once they

learned their background information, they found little basis for

enjoyable interaction. These adoptees maintained reunion contact

primarily because they believed that their birth mother valued and

cherished their association. They claimed that,

> I don't think that I would ever cut it off
> unless she wanted to. Because, I just can't
> hurt somebody like that. To make contact and
> just drop it when she seems to want it and need
> it. It just doesn't seem fair. So, I still keep
> in touch. (Respondent No. 44, female, age 29)

These 'duty' reunions compare significantly with the 'rejecting'

adoptee reunions that appear in part "c" of this section. Both types

of adoptees found a woman who "is on welfare", "sexually promiscuous"

and "lower class" (Respondent Nos. 18, 44 and 49). The birth mothers

in the 'duty' reunions, however, demonstrated a "caring and loving

attitude" that made reunion contact beneficial for the adoptee

(Respondent No. 49). In contrast, the birth mothers in the 'rejecting'

adoptee reunions paid little attention to the adoptee's needs and made

reunion contact unpleasant and non-productive for him/her. Thus,

despite their apparent distress at the birth mother's current life-

style, standards of behaviour and moral ethics, these 'duty' adoptees,

> ...think that I will always try to maintain some kind
> of contact. I feel very sorry for her. Like, after
> the first time that I met her I was happy with that.
> I didn't want any further contact. I had gotten a lot
> of family history and I was content with that. And, I
> did not want to disturb her life. She looked like a
> woman who did not have a handle on life. I thought
> that she must have had a terrible life to get herself
> so rundown. She's on welfare and she's slovenly. Like,
> I am talking about a woman who is 350 pounds! But, then,
> a while later I got this call from the Children's Aid
> office that she was looking for me. And, I called her.
> We talked on the phone every day for a while. And, we
> met again. And, every time that she saw me, she would
> tell me that she loved me. That she had always loved me.
> That was so nice to hear. And, she has helped me in that

way to be more open with my children and in other
relationships. Because, she has shown me how
important these types of things are. And, how
important I am to her. (Respondent No. 60,
female, age 38)

These 'duty' reunions present a problem for these adoptees
because the birth mother takes on the 'mother' role in their birth
mother-adoptee interactions. They find this activity "intrusive"
and "overbearing" (Respondent Nos. 18, 44 and 60). "She acts as if
she couldn't care less about my past, my parents or my personal life
with them" (Respondent No. 53). This is an important variable in
reunion outcome. The birth mother's failure to recognize and accept
the adoptee's strong adoptive parent-child bonds demonstrates her
lack of understanding and consideration for a major part of the
adoptee's identity and his/her history as a human being. The birth
mother's appropriation of the 'mother' role suggests an intimacy and
familiarity that these adoptees do not experience from their reunion
contact. This places stress on the birth mother-adoptee interaction
process and makes it difficult for the adoptee to bring his/her full
identity into play.

Five of the adoptees who formed 'friendship' reunions with
their birth mother also report that she attempted to take on the
'mother' role in their birth mother-adoptee interactions. These five
adoptees confronted their birth mother with the message that "she
wasn't my mother just an important person in my life" (Respondent No.
49). The birth mother accepted this definition of reunion and began
to enact the role of 'friend'. These adoptees note that,

> It was really tense at first. Because she tried
> to mother me. Finally, I had to say that I was
> frightened of being smothered. And, yet, I could
> understand her point. Like, "My God, here's my
> lost child! I've found her!" And, she is just
> naturally very, very nuturing. But, I had to
> make her realize my age and my position and that
> she doesn't have to nuture me. And, that she
> had to see me as a friend. That she doesn't have
> to play the mother role. (Respondent No. 47,
> female, age 42)

Three of the 'duty' reunion adoptees attempted the same
type of confrontation but achieved little success. Their birth
mother insisted on playing the mother role. These adoptees met
such resistence from her that they discontinued their protests
and accepted their birth mother's definition of their reunion
situation. As one of them remarked,

> She had got her baby back and she wasn't letting
> me go. And, I said to her, "Take a look at me!
> Look at what a wonderful job that my parents did
> with me. I mean, they were fantastic people and
> look how they raised me." And, she still said,
> "But, you're mine." Like, I just sort of wanted
> to be a friend. Now, I think we call each other
> about once a month because she lives so far. And,
> I find it hard. It's eased up. But, I think that
> she still thinks of me as her daughter and she will
> never give that up. (Respondent No. 53, female, age 42)

Once contacted, the birth mother becomes an active participant
in the reunion process. The adoptees in this study recognize this fact
in their method of contact, their fear of rejection, and, their
acceptance of 'conditional contact' reunions. The birth mother's
own desire for a reunion affects the type of reunion relationship that
evolves between her and the adoptee. She possesses her own personal
agenda of reunion needs that she wants fulfilled. She brings that
agenda to the birth parent-adoptee interaction process. Both parties

negotiate the basis for continued interaction and the role-identities
that are involved when they interact. The role-identity of 'mother'
is so salient for the birth mothers in these 'duty' reunions that
it overpowers the birth mother-adoptee interaction process. In
contrast, the birth mothers in 'friendship' reunions can accept the
role-identity of 'friend' and place their role-identity of 'mother'
in a less prominent position. Thus, the birth mother's 'smothering'
and her apparent lack of concern for the adoptive parents
signify the lack of alternative role-identities that she is able to
perform in her birth mother-adoptee interactions.

The majority of the birth mothers in these 'open contact'
reunions recognize and accept the adoptee's status and the important
role that the adoptive parents play as the adoptee's "real parents"
(Respondent Nos. 7, 19 and 30). Thus, even though 6 of these adoptees
report a 'parent-child' reunion relationship, they note that this
type of interaction slowly evolved as positive reunion contact
continued. These adoptees, therefore, caution both parties to,

> ...go very slow and cautiously. And, wait. See
> how it works. Like, for me, first there was meeting
> the person for the first time and not knowing what to
> say. Or, how to say it. Then, after that, if the
> relationship is going to work into something, then,
> you start talking a little more about other things
> that maybe you wouldn't tell somebody else. Getting
> closer. Getting to know a person better. Because,
> the first step is just finding out the answers to
> your questions and then the next stage is finding
> out about each other. And, then, after you get to
> know the person a bit more, then, maybe you may want
> to get into a relationship of mother-son or just friends.
> You can decide if it's going to work after you get to
> know the person. Her likes and dislikes. That they
> mix well with yours. If you are compatible or not.
> And, if you talk about your differences, then, it's

> okay. From there, you just take it one step at
> a time. Slowly and cautiously. Like any other
> relationship that you get into. (Respondent No.
> 7, male, age 24)

The largest number of these 'open contact' adoptees describe

their reunion contact as 'friendly', 'close', 'companionable' and

'affectionate'. They view their birth mother-adoptee interactions as

positively rewarding and mutually beneficial. They delight in their

association with the birth mother because these reunion contacts

reveal information about self that stems from their biological

heritage. They note, however, that their continued birth mother-

adoptee interactions have evolved into a friendship based on their

common interests and mutual regard rather than a parent-child bonding

process. They claim that,

> The thing that makes you close with your mother is
> not the fact that she bore you. It's the fact of
> of all the things that she did for you all of your
> life. And, this person, although she is my biological
> mother, she doesn't remember any of that. So, I'm
> meeting another adult. Just the same as I'm meeting
> anyone. And, I meet her on the basis of how she
> interacts with me. Like, mine is the kind of person
> that if I met her at the laundromat, I would be happy
> to know her. The fact that she's a blood relation
> and that she is happy that she got to know me makes
> me feel good. It's a bonus, really. (Respondent No.
> 21, female, age 45)

These adoptees note that it is the special circumstances of this

reunion meeting that sets it apart from others and places such emphasis

on the interaction process that occurs between themselves and their

birth mothers.

f) <u>Birth Mother Deceased</u>

Five (8%) of these reunited adoptees found that their

birth mother had died before they completed their search. Although

these adoptees contacted other birth relatives who provided them

with background information, they feel 'cheated and 'deprived' of

a reunion experience (Respondent No. 29, 31 and 55). They cannot

reaffirm or negate the motherhood myth or their birth mother's

concern for them because her death closed off the possibility of

her rejection or acceptance of reunion contact. These adoptees

report that,

> When I found out that she was dead, I was angry.
> But, now I'm sad. I'm sad that I missed the
> opportunity. I'm still at losse ends and I regret
> that I didn't take the risk sooner. Like, stop
> worrying about the negative and think about the
> positive and take the risk because tomorrow might
> not come. They may die in the meantime.
> (Respondent No. 28, female, age 55)

These adoptees focus on their fear of search and the social

constraints against search when they explain their reunion outcome.

One adoptee observed, for example, that a social worker had failed

to disclose his birth mother's death to him when he approached the

Children's Aid Society for background information. He expressed

anger that he had "wondered and worried about her and participated in

an unnecessary search process for nothing" (Respondent No. 31). Another

was "resentful that all this secrecy was made of our background because

that makes you delay until you reach a dead end" (Respondent No. 29).

A third was bitter because she had "worried so much about what others

might think and how my adoptive parents would behave until it was too

late" (Respondent No. 12). These adoptees focus their strong feelings

over their reunion outcome on the institution of adoption and the social constraints that support anonymity. This motive talk excuses their delay in search and distances them from the self-directed anger that might otherwise ensue.

Haimes and Timms (1985: 70) note the positive benefits that arise when adoptees view their original birth certificates, their birth parents' records and written documentation on their genetic background. Such items give the adoptee "a paper identity...as though the person's body assumes the property of a mere appearance verifying the need for a permanent and real record of his organizational existence" (Haimes & Timms, 1985: 70). These adoptees also looked for a permanent and real record of their birth mother's existence. Three found their birth mother's grave "just so I could see it and believe that she was a real person and that she was dead" (Respondent No. 31). Another obtained copies of her birth mother's death certificate and the coroner's report of her autopsy (Respondent No. 29). These symbolic gestures established the presence of an actual person rather than a vague and imprecise image (Respondent No. 28). Continued reunion contact with birth relatives supplemented that reality and provided the biological connection that the birth mother's death had severed.

III: The Importance of Face-to-Face Contact

The previous section reveals a variety of contact results and reunion outcomes. This section examines the impact of a face-to-face meeting between adoptee and birth mother. Face-to-face contact represents another stage in the reunion process because adoptees confront the physical source of their genetic heritage. It clearly

establishes and validates the more vague and indeterminate

background information that others provide. The impact of that

physical contact on the adoptee's self-concept greatly depends

on his/her assessment of his/her adoptive status and the role

that it plays for the organization of his/her social world.

Only 38 (63%) of the reunited adoptees in this study

achieved face-to-face contact with their birth mother. Table 5.7

reveals their first impression of the birth mother at this initial

reunion meeting. The majority of responses to this question indicate

that the birth mother was "different" than the adoptee. She did not

physically resemble the adoptee (11 or 16%); she was not like the

adoptee's adoptive family (9 or 13%); or, she was a stranger (12 or

18%). These types of comments reveal the adoptee's latent expectation

that the biological bond would be obvious and apparent to both parties.

This latent expectation corresponds with the motherhood myth that

"some magical bond exists between a biological mother and child which

no amount of time or separation can eclipse" (Stoneman et. al., 1980:

5). Thus, these reunited adoptees report that,

> I never thought of her being lower class. I thought
> that she would be like us. Like my adoptive family.
> But, I know that I am a good person and I knew that
> she would be good too because she's genetically
> related to me and that's the way that I thought.
> And, I was relieved that she was good looking. It's
> kind of a legacy. Not that I'm good looking but I
> know that I will probably grow old gracefully.
> (Respondent No. 15, female, age 38)

and,

> I went to see her and it was like walking in on anyone.
> And, I didn't have in my mind, "This is my mother."
> When I saw her, I thought, "This is a stranger." And,
> there was no relationship. No feeling. So, in a way,
> she was just like any other person that I had to get
> to know. (Respondent No. 16, female, age 41)

Table 5.7

## Adoptee's First Impression of Birth Mother *

| Impression of Birth Mother | First Response | | Second Response | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % |
| She's not like me | 8 | 22 | 3 | 10 | 11 | 16 |
| A nice person, warm, open | 12 | 31 | 9 | 30 | 21 | 30 |
| Different from my adoptive family | 4 | 11 | 5 | 17 | 9 | 13 |
| Lower class, loud, abrasive | 7 | 19 | 3 | 10 | 10 | 15 |
| Just like me | 4 | 11 | 1 | 3 | 5 | 8 |
| A stranger | 3 | 7 | 9 | 30 | 12 | 18 |
| Total | 38 | 100 | 3C | 100 | 68 | 100 |

*rounded to nearest percent

and,

> Meeting her was odd.  Like, when you tell people,
> they get all emotional and sentimental.  That word
> 'mother'.  It gives people a warm feeling.  Because
> of what a mother means to you.  And, everybody thinks
> that you are experiencing that feeling.  But I
> certainly didn't.  It was exciting to find her but
> it's not the same thing as if your mother raised you
> and, then, all of a sudden, through circumstances of
> war, you lost her and you were reunited.  It's not
> that sort of feeling at all.  It's sort of empty.
> Because that could be anybody sitting there.
> (Respondent No. 21, female, age 45)

This sensation of 'meeting a stranger' rather than 'finding

your mother' neutralizes that part of the motherhood myth that promotes

the predominance of the 'blood bond' (Miall, 1987: 34) and reinforces

the adoptee's strong attachment to his/her adoptive parents.  Like the

adoptees in other research studies, these adoptees find that their

reunion supports their position in the adoptive family system and

confirms their definition of self as the adoptive parents' child

(Simpson et. al., 1981: 434).  One adoptee remarked, for example, that,

> She is not living in very good circumstances.  I really
> didn't care about that.  But, I was still shocked to
> meet her.  Like, she's one step up from a hooker.  And,
> I was really amazed that I could take it so calmly.  But,
> that was her life  not mine.  It really didn't have much
> to do with me.  I'm different.  And, she made me different.
> She gave me to my parents and gave me that life and made me
> different from her.  (Respondent No. 49, female, age 39)

The debate over the importance of 'nature' versus 'nuture is a

well-known controversy in our society.  This debate holds particular

relevance for adoptees who "possess 'suspect' genetic background" (Miall,

1987: 37).  Reunion resolves the inconsistencies that adoptees note

between themselves and their adoptive families.  In contrast, the

socialization process that they experience from their adoptive parents

provides social distance from the full effects of their reunion findings. These reunited adoptees focus on the impact of 'nature' versus 'nuture' as they account for the various types of new background information that they encounter. This motive talk helps them positively integrate their reunion results as a part of their self-concept. The following adoptee, therefore, used her birth family's experience to justify actions that contradicted her adoptive family's standards of behaviour. She stated that,

> Meeting her gave me roots. Just being able to identify
> things about myself that I couldn't identify as coming
> from my mother. My adoptive mother, that is. But, in
> sharing our similarities, it gave me the feeling that
> some of the things that I do, I just didn't invent.
> Like, I like to drive and so does she. Silly things
> like that. I hate milk and my mother and I fought
> about it from the time I was little. She made me
> drink it and I'd even throw up. Now, my birth mother
> hates milk and all of the kids in her family do too.
> It sounds silly but little things like that are important.
> Like, it was there in the first place. And, just being
> able to say, "I do too". (Respondent No. 25, female, age 36)

This adoptee experiences an "inner peace" and an acceptance of self because she discovered a source for her "apparent inconsistencies". In contrast, the following adoptee used her adoptive family to account for the differences that she identified between herself and her birth mother. She observed that,

> We are very close but I sort of expected her to be
> more like me. And, she's not. She's always trying
> to identify characteristics in me that are like hers.
> But, I don't see them. Physically we are the same but
> my values are different. She's materialistic and I'm
> not. And, I'm glad that my adoptive parents pushed my
> education because she can't see any point in it. And,
> my parents were into ballet and art and a lot of my
> creativity was a result of being raised by them. And,
> I was really surprised because I thought that for some
> reason she would be like us. My adoptive family. But,
> she isn't. (Respondent No. 1, female, age 29)

The importance of this nature-nuture debate depends greatly
on the meaning that the adoptee gives to the various traits that he/she
observes. Face-to-face contact frequently answers the question, "Who Do
I Look Like?". Many of the reunited adoptees in this study commented on
the physical similarities and differences that they observed between
themselves and their birth mother. One adoptee noted, for example, that
she finally accepted her difficulties with weight gain because, upon
meeting her birth mother, she realized that it was a genetic problem
rather than a lack of personal restraint. She remarks that,

> When she came through the door, she had to squeeze
> by me. And, I laughed. Because, I have been dieting
> all my life. And, I realize now that it isn't my
> fault. That, I come from a background of people who
> are built like that. But, I had been raised in a
> family where everybody was six feet tall and 109
> pounds. It's no longer a personal failing. I mean,
> I still try to keep my weight down but I don't get so
> upset about it as I used to. (Respondent No. 19,
> female, age 39)

Another adoptee with similar weight problems, however, became
"horrified and appalled" when she saw the same trait in her birth mother
(Respondent No. 18). This adoptee turned to her adoptive family structure
for refuge and support. She disclaimed genetic responsibility for her
physical size and argued that the "willpower" that she received from
her adoptive parents would nullify the effects of her heredity. This
adoptee believes that,

> I always had to fight my weight gain. And, now I know
> why. And, I never want to look like her. And, I've
> begun to think more about whether things are environmental
> or hereditary. And, I've chosen to believe that if it's
> hereditary, then, I'm just going to have to work twice as
> hard to overcome it. Fortunately, my adoptive family has
> given me the ability to do that. I guess willpower isn't
> hereditary. (Respondent No. 18, female, age 24)

Possession of her adoptive family's 'willpower' means that, unlike

her birth mother, this adoptee can control her weight gain and

maintain a positive self-concept.

Face-to-face contact makes the genetic relationship between

birth parent and adoptee more distinct and sharply focused.  It

provides tangible proof of the adoptee's connection to others and his/

her existence as a human being.  Like the adoptees in other studies,

these reunited adoptees report a sense of inner peace and tranquility

because the 'gaps' have been filled for them.  The physical connection

provided by face-to-face contact, however, makes it much more difficult

for the adoptee to disclaim or excuse the results of his/her search

findings.  These adoptees found it much easier, for example, to disclaim

the impact of character traits and life-style habits than physical

similarities.  These factors were more abstract and removed from self

than the less mutable physical form.  The issue of nuture is much

easier to apply when the adoptee finds similarities in temperament or

a life situation that they view as objectionable.  As one adoptee remarked,

> In personality, she says that I am like her but I'm
> not.  I think that my upbringing has changed me.  I
> am very different from her.  I think that the only
> thing we have in common is our looks.  Like, she's
> a very emotional person and I'm not.  She's strung
> out.  Very hyper.  I think that my parents gave me
> a sense of peacefulness.  Like, she gave me birth,
> they gave me my life.  And, it's those vital years
> that make the difference.  (Respondent No. 53, female,
> age 42)

Conclusion

The reunited adoptees in this study minimize any negative

implications of their reunion outcome for their self-concept with a

vocabulary of motives that focuses on the institution of adoption, their

own status as adoptees, and, their expectations of reunion outcome.  They

take the vocabulary of motives that their society uses to aid their
full integration into the adoptive family system and manipulate it
to fit their own reunion outcome. This motive talk gives them a
satisfactory account of their birth mother's rejection; the similarities
and/or differences that exist between the two parties; and, their
birth parent-adoptee interaction process.

The motherhood myth plays a major role in this motive talk
because it promotes the supremacy of the biological bond and implies
that adoptees are 'unchosen' by their family of origin. These reunited
adoptees use the many components of the motherhood myth to rationalize,
justify or excuse their birth mother's actions and to account for the
different types of reunion contact that each encounters. This motive
talk protects self from many of the negative effects that reunion
contact produces. It places the adoptee's reunion outcome within a
social context that he/she already accepts and understands.

Face-to-face contact with the birth mother emphasizes the
source of the adoptee's genetic heritage because it provides concrete
evidence of his/her connection to others and his/her existence as a
human being. It strengthens the adoptive parent-child bonds because the
experience of 'meeting a stranger' reinforces his/her identity as the
adoptive parents' child. This experience heightens the nature-nuture
debate that frequently arises for adoptees when they try to account for
the source of their physical characteristics or character traits. The
reunited adoptees in this study use the 'nature' part of this debate
to explain observed disparities between themselves and their adoptive

parents. They neutralize 'objectionable' reunion findings by referring to the supremacy of 'nuture'. In this way, these reunited adoptees minimize the full impact of reunion contact for their self-concept and the organization of their social world.

These reunited adoptees observe that contact with the birth mother makes her an active participant in the reunion process. As such, she presents reunion needs and expectations of her own that must be negotiated in the birth mother-adoptee interaction process. Few adoptees consider this prospect as a major factor in reunion outcome until they identify the birth mother and decide to contact her. Few birth mothers also prepare themselves for the adoptee's contact (Stoneman et. al., 1985). As a result, the first few birth mother-adoptee interactions generally involve a period of role negotiation as each party mediates their reunion needs and the type of reunion relationship that they will maintain. The next chapter in this study examines the significance of this process of negotiation for the reunited adoptee who maintains long-term reunion contact with his/her birth mother.

CHAPTER VI - CONTINUED CONTACT, AWARENESS CONTEXTS AND

ROLE-IDENTITIES

## Introduction

Chapter V outlined six different reunion types based on the
contact results between birth mother and adoptee.  A large number of
these reunited adoptees found that their birth mother desired a
long-term, open reunion relationship with them.  These adoptees
became involved in a process of role-negotiation that determined the
characteristics of their birth mother-adoptee interactions and the
type of reunion relationship that they eventually established.
Section I of this chapter examines this reunion process and its
implications for reunion outcome.

Many adoptees at Parent Finders meetings noted feelings of
powerlessness and anger because they lacked their background informa-
tion.  Haimes and Timms (1985: 62) suggest that this sense of
powerlessness stems from the adoptee's inability to provide a complete
account of the details of his/her conception, birth and relinquishment.
Reunited adoptees who gain access to this information must integrate
that data into their biography.  Section II outlines this issue and its
relevance for the reunited adoptees in this research study.

Section III considers the birth father's role in reunion outcome.
The birth father's identity provides more background information that
the adoptee uses to complete his/her biography.  Many of these reunited
adoptees believe that reunion includes the full identification of both

their birth father and birth mother. A large number of their birth

mothers refused to discuss the birth father's identity or the

details of their relinquishment. This factor caused dissension in

the birth mother-adoptee interaction process because, once again,

these adoptees found themselves in a powerless position over vital

information that they could use to complete their biography.

Studies on search and reunion indicate that adoptees are

searching for a sense of identity. Section IV explores this issue

more fully. It examines the adoptive role-identity and the overall

effects of reunion outcome for the adoptee's identity structure.

Like the adoptees in other research studies, these reunited adoptees

report little dramatic change in self after reunion. Section IV

suggests that the impact of reunion outcome greatly depends on the

prominent position that the adoptive role-identity occupies in the

adoptee's salience hierarchy. Reunited adoptees create a new role-

identity that corresponds with their reunion outcome. This is the

role-identity of 'reunited adoptee'. The structure of that new role-

identity and its effects on the adoptee's identity structure appear

in Section IV.

I: Continued Contact and Long-term Reunion Relationships

Of the 38 reunited adoptees who achieved a face-to-face meeting

with their birth mother, 25 maintained an open reunion relationship

(See Tables 6.1 and 6.2). Their initial reunion meeting showed them

that the birth mother desired continued contact. Her obvious interest

in them during this initial reunion meeting and her continued concern

for them since her relinquishment encouraged these adoptees to attempt

Table 6.1

Adoptee's Description of Present Reunion Relationship*

| Type of Reunion | Male | | Female | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % |
| One meeting only | 3 | 27 | 1 | 5 | 4 | 10 |
| Disengaged | 1 | 7 | 5 | 20 | 6 | 16 |
| Limited contact | 0 | 0 | 3 | 10 | 3 | 8 |
| Duty | 1 | 7 | 6 | 22 | 7 | 18 |
| Friendship | 3 | 27 | 9 | 33 | 12 | 32 |
| Mother-child | 3 | 27 | 3 | 10 | 6 | 16 |
| Total | 11 | 100 | 27 | 100 | 38 | 100 |

*rounded to nearest percent

Table 6.2

<u>Type and Frequency of Contact Maintained Between Birth Mother and</u>
<u>Adoptee</u> *

| <u>Frequency of Contact</u> | <u>Telephone</u> | | <u>Letters</u> | | <u>Visits</u> | | <u>Total</u> | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % |
| once a week | 12 | 43 | 1 | 4 | 2 | 5 | 15 | 16 |
| 2 to 3 times per month | 4 | 14 | 3 | 11 | 9 | 22 | 16 | 17 |
| special occasions | 12 | 43 | 24 | 87 | 17 | 43 | 53 | 55 |
| stopped after 3 to 4 meetings | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 18 | 6 | 7 |
| stopped contact after first meeting | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 12 | 4 | 5 |
| Total | 28 | 100 | 28 | 100 | 38 | 100 | 94 | 100 |

*rounded to nearest percent

a long-term reunion relationship. They noted specific symbolic

gestures from their birth mother that reinforced her declarations

of care and concern for them (See Table 6.3). These symbolic

gestures strengthened their decision over reunion contact. Many

found, for example, that,

> I didn't feel anything when I met her. Like, I
> thought, "This is a stranger!". And, I really had
> a lot of trouble feeling an attachment. But, she
> asked if I would like to meet again. I agreed.
> Like, the night we met, she had saved a music box
> for me that was her mother's. And, she told me,
> "It would have been your grandmother's and I kept
> it for you." And, I thought that it couldn't have
> been easy for her. And, I thought that it was
> worth the effort to try and become friends.
> (Respondent No. 45, female, age 29)

and,

> I was in shock when I actually went to see her because
> I hadn't been used to anything like that. Like, the
> screen door was off the hinges. And, they had no
> running water. They were living in poverty. But, the
> meeting was very, very emotional. I thought that I
> can find out anything that I want to now. I know who
> I am and where I came from. And, I thought that you
> had to give the lady credit for guts to level with
> everybody at that point in her life. Nobody knew
> about me and she told them. She was introducing me
> to her friends and neighbours as her daughter. So, it
> meant something to her. So, I kept up contact. I mean,
> if she wants it, I'll go for it. I mean, I started the
> whole thing. And, she isn't such a bad person. She's
> just had bad times. (Respondent No. 49, female, age 39)

These symbolic gestures justify the adoptee's attempt at a long-

term relationship with someone who "just gave me away" (Respondent No. 44).

They negate the 'unchosen child' message that their adoptive status

incorporates and support the image of a birth mother who suffered over

relinquishment. This image provides the adoptee with a stronger

vocabulary of motives for continued reunion contact because he/she can

now include the benefits that reunion produced for his/her birth mother.

Table 6.3

| Symbolic Gesture | Limited Contact | | Duty | | Friendship | | Parent-Child | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % |
| Tried to keep adoptee | 2 | 15 | 1 | 13 | 2 | 13 | 1 | 7 | 6 | 12 |
| Visited foster home | 0 | 0 | 2 | 25 | 1 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 6 |
| Kept baby picture | 0 | 0 | 1 | 13 | 3 | 19 | 2 | 14 | 6 | 12 |
| Kept baby memento | 1 | 8 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 31 | 5 | 36 | 11 | 21 |
| Registered with Adoption Registry | 1 | 8 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 6 | 1 | 7 | 3 | 6 |
| Destroyed anonymity-told others | 1 | 8 | 11 | 25 | 4 | 25 | 5 | 36 | 12 | 23 |
| No gesture given | 8 | 61 | 2 | 26 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 10 | 20 |
| Total | 13 | 100 | 8 | 100 | 16 | 100 | 14 | 100 | 51 | 100 |

*rounded to nearest percent

To quote one adoptee,

> Before, I sort of thought that she had a kid and
> decided, "Let's get rid of it." And, that was
> that. So, there was a little bit of hate there
> against her. But, when I found out the reasons.
> And, we sat and talked. And, she let me ask any
> questions that I wanted. And, she told me how
> hard it was for her. Like, the only thing that
> she had of me was my identification bracelet from
> the hospital. And, she gave it to me the first
> day that I was there. Then, I knew that it was
> hard for her. She asked if I wanted to keep it.
> But, I said, "No, you have had it so long that
> you should keep it." Besides, I knew that I was
> coming back. For both of us. (Respondent No. 7,
> male, age 24)

Gestures of this type explain the absence of anger in many of these reunited adoptees that was so apparent at Parent Finders meetings. Unlike those searching adoptees, they possess data that demonstrates to them that they hold a position of value in their birth mother's life.

Stoneman et. al. (1980: 10) found that reunion contact presents difficulty for both parties because "there is no precedent or norm for social behaviour to guide the people involved". This results in a "struggle for role-identity" that develops more strongly as the number of meetings between adoptee and birth mother increase (Stoneman et. al., 1980: 10). Chapter V outlines the confict that some of these reunited adoptees experienced when their birth mother tried to enact the 'mother' role. Some of them found that their birth mother's desire for that role performance was so strong that they failed to negotiate satisfactory role-identities. This produced stress on the birth mother-adoptee interaction process and made reunion contact awkward and uncomfortable for the adoptee.

These 25 reunited adoptees formed three types of role-relationships with their birth mother. These are: (a) 'parent-child' (6 or 25%); (b) 'friendship' (12 or 46%); and, (c) 'duty' (7 or 29%). The following quotes exemplify the struggle for role-identity that these three types of reunion relationships produced. Thus, one adoptee described his 'parent-child' relationship as,

> Very, very good. I think of her as a 'mother'. And, we both tried not to let it happen. Because, I think that I thought that it would be a betrayal of my adoptive parents. But, I guess that it's like having a marriage and you meet some one and it takes over. The feeling that you have for someone takes over even though you don't want that feeling to arise. Not that it's changed my feelings for my adoptive parents. They are still my parents. But, I think of her in that way too. Like, we both tried not to get too close. Like, her husband would say, "Your mother." And, she would say, "I'm not his mother. Mrs. X is his mother.". And, I would agree. But, I soon found myself getting closer and closer to her and I began to think of her as my mother too. And, I think that we both hold back because someone else is supposed to have that. And, they come first. And, yet, I know in my heart that I feel for her like I do for my mother. (Respondent No. 20, male, age 40)

An adoptee with a 'friendship' observed, however, that,

> The visits are nice. But, you drive there for an hour and you sit and talk. That's basically what we do. You know, you don't get out and camp or hike or things like that because of the distance. So, our friendship and getting to know one another is more on a conversational basis than a companionship. You know, we talk about anything that you would sit down and talk to friends about. Your life. Your plans. Your house. Things like that. (Respondent No. 14, male, age 34)

In contrast, an adoptee involved in a 'duty' reunion relationship remarked,

> I wouldn't even call it a relationship. Like, I go over there from time to time and just drop in for a visit with her and sit down and have a cup of tea. And, she's not a big one for conversation. I have to sit and drag it out of her. And, being a shy person, myself, I find it hard. It takes a lot of work. I find at times that we're just

sitting there.  And, you have to feel out the situation.
Like, the first time, you can't just go in and say,
"Well, here's a cup of tea now spill your guts.".  You
have to feel it out.  And, how much they want to talk
about.  And, I guess, she just doesn't want to talk much.
(Respondent No. 22, male, age 35)

These reunion role relationships are significantly affected

by the similarities and differences that these adoptees identify

between themselves and their birth mother and the meaning that each

particular trait holds for them.  Those adoptees in 'friend' role

relationships found that their similar tastes in books, sporting

activities and occupational interests made reunion contact easier

because they had another basis for mutual interaction than their

biological connections.  As one adoptee stated,

In some ways we are so alike that it makes it easier
to be together.  We both like country music.  And,
I was brought up on classical music which I could
never get into.  And, at first, I used to go visit
her and she would put on her tapes and we'd sit and
talk and listen to music.  It was like being teenagers.
And, we talked about everything and anything that just
popped into our heads.  (Respondent No. 23, female, age 36)

In contrast, many of the adoptees in 'duty' reunions observed

that their similarities to the birth mother emphasized characteristics

in self that they disliked.  One stated that she distrusted her birth

mother's character because "I can see a look in her face that reminds me

of myself when I am not telling  the truth and it makes me uncomfortable

because I really don't like a lot of my character that well" (Respondent

No. 44).  Two others found that their mutual shyness made it difficult

to initiate and sustain conversation (Respondent Nos. 22 and 26).  Three

observed physical similarities that reinforced their fear that they

"might eventually get to look like that" (Respondent Nos. 18, 49 and 60).

These adoptees linked their birth mother's physical condition to a lack

of control over self. These 'duty' adoptees found reunion contact

unpleasant because their birth mother's presence mirrored a negative

self-image that they had tried to manage before reunion contact.

It gave them a sense that these characteristics were innate and beyond

their power to control. They, therefore, experienced great difficulty

negotiating a satisfactory role relationship with a person that they

actually wanted to avoid. To quote one of them,

> When I saw her, I was absolutely stunned. This woman
> was at least 300 pounds. She was so obese. And,
> slovenly. And, immediately I knew that this was my
> mother. But, I didn't want to admit it to myself.
> And, that night, my husband said that he could notice
> a resemblance. But, I refused to talk about it.
> Because of her ugliness. Like, I went back later
> because she wanted to get to know me and I wanted to
> find out about her. And, she let me know that I meant
> a great deal to her. But, I wasn't surprised at her
> life. It was hard. But, she looked like a woman who
> didn't have a handle on life. To allow herself to get
> that way. (Respondent No. 60, female, age 39)

Each additional contact between birth mother and adoptee

transmits further information about the adoptee's genetic background

and the birth mother's personal life situation. Each new contact,

therefore, either alleviates or reinforces those strengths and

weaknesses that the adoptee sees in self. Adoptees in 'duty' reunions

used the 'differences' that they identified between themselves and

their birth mother to nullify the 'negative' similarities that they

observed. They claimed that these differences stemmed from the

individual life experiences that each party encountered (i.e. nuture).

In contrast, adoptees in 'friend' or 'parent-child' role relationships

found that their differences enhanced their birth mother-adoptee

interactions. They observed that,

In a way, the similarities have helped me bond with
her but the differences have kept me as me. You know,
I realize that I still am me. It's nice to know that
there is another human being out there that looks a
little bit like you and has some of the same mannerisms
and that you did inherit something from them. Some core.
Something. Like, our lives are so different and I think
that the fact that I was an only child has a lot more to
do with who I am sometimes than the fact that we are
biologically connected. (Respondent No. 9, female, age
33)

These reunited adoptees focused on these similarities and

differences in their attempt to answer the question, "Who Am I?".

Thompson et. al. (1978: 26) claim that reunion gives adoptees the

opportunity to "make direct comparisons between the life that they

had with their adoptive parents and the one that they might have had

with their birth families". The reunited adoptees who maintained long-

term reunion contact experienced an extreme period of emotional tension

and personal strain that the other reunited adoptees did not report.

They claim that,

It was frightening in a way. Like, this is a stranger
and yet she is your mother. And, the similarities and
the family ties. I had to go home and think, "Now, Who
am I?". And, I had to think about it for about a week
or so. And, finally, I said to myself, "You are M--.
And, that is the daughter of your adoptive parents."
Because I knew that I was their daughter. But, I think
that I got confused for a while and I had to sort it out.
Like, she gave me birth but they gave me more of life.
And, everybody can give birth but it's those vital years
that make the difference. (Respondent No. 53, female, age 42)

and,

Even though it was wonderful, there were difficulties.
I felt this incredible peace. I looked at her and I
thought, "That's who I am like.". And, "This is what
I am going to look like when I'm old." And, then, after
she left. She stayed with me for two weeks and it was
pretty tense because we didn't know each other that well
but we did on an emotional level. We have a very strong
bond on an emotional level. But, after she left, I

remember crying and crying because I really,
really missed her. I found that I had to
distance myself. I write her about once a
month and we phone each other every week but
I finally asked her to space her visits out
about once every two years. I just find them
so intense. (Respondent No. 47, female, age 42)

or,

I sort of knew in the back of my mind that the reason
for the adoption was because things hadn't been that
good. And, when I met her, I realized that things
were no different now that they were 25 years ago.
I didn't like what I saw and I felt guilty. When I
left, I thought, "Thank God, I'm adopted. That I
didn't grow up there.". I could have been that child
instead of who I am. And, there was just thankfulness.
And, my birth mother had a real need that night to
pinpoint likenesses in us. My automatic response was
to deny everything and run. She was trying to come
closer and I was backing off. I went home and I
thought about it for a long time. I even went to a
counsellor because I was so upset. But, I went back.
Because there were still questions that I wanted
answered. You can't get everything all in one night.
And, different pieces started coming out each time.
I got to know her better and I'm happy for her and
some of the things that she's done with herself. It
hasn't been all bad. And, that's nice to know.
(Respondent No. 18, female, age 18)

This intense period of introspection represents a new stage in

the reunion process. These adoptees needed time to absorb and sort out

the various 'bits and pieces' of background information that they

discovered and place them in a social context that was consistent with

their self-concept. This stage of reunion varied according to the types

of similarities and differences that the adoptee identified between

himself/herself and the birth mother and the meaning that each charac-

teristic held for him/her. This process intensified as continued

contact disclosed more and more information for the adoptee to process.

The birth mother's need for continued contact merely increased the

strain that each adoptee experienced during this period of adjustment.

Many of these reunited adoptees coped with this transition period by consulting reunited Parent Finders members and learning that their reaction was 'normal'. Two sought professional counselling. Many others gained emotional strength and reassurance from their spouses and/or adoptive parents. The mutual sharing of these concerns often increased the adoptee's understanding of his/her adoptive status and the impact that it made for significant others. One adoptee stated, for example, that,

> It really helped my mom and me to talk about it. My
> adoptive mother, I mean. Before, I was so selfish
> that I never thought of the pain that she had not
> having children and of maybe losing me by my search.
> Like, I was telling her how nice it was to finally
> meet someone who looked just like me and she told me
> that she knew how I felt because she always felt
> especially close to my cousins and that was because
> they were the only children that she knew that
> looked like her. And, I have never thought how hard
> it might be for her not to have children that looked
> like her. (Respondent No. 2, female, age 20)

Another adoptee remarked that she found comfort from her fellow Parent Finders members because,

> They help you if you want to use them. You sit around
> and you talk about it. You say that you can't condemn
> a person for the kind of life they live. Things like
> that. And, let's face it. A lot of birth mothers get
> married and have families of their own and haven't told
> their husband. I found that out at meetings. And, a
> lot of adoptees feel the way that I do. I found that
> out at meetings too. I had to re-think that. Parent
> Finders made me realize that all situations aren't the
> same. But, many of them are. (Respondent No. 26, female,
> age 49)

A third adoptee found that a 'family friend' gave her emotional support and an objective outlet for her reunion concerns. She stated that,

> I think that I was disappointed for a while. But,
> then, I thought, "Well, you got exactly what you
> went out after.". Like, you can't judge her.
> Because, God knows what you would have done under
> the circumstances. And, I talked to Mrs. D--. She
> said, "Now, you must never judge someone until you
> walk a mile in their shoes." And, I said, "Well,
> I don't think that I could walk in those shoes."
> And, I think that helped me a lot to talk to her.
> (Respondent No. 49, female, age 39)

These significant others helped the adoptee reconcile the

emotional impact of their reunion outcome. The adoptee's discussions

with these others mirrored their concerns over their reunion outcome,

their adoptive status and the meaning that their genetic background

held for them. Those adoptees who encountered long-term reunion

contact with the birth mother experienced this more intense period

of introspection than the other reunited adoptees because they could

"look, touch and hear a real person" (Respondent No. 1) who symbolized

these concerns. Their reunion role relationships are important

because they emphasize the process that reunited adoptees encounter

as they integrate their search and reunion findings as a part of their

self-concept.

II: The Importance of Reunion for the Adoptee's Biography

Haimes and Timms (1985: 2, 9) claim that a person's "background

and circumstances of conception and birth continue to be of crucial

significance to the present" because they aid the individual "towards a

retrospective reordering of certain important items of self-knowledge".

Research studies on search and reunion suggest that adoptees search for

their background information because they experience feelings of

discomfort about their past and a sense of incompleteness due to their

lack of access to this type of knowledge about self (Sobol & Cardiff,

1983: 43). This section explores this issue for the reunited adoptees
in this research study.

These reunited adoptees confirm the findings of other research
studies that report little negative impact of search and reunion on
the adoptee's identity structure. For example, 50 (83%) of these
adoptees replied, "Yes" to the question, "Do you think that your reunion
experience has changed you? (Question No. 37). Twenty-seven (25%) of
their responses claim that they feel "more complete" because they had
filled in the gaps of their background information (See Table 6.4).
Eighteen (17%) indicated that they were "more relaxed and self-confident"
because their genetic heritage was no longer in question. Eight (7%)
noted that they "understand self better" because they now know the
source of certain character traits and physical characteristics. These
reunited adoptees remarked that,

> I'm a lot happier than I was. I always had that blank
> before. I'm happier now because I know. I know what
> I am now. And, she has given me every detail in my
> background that is possible. Like, who died and from
> what. And, about my grandparents. She gives me any
> information that I want. She answers all my questions.
> (Respondent No. 42, female, age 42)

or,

> I think that I'm more relaxed now that I've found out what
> I need to know. And, I feel at peace with myself. Those
> pieces aren't missing anymore. I always thought that I
> had this big black cloud over me and now I feel more
> complete. (Respondent No. 17, female, age 36)

Five of the responses (5%) to this question revealed the adoptee's
"anger and bitterness" over reunion outcome. Three of the adoptees who
responded in this fashion experienced 'birth parent deceased' reunion
outcomes. The other two encountered 'rejection'. These adoptees defined
their reunion as 'incomplete' because they had been denied the opportunity

Table 6.4 <u>Type of Change in Self Report by Adoptee After Reunion with Birth Mother</u>*

| Type of Change | First Response | | | | Second Response | | | | Third Response | | | | Total | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | Did Not Meet | | Met | | Did Not Meet | | Met | | Did Not Meet | | Met | | No. | % |
| | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | | |
| More relaxed at peace | 2 | 9 | 9 | 25 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 14 | 1 | 50 | 2 | 20 | 18 | 17 |
| More complete, gaps filled | 7 | 31 | 14 | 36 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 17 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 10 | 27 | 25 |
| More confident, secure | 1 | 5 | 6 | 15 | 2 | 29 | 7 | 24 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 10 | 17 | 16 |
| Like self better | 1 | 5 | 4 | 11 | 1 | 14 | 4 | 14 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 20 | 12 | 11 |
| Understand self better | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 14 | 5 | 17 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 10 | 8 | 7 |
| More appreciative of adoption | 0 | 0 | 2 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 14 | 1 | 50 | 3 | 30 | 9 | 9 |
| Angry, bitter | 2 | 9 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 43 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 5 |
| No change | 9 | 41 | 2 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 11 | 10 |
| Total | 22 | 100 | 38 | 100 | 7 | 100 | 29 | 100 | 2 | 100 | 10 | 100 | 107 | 100 |

*rounded to nearest percent

to meet their birth mother and add further background information

to their biography. As one of them observed,

> I guess I have changed in that I have become more
> militant over human rights. In the fact that I
> don't think that it was politically fair that I not
> have this information. I was just interested in my
> roots. I'm not that adamant to go march on Queen's
> Park. Which would probably be healthier when it
> comes right down to it. But, I really feel angry
> that this has been denied to me. And, now, it's
> too late. (Respondent No. 29, female, age 44)

These adoptees believe that meeting the birth mother yields

more information about one's genetic background and permits a more

extensive comparison that can be used to 'fill in' one's biography.

Seven of the nine 'no change' responses came from adoptees who were

denied face-to-face reunion meetings. They indicate little change in

self because,

> I haven't found the answers to some of my questions.
> Maybe if I did, then, I might feel like it changed
> me. A few letters don't really count that much.
> (Respondent No. 27, female, age 21)

Question No. 50 in the interview questionnaire explored this

same issue. It asked, "Do you think that you could take a moment to

describe the type of person that you were before the reunion and the

type of person that you are now?". Thirty-eight (28%) of the responses

to this question noted that the adoptee was "basically the same" after

reunion. Those adoptees who noted changes observed that they felt "more

complete and whole" (30 or 22%) or "more confident and secure" (22 or

16%). These adoptees stated that,

> I think that I am basically the same. But, I have an
> understanding of where I came from. The reason behind
> why I was conceived. Why I was born. Why I was adopted.
> A clear understanding of my whole background on both sides.
> Acceptance of myself in accepting my physical attributes
> and my emotional disposition. Which had always been a
> burden to me. I had always been ashamed of that before

and I still in some ways don't accept my lack of
control. But, I am a lot more comfortable with it.
I understand why I am that way now. (Respondent No.
19, female, age 42)

This adoptee believed that her search and reunion affected
her biography because it revealed the facts and events that formed
the beginning of her existence as a human being. She had found
the onset of her own personal story. In a similar fashion, one
adoptee expressed frustration because she had been placed in a
foster home before her adoption. Even though she experienced a
reunion, she lacked a complete account of the first three months
of her life. She felt 'different' because she had not gained
complete access to that part of her biography. She, therefore,
complained that,

Everybody else knows who they are and where they are
from and how much they weighed when they were born.
Maybe it's because I'm an adoptee but I kept baby
books for my kids and filled out all the information
until they were in grade school. And, my search fills
that gap because there was no baby book for me. I was
3 months by the time I got adopted and there is no first
picture. I can show my kids their pictures and say,
"This is you within the first 24 hours you were born."
or "This is the first night that you came home from the
hospital." There is no gap there. Where for me there
is the 3 months where I don't know where I was. In a
foster home or what? Nobody seems to be able to answer
that. It bothers me. That gap isn't completely filled.
And, I guess that I will never know that part.
(Respondent No. 11, female, age 35)

The majority of the reunited adoptees in this study noted,
however, that their reunion let them compose their own personal story
of their beginning as human beings. They typically stated that,

> It really helped me to find out these things. Because
> it's like belonging. Like, my nationality. Everybody
> has a background. They're Italian, English, Jewish or
> whatever. And, I couldn't say anything like that. If
> they mentioned my nationality they would start to
> guess. And, I didn't know. Finding her. In a way, I
> felt like I was writing my own chapter. My story had
> finally started. You know, after all of these years
> of wondering. I was finally getting my questions
> answered. I now know my story and there is no more
> guessing. (Respondent No. 17, female, age 36)

This issue of 'writing one's own chapter' arose during the

interview stage of this research study. Forty-three (72%) of these

reunited adoptees brought folders, booklets or pictures to their

interview session. These folders outlined the various events of their

search and reunion and the types of background information that they

found. Five (12%) had kept personal diaries during their search and

reunion. Six (14%) saved mementoes of their initial reunion meeting.

Many used reunion pictures to verify their accounts of the physical

similarities and differences that existed between themselves and their

birth relatives. These folders, picutes and mementoes supplied these

adoptees with a "paper identity" or "permanent and real record of their

existence" (Haimes and Timms, 1985: 70). It gave them tangible evidence

that this part of their biography was authentic and complete. In this

way, their search and reunion provided them with a personal link to

their 'beginning'. This link gave them serenity because,

> I no longer have a preoccupation with the past and nothing
> to worry about what occured in the past. Now, when people
> find out that I'm adopted and they ask questions, it's
> better. Because I can give them the answers. And, I feel
> better because I have the answers now. And, it's a better
> story. It has an ending. It makes them happier too and
> less concerned about me and my status. There isn't a
> question in their minds. It satisfies their sense of
> completeness too. They aren't satisfied when you say that
> you don't know because they can't imagine being anyone else

> but what they are. So, they can't deal with you
> not knowing. So, knowing makes it better for
> both of us. (Respondent No. 9, female, age 33)

Possession of these facts eliminates the uncertainty that both adoptees and others experience over the adoptee's lack of a complete biography that can be substantiated. This explains the sense of inner peace and contentment that adoptees report after search and reunion (Simpson et. al., 1981: 481; Sobol & Cardiff, 1983: 434). Filling in the gaps in their biography alleviates the ambiguity that their adoptive status presents. Thus, one of these adoptees remarked,

> Those feelings of not belonging that I developed. I
> don't think that they were necessarily formed on my
> own. They were inflicted on me from the outside.
> And, that negative message or reaction that you got
> whenever the topic of adoption was brought up. I
> soon learned from it never to volunteer the information
> that I was adopted to anyone unless I was asked it
> directly. I didn't want to be thought of as different
> from the rest. But, now, I think it's easier. Now, I
> know. Before you didn't feel like you wanted to explain
> your situation because you didn't have the information.
> I'm quite comfortable with it now. It's like coming
> out of the closet. (Respondent No. 22, male, age 35)

Goffman (1963: 78) outlines a scheme whereby actors suffer difficulties in their presentation of self because they experience "biographical discontinuities" that impede social interaction. The adoptees in the above examples describe the social awkwardness that they endured before reunion because they could not provide accurate information about their past to those in their present. Goffman's scheme focuses, however, on the audience's need to define the individual's identity during the process of social interaction and the actor's attempts to control that interaction by "expressing himself in such a

way as to give them the kind of impression that would lead them to

act voluntarily according to his own plan" (Goffman, 1959: 4). Thus,

before his reunion, Respondent No. 22 rarely revealed his adoptive

status to his audience because it threatened his ability to manage the

interaction process. His reunion experience resolved this conflict

for him because it filled in the missing biographical information that

others might use to question his presentation of self.

Goffman limits his model, however, to the process of impression

management and the audience's acceptance or rejection of the identity

that the actor presents to them. In contrast, Glaser and Strauss (1967)

offer a paradigm that considers the actor's awareness of his/her identity

and the impact that this awareness context makes on social interaction.

Glaser and Strauss (1967: 430) define awareness context as "the total

combination of what each interactant in a situation knows about the

identity of the other and his own identity in the eyes of the other".

These researchers outline four different types of awareness contexts

that affect the presentation of self. These are 'open', 'closed',

'pretence' and 'suspicion'. Thus,

> An open awareness context obtains when each interactant
> is aware of the other's true identity and his own identity
> in the eyes of the other. A closed awareness context
> obtains when one interactant does not know the other's
> identity or the other's view of his identity. A suspicion
> awareness context is a modification of the closed one:
> one interactant suspects the true identity of the other
> or the other's view of his identity or both. A pretence
> awareness context is a modification of the open one: both
> interactants are fully aware but pretend not to be.
> (Glaser & Strauss, 1967: 430)

Glaser and Strauss note that an awareness context surrounds every

interaction. Thus, for example, Respondent No. 22 employs a closed

awareness contact before reunion when he hides his adoptive status from

others. Respondent No. 17 remarks on the suspicion awareness context
that arose before reunion when others tried to establish her ethnicity.
In contrast, Respondent No. 9 notes the development of an open
awareness context after reunion because she now possesses the facts
that she needs to complete her biography. Knowledge of these facts
increases her awareness of the identity that she presents to others.
She now controls the information about self that is revealed in the
interaction process.

Search and reunion empower adoptees because they diffuse the
closed awareness context that surrounds any interaction that concerns
the adoptee's genetic history. Before reunion, adoptees experience a
closed awareness context that closely resembles the one that Glaser
and Strauss (1967: 432-434) found to surround dying patients in a
hospital setting. This closed awareness context limits the adoptee's
presentation of self because it hampers his/her ability to openly
acknowledge his/her past heritage in the process of social interaction.
Several structural conditions support this closed awareness context.
These include the adoption contract, the secrecy clause in that contract
and the normative constraints against disclosure. The state adds to this
closed awareness context by giving the adoptee a 'false biography' and
'false birth certificate' that presents him/her as a biological member
of the adoptive family system. Others engage in 'collusive games' in
their attempt to protect this belief. They offer the 'chosen child'
story. They encourage the 'as if born to' attitude. They maintain the
'fallen woman' image for the birth mother. They label those people who
promote search and reunion as deviant, perverse or psycho-pathological.
This closed awareness context produces a sense of powerlessness in the

adoptee and anger over the adoptive status that sets him/her apart
from others in his/her society. It hides the biographical information
that concerns the events of his/her conception, birth and relinquishment.
It denies him/her the ability to bring his/her full identity to the
interaction process. Thus, the adoptees in this study claimed that,

> It bothered me a lot not to have that information. It
> made me really angry. Like, you and this person down
> town or anyone can come in and look at my file and
> know everything about me but I can't. Well, who are
> those records being kept for anyway if not for the
> adoptee? Who really cares about that information
> except me? What's it to them? That made it all the
> more imperative to find my birth mother and all the
> more joyful when we met because when I found her I
> could get all my questions answered. Like, if your
> mother is a drunk and you know it, then, you handle
> it. But, if you're an adoptee, you're not allowed.
> It just makes me so mad. (Respondent No. 2, female,
> age 20)

Reunion changes this closed awareness context into an open
awareness context because adoptees learn about their genetic heritage.
As a result, much of the anger and frustration that searching adoptees
expressed at Parent Finders did not appear in the interview sessions
with reunited adoptees. They now had power over that part of their
identity that others had denied them. As one of them observed,

> When I went to the Children's Aid during my search, I
> got angry. She had access to my information and I
> couldn't see it. Here I was at age 38 and she had to
> control what I was allowed to see about myself. Honestly,
> I felt that I was going to rip that piece of paper out of
> her hand and kill her. How dare she just sit there and
> read it and not read it to me. And, then, she started to
> read things that didn't make sense. Like, all the ages and
> dates didn't match and I started to question her if she had
> the right file. And, it turned out that she went back to the
> original records and she did have the wrong file! But, now,
> it doesn't matter. Now, I have found my own information. I
> don't need to guess anymore. I don't have to rely on her.
> I know the facts. (Respondent No. 43, female, age 39)

Smooth social interaction depends upon a process of continuous deliberation, constant adjustment and mutual negotiation between those individuals engaged in the interaction process. This requires a consistent and coherent presentation of self. Goffman (1959: 1) notes that "when an individual enters the presence of others, they commonly seek to acquire information about him or to bring into play information about him already possessed". This information helps others elicit the response that they desire from him. Others collect data about the individual so they can manipulate the interaction process. They place one's socio-economic status, learn one's attitudes and opinions, establish one's intellectual capabilities, verify one's personal ethics and so forth. They take cues from the individual's manner and appearance and apply untested stereotypes to him/her. They rely on the individual's personal description of self and the documentary evidence that he/she presents in support of that description. In this way, others form a definition of the situation and adjust their interaction patterns to fit that definition. The individual co-operates in that process "by expressing himself in such a way as to give them the kind of impression that will lead them to act voluntarily in accordance with their own plan" (Goffman, 1969: 4). Those who present questionable information about self affect their self presentation and disrupt the continuity of the interaction process. Adoptees who lack a complete biography fall within this category of 'discreditable' actors when they are unable to present the required background information that their genealogy provides.

This model describes the difficulties that others encounter over the adoptee's inability to offer them a complete biography. The adoptee

senses the discomfort and social embarrassment that others experience

over his/her biographical discontinuities and transfers those feelings

to self.  The adoptive status embodies those feelings of discomfort and

social embarrassment.  However, the emotions of powerlessness and anger

that adoptees express over their lack of background information also

reflects the disadvantageous position that they encounter during

social interaction and the personal doubts that they experience over

their full identity.  Like dying patients in a hospital setting, they

are blocked from full participating in the interaction process because

they experience uncertainty "about their identity in the eyes of others"

(Glaser & Strauss, 1967: 430).  This closed awareness context lets

others manipulate the adoptee's presentation of self more easily because

his/her biographical discontinuities produce personal doubts and

misgivings about that presentation.  Reunion resolves this conflict

because it provides the missing information that the adoptee requires

for an open awareness context and a full presentation of self during the

process of social interaction.

III: <u>Birth Fathers and the Completion of the Adoptee's Biography</u>

Past studies on search and reunion rarely discuss the topic

of birth fathers.  My participant observation sessions at Parent

Finders meetings also revealed little data on this issue.  Adoptees

in search focus on the birth mother's identity.  Her name appears on

the adoption order and the majority of their background information

centres on her genetic background.  She symolizes the 'unchosen child'

message that their adoptive status represents because she signed the

papers for their relinquishment to others.  Adoptees in search view

reunion contact with the birth mother as the key to the vital

background information that they desire.

The reunited adoptees in this study noted that, once they

experienced a birth mother reunion, their birth father's identity

became a significant issue for them. This need for complete

information on the birth father represents another stage in the

reunion process. Desire for a birth father reunion might lay dormant

for a long period depending on the time that it took for the adoptee

to incorporate his/her birth mother search findings as a part of his/

her self-concept. These reunited adoptees, therefore, remarked that,

> I found her at Christmas but it wasn't until the next
> May that I began to search for him. She gave me his
> name right away but I didn't want to proceed any
> further. I just didn't. It had never corssed my
> mind to look for him. I was all wrapped up in her.
> And, then, one day, I was working in the garden and
> I started thinking about him and I thought that I
> should find him. Like, I wanted to see her at once.
> He came later. He was a bonus. That's how I think of
> him. (Respondent No. 23, female, age 37)

or,

> It took me about six or seven years before I began to
> search for my father. It took that long to gather up
> all the information that I wanted about my mother.
> And, I remember sitting there and talking and I thought
> that I should look for him. So, it wasn't because of
> her rejection. It was more a second step for me. Now,
> I don't know how some people feel but I wanted to know
> something about him. I realized how much I was like my
> mother but I thought that there must be something from
> him too because he also had a hand in it. (Respondent
> No. 34, female, age 55)

Data on the birth father were available in this study because

these reunited adoptees had time to assimilate the events of their birth

mother reunion and consider the role that their birth father played in

their beginning as a human being. These adoptees noted that their

concern over their birth father's identity strongly correlated with the

type of reunion relationship that they formed with their birth mother

(See Table 6.6). One adoptee replied, for example, that her birth

mother's frankness about her birth father's identity relieved her of

the need of a birth father search and reunion because,

> She was very open about him. He was Roman Catholic and
> in those days you just didn't marry out of the church
> and her father was very strict. She loved him dearly
> but she never even told him about me. She's kept track
> of him over the years. Sometimes, I have this urge to
> go down and just take a look at him but she said that
> he's a real nice man and loved her and loved children
> and animals and all that. And, I get any information
> that I want about him from her. So, I don't need to
> really. (Respondent No. 47, female, age 43)

Another adoptee observed that her desire for knowledge of her

birth father created strain between herself and her birth mother because,

> I tried to get her to talk about my father but she won't
> tell me anything about him. I still don't know his name.
> She won't give it to me. She is always tense every time
> that I talk about him. And, yet, that's something that
> I can't let go of. I have to find him in order to finish
> my search. (Respondent No. 30, female, age 29)

A third adoptee described the lengthy battle that she experienced

with her birth mother over her birth father's identity. She said,

> I was pretty mad at her for quite a while. There was a
> period of about three years when we would have constant
> fights over that. I wanted to find him and she wouldn't
> give me his name. It was only after constant nagging
> and persistence that she finally gave in. But, I had to
> have it. I guess because he is the other part of me that
> I don't know. (Respondent No. 19, female, age 42)

Only three of the adoptees who participated in 'open contact'

reunions were denied access to information on their birth father and his

identity (See Table 6.5). The remaining adoptees experienced 'rejection',

'disengagement' or 'limited contact' reunions. These adoptees noted

that their birth mother became "evasive", "secretive", "hostile" and

"terribly angry" when they raised the topic with her (Respondent Nos.

26, 37, 42 and 43 respectively). Thus, one of these adoptees replied,

> She refused to discuss anything about him. I
> asked her and she said, "I refuse to mention it
> to my dying day. That information is locked deeply
> in my heart." I'm really disappointed because I
> would like to know who he is and where he is and
> what he's like. Because he's part of me too. But,
> she took it personally when I pushed it. She said,
> "That's all you wanted to meet me for was to find
> him." She was upset about that and I couldn't
> convince her otherwise. And, I never got another
> change because she refused to see me again after
> that meeting. (Respondent No. 33, male, age 42)

Many of these adoptees found that their birth mother-adoptee

interaction patterns were affected by their ability to discuss the birth

father's identity. One adoptee, therefore, noted that,

> I asked her about him and she said that she can't
> remember who he was. But, when she said that his
> name was J-- and he was tall and fair, how can she
> not remember his last name. But, she was very
> uncomfortable with the topic. When her sister
> suggested someone, she said, "Oh, for heavens'
> sakes, no." So, if she knows who it wasn't,
> then, it puzzles me that she doesn't know who it
> was. I wasn't quite satisfied and yet I have to
> be. Because, she gets upset whenever the subject
> is mentioned. So, I have to let it go. Or, we
> might never be able to talk at all. She could cut
> me off entirely. (Respondent No. 36, female, age 53)

In contrast, the majority of the adoptees in 'open contact'

reunions believed that their birth mother's ability to present them with

a complete account of their birth father's identity and his background

strengthened their birth mother-adoptee bonds and eased the flow of

interaction. Twelve of these adoptees subsequently searched for their

birth fathers. Six expressed little interest in contact with this

person. Four of these 'non-interest' adoptees stated that their birth

father had been violent and abusive to the birth mother (Respondent Nos.

Table 6.5 : <u>Relationship between Adoptee-Birth Mother Reunion Type and</u>
<u>Positive Identification of Birth Father</u>

| | Open Reunion with Birth Father | | Limited Contact with Birth Father | | Birth Father Rejects Adoptee | | Birth Father is Deceased | | Adoptee Still Search- ing | | Birth Mother Won't Discuss | | Adoptee Not Interested | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % |
| Birth Mother rejects Adoptee | 1 | 11 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 32 | 1 | 12 | 8 | 14 |
| Limited contact | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 50 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 12 | 5 | 26 | 0 | 0 | 7 | 12 |
| Adoptee Rejects Birth Mother | 0 | 0 | 3 | 49 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 15 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 10 | 1 | 12 | 7 | 12 |
| Conditional Acceptance | 3 | 33 | 1 | 17 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 22 | 3 | 16 | 0 | 0 | 9 | 14 |
| Open Reunion | 5 | 56 | 1 | 17 | 1 | 50 | 5 | 70 | 3 | 33 | 3 | 16 | 6 | 76 | 24 | 40 |
| Birth Mother is Deceased | 0 | 0 | 1 | 17 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 15 | 3 | 33 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 8 |
| Total | 9 | 100 | 6 | 100 | 2 | 100 | 1 | 15 | 3 | 33 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 8 |
| | 9 | 14 | 6 | 10 | 2 | 5 | 7 | 12 | 9 | 14 | 19 | 32 | 8 | 13 | 60 | 100 |

% rounded to nearest percent

7, 9, 17 and 45). Their close relationship with the birth mother
and her openness about the birth father satisfied their 'need to
know'. Thus, one of these adoptees stated,

> She answered most of the questions that I had to
> the best of her knowledge. I would say a good
> 80 to 90 percent of them. I accepted her answers.
> I thought of searching but why bother. Like, he
> was a real jerk. The way he treated her. I had
> to think if I wanted this type of person disrupting
> my life. Or, he may cause problems for her. So,
> I'm not that interested. (Respondent No. 7, male, age 24)

This adoptee is satisfied with his reunion outcome because he
has gained access to most of the information that he needs to complete
his biography. Those adoptees who were refused this information,
however, express "disappointment", "regret", "great frustration",
"disillusionment" and "anger" at their birth mother's behaviour
(Respondent Nos. 24, 26, 6, 5 and 43 respectively). These adoptees
experience a renewed sense of powerlessness over their inability to
make their birth mother disclose information that they define as a
vital part of their biography. Their birth mother's denial of their
'need to know' symbolizes her lack of concern for them and reactivates
the 'unchosen child' message that her relinquishement of them implies.
One of these adoptees, therefore, replied that,

> It's like another rejection. I only asked her for
> one thing in my life. She might not think that it
> is important but I asked her for my father's name.
> And, she said, "You want it. You get it. Find him
> the same way you found me." And, she hung up. After
> forty years, if my daughter phoned up, I certainly
> would have given her a few scraps. It's a part of
> my life that only she can tell me about. I didn't
> think that was too much to ask for. But, I guess she
> did. It's funny. You would think that one biological
> tie would be enough. But, I need that too.
> (Respondent No. 43, female, age 39)

These adoptees believe that, without knowledge of the birth father's identity, they lack a complete account of their connection to others and their beginning as a human being. The birth mother's refusal to reveal this information keeps them in the same 'discreditable' position that they held with others before their reunion. They possess doubts and uncertainties about their presentation of self because others can still question their biography and the identity that they offer. These adoptees, therefore, express the same feelings of anger, frustration and disillusionment that adoptees at Parent Finders meetings express. They find themselves in the same powerless position with their birth mother that they encountered when they first began to search for her. They are at a standstill, however, because, unlike their search for her, they possess few alternative sources for the information that they desire.

The birth mother's refusal to identify the birth father also places strain and tension in the birth mother-adoptee interaction process because she surrounds their interactions with a closed awareness context. She recognizes that part of the adoptee that stems from his/her biological connection to the birth father. The adoptee finds himself/herself at a disadvantage because he/she is uncertain about his/her identity in the birth mother's eyes and the presentation of self that he/she offers. This factor helps explain the adoptee's relatively easy acceptance of 'rejection', 'limited contact', or 'disengaged' reunion outcomes. These types of reunions provide little opportunity for the adoptee to enhance his/her presentation of self and the positive rewards that such presentations generally offer.

Those adoptees in 'open contact' reunions find that an
open awareness context surrounds their birth mother-adoptee
interaction process. These 'open' birth mothers eliminate the
doubts and uncertainties that these adoptees experience over their
identity because they reveal the adoptee's full biography to him/
her. In this way, these 'open' birth mothers eliminate the sense
of powerlessness that these adoptees experience over their presentation
of self and the anger and resentment that accompany that feeling.
These adoptees know that all their questions will be answered "to the
best of the birth mother's ability" (Respondent No. 7). They are,
therefore, assured of their identity in their birth mother's eyes
because she tells them how she views them. In addition, her concern
for the adoptee's 'need to know' reinforces the adoptee's belief
that she cares and strengthens the bonds that develop between them.
These adoptees return for future reunion meetings because the birth
mother-adoptee interaction process brings them personal satisfaction
and mutual gratification.

IV: The Effects of Reunion on the Adoptive Role-Identity

Haimes and Timms (1985: 77) suggest that adoptees use search to
confront the 'differentness' that they experience from others in their
society. The reunited adoptees in this study believe that this
'differentness' stems from an adoptive status that denies them full
knowledge of their connection to others and information about their
beginning as human beings. The model presented in this study claims
that individuals develop role-identities that guide their role perfor-
mance for each particular role position (i.e. status) that they hold.
Thus, the adoptive role-identity encompasses the character and role

performance that adoptees devise for themselves as occupants of the role position of 'adoptee'. Adoptees use their adoptive role-identity in social situations that concern their adoptive status. The characteristics of that adoptive role-identity correspond with the adoptee's self-concept and the social expectations that others hold for that particular role performance.

Goffman (1963: 9) notes that, when stigmatized individuals correct that objective basis upon which their stigma rests, they transform themselves "from someone with a particular blemish into someone with a record of having corrected a particular blemish". The reunion situtation changes the meaning that the adoptive status holds for adoptees. It gives them access to that body of knowledge that sets them apart from others. Reunited adoptees no longer possess the 'stigma trait' or 'perceived imperfection' that sets them apart from their society. The reunited adoptees in this study report, however, that others still view them as 'different' because they now know their genetic background and have found their birth mother's identity. This differentness appears more compelling to others because they have rarely been exposed to adoptees who reunite. They do not understand the social phenomena of reunion and have formed no rules of social interaction for this particular type of role performance. These reunited adoptees, therefore, complained that,

> It bothers me to mention my reunion because I have
> to continually answer questions to people. Society
> doesn't make place for two mothers and I have to
> live with society. No one tries to understand why
> I would want to search and reunite. I just have to
> live by their rules and I have to struggle to please
> society as well as please me too. (Respondent No. 2,
> female, age 20)

and,

> I really find that I have to educate people about
> this. They'll say, "Are you going to visit your
> real parents?". And, I have to say, "No, I am
> going to visit my birth father. My real parents
> are at home." Like, he's the guy who conceived
> me. They are my parents. But, people find it
> difficult to understand. And, that's how I think
> of him. As V--. It sets the tone. It's casual.
> Like our relationship. My friend V--. Not my
> father. (Respondent No. 4, male, age 25)

Search and reunion produce a new process of stigmatization

for reunited adoptees and another stigma trait that they must manage.

The data in this study indicate that, as searching adoptees complete

their biography, they create role-identities that depict the social

experience that they encounter through their reunion outcome. This

is the role-identity of 'reunited adoptee'. Since their society offers

these adoptees little direction for the enactment of this new role-

identity, reunited adoptees draw upon other, more closely related role-

identities for assistance in their performance of this new one. This

is possible because role-identities are woven into a complex pattern

that forms a systematically interrelated identity structure (McCall &

Simmons, 1978: 73). Thus, for example, the reunited adoptees in this

study formed 'parent-child', 'friendship' or 'duty' relationships with

their birth mother. These role performances provided them with guidelines

for the type of birth mother-adoptee interaction process that they

encountered (See Chapter V).

These reunited adoptees successfully managed the new stigma

trait that they experienced from their social status as 'reunited'

adoptees by turning to their adoptive status and their adoptive role-

identity for guidance. These two role-identities are closely related

through their common bond of adoption. The role performance of one

greatly influences the other. Similarly, the social characteristics

of one encroach upon the other. These reunited adoptees defined

their adoptive role-identity and the role-identity of 'reunited

adoptee' in similar ways. One reunited adoptee, therefore, noted that,

> When I was young and I told people about my adoption,
> I began to realize that their reaction wasn't really
> that nice. There was a hidden message that I was odd.
> Different. In some way, acceptable. So, now that I
> have had a reunion, I am also very careful about who
> I tell. I know that they think it is odd. Like my
> adoption. And, that it is, in some way, also
> unacceptable and different. (Respondent No. 43,
> female, age 39)

Another adoptee, however, remarked that,

> I don't mind talking about my reunion. It's part of
> me. Just like my adoption. Actually, I was quite
> proud of my adoption when I was growing up. You know,
> the chosen child story really had an effect on me. I
> used to tell kids that their mother was stuck with
> them but mine had a choice. And, my reunion. Well,
> she comes her for visits and I write. Like, my
> adoptive parents got upset when they first heard.
> But, I told them that it was something that I had to
> do and they had to make up their own minds about it.
> But, I had to tell them. We had always levelled with
> each other about my adoption. And, this was something
> important and I didn't think that it was fair to keep
> it away from them. (Respondent No. 49, female, age 39)

The close interrelationship between these two role-identities

lessens the effects that reunion makes on the adoptee's self-concept and

the organization of his/her social world. For example, in those cases,

where adoptees are uncomfortable with the consequences of their search,

they are likely to emphasize their more familiar adoptive role-identity.

They disclaim the negative effects of their reunion by focusing on their

adoptive status and their adoptive families as the major creative force

in their social development as human beings. In such cases, the adoptive

role-identity takes a more prominent position in the adoptee's salience

hierarchy. These adoptees use such phrases as, "She's not really my mother" (Respondent Nos. 8, 16 and 21); "I'm my adoptive parents' child" (Respondent Nos. 9, 39 and 53); or, "I'm different because I was raised differently" (Respondent Nos. 10, 40 and 49) to reinforce the dominant position that their adoptive role-identity holds for them and disclaim any personal connection to their more unacceptable reunion findings.

The role-identity of reunited adoptee takes a more prominent position when these adoptees account for the events of their search and reunion experience. The adoptive role-identity offers little opportunity for the expression of one's search findings or the integration of that background information as a part of self. It provides an insufficient role performance for reunion contact. At times like these, the adoptive role-identity becomes less salient. However, because a role-identity's salience depends on the social rewards and personal benefits that its role performance produces, adoptees are more likely to emphasize the role-identity of reunited adoptee when they account for the more positive effects of reunion. They use such phrases as, "I can get any information that I want now" (Respondent Nos. 1, 20 and 47); "I can identify things about myself that didn't come from my adoptive family" (Respondent Nos. 5, 11 and 25); and, "It was nice just to meet her and know that she was okay" (Respondent Nos. 8, 9 and 18) to justify their need for reunion contact with their birth mother.

These reunited adoptees view their search and reunion as an extension of the adoption process. As such, their reunion outcome becomes one more life-crisis event in their life career. The interrela-

tionship between the role-identities of 'adoptee' and 'reunited adoptee'

permits a continuous interchange that mediates the effects of the new

stigma trait that their reunion produces. The close affinity that

exists between these two role-identities means that they are likely to

occupy similar positions of prominence in the adoptee's salience

hierarchy. These adoptees give the same significance to the events of

their reunion as they do to the events of their adoption. Those who

believe that their adoptive status holds little significance for their

self-concept or the organization of their social world are likely to

place less import on their reunion outcome than those adoptees who view

their adoption as a major factor in their lives. Thus, for example,

many of these reunited adoptees stated that,

> I really need to go through this folder on my search
> again and remind myself of the events. Because, you
> forget. For the most part of my life, I don't think
> about it. This folder hasn't been out of the cupboard
> for months. I had to dust it to bring it to you.
> Because, I'm busy. I'm a professional woman and I have
> a family and my hobbies. So, I don't have time to sit
> around and think about it. I don't think that most
> adoptees do. It's just part of me now. Like, my
> adoption. (Respondent No. 29, female, age 44)

or,

> It was an experience. If you had got me two years ago,
> I would have been more excited. I would have probably
> talked your ear off. But, now, I have other concerns
> that are more important. Like, life goes on. I am
> more interested in my daughter right now and what is
> happening with her. That takes up all of my time and
> energy right now. (Respondent No. 8, male, age 30)

These adoptees have placed their reunion within a social context that

corresponds to their self-concept and the other events that they have

encountered during their life career. Other adoptees who view their

adoption as a more important component of their self-concept find that

they give considerable importance to their reunion outcome. Like

their adoption, their reunion plays a dominant role in their lives.

The following adoptee, therefore, found that her adoptive experience

and reunion outcome led her to take a leadership position in Parent

Finders. She replied that,

> I was always concerned with my adoption because
> I was so different and out of place in my adoptive
> family. Physically and emotionally. My search and
> reunion totally changed the way that I look at myself.
> I can accept myself now because I found that all of
> those things that made me different were not my fault.
> I was born that way. And, now, I am very involved in
> Parent Finders. But, everybody sees me as very search
> oriented. I am. I can do it and I enjoy doing it.
> However in order of importance, I would rather help
> give moral support to adoptees. Talk to them and listen
> to them and let them know that others feel the same way.
> That helped me to know that there were others like me.
> (Respondent No. 19, female, age 42)

Those adoptees in 'open contact' reunions frequently make

considerable adjustments in the organization of their social world if

they desire a birth mother-adoptee relationship. Continuous contact

with the birth mother brings the role-identity of reunited adoptee

into a very prominent position. One of these adoptees noted, for example,

that,

> Sometimes I feel almost like I'm split in two. Like, we
> go out together and I am looked at as her third daughter
> and everybody knows me as that. Her friends, neighbours,
> teachers. Everyone. And, if I mention something about my
> past life or my family or my mother, my adoptive mother,
> that is, it just takes such a big long explanation. It
> gets tiring. (Respondent No. 2, female, age 20)

Another 'open contact' adoptee experienced a similar type of

pressure from her birth relatives because,

> The biggest shock came from her family. Like, I had only
> thought of meeting her. And, all of a sudden, I had a
> whole new family of relatives. And, trying to fit them
> into a life with my other relatives was hard. Like, the

first Christmas, they were all buying me presents and
everything. I found that hard to deal with. And, it
was murder trying to find time for everybody. They all
wanted us there and my adoptive family had to take
precedence. Finally, I had to just put my foot down.
(Respondent No. 50, female, age 31)

In contrast, an adoptee who keeps her birth mother reunion a

secret from her adoptive parents observed that,

I think that my contact with her affects me when I
think of long-term plans. Like, a wedding or a
funeral. It would really bother me because I know
that she would like to be there but how can she
when my parents don't know. It would upset them.
And, having children. Having two grandmothers.
All those things. How will I work them out. I
keep putting it off but I know that I will have to
face it some day. (Respondent No. 1, female, age 29)

These adoptees comment on the role that others play for their

reunion outcome and the type of birth mother-adoptee interaction process

that occurs. Stoneman et. al. (1980: 10) note that "as the number of

meetings increase, the struggle for role identity develops and, in turn,

affects other people in the wider family circles, birth, adoptive,

and immediate". The next chapter in this study considers those effects

from the perspective of two other important people in the adoption

process. These are the birth parents and the adoptive parents. Their

involvement in the search and reunion process and, their view of that

process is a significant factor in reunion outcome that cannot be

ignored.

Conclusion

Adoptees begin their search hoping for, but not expecting, a

long-term reunion relationship with their birth mother. Those adoptees

who experience face-to-face contact find that there are few rules of

conduct to guide the birth mother-adoptee interaction process. On one

hand, they are 'mother' and 'child'. On the other, they are complete

strangers. These reunited adoptees turned to other role relationships for guidance as they struggled for an acceptable role-identity that they could bring to this type of interaction process. Those adoptees in 'open contact' reunions formed 'parent-child', 'friendship' or 'duty' relationships based on the type of interactions that evolved between themselves and their birth mothers. Other adoptees who experienced 'limited contact', 'disengagement' or 'rejection' encountered less pressure to form role relationships and maintain reunion contact. They withdrew more easily from reunion situations that were problemmatic for them or that contributed little to their positive self-concept.

Before reunion, these adoptees experienced a sense of powerlessness over their presentation of self in social interaction. Their lack of a complete biography placed them in a discreditable position and made them uncertain about their identity in the eyes of others. Their presentation of self remained in doubt because a closed awareness context surrounded their interactions. Search and reunion changed this closed awareness context into an open awareness context because it completed their biography. The extent of this open awareness context greatly depended upon the amount and type of background information that these adoptees discovered. The more background information that they discovered, the more this sense of powerlessness disappeared.

The desire for more background information increases the adoptee's need for knowledge of the birth father and his identity. The birth father represents the 'other half' of the adoptee's genealogy.

The birth mother possesses the key to this particular body of information because only she knows for certain the birth father's identity. Her willingness to openly discuss the birth father significantly corresponds to the type of reunion contact that she maintains with the adoptee. Once again, the birth mother's own reunion needs greatly affect the brith mother-adoptee interaction process and the type of reunion outcome that the adoptee encounters.

These reunited adoptees made themselves more 'different' by "flaunting their refusal to accept their place" (Goffman, 1961: 145) and honour the original adoption contract that guarantees secrecy to all three members of the adoption triangle. The role-identity of 'reunited adoptee' embodies the 'new' stigma trait that their searching actions have produced for them. The close affinity that exists between the more familiar adoptive role-identity and this unknown role-identity of reunited adoptee helps them manage the effects that this new process of stigmatization produces. The close interconnection that exists between these two stigmatized role-identities places them both in similar positions of prominence in the adoptee's salience heirarchy. Both take on the characteristics and role performances that present the adoptee in the most favourable light. The effects of search and reunion are, therefore, less noticeable for the adoptee's identity structure and his/her self-concept than expected.

Those adoptee who maintain 'open contact' reunions encounter the greatest number of personal adjustments from their reunion outcome. They must integrate their birth mother as a part of their social world. Search and reunion affects others who also become involved in the

adoptee's life. Those others may include the adoptee's husband, wife or children. They may incorporate other birth relatives such as half-brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles or grandparents. Two of the major actors in the adoption process are the birth mother and the adoptive parents. These two people signed the original adoption contract that guaranteed them continued confidentiality. These two parties are likely to experience the most noticeable adjustment to reunion contact. The next chapter in this study examines the reunion process from the perspective of these other two members of the adoption triangle.

CHAPTER VII - THE EFFECTS OF REUNION ON THE OTHER MEMBERS

OF THE ADOPTION TRIANGLE

Introduction

        This chapter explores the effects of reunion contact for

birth parents and adoptive parents.  Few of the reunited adoptees in

this study gave their permission for me to contact their birth

parent(s) or their adoptive parent(s) for an interview (See Chapter

III).  I, therefore, obtained a sample of only four (4) adoptive

parents and seven (7) birth parents that could be used in this study.

This small sample limits the analysis presented in this chapter and

the generalizations made from that data.  However,  studies on search

and reunion rarely describe the effects of reunion contact for these

other members of the adoption triangle.  This chapter offers

instructive information that may add to that small body of knowledge.

        Section I  explores the reasons that these adoptees gave for

their refusal to release their adoptive parents' or their birth parents'

name for interview.  These reasons disclose significant issues for the

assessment of reunion outcome and the structure of adoption.  Section II

and Section III examine the reunion situations that the small number of

interviewed adoptive parents and birth parents in this study describe.

Their personal accounts of their own reunion outcome offer great

insight about the definition of motherhood, the meaning that this term

holds in our society and the possible effects that this meaning produces

for reunion outcome. The issue of motherhood permeates this thesis.

It presents a major theme for the assessment of adoption and the impact

of reunion outcome for all three members of the adoption triangle.

I: Finding a Sample of Reunited Birth Parents and Adoptive Parents

        a) Denial of Access to the Birth Parents

        The reunited adoptees in this study expressed considerable

anxiety over their birth parents' anonymity and their fear of disclosure.

Their hesitance to grant permission for an interview with their birth

parents revolved around their concern for the birth parents' stigmatized

position in the adoption triangle and their fear that an interview

request would affect their reunion outcome. Only eight (8) adoptees gave

me permission to interview their birth mother and only four (4) gave me

their permission to interview their birth father  (See Tables 7.1 and 7.2).

These requests for birth father interviews stemmed from the limited

response that I obtained over my request for contact with the birth

mother. The adoptee's view of the birth father as the 'other half' of

his/her genealogy combined with my own desire to gain a more complete

account of the effects of reunion contact on birth parents and led me to

consider birth fathers as an additional source of data.

        Those adoptees who gave me their permission to contact their

birth parents believed that the birth parent was an active participant

in the reunion process. Their open acknowledgement of the adoptee's

contact indicated that they no longer feared disclosure and could be

approached by me. In contrast, those adoptees who denied their

permission claimed a personal obligation to protect the birth parents'

confidentiality.  For example, 13 (87%) of the adoptees who were

'rejected' by their birth mother and 2 (100%) who were rejected by

their birth father had rationalized that rejection as the birth

parent's fear of disclosure rather than as a personal rejection of

the adoptee.  These adoptees excused their interview refusal by

referring to this factor.  They stated that,

> I know that your research is important and it should
> be done.  But, I don't want to anger her or upset her.
> I did say that I wouldn't tell anyone and I can't
> break a promise like that.  I hope you understand.
> (Respondent No. 32, female, age 55)

or,

> I don't think that she was ready for contact from me.
> She probably never will be.  I mean, this was a woman
> who denied her pregnancy completely.  And, she has been
> denying it for years and years.  I think that she suffers
> great guilt.  And, my coming along just brought it up
> again.  I don't think that she could handle talking to
> you.  She was just livid at my contact call.  I just
> couldn't upset her like that.  (Respondent No. 33, male,
> age 42)

These statements compare greatly with those made by adoptees

who had 'rejected' their birth parents.  These adoptees feared that my

interview contact might renew the birth parent's interest in them.  They

justified their refusal by referring to the negative reunion contact

that they had experienced and their desire to "leave things just the way

they are" (Respondent No. 5).  They claimed that,

> I would rather just leave it alone.  She was two-faced.
> She would say one thing and do another.  I could never
> get the truth from her.  And, she'd get hostile toward
> me depending on her mood.  I don't need that.  I cut it
> off and I'd rather just leave it that way.  (Respondent
> No. 40, female, age 25)

Table 7.1  <u>Type of Reunion Experience Reported by Adoptee and Permission to Interview</u>

<u>Birth Mother</u>*

| Permission Response | Open Contact Reunion | | Limited Contact/ Disengaged | | Rejection | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | <u>No.</u> | <u>%</u> | <u>No.</u> | <u>%</u> | <u>No.</u> | <u>%</u> | <u>No.</u> | <u>%</u> |
| Permission granted | 4 | 17 | 2 | 12 | 2 | 13 | 8 | 15 |
| Interview would be too traumatic for her | 9 | 38 | 7 | 44 | 0 | 0 | 16 | 29 |
| The topic is too personal and private | 7 | 28 | 4 | 25 | 0 | 0 | 11 | 20 |
| Her identity remains anonymous | 4 | 17 | 3 | 19 | 13 | 87 | 20 | 36 |
| Total | 24 | 100 | 16 | 100 | 15 | 100 | 55 | 100 |

*rounded to nearest percent

**the sample consists of 55 persons because five found their birth mothers deceased

Table 7.2  Type of Reunion Experience Reported by Adoptee and Permission to Interview

Birth Father*

| Permission Response | Open Contact Reunion | | Limited Contact/ Disengagement | | Rejection | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % |
| Permission granted | 4 | 55 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 25 |
| Interview would be too traumatic for him | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| The topic is too personal and private | 3 | 34 | 4 | 67 | 0 | 0 | 7 | 41 |
| His identity remains anonymous | 1 | 11 | 2 | 33 | 2 | 100 | 5 | 29 |
| Total | 8 | 100 | 6 | 100 | 2 | 100 | 16 | 100 |

*rounded to nearest percent

** only 16 respondents achieved reunion with their birth father at the time of this study

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The majority of these adoptees denied their permission because an interview situation would be "too painful" or "too stressful" for the birth parent to endure. For example, 8 (33%) of the adoptees who formed 'open contact' reunions with their birth mother and 7 (44%) who maintained 'limited contact' with her claimed that an interview would be "too traumatic because it would remind her of painful events in her past" (Respondent No. 60). Three (34%) of the adoptees who formed 'open contact' reunions with their birth father and 4 (67%) who maintained 'limited contact' with him also presented similar arguments. These adoptees observed that,

> She might think that it's a little bit of an invasion of her privacy. I don't think that she would like it. It's a very touchy situation for the birth mother, I think. Just knowing her, I think that she'd like to keep things nice and quiet. Between us. And no one else. You know, a woman who has given up her child has gone through an awful lot to start with and then to get all these questions and they have to go through the experience all over again. I don't think it's fair. I couldn't say yes. (Respondent No. 14, male, age 34)

or,

> I think that it might be difficult for him. Like, he was very open with me and said, "I'm glad you turned out okay. Come back anytime and see me. It would be nice to see you again." Which I wonder how I could really since none of his family knows about me. I mean, he handled the call from me okay and made the arrangements but I don't know how he would handle it from you. Knowing that I had told you about him. (Respondent No. 31, male, age 30)

or,

> I really don't think that it would be a good idea. She says that she's not ashamed of it but she really doesn't want anyone to know. Like at work. She worries about them finding out. It's different that way. Like, I don't have to worry but it's different from the other side. And, she didn't ask for this. She had decided to

put me out of her life and here I am sort of
stirring things up again. Meeting you and
talking to you could upset things. I don't
think that an interview would be a very good
idea. (Respondent No. 23, female, age 37)

These adoptees justify their denial of an interview by

referring to the social stigma that birth parents encounter as members

of the adoption triangle. This motive talk demonstrates the adoptee's

awareness of the normative constraints that support the institution of

adoption and the stigmatized position that birth parents hold. Despite

their own search and reunion activities, these adoptees still accept

and support the code of secrecy that their society promotes. They take

their society's vocabulary of motives and use it to excuse their own

refusal to grant their birth parents the opportunity to be interviewed

for this study.

This motive talk also reveals the adoptee's own assessment of

his/her precarious position in reunion outcome. Thus, Respondent No. 23

replied that, even though her birth mother openly accepts her reunion

contact, she worries about others learning of her relinquishment. Two

other adoptees noted that their birth mother had difficulty acknowledging

their relationship and introduced them as "an old family friend" to her

other children (Respondent Nos. 11 and 45). A third observed that his

birth father had withdrawn from reunion contact because his younger son

required more attention (Respondent No. 5). Many of these adoptees viewed

my interview request as a threat to the tenuous reunion relationship that

they had established with their birth parents. They feared that my contact

might upset that equilibrium. This definition of their reunion situation

reflects the closed awareness context that surrounds the process of

adoption and the lack of rules for reunion contact. These adoptees

believed that they had intruded themselves into their birth parent's life.

Further demands on their good will might upset the delicate balance that existed in the birth parent-adoptee interaction process and the type of reunion contact that they encountered. As one adoptee remarked,

> She's the one that holds the key to everything that
> you want to know and she'll let you know exactly what
> she wants you to know and no more. She's in a power
> position. Once you make the initial contact, you have
> to follow their way. Otherwise, you're intruding. I
> think that if an adoptee is willing to search and they
> make the opportunity to the birth parent that, "I'm
> here. You know where I am." then, you have to leave
> it like that until they are ready. You can't just go
> on pushing. Because you are intruding. And, you
> wouldn't do that to anybody. But, especially not her.
> I have intruded enough, I think. You would just be
> another intrusion. (Respondent No. 26, female, age 49)

### b) Denial of Access to the Adoptive Parents

Many of these reunited adoptees expressed similar fears over my interview contact with their adoptive parents and its effects on that role relationship. Fifteen (25%) of these adoptees had kept their reunion a secret from their adoptive parents, while 5 (8%) had waited for their adoptive parents to die before they conducted a search (See Table 3.4). Many of the remaining adoptees received "strained" or "self-conscious" responses when they informed their adoptive parents about their search and reunion outcome (See Table 7.3). These adoptees denied my interview request because,

> It's a touchy area for them. I told my father because
> I knew that he would understand. And, he told my mother
> about a month later. She reacted just the way I expected.
> She was hurt but I reassured her that the relationship
> that we had would never change. She was the woman who
> raised me and took care of me. I told her that she would
> always be my mother. She doesn't seem to be upset anymore.
> But, she doesn't like to talk about it. It's a closed
> topic with my parents. I don't know whether it is really
> worthwhile opening it up again. (Respondent No. 20, male, age 40)

Table 7.3

<u>Response Given to Request for Interview With Adoptive Parents</u>*

| <u>Response Given</u> | <u>No. of Cases</u> | <u>Percent of Cases</u> |
|---|---|---|
| Permission granted | 8 | 20 |
| Reunion is a private topic | 8 | 20 |
| Respect for parent's stigmatized position | 9 | 23 |
| Parent might be upset talking about reunion | 5 | 12 |
| Adoptee and parent have severed contact | 3 | 8 |
| Adoptive parents live outside the province | 2 | 5 |
| Adoptive parents have died since the reunion | 5 | 12 |
| Total | 40 | 100 |

*rounded to nearest percent

** only 40 adoptees informed their adoptive parents about their reunion

and,

> It's a touchy area. I'm not sure that I would like
> her to do it. I'm not sure how open she would be
> discussing this with other people. She's very private.
> You know, adoptive parents have a lot to deal with.
> Maybe it's best not to bother her. I really wouldn't
> want to put her on the spot about it. (Respondent No.
> 56, female, age 25)

or,

> When I told them, my mother was calm. She was hurt but
> calm. My father started to cry. Because, he felt that
> he had lost his daughter. And, then, I said, "I still
> love you and you are my parents. The only ones I want.
> She'll never be like a real mother to me. Not even a
> friend." And, I told them that I don't see her anymore.
> Now, they are okay. But, they are very conscious about
> me being there at Christmas, Easter, things like that.
> I think that it's because they are afraid of losing me.
> They were hurt. That's only natural. And, to ask them
> for an interview. I think that would only hurt them
> more that I am talking about it to other people.
> (Respondent No. 1, female, age 27)

These adoptees refused their permission for an interview with

their adoptive parents because "the reunion is a closed topic" (8 or

20%); the interview would "disturb their privacy" (9 or 23%); or,

"talking about it upsets them" (5 or 14%) (See Table 7.3). They

observed that their birth parents expressed "anger", "betrayal", and,

"great distress" when they learned of the adoptee's search and reunion.

They believe that their adoptive parents are afraid that their birth

parents might displace them or "steal the adoptee away". Their continued

attempts to reassure the adoptive parents of their strong adoptive parent-

child bonds and their position as the adoptive parent's child demonstrate

their concern that their reunion contact might harm this very

significant role relationship. An interview with their adoptive parents

might reactivate the anxiety that they have tried so hard to alleviate

for their adoptive parents. It threatens the precarious bridge of

trust that they have established with their adoptive parents since

they first informed them of their reunion situation. As one of these

adoptees remarked,

> It took me about a year to convince my mother that
> nothing had changed between us because of the reunion.
> She was so upset. She understood. But, it took her
> quite a while. I wouldn't want to go through that
> again. She wanted to know every single detail. She
> wanted to know how much I was seeing my birth mother.
> How I felt about her. If I was planning on changing
> anything. You could tell that she was hurting and
> I had to get across to her that nothing had changed
> between us and I don't need another family. I've got
> one. I had to placate her. Constantly. Every phone
> call and every visit for about a year. It took a long
> time. Now, she knows that she is number one and my
> birth mother is number two. Like, she wanted to know
> if she was going to lose me or what. And, constantly
> reassuring her. I don't want to go through that again.
> I'm afraid that you might just stir all of it up for
> me. (Respondent No. 11, female, age 35)

Other adoptees used this same vocabulary of motives to justify

their decision not to disclose their search and reunion activities to

their adoptive parents. These adoptees claimed that,

> I really think that in her own way my mother was
> embarrassed by my adoption. They were married 18
> years before they decided to adopt. And, I would
> never tell them because they would have never
> understood. They would have been angry and hurt.
> They would have been devastated. (Respondent No.
> 60, female, age 40)

or,

> I couldn't even ask them for my adoption papers. It
> would have hurt them so much. My mother would have
> seen it as a rejection of her or that she had failed
> me in some way. She'd sit up all night thinking,
> "What did I do wrong?" I could see it happen. You
> know, it wasn't that I was dissatisfied with my
> parents or I wanted other parents. But, try to
> explain that to them. It's impossible.
> (Respondent No. 22, male, age 35)

These adoptees expressed stronger feelings of fear and
hesitancy over their adoptive parents' knowledge of their reunion.
They worried more about their adoptive parents' possible negative
reaction than their more open counterparts.  They cited more specific
examples of their inability to discuss search and reunion with their
adoptive parents than those adoptees who informed their adoptive
parents of their reunion situation.  For example, one of these
adoptees claimed that,

> I mentioned to my mom that I was thinking about a
> search.  She was so angry that she sent me a box
> and a letter saying that she wanted me out of her
> life completely.  In the box were all of my baby
> pictures, cards and mementoes.  From when I was a
> kid.  And, the letter said, "Stay out of my life.
> I want nothing left of you.  I'm your mother and
> if you want another one, I don't want you anymore."
> What could I do?  I called her and said that I was
> sorry.  But, it's going to take a lot of work.  I
> don't think that she believes me.  (Respondent No.
> 35, male, age 20)

Another adoptee recalls a less dramatic, but very explicit,
reaction to her suggestion that she might search.  She stated,

> I asked them for my adoption papers.  Which devastated
> my father.  He was very upset that I would ask.  I
> think that it was probably because it reminded him that
> I wasn't really his.  I have a very good relationship
> with my parents.  But, when he gave me the papers and
> I saw how upset he was, I decided not to tell them
> anything.  I told them that I wasn't searching.  Just
> that I needed medical information.  They accepted it.
> My daughter was very ill at the time.  (Respondent No.
> 24, female, age 30)

The vocabulary of motives that these adoptees use to account
for their decision not to grant me an interview with their adoptive
parents demonstrates their awareness of the adoptive parent's stigmatized

position in the adoption triangle and their concern over their

entitlement to the adoptee. These adoptees support this definition

of the situation with specific examples of their adoptive parents'

negative reaction to the idea of search and their own attempts to

alleviate these types of concerns. This protective stance, however,

also reflects the adoptee's own position of vulnerability in the

adoptive parent-child role relationship. These adoptees possess very

strong adoptive parent-child bonds (See Chapter IV). Their adoptive

parents represent that set of significant others who act as their

primary agents of socialization. In the minds of these adoptees,

their adoptive parents are the 'real' parents not their birth parents.

They view any disruption or dissolution of this primary role

relationship as highly detrimental to their self-concept and the

organization of their social world. This is the major reason that a

large number of the adoptees in this study decided not to reveal their

search and reunion activities to their adoptive parents. This is the

major reason that an even greater number feared the possible aftermath

that my interview session might cause.

II: The Birth Parent's Assessment of Reunion Outcome

Six (6) birth mothers and one (1) birth father were interviewed

for this section of the research study. One birth mother declined an

interview because her health was critical. One birth father could not

be located. Two other birth fathers refused an interview because they

believed that they had little to offer in this matter. This section,

therefore, considers the reunion experiences of the seven birth parents

who accepted my interview request. These remaining birth parents

presented some very interesting analysis of their reunion experience
during their one to one and a half hour interview sessions. Although
these data may not adequately represent the larger population of
reunited birth parents, these interviews offer considerable insights
about reunion outcome for these members of the adoption triangle.

The majority of these birth parents relinquished their birth
child during the late 1950's to mid-1960's (See Table 7.5). These
were the peak years for third-party adoptions in Ontario (Garber, 1985:
70). In all cases, the birth status of the relinquished child was
'illegitimate'. This, too, represents the majority of third-party
adoptions that occurred during this time period (Hepworth, 1980:
132). Only one person in this sample received a post-secondary
education (See Table 7.4). Two were employed in management or
professional activities. Five were members of the Roman Catholic
Church and four were of British ethnic descent. All of these birth
parents married people other than the birth father/mother after their
relinquishment. Two were divorced at the time of the interview. Two
of the birth mothers reported that, although they had raised step-
children from their husband's first marriage, the adoptee was their
only biological child. These characteristics agree with those reported
by 147 birth parents who approached the Children's Aid Society of
Metropolitan Toronto to gain updated information on their relinquished
children (Stoneman et. al., 1985). However, this sample may merely
typify those birth parents who see their own reunion. They may not,
for example, represent the other birth parents in this study who were
denied the opportunity to be interviewed or those birth parents who never
desire reunion contact.

Table 7.4                      <u>Demographic Characteristics of Birth Parent Sample</u>

|  | Birth M. No. 1 | Birth M. No. 2 | Birth M. No. 3 | Birth M. No. 4 | Birth M. No. 5 | Birth M. No. 6 | Birth F. No. 1 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Age at time of interview | 51 | 56 | 51 | 40 | 38 | 42 | 74 |
| Marital status | divorced | married | married | married | divorced | married | married |
| No. of other children | 3 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| Religion | Roman C. | Roman C. | Anglican | Roman C. | Roman C. | Anglican | Roman C. |
| Ethnic origin | British | French Canadian | British | British | Scottish | British | Ukranian |
| Education level | grade 10 | grade 6 | grade 11 | grade 10 | college | grade 10 | grade 8 |
| Occupation | secretary | housewife | housewife | factory worker | teacher | housewife | owner of business |

Table 7.5 <u>Age Profile of Adoptee and Birth Parent and Reported Reunion Contact</u>

| | Birth M. No. 1 | Birth M. No. 2 | Birth M. No. 3 | Birth M. No. 4 | Birth M. No. 5 | Birth M. No. 6 | Birth F. No. 1 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Age at time of relinq. | 18 | 19 | 18 | 18 | 17 | 16 | 34 |
| Age of adoptee at relinq. | newborn | 6 months | 6 months | newborn | newborn | newborn | 15 months |
| Year of relinq. | 1952 | 1952 | 1961 | 1965 | 1965 | 1960 | 1947 |
| Age of ad. at reunion | 28 | 34 | 24 | 20 | 18 | 25 | 31 |
| Age of birth parent at reunion | 45 | 53 | 42 | 38 | 36 | 41 | 65 |
| Years since reunion | 6 | 3 | 9 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 9 |
| Adoptee's descrip. of reunion | friends | diseng. | parent-ch. | duty | friends | parent-ch. | friends |
| B.P.'s desc. of reunion | diseng. | friends | parent-ch. | friends | parent-ch. | parent-ch. | friends |

Six of these birth parents were under the age of twenty when they relinquished their birth children for adoption. This age level corresponds with the birth parent profiles found in other research studies (Sorosky et. al., 1978; Stoneman et. al., 1980; 1985). Two of the birth mothers had tried to keep the adoptee but found it too difficult. One birth mother was a minor and her mother signed the adoption papers without her consent. The birth father had offered to marry the birth mother but she refused and placed the child for adoption without his permission. These birth parents believed that their relinquishment was forced upon them by external factors. This view let them disclaim any personal rejection of the adoptee that their act of relinquishment might imply. They claimed that,

> There wasn't much choice really. Not back then.
> Things were different. When you are 19 years old,
> you don't know what to do. You've got no friends.
> No job to speak of. I was a waitress. You try to
> do what is best. And, they wanted her. She was
> brought up a lot better than me. She had parents
> who loved her and cared for her and she had rules
> and manners and proper behaviour. When you have
> two parents that makes life easier. They took
> care of her. I never had that. And, I'm glad she
> did. (Birth Mother No. 2)

and,

> For me, there wasn't a choice. Like, you didn't
> get mother's allowance. What were we going to do?
> Sit in a room and starve to death? Really, I had
> no choice. Unless your folks stuck by you. And,
> it wasn't easy. I cried and cried and cried. I
> couldn't stop myself from crying. But, I knew that
> I had done the right thing. She had a better life.
> Adoptees shouldn't feel so bad about being given up.
> I feel that I gave my child a better chance.

Reunion contact with the adoptee reinforced this belief that they had offered their child a better future with others than they could have provided themselves. These birth parents observed that the adoptee

"was loved, pampered and well-cared for" by a set of parents who had

been "carefully screened and assessed" by the Children's Aid Society

(Birth Mother No. 1). They praised the adoptee's life achievements,

his/her high level of education and his/her successful employment

opportunities (Birth Mother Nos. 1, 2 and 3) as tangible proof that

they had made the correct choice by their relinquishment. They noted

that the adoptee was a "happy, secure and confident adult who searched

out of love and concern rather than anger and resentment against"

them (Birth Mother Nos. 5 and 1). These observations eased the birth

parents' need to make amends to the adoptee for their relinquishment

or any ill-treatment that he/she may have experienced through the

process of adoption. To quote one birth parent,

> I always hoped that she would come to me but I didn't
> think that it would be a possibility because of the
> laws. But, I wasn't afraid that she had been unhappy.
> I think that it was not knowing where you came from
> and wanting to get the answers to that. And, that's
> how I got the call. I was happy to learn that she was
> alive and well and that she was physically, mentally,
> emotionally okay. That she had a good life. She was
> happily married and had a child and a good job. That
> was nice to know. (Birth Father No. 1)

These birth parents emphasized their inability to sever their

birth parent-child bonds after their relinquishement. They "thought of

her at least once a day" (Birth Mother No. 5); "would look at other

children on the street and wonder is they were mine" (Birth Mother No.

3); "became depressed for at least a month every year before her

birthday" (Birth Mother No. 6); and, "carried a picture of her in my

wallet to look at" (Birth Father No. 1). Three of these birth mothers

had returned to the Children's Aid Society to learn more information

about the adoptee and his/her adoptive situation (Birth Mother Nos. 1,

3 and 5). One birth mother became attached to a friend's adopted

daughter because she believed that the girl might be her birth

child (Birth Mother No. 3). Two openly acknowledged their birth

mother status to others (Birth Mother Nos. 3 and 6). One achieved

reunion through the Adoption Reunion Registry (Birth Mother No. 1).

Even though these birth parents were "clearly aware that they had

relinquished their parental rights and responsibilities, they retained

the essence of that parental quality which is forever concerned with

the well-being and happiness of a child throughout its life" (Stoneman

et. al., 1985: 455). These birth parents had desired reunion contact

long before the adoptee found them. This factor influenced their

decision to form long-term 'open contact' reunion relationships with

the adoptee.

Despite their desire for reunion, these birth parents recognized

and acknowledged the adoptive parents' pre-dominant role in the adoptee's

life and their own position as a possible interloper in the adoptive

family system. They expressed great appreciation for the adoptive

parents' continued love and concern for the adoptee and remarked on their

secondary status as birth parents. Five of these birth parents also

desired an adoptive parent-birth parent reunion meeting. They viewed

the adoptee's initial contact as the beginning of a life-long relatinship

and believed that this type of meeting would further their understanding

of the adoptee. It would increase the likelihood of an open contact

reunion that covered all aspects of the adoptee's life. This necessitated

an open relationship with the adoptive parents. One birth mother,

therefore, complained that,

> Her mother won't have anything to do with us. And,
> it makes me sad. Because, I would like to meet her
> mother. This woman who brought my daughter up. And,
> I would like to say, "Thank you very much". Because,
> I think that they have done a terrific job. And, I
> want to tell her that she doesn't have to be afraid of
> me because I don't want any more. I don't want to take
> A-- away from her. Her relationship with A-- is her
> relationship. I just want to have a relationship too.
> But, I haven't earned anything. So, whatever I get is
> just gravy to me. And, I don't want her to think that
> I am trying to take her place. I can't. I just want
> to share. (Birth Mother No. 6)

As this birth mother notes, some adoptive parents expressed

little enthusiasm for their adopted child's reunion contact. Two of

the adoptive mothers were "very angry and hostile" and refused contact

with the birth parent (Birth Mother Nos. 3 and 6). One adoptee kept

her reunion a secret from her adoptive parents because she feared that

they would "be hurt by the reunion" (Birth Father No. 1). One adoptive

mother "cautiously" accepted the reunion situation but desired little

contact with the birth mother (Birth Mother No. 4). These types of

reactions remind us that reunion contact involves all three members of

the adoption triangle who may, each, possess diametrically opposed views

and needs that evolve from their own unique position in that triangle.

Thus, for example, one birth parent described her unsuccessful attempt

to mediate between the demands that her birth child had placed on her

and her desire to support the adoptive mother's position. She stated

that,

> S---- said that she wouldn't get married if I didn't
> come to her wedding. And, I told her that I wouldn't
> go if it would upset her mother. I don't want our
> relationship to be like that. But, she insisted that
> I be there. So, I called her mother to try and talk
> to her and work things out. And, try to make her
> realize that I'm not trying to take S--- away. That
> I knew that she was S---'s mother. But, she didn't

> want to talk to me at all. So, I went late to the
> wedding and sat at the back of the church. So that
> S--- would know that I was there but her mother could
> ignore me. I don't want to cause any problems between
> them. (Birth Mother No. 3)

Many of these birth parents expressed their reunion concerns
in terms of their own stigmatized status as birth parents. Birth
parents who accept reunion contact confront the negative stereotypes
and the social disgrace that come with their status position in the
adoption triangle. Many may have not recovered from the process of
stigmatization that they experienced through their relinquishment. This
factor may explain some of the 'rejection' reunions in this study. These
birth parents noted, for instance, that their contact with the adoptee
resurrected many of the painful events of their past relinquishment that
they now had to face. They found that,

> After I saw her, the pain was so difficult. I mean,
> it's the hardest thing in the world to give up your
> baby. Especially, after you've had it for six months.
> To just walk away from it. I always wondered and I
> always wanted to know. And, then, all of a sudden,
> you get a phone call. After 30 years. And, the
> memories. They just start flooding back. And, you
> have to face the pain. It's hard to face it. And,
> on top of all this, you are meeting and learning
> about each other. It's really hard. (Birth Mother
> No. 2)

and,

> The process of relinquishment lowered my self-esteem.
> It was low already and that just added fuel to the
> fire. I was always down. I thought that I wasn't a
> good person. For a while, the guilt would come out
> every time that I looked at her. That time was buried
> deeper than she was. It was shocking at first. I had
> to learn to accept her. (Birth Mother No. 5)

and,

> Birth mothers have low self-esteem in the first place.
> Looking for love in all the wrong places. And, I was

afraid.  When she called, I was ecstatic.  But it
was hard.  Like, I have this small core of hatred
against my mother about this.  And, I am more angry
at her now than I have been in a long time.  Because,
finding my daughter just brought all of this back.
(Birth Mother No. 6)

These birth parents experienced an intense period of
adjustment to the reunion situation after contact occurred and they
met the adoptee.  This period of adjustment represents the second
stage in the birth parent reunion process.  This stage may explain
some of the 'limited contact' or 'disengaged' reunions reported in
this study.  The reunited adoptees in these reunions believed that
their birth mother avoided further contact with them because she could
not handle the painful memories of her relinquishment and/or a public
acknowledgement of her birth mother status. These birth parents support
this view by emphasizing the stress that reunion contact produced for
them.  Some birth parents may find that this period in the reunion
process is so traumatic for them that they withdraw from the reunion
situation completely.

Birth Mother No. 2 admitted that she withdrew from the reunion
situation because she found contact too painful.  The adoptee renewed
their contact by sending her a letter requesting an explanation for her
apparent disinterest.  This letter stimulated an open discussion of the
birth mother's concerns.  Reunion contact was subsequently renewed on a
more intimate and open basis.  Birth parents may find it extremely
difficult to 'work through' this grieving process and maintain reunion
contact without some help of this type.

Like many reunited adoptees, these birth parents also noted a
'struggle for role identities' in their birth parent-adoptee interactions.

These birth parents believed, however, that the adoptee should

establish the rules for their mutual interaction. They had originally

relinquished the adoptee. As a result, they had no right to make

demands in the reunion relationship. These birth parents, therefore,

noted that,

> I felt that it was all in her hands. Because, if she
> said that tomorrow she didn't want to see me again,
> well, I would question why but, if that was what she
> wanted, then, I would definitely be unhappy about it,
> but, I would let go. Because I have no rights to her.
> I gave up my rights to her a long time ago and I have
> no right to demand a thing now. (Birth Mother No. 3)

or,

> At first, we felt overpowered by one another. It was
> a little claustrophobic. Even though I wanted it, I
> found it difficult to handle. She was mine but the
> stranger part was more dominant. I couldn't act or
> be as I wanted. I was afraid that she would feel
> rejected or that she would reject me. There was a
> "I'm not your mother feeling" in me. Yet, I knew
> that I wanted to be in her life. I just didn't know
> how to do it. (Birth Mother No. 5)

This assessment of reunion contact contrasts with the analysis

given by the reunited adoptees in this study who believed that birth

parents controlled reunion outcome (See Chapter VI). Both parties

experience considerable uncertainty over their power vis-a-vis each

other. This dilemma stems from the adoptive process and society's

taboo against disclosure. The lack of rules for the birth parent-

adoptee interaction process produces great uncertainty over the role

that each actor should play. Each actor's awareness of the other's

stigmatized status increases his/her own inability to confront the

other about his/her own personal reunion needs. The birth parent fears

that his/her openness will be defined as another 'rejection' by the

adoptee, while the adoptee fears that his/her reunion demands are excessive. The birth parent-adoptee interaction process becomes strained because neither is certain about his/her identity in the eyes of the other. Unless one party is able to change this closed awareness context into an open awareness context, reunion contact is likely to remain tense and uncomfortable. Thus, for example, Birth Mother No. 1 described her reunion as 'disengaged' because,

> I wanted to have more but I had to come to realize that it just couldn't be. In a way, there was no formal breakup. But, it was strained. At the beginning, we wrote a lot of letters and phoned and visited. But, now, I guess she just doesn't like me. She has dropped contact. It's been six years but I haven't heard anything for over four months. But, I would never interfere in her life. She will never hear from me. It's up to her. (Birth Mother No. 1)

After a six year relationship with the adoptee, this birth mother still interacted within a closed awareness context. Neither she nor the adoptee were able to clearly establish their role relationship or their identity in the eyes of the other. This reunion outcome compares with that of Birth Mother No. 2 who eventually discussed her reunion concerns with the adoptee and the type of role relationship that they would enact. The open awareness context in that birth parent-adoptee interaction process alleviated much of the tension that had previously existed between the two parties.

This closed awareness context is reflected in the obvious distinction between the type of role relationship that the adoptee believes to exist in the reunion relationship and the one that these birth parents reported (See Table 7.5) Only two of these reunions are mutually described as 'parent-child' (Birth Mother Nos. 3 and 6). The

remaining birth parents defined their reunion relationship in more

intimate terms than the adoptee. One of these 'parent-child'

reunions is nine years old, while the other is two years old. Thus,

the length of time of reunion contact has little effect on reunion

outcome. The open or closed awareness context that surrounds the

birth parent-adoptee interaction process is a more significant factor.

To quote Birth Mother No. 1,

> When we met, I realized that I was her biological
> mother but I was not her mother. So, when she
> talked about her mother, it would bother me. Like,
> I couldn't stop loving her and thinking that she was
> mine. I was always on guard. About what I thought
> and what I would say. Like, I couldn't say anything
> that would indicate that I was her mother. And, I
> can't be open. I just feel on guard. Like, if I
> ask her how her mother is, it just makes me feel silly.
> Because, I'm her mother. But, not really. I gave her
> up. So, I'm not her mother. Another person could
> handle that really easy. I thought that I could at
> first but it just seemed phoney. (Birth Mother No. 1)

This birth mother noted that, despite her relinquishment, she

retained strong parental feelings toward the adoptee. This factor

explains the birth parent's more intimate assessment of reunion outcome.

These birth parents wanted a closer reunion relationship than the adoptee

could provide. These observations support the statements of the reunited

adoptees in this study who claimed that they did not want another set of

parents. They also confirm the difficult situation reported by those

adoptees in 'duty' reunions. If the birth parent cannot change his/her

reunion expectation of a 'parent-child' role relationship, reunion contact

remains problemmatic for both parties. As Birth Father No. 1 observed,

> I can think of her as my daughter and try to be her
> father but she doesn't want that. She is not
> comfortable with that. Because, she does not ask
> for anything and it's very difficult to give her
> anything. She gets embarassed to take it. And, it
> appears to me that she is satisfied with the situation
> as it is. During the first year of my conversations
> with her, she let me know that she would like it under
> those terms. I offered her more. But, she likes it
> just the way it is. She doesn't want any deeper
> involvement. I have to respect her wishes. If I tried
> to be of more assistance to her, I feel that it would be
> to her displeasure. That I would be intruding. But, I
> think that we have a normal relationship. We have never
> had any quarrels or misunderstandings. We have had good
> times. (Birth Father No. 1)

Unlike Birth Mother No. 1 who viewed herself as a 'phoney' because she could not express her identity as the adoptee's 'mother', this birth father acknowledged his daughter's status position and changed his role expectation from 'father' to 'friend'. His reunion contact became more relaxed because the birth parent-adoptee interaction process was more enjoyable for both parties.

Like the reunited adoptees in this study, these birth parents complained about the lack of rules for the birth parent-adoptee interaction process. These birth parents noted, however, that the designation of the terms of 'mother', 'father' and 'parent' increased the uncertainty that evolved between birth parent and adoptee because each was doubtful about their rights and responsibilities to one another. These titles imply that a much closer bond should exist between 'parent' and 'child'. The birth parent's role expectation of 'mother' or 'father' was denied, however, during the initial reunion meeting when he/she realized that, even though he/she was the adoptee's biological parent, he/she had never 'parented' his/her child. The

adoptive parents fulfilled that function in the adoptee's life.

These birth parents had to turn to other role-identities if they

desired continued contact with the adoptee.  Like the adoptees in

this study, these birth parents turned to the more familiar role-

identity of 'friend' for guidance.  They stated that,

> When I see her, I don't know what the rules are.  I
> don't feel comfortable.  I don't know what she wants.
> And, I don't know what I can give.  Like, I don't feel
> like her mother.  And, she has a set of parents already.
> I don't know where I fit in.  They are her parents.  I
> gave birth to her and she will always be mine in a way.
> But, that's her mother and father.  That's where she's
> been all of her life.  I was just sort of an accident.
> You know, I just gave birth to her but they raised her.
> So, don't think that meeting is going to really change
> you.  That this child will be yours again.  You have to
> remember.  She's got a family.  And, it's not you.  They
> loved her and she grew up with them.  So, I think that if
> you can settle for friends, then, you are okay.  Just
> settle for being a friend.  That's what I finally did.
> (Birth Mother No. 4)

These birth parents never completely severed the birth parent-

child bonds that they formed with the adoptee before their relinquishment.

They expressed a latent desire to play a parental role in their birth

parent-adoptee interactions.  Our society supports that desire by its

promotion of the motherhood myth and its social expectation that the

blood bond is predominant (Miall, 1985; Stoneman et. al., 1980; 1985).

This image is promoted, for example, in the press stories on reunion

and the emotional contact meetings that are portrayed in the media.

Many birth parents, therefore, enter the reunion situation with the

idea of 'getting their child back' and forming a parent-child role

relationship with the adoptee.  These birth parents found, however,

that their initial reunion meeting with the adoptee revealed a

'stranger' who desired his/her genealogy not an 'abandoned' child who

needed 'mothering'. These birth parents, therefore, adjusted their
initial reunion expectations and proceeded to negotiate a role
relationship that was acceptable to both parties. This process of
role negotiation represents another stage in the birth parent reunion
process. However, role negotiation may present problems for birth
parents such as Birth Mother No. 1 who was denied an identity that
is important to her self-conept. This type of birth parent may
experience dissatisfaction in reunion outcome and eventually 'reject',
'limit' or 'disengage' from reunion contact.

These reunited birth parents found that they had to change
their view of their own identity to match the identity that they
observed in the eyes of the adoptee. Yet, reunited adoptees also lack
a clear and concise definition of the role relationship that exists
between birth parent and adoptee (See Chapter VI). This causes great
confusion for both interactants as they to negotiate role-identities
that are mutually satisfying. Neither actor possesses a script for
his/her role performance or for his/her view of other's identity.
Each plays a role that infringes on his/her presentation of self because
it denies his/her full identity in the eyes of the other. This
uncertainty complicates the process of role negotiation that evolves
in the birth parent-adoptee interaction process. For example, these
birth parents found that the adoptee frequently interpreted their
negotiation of a 'friend' role-identity as "rejection", "indifference"
and "lack of concern" (Birth Mother Nos. 4, 1 and 2). The birth parent's
unexplained withdrawal from the painful memories of his/her past
relinquishment exacerbated that process. Unless the two parties openly

discuss their reunion concerns with one another, reunion contact is likely to remain problemmatic for both of them. Yet, the social constraints against disclosure and the normative restrictions against reunion contact make both parties hesitant to try this approach in case they 'intrude' on the other. The birth parent's precarious position as the relinquishing party in the adoption process impedes his/her ability to fully express his/her emotions toward the adoptee. Many birth parents may, therefore, prefer to immediately 'reject' contact or slowly 'disengage' from contact rather than take further risks with self and face the 'second' loss that the adoptee's own rejection of him/her would entail. To quote Birth Mother No. 5,

> At first, I didn't think about it because I was so overjoyed to find her. I buried her and she was dead for me. And, then, she arose from the dead. She was gone. Never to be seen or heard from again. And, now, she was back. Can you imagine how excited I was? So, I never want to lose her again. I am sort of thinking that she is my daughter but I can't say it too loudly. Someone might hear me and take her away again. But, each time she makes contact, I get stronger and more confident. Even then, I have to watch my step because rejection is so overpowering for both of us. If we disagree or argue, it seems greater because one of us might break it off and never return. That fear is always there. And, the gaps are there. Like, I'm not her mother but sometimes the mother role comes out. And, I try to stop it. Because it doesn't fit for either of us. I guess, that I would say that we are trying for a relationship of an older-younger woman friendship. But, an awful strong friendship because the other feelings are there too. I don't think they've invented a word for it yet. Female-to-female, I guess. But, I find it so hard because I'm always afraid that she may never come back every time that she leaves me. (Birth Mother No. 5)

III: <u>The Adoptive Parent's Assessment of Reunion Outcome</u>

The reunited adoptees and birth parents in this study note that their reunion contact rarely solves the social restrictions that society places on disclosure. Neither party truly believes that they have the right to be involved in the reunion process. The adoptive parents' view of search and reunion is an important factor for reunion outcome because the adoptive parents represent the significant others in the adoptee's life. Their support or nonsupport of the reunion situation may affect reunion outcome by either encouraging or discouraging the adoptee's continued involvement in this very new and very difficult social interaction process.

Studies on search and reunion find that, as a group, adoptive parents are much less supportive of disclosure and adoption reunion than either adoptees or birth parents (Garber, 1985: 18; Baran et. al., 1974). Our society believes that the biological or blood tie is "indissolvable and of a mystical nature that transcends legal and other kinship arrangements" (Miall, 1987: 35). Although it lets infertile couples maintain "a semblance of normalcy" by encouraging them to consider their adopted children "as if born to them" (Thompson et. al., 1979: 1), it still stigmatizes adoptive families for their lack of a biological connection to one another (Miall, 1985: 384). Birth parents who possess this 'mystical blood tie' threaten the adoptive parents' entitlement to the adoptee because they may re-enter their adopted child's life and take the predominant position that their blood bond gives to them (Jaffee & Fanshel, 1973; Feigleman & Silverman, 1983; Kirk, 1981). Thus, unlike the adoptee and birth parent who 'struggle for role-identity',

adoptive parents struggle to maintain the role-identity that they have already established. The reunion situation creates a sense of uncertainty in the adoptive parent-child interaction process because the adoptive parent no longer knows his/her identity in the eyes of the adoptee.

The reunited adoptees in this study noted their hesitancy to inform their adoptive parents of their search and reunion activities. A large number of the adoptees who told their adoptive parents about their reunion found that they had to repeatedly reassure their adoptive parents that the reunion had not changed their adoptive parent-child relationship. If anything, it had solidified the adoptive parents' role as the 'real' parents. Many of these adoptees feared that an interview might disrupt their attempts to restore their adoptive parents' confidence. As a result, only eight (8) adoptees gave me their permission to interview their adoptive parents.

Of these eight adoptive parents, four (4) agreed to be interviewed. One adoptive mother refused because she feared that my study might upset her husband. Although he had "cautiously" accepted his daughter's reunion, he was very angry that she had publicized her reunion activities with an appearance on a local television station. Another adoptive mother refused because her English was "too poor to give a proper interview". The remaining two adoptive parents claimed to have "little to offer" on the topic that was of value. One of these adoptive mothers had attended Parent Finders meetings and actively helped her son to search. She stated, however, that, "It's not such a big deal and I don't want to make a big deal out of it by talking to you."

Thompson et. al. (1979) and Stoneman et. al. (1980)

experienced similar difficulties when they tried to find a sample

of adoptive parents for their studies on search and reunion.  Stoneman

et. al. (1980: 20) found only seven (7) adoptive parents who would

discuss their child's reunion.  These seven exhibited an "attitude of

reluctant support, of wishing it weren't so.  In fact, they would

really have been happier if the issue had never been raised" (Stoneman

et. al., 1980: 20).  Thompson et. al. (1978: 29) noted the same type of

attitude in the adoptive parents that they encountered during their

study.  These researchers observed that, the extent of the adoptive

parents' sympathy toward reunion,

> ...varied from the parents who acknowledge the
> adoptee's need while hoping that a search would
> be too difficult to achieve, to those with a firm
> conviction that reunion was both a need and a right
> of the adoptee.  Some parents offered their support;
> others counselled their children in terms of their
> responsibility for the possible creation of trauma
> for the birth family.  They at least conveyed to
> the adoptee a real concern for the birth parents,
> even if one suspects that they might have secretly
> hoped that the possibility would discourage the
> adoptee.  (Thompson et. al., 1978: 29)

The set of adoptive parents who refused to be interviewed may represent

that group of adoptive parents who accept their child's 'need to know'

but still 'wish it weren't so'.  Their avoidance of an interview

situation indicates a certain distancing behaviour from the issue of

reunion and their adopted child's contact with his/her birth parents.

All of the adoptive parents who accepted an interview request

were female.  This factor supports Garber's (1985: 18) observation

that resistance to disclosure is "more common among male than female

adoptive parents".  It does not, however, support the motherhood myth

that views adoptive mothers as more vulnerable due to their lack of
physical bonding with the adoptee through the biological experience
of pregnancy (Verny, 1981). On the other hand, the motherhood myth
demands that 'good' mothers subordinate their own personal needs,
desires and routines to their child's welfare (Dally, 1982: 100;
Levine & Estable, 1981: 27). Mothers are expected to forsee,
confront and learn how to cope with their children's problems before
they arise (Schur, 1983; Miles, 1986). Adoptive mothers who accept
reunion may, therefore, prepare themselves for the possibility long
before their adopted children consider the prospect. These adoptive
mothers are more likely to support the argument that reunion reflects
personal identity issues for the adoptee rather than "a betrayal of
all of their years of caring and nuturing" (Stoneman et. al., 1980: 5).
This view of reunion sustains their self-concept and their identity as
the adoptee's 'mother'. It gives them a vocabulary of motives that
rationalizes their child's searching behaviour as 'normal' and
justifies their own status as 'good' mothers. The adoptive mother's
acceptance of this motive talk lessens the threat that the birth
parents' presence makes and strenghtens the support that she gives the
adoptee who faces reunion contact.

The four adoptive mothers who were interviewed for this study
were between the ages of 49 and 60 (See Table 7.6). Three were of
British ethnic descent. Two belonged to the Anglican Church; one was
Roman Catholic; and, one was Baptist. Although these women were well-
educated for their age cohort, only one worked outside the home. She
returned to a nursing career after her husband's death. The remainder
reported husbands who held management positions in their companies. Thus,

Table 7.7          Adoptive History of Adoptive Mothers Who were Interviewed for this Study

|  | Adoptive Mother No. 1 | Adoptive Mother No. 2 | Adoptive Mother No. 3 | Adoptive Mother No. 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Year adopted | 1967 | 1963 | 1958 | 1966 |
| Age at time adopted | 28 | 28 | 32 | 40 |
| Age at time of reunion | 46 | 46 | 54 | 60 |
| Age of adoptee at time of reunion | 18 | 18 | 22 | 20 |
| No. of years since reunion | 2 | 5 | 5 | 2 |
| No. of other adopted children | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Role relationship with birth mother | friends | friends | none | friends |

Table 7.8 Socio-Economic Characteristics of Adoptive Mothers who were Interviewed

| | Adoptive Mother Number 1 | Adoptive Mother Number 2 | Adoptive Mother Number 3 | Adoptive Mother Number 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Age | 49 | 51 | 60 | 60 |
| Marital status | married | married | widowed | married |
| Religion | Anglican | Anglican | Roman Catholic | Baptist |
| Ethnic origin | British | British | Ukranian | British |
| Education level | grade 12 | grade 12 | nursing college | nursing college |
| Occupation | housewife | housewife | nurse | housewife |

these women maintain a middle-class lifestyle. This profile agrees with the data available on parents who adopted children during the time period that these women adopted (Davenport, 1984: 4). They also experienced their adoption during the peak years of adoption in this province (Garber, 1985: 70). Thus, these adoptive mothers reflect the 'typical' adoptive parent who may encounter a reunion situation.

Two of these women were aged twenty-eight at the time that they adopted (See Table 7.7). One was thirty-two. The other was aged forty. Two had one other adopted child that was younger than the adoptee. One stated that her younger daughter was thinking of a search. The other believed that her younger child was unlikely to ever search. Both of these adoptive mothers observed that reunion is an individual decision for each adoptee. They accepted their child's desire not to search as easily as they accepted their child's desire to search.

Two of these adoptive mothers experienced their child's reunion five years before this interview session. The other two reunions were two years old. None of these adoptive mothers represented the counter-part to the birth mothers who were interviewed for this study. Even though two of these mothers claimed a friendship with the birth mother, this factor could not be tested. One birth mother was too ill for an interview. The other lived in another province. The remaining birth mothers were excluded from the study by the adoptee.

Each of these four adoptive mothers actively supported the adoptee's search. They contacted Parent Finders (Adoptive Mother Nos. 1, 2 and 4). They approached the Children's Aid Society for more background information (Adoptive Mother No. 1). They gave the adoptee

their adoption order. They discussed each phase of search and reunion
with the adoptee as each stage arose (Adoptive Mother Nos. 1, 2, 3 and
4). This supportive approach reflects the relatively young age of
these adoptees. At the time of their reunion, they ranged from 18 to
22 years. These adoptive mothers expressed considerable concern over
their child's ability to cope with their reunion outcome. They also
feared that the adoptee's immaturity might cause problems in the birth
parent-adoptee interaction process. They counselled and cautionned the
adoptee about the birth mother's possible life situation and the prospect
of rejection. They viewed rejection, however, as the birth mother's
inability to face the trauma of her relinquishment rather than a denial
of the adoptee. Their personal involvement in the reunion process
protected the adoptee from any negative findings that might arise
because it let them help their child analyze and interpret the events
of his/her reunion outcome. As Adoptive Mother No. 4 observed,

> I told her that if she wanted to do it then she would
> have to go through the proper channels. So, we went
> and contacted Parent Finders. I didn't want her to go
> and barge in on this woman. Who knows what type of life
> she had made for herself? I made my daughter realize
> that anything could have happened over the years. She
> could have married and not told her husband. Or, her
> children. She might just want to forget the whole thing.
> So, we talked about rejection. And, what she might find.
> I wanted to make sure that she could handle any possibility.
> (Adoptive Mother No. 4)

These adoptive mothers viewed reunion as a significant life-change
event in their child's life. They compared it to participating in the
events of their child's first step, first day at school and first date
(Adoptive Mother Nos. 4 and 1). This view lessened the impact that
reunion produced for their definition of self as the adoptee's 'real'

mother.  It gave them a script for their role in the reunion process.

They handled the event of reunion in the same way that they handled

these other major life-change events in their child's life.  Thus,

one adoptive mother observed that,

> I didn't see reunion as a rejection of me because
> we have always had such a good relationship.  We
> have been able to talk about almost anything.  So,
> when he asked about this, I knew that he needed to
> try.  It was something that he had to do.  I felt
> more fear for him being hurt than anything else.
> When they met.  I was really excited for him.  I
> wanted to be there so much.  He didn't want me to
> and I understood.  It was personal.  But, I would
> have loved to have seen that meeting.  To share
> that with him.  (Adoptive Mother No. 2)

These adoptive mothers had gradually prepared the script for

their role in the reunion process since they had first adopted.  At that

time, they were advised that an open acknowledgement of the differences

that existed between their adoptive family and biological families would

produce positive adoption outcome.  Thus, these adoptive mothers responded

to any questions that their children asked about their adoption, their

genealogy, or their birth parents' identity.  This open communication

extended into the search and reunion process.  It let these adoptive

mothers participate in their child's reunion by acting as a parental

guide who assisted them just as she had assisted them during the other

life-change events that they encountered.  As Adoptive Mother No. 1 stated,

> My husband and I both decided that we would recognize
> the difference between the fact that our children were
> adopted and other people's were not.  We had been given
> the book, Shared Fate, by David Kirk.  And, in this book,
> the author had observed that families that tended to
> recognize this difference and accept it were more likely
> to adjust to the adoption situation more favourably than
> those who did not.  We took his advice and applied it to
> our situation.  I tried to be open about it with both of

my children. I tried to answer all their questions
as fully as possible and deal with their feelings
about their adoption as they arose. So, when my
daughter told me that she wanted to find her birth
mother, I told her that I would help her. (Adoptive
Mother No. 1)

This open acknowledgement of the differences between adoptive

families and birth families lessened the threat that the birth mother

represented for these adoptive mothers. They had already integrated

the birth family as a part of the adoptive family structure by

stressing their child's separate genetic heritage and the important

role that adoption played in their adoptive parent-child relationship.

Reunion contact merely established the birth mother's physical

presence in their lives. It presented these adoptive parents with a

source for the adoptee's apparent inconsistencies from the adoptive

family and permitted a positive assimilation of the adoptee's background

information as a part of the adoptive family structure. These adoptive

mothers noted that this process of assimilation strengthened their

adoptive parent-child bonds because the adoptee discussed his/her reunion

findings with them. Thus, Adoptive Mother No. 4 stated that,

It was hard on my daughter to suddenly find this new
family. Her birth mother and she are so much alike
in temperament and interests. Sometimes, I wonder
what we have given her. They have the same voice
and hand movements and facial expressions. And, they
never met before. It makes you wonder if environment
had any impact at all. It explained a lot to me about
her. But, that causes problems too for them because
they have such strong personalities. My daughter has
matured a lot from it. She's more settled now because
she knows who she is. But, I have always been secure
that I am her mother. I raised her. And, she turns
to me when she has problems over it and we talk about
it. I think that it has brought us closer. It seems
clearer to her now that I am her mother. Not, that I
doubted it but I think that sometimes she did.
(Adoptive Mother No. 4)

One of these adoptive mothers appeared less positive toward
her daughter's reunion than the other three, however.  Adoptive
Mother No. 3 believed that reunion infringed on her adoptive parent-
child bonds because,

> Nothing was the same after that.  I think that she
> thought that she was like them.  Like, her anger.
> She was afraid of her temper because she felt that
> she had a temper like theirs.  Remember, her father
> had been in jail several times for assault.  And,
> she told me that she hated herself for it.  But,
> before, when she got angry, she would just accept it.
> But, after the reunion, she felt that it was because
> she was like them.  And, she hated it.  And, before,
> when she got angry, my husband would say, "You're
> just like your mother."  Meaning me.  And, we'd
> laugh.  Like, he'd tease us about being the same.
> Like, getting angry or likin the same things.  But,
> after the reunion, we couldn't say that.  Because, I
> wasn't her mother.  She had another one.  Which mother
> was he talking about?  You know what I mean?
> (Adoptive Mother No. 3)

Although this adoptive mother claimed that she was "never afraid
of reunion because motherhood means caring for that child all of its life
and, until then, you're just a pregnant lady", she noted that she "had
been betrayed by the reunion"; that she "was deeply hurt by the search";
and, in retrospect, "would tell any adoptive parent to do whatever they
could to try to stop their child from doing it".  Unlike the other three
adoptive mothers in this sample, she had never fully prepared herself
for the prospect of reunion.  She and her daughter had rarely discussed
her adoption or the information that she received on the birth parents.
Adoptive Mother No. 3 primarily supported her daughter's searching
activity because,

> She would have probably done it without me knowing.
> We both cared for her and wanted her to have what
> she wanted.  And, she was really strange about it.
> Like she was getting a bit and then going to get
> more.  It was an obsession.  I don't really think

> she considered what she was doing. Like, she knew
> all the time that I was hurt but she just kept
> going. But, I never said a word. Until she found
> her. Then, she started to talk to me about her.
> She said that this woman wasn't her mother. That
> I was because I had been her mother. And, I accepted
> it and I believed it, too. (Adoptive Mother No. 3)

Adoptive Mother No. 3 does not trust her daughter's reassurances that she is her 'real' mother because reunion contact took away part of her identity as her child's mother. Although her daughter severed her ties with the birth family, this adoptive mother can no longer ignore the existence of 'the pregnant lady' who gave her this child. The adoptee's similarities to the birth parent negate her claim to have a child 'just like me'. Even though her view of a 'good' mother made her support her daughter's search, she feels betrayed by an adoptive process that promised her a child who would be "as if born" to her (Thompson et. al., 1978: 1). Adoptive Mother No. 3 represents that set of adoptive parents who find the adoptee's searching behaviour problemmatic because it forces them,

> ...to face the reality of adoption, that their child
> is born to someone else who still exists and has some
> importance to the adoptee. Although they are assured
> by the adoptee that they are still the 'real' parents,
> they can no longer go on pretending that they are the
> 'only' parents. (Stoneman et. al., 1980: 23)

Unlike the other three adoptive mothers in this sample, Adoptive Mother No. 3 expressed considerable anger over her daughter's search and reunion activities. She refused to meet the birth family and disclaimed any connection between them and her daughter. She criticized their lifestyle and warned her daughter against any intimate involvement with them. This anger reflects the closed awareness context that surrounded her adoptive parent-child interactions. Now that her daughter had found

her birth mother, Adoptive Mother No. 3 doubted her own identity

as a 'mother' in her daughter's eyes.  Despite her daughter's

reassurances, she never quite forgave her disloyalty.  She tried to

return to a situation much like the one that she experienced before

reunion by denying the birth mother's presence in her life.  The

adoptee's full and open knowledge of her birth family's identity,

however, made this situation quite tenuous.  Thus, Adoptive Mother

No. 3 noted that,

> I never met the family because I told her that I never
> wanted to know who they were.  Especially, when I heard
> how they were.  She was mine.  This was just something
> that she had to find out.  This didn't make any
> difference.  And, a neighbour came over one day and told
> me that she had met my daughter's sister and I said,
> "She doesn't have a sister.  I have only one child."
> And, one night her mother phoned and I told her that we
> didn't want to be bothered by her.  And, I told her not
> to let them know where she lived.  Because, they were
> probably on drugs and things like that and they would
> probably steal from her.  I really think that this was
> something best left alone.  But, she was determined to
> do it.  After, I think that she wished she hadn't done
> it.  Because, she suffered a lot of guilt about what she
> had done to us.  We said that we forgave her but I think
> that she knows that we really can't.  (Adoptive Mother
> No. 3)

Adoptive Mother No. 3 stands in contrast to the other three

adoptive mothers in this sample who had established an open awareness

context that assisted in their acceptance of the reunion situation.  In

fact, all of these adoptive mothers formed a 'friend' role relationship

with the birth mother.  This role relationship was facilitated by the

birth mother's recognition and acceptance of the adoptive mother's

position as the adoptee's 'real' mother and her lack of interference in

the adoptive parent-child relationship.  Thus, even though these

adoptive mothers noted that the birth mother and they 'shared' a similar

concern for the adoptee's well-being, they agreed to recognize the

adoptive mother's pre-dominant position of 'mother'.  To quote

Adoptive Mother No. 1,

> There was an intense period when they first met.
> They were always together.  And, then, my daughter
> started to call her 'Mom'.  I felt threatened.  But,
> I realized that she could never take my place.  They're
> more like sisters.  Good friends.  And, her birth
> mother and I have become good friends too.  We talked
> about it.  Like, she has only had the experience of
> being the mother of a seven-year old.  Because that's
> how old her son is.  She can't be the mother to my
> daughter.  She doesn't know how to handle a teenager.
> And, she doesn't want to take my daughter away from
> me.  I think that I will always be R--'s mother.
> Because she will always turn to me when she wants and
> needs a mother.  (Adoptive Mother No. 1)

Adoptive Mother No. 2 agreed with this assessment of her son's

reunion outcome.  She observed that,

> I feel that there is something between us.  We could
> almost be sisters.  We are the mother of my son
> combined.  In a way, that is.  She's really nice.
> We talk about my son.  Very emotionally involved
> almost.  And, that's good.  But, they were concerned
> at first because they didn't want to jump into our
> family or cause problems for us.  And, they visit us.
> Her and her husband.  And, they are really trying to
> make sure that everyone realizes that we are his
> parents.  My husband and I.  They don't want to try
> and jump in and take over.  It makes everything a
> lot easier.  (Adoptive Mother No. 2)

These three adoptive mothers integrated their child's reunion

into their family structure because they defined it as a continuation of

the adoptive process.  The birth mother's physical presence became a

concrete manifestation of the role position that she had always occupied

in the adoptive family structure as the source of the adoptee's genealogy.

These women also accepted their child's interest in the birth mother's

identity because it satisfied some of their curiosity about unexplained

inconsistencies that might stem from their child's genetic roots.  The

birth mother assisted in this process because she recognized and
supported the adoptive parents' position as the adoptee's 'real'
parents. The open awareness context that these actors created around
the birth parent-adoptive parent-adoptee interaction processes relieved
the tension and strain that their reunion situation might have produced.
Unlike Adoptive Mother No. 3 who denied the differences that existed
between herself and her adopted child, these adoptive mothers found
that their reunion produced little negative effect on their self-concept
or the adoptive family structure. As Adoptive No. 2 remarked,

> Even when you have natural children, there is
> always something. Life's like that. And, when
> you adopt a newborn, as far as I'm concerned,
> the baby is yours. A parent does not mean only
> that a mother and father have given birth to a
> baby. Parenting is parenting. Bringing them up.
> Feeding them. Clothing them. Parenting is
> something right until the day you die. It never
> ends. And, you just don't go into it without
> wanting a child. It just isn't a whim. He
> probably would have had a chance with anyone.
> But, I'm glad that he likes what he got. And,
> meeting them. I think that it just helped to
> settle all of that in his own mind. (Adoptive
> Mother No. 2)

Conclusion

Haimes and Timms (1985: 68) found that there is "a great
similarity between the reasons given by adoptive parents for not
informing their child about adoption and the reasons given by the
adoptee for not informing their adopters about their inquiries" for
more background information. The closed awareness context that surrounds
the institution of adoption in modern Western society flows into the
reunion process that emerges from that structure. These reunited adoptees
used a similar vocabulary of motives to account for their decision not

to release their adoptive parents' or birth parents' names for an interview as their society uses to account for the non-disclosure of information to these members of the adoption triangle. This motive talk legitimized the apparent paradox that existed between their own personal demand for disclosure and their protective stance toward these very important sets of significant others in their lives.

Because these adoptees eliminated these two groups as possible research respondents, the data on birth relatives and adoptive parents is very limited. This data does, however, enlighten us about the reunion experience of these other two parties. For example, both sets of parents noted that the 'motherhood myth' affected their reunion expectations and the types of adjustments that they made to reunion contact. The birth parents' belief in the supremacy of the blood tie led them to anticipate a parent-child reunion role relationship. These birth parents struggled with their reunion expectation as they tried to form a role-identity that matched both their own and their birth child's reunion needs. Their experience of meeting a 'strange adult' rather than a 'birth child' helped them maintain social distance and establish a birth parent-adoptee interaction process that more closely resembled a 'friend' role relationship. The birth parent's ability to openly express his/her reunion concerns with the adoptee assisted in this process of role negotiation because both parties could mutually establish the 'ground rules' for their continued contact.

In contrast, the adoptive mothers in this study found that reunion contact made them struggle to maintain the role-identity that they had already formed in their adoptive parent-child interactions. Their belief

in the pre-dominance of the blood bond threatened their identity as 'mothers'. Three of these adoptive mothers note, however, that their child's reunion strengthened their adoptive parent-child bonds. It removed the doubts and uncertainties that their lack of a blood bond held for their parent-child role relationship. The adoptive mother's openness to the reunion situation reinforced her adoptive parent-child interactions because she acted as a parental guide while the adoptee adjusted to his/her reunion situation. The birth parents' acknowledgement of the adoptive parents' role as the 'real' parents reinforced her dominant position in the adoptee's life and made the adoptive mother's acceptance of reunion contact much easier.

One adoptive mother could not accept this definition of reunion contact. Her inability to accept the birth mother's presence caused conflict in her adoptive parent-child interactions, thereby reinforcing her fear that reunion would alter her daughter's view of her as the 'real' mother. This adoptive mother was threatened and betrayed by her child's searching activity. She refused contact with the birth mother and described the birth family in a negative light. She had established a closed awareness context around the adoptive process that extended into her child's reunion situation. Reunion contact threatened her identity as a 'mother' because it destroyed her presentation of self as the 'only mother' in her daughter's life.

CONCLUSION

This study offered a 'psycho-social' model of identity that

could be used to examine the social process of adoption reunion.

That model viewed searching behaviour as a response to the process

of stigmatization that adoptees experience from their status position

as members of the adoption triangle.  The institution of adoption in

modern Western society imposes a ban on the disclosure of the adoptee's

genetic background and his/her birth parents' identity.  Adoptees find

that this lack of background information affects their satisfactory

presentation of self in social interaction.  Search and reunion

symbolize the adoptee's attempt to normalize self by gaining access to

and controlling the vital background information that others in their

society easily possess.

This pyscho-social model of identity is based on the symbolic

interactionist approach and its theoretical concepts of self, identity,

significant and generalized others, motive talk, definition of the

situation and role-identity salience.  These concepts take the analysis

of search and reunion away from the more individualistic psycho-

pathological view that has governed many studies on adoption and

adoption reunion.  That view defines search behaviour as a symptom of

dysfunctional identity structure, poor adoptive parent-child bonding

and dissatisfactory adoption outcome.  In contrast, this psycho-social

model views search and reunion as social acts that emerge from an adoptive process that supports non-disclosure. In this way, the psycho-social model leads the topic of adoption reunion away from the individual adoptee and places it into the larger social context of which he/she is an integral part.

The sixty reunited adoptees who were interviewed for this study believed that they were different from others in their society because they lacked specific genealogical information that they could bring into the process of social interaction. This 'difference' (i.e. stigma trait) stemmed from an adoptive status that denied them a full account of their biological connection to others and their beginnings as a human being. Search and reunion resolved this sense of differentness because it gave these adoptees the background information that others demanded of them. These reunited adoptees found, however, that their search and reunion experience set them further apart from others because they no longer carried the stigma trait that was expected of adoptees. They encountered a new process of stigmatization as a result of their search and reunion activities. They had transformed self from someone who carried a particular social blemish into someone with a record of having corrected that particular social blemish (Goffman, 1963: 9). These reunited adoptees managed their new stigma trait in the same way that they had managed their old one. They drew upon their more familiar adoptive role-identity to guide them in their satisfactory role performance of the new role-identity of 'reunited adoptee'. This process eased the effects that reunion made on the adoptee's identity structure and facilitated the

integration of his/her background information as a part of his/her self-concept.

This study's focus on the long-term effects of reunion outcome permitted a more extensive analysis of the search and reunion process than other studies describe. The reunited adoptees in this study outlined a series of stages in the search and reunion process that began with their conscious expression of a desire to search and ended in the formation of long-term contact with their birth mother. Not all adoptees experienced each stage in the same way. Many withdrew when they found that the risks to self were too great. Thus, for example, a large number of these adoptees accepted their birth mother's rejection of reunion contact without further attempt to communicate with her. Others rejected birth mothers who showed little appreciation for their renewed presence in her life. Some maintained a birth mother-adoptee interaction process that violated their definition of self as the adoptive parents' child and ignored their current social position as adopted adults. Like all social processes, these search and reunion outcomes took on the character of the social actors that were involved in them.

These reunited adoptees found that, in spite of the events of their reunion contact or the type of background information that they discovered, their reunion experience held positive results for them. It gave them power over self because it completed their biography. Knowledge of their beginning as human beings removed the doubts and uncertainties that they experienced over their presentation of self in social interaction. They could now bring their full identity into

the interaction process and more effectively control that presentation. They no longer experienced uncertainty about their identity in the eyes of others when their adoptive status came into play. Their possession of a 'full' identity changed that closed awareness context into an open awareness context that they, like others, could freely manage and negotiate.

'Negative' reunion outcome compared insignificantly to the lack of power over self that non-disclosure produced for these adoptees. They could now place self in a social context that included both their genetic and their social history. These adoptees, therefore, viewed their search as a personal journey of self-discovery and self-exploration. That journey represented one of the many searches for meaning that they had encountered as they proceeded through the life cycle. This definition of reunion let these adoptees place the events of their reunion outcome in context with the other social experiences that they encountered. As such, they could more easily integrate their search findings as a part of their self-concept. Thus, these adoptees observed few radical changes in self after reunion. They rationalized, justified and excused their search and reunion outcome until it agreed with the self-concept that they currently held. This vocabulary of motives emerged from their previous view of the adoptive process and the status positions held by each member in the adoption triangle.

At the point of reunion contact, the birth mother becomes an active participant in the reunion process with a reunion agenda of her own. Only 24 (40%) of the reunited adoptees in this study

established long-term reunion contact with their birth mothers. However, society's rule against disclosure left these two interactants unprepared for the type of interaction that reunion contact entailed. These long-term contact adoptees struggled for a satisfactory role-identity that they could bring to this new social interaction process. They turned to other, more familiar role-identities for guidance as they negotiated the type of reunion contact that they and their birth mother would maintain. The majority settled for 'friend', 'duty', or 'parent-child' reunion role relationships. This process of role negotiation made these adoptees question the meaning that their birth mother's contact held for them and the types of role expectations and role obligations that reunion contact necessitated. These issues became a major focus of concern for them once they established reunion contact.

This difficulty over mutual role obligations and birth mother-adoptee interaction patterns stems from the motherhood myth that our society promotes. That myth proclaims the pre-dominance of the indestructible blood bond that permanently connects biological mother and child. These reunited adoptees possessed a latent expectation that a parent-child bond would exist between themselves and their birth mothers. They were shocked and disillusioned to discover that their birth mother appeared as a 'stranger' to them. This factor let some adoptees effortlessly disengage from reunion contact. Others experienced greater difficulty. The biological connection that drew these two interactants together pushed them into a more intimate type of interaction process than they would normally exchange with strangers.

Those adoptees and birth mothers who honestly discussed these types of reunion concerns ensured more positive reunion contact. They surrounded their birth mother-adoptee interactions with an open awareness context in which each party freely expressed his/her view of the other and communicated his/her own personal reunion needs to the other. Few reunions achieved this type of interaction, however, because the motherhood myth obscured the interaction process and deflected the adoptee from achieving his/her reunion goal (i.e. access to more information). Each party doubted the extent that he/she could probe into the sensitive areas of the birth mother's past relinquishment or the adoptee's present adoptive situation. Each party, therefore, remained uncertain about his/her identity in the eyes of the other. This closed awareness context caused strain and tension in the birth mother-interaction process that made both parties uncomfortable in the presence of the other.

The eight birth parents in this study support the assessment of reunion contact that these reunited adoptees reported. This data on the birth parent's view leaves out of consideration the concerns of those birth parents who were denied the opportunity to be interviewed for this study because the adoptee did not give me permission to contact them. It also omits the analysis of reunion outcome from the perspectives of those birth parents who rejected or disengaged from reunion contact. Nevertheless, these eight birth parents also noted that reunion contact was problemmatic for them because they possessed the latent expectation that reunion would renew their parent-child bonds.

They found, instead, that they met a fully-developed and self-contained 'strange' adult who was satisfied to form a 'friend' role relationship with them. These eight birth parents had to change their identity of 'mother' or 'father' to match the identity that they saw in the adoptee's eyes. Their ability to openly discuss the role-identity that they were to play in the birth parent-adoptee interaction process eased their reunion contact. As equal partners in the reunion process, their own reunion concerns greatly affected the dynamics of their reunion contact and the type of reunion outcome that the adoptee experienced.

Of the three members in the adoption triangle, adoptive parents express the most misgivings about search and reunion. Many believe that reunion contact threatens their adoptive parent-child bonds and their role as the adoptee's parents. The reunited adoptees in this study supported this observation through the motive talk that they used to account for their decision not to include their adoptive parents in their search and reunion. They also employed a similar vocabulary of motives to explain their elimination of their adoptive parents as possible interviewees for this study. These reunited adoptees believed that their adoptive parents hesitated over reunion because they feared losing the adoptee to his/her birth parents. This motive talk, however, reveals the adoptee's assessment of the adoptive parents' situation. Future research needs to focus specifically on adoptive parents and their concerns about search and reunion and post-reunion contact if we are to understand these social processes from the perspectives of these members of the adoption triangle.

The four adoptive mothers who were interviewed for this study noted that their adopted child's reunion made them reassess their role as mothers and reanalyze the meaning that parenthood held for them. The more that they accepted that part of the motherhood myth that promotes the supremacy of the biological blood tie, the stronger their feelings of uncertainty and hesitancy over reunion contact became. This sample's assessment of reunion contact greatly depended upon their ability to view their child's searching behaviour as separate from their adoptive parent-child bonds and as a major life-change event that both could share. Three of these adoptive mothers reinforced their role-identity of 'mother' by surrounding the topics of search and reunion with an open awareness context. The birth mother held a role position in the adoptive family system as the source of the adoptee's genealogy. Reunion let her enact that role by firmly establishing her physical presence in the adoptee's life.

Glaser and Strauss (1967: 430) note that another definition of an awareness context "is the total combination of what specific people, groups, organizations, communities or nations know what about a specific issue. Thus, this structural concept can be used for the study of virtually any problem entailing awareness at any structural level of analysis." The institution of adoption in modern Western society bases itself on the principal of non-disclosure. The closed awareness context that surrounds the members of the adoption triangle and the structure of adoption in our society produces uncertainty and ambiguity for any interaction process that involves these individuals

and their status as members of that structure. This includes

interactions with teachers, social workers, doctors, lawyers, and

so forth. The suppression of identifying information and the secrecy

clause in the adoption contract ensures that few members of the

adoption triangle experience security over their full identity in

their own eyes or in the eyes of the other when they interact on

the basis of their status position in the adoption triangle. The

adoptee's searching behaviour upsets the adoptive process because it

changes this closed awareness context into an open awareness context.

However, because the institution of adoption still supports the

closed awareness context that surrounds the adoption process, it has

not fully prepared itself for the prospect of reunion. Our society

lacks clear role definitions or rules of social interaction for the

type of role relationships that an open awareness context demands.

As one of these reunited adoptees noted, "Society doesn't make room

for two mothers and that's what makes everything so hard." (Respondent

No. 2).

The data in this study demonstrate the important role that

society holds for the development of self, identity and social action.

The motherhood myth sustains the closed awareness context that supports

the institution of adoption in modern Western society. Acceptance of

this myth presents complex issues for those members of the adoption

triangle who face reunion. Social attitudes toward adoption, search

and adoption reunion require further change for the transition from

a system of non-disclosure to disclosure to succeed. One major change

lies in our belief in the primacy of the blood bond. These respondents

indicate that this belief is a fallacy that we, as a society, must accept if we desire satisfactory reunion contact.

The recent legislative reforms to the Child Welfare Act of Ontario and the Ontario Reunion Registry reveal the state's recognition of the adoptee's 'need to know'. Society requires more information on reunion outcome, however, to make these social acts more acceptable to others. Any examination of these social processes must consider the impact that the motherhood myth creates for the members of the adoption triangle. This study adds to that body of knowledge in its assessment of long-term reunion contact for reunited adoptees. Most importantly, this research supports the claim that reunion contact produces little negative effect on the adoptee's identity structure or the adoptive parent-child bonds. Further research must follow to examine the legitimacy of the concerns expressed by adoptive parents and birth parents who also face the possibility of reunion. Such research might provide these members of the adoption triangle with the guidance necessary for satisfactory reunion contact of their own.

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APPENDIX A

Number: _____

THE SEARCH:

1 a) At what age did you first begin to think about searching?

   Age:          _____

1 b) At what age did you begin your search?
        1) 18 to 20 years            _____
        2) 21 to 25                  _____
        3) 26 to 30                  _____
        4) 31 to 35                  _____
        5) 36 to 40                  _____
        6) 41 to 50                  _____
        7) 51 to 60                  _____
        8) 61 to 70                  _____
        9) over 70 years             _____

   Age:          _____

1 c) (If there is a difference between the two ages) Why do you think you waited until you were _____ years old, when you began to think about searching earlier?
        1) too young before                                _____
        2) didn't feel ready                               _____
        3) didn't know how to search                       _____
        4) too many other things in my life at that time   _____
        5) other  _____

Explain: _____

_____

_____


2 a) Why do you think that you wanted to search? (N.B. may be more than one-number sequentially)
        1) genealogical curiosity                _____
        2) medical curiosity
        3) accidental happenings (e.g. being given
           information by a clerk in record dept.)   _____
        4) always been interested                 _____
        5) felt out of place in adoptive family   _____
        6) other  _____

2 b) Explain: (N.B. probe for links with identity, feelings about self and being adopted) _____

_____

_____

_____

3. What did you expect to occur as a result of your search? (Probe
for ideas about lack of knowledge about self as a result of adoption.)

       1) find my birth mother                    _____
       2) obtain medical information         _____
       3) satisfy geneaological curiosity    _____
       4) find a family of my own            _____
       5) find a place where I belonged     _____
       6) find out 'who I am'                _____
       7) other  _____

Comment: _____

_____

_____

_____

_____


4. Could you just take a few minutes to tell me about your search
and the way it proceeded? (N.B. Probe for stages or series of
steps which accompany specific emotions or thoughts about self.)

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

5 a) So from what you just told me, you used the following means of searching: (N.B. Number each one sequentially)

       1) Parent Finders              _____
       2) CAS                       _____
       3) Adoption Disclosure Registry  _____
       4) newspaper ads or letters     _____
       5) phone book, city directory, voter's list,
          assessment rolls            _____
       6) other _____

5 b) Was there anything else?

_____

_____

_____

6 a) How long was your search?

       1) less than 1 week      _____
       2) 1 week to 1 month     _____
       3) less than 6 months    _____
       4) 6 months to 1 year    _____
       5) 1 to 2 years         _____
       5) 2 to 5 years         _____
       6) 5 to 10 years       _____
       7) over 10 years       _____
       8) other_____

_____

_____

7 a) Did you search alone or did someone help you?

       1) Alone  _____            2) Help  _____

7 b) (If alone) Was there a special reason why you did not have any help?

       1) wanted it to be my own search     _____
       2) adoptive family disapproved      _____
       3) didn't know who to ask         _____
       4) did not want to tell anyone      _____
       5) other _____

Explain: (Probe for idea that it was a personal journey or quest

for identity.) _____

_____

_____

_____

_____


7 c) (If obtained help) Who helped you in your search?

        1) spouse                              _____
        2) sister or brother                   _____
        3) adoptive parent(s)                  _____
        4) close friend                        _____
        5) member of Parent Finders            _____
        6) other_____


7 d) (If obtained help) Do you think this person (or persons)
helped you in ways other than obtaining search information?

    1) Yes _____  2) No _____  3) D.K. _____  4) No Ans. _____

    (If yes) In what way?  (N.B. may be more than one)

        1) emotional support                             _____
        2) made contact call                             _____
        3) developed a close friendship                  _____
        4) helped me put my expectations into perspective  _____
        5) helped me put my adoptive status into perspective _____
        6) helped me understand birth mothers better    _____
        7) other _____

Explain:_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

9. Why do you think that you began your search at that particular time of your life? (Probe for major life change events that may make one question identity.)

_____

_____

_____

_____


10 a) Some people have observed that major personal events such as marriage or the birth of a child often occur a few months before a search is started. Think back, did such an event occur before you began your search?

1) Yes _____    2) No _____    3) D.K. _____    4) No Ans. _____

10 b) (If yes) Can you name the type of event?

|  |  | Occurrance |
|---|---|---|
| 1) marriage | _____ | _____ |
| 2) death of a parent | _____ | _____ |
| 3) birth of own child | _____ | _____ |
| 4) adoption of child | _____ | _____ |
| 5) serious illness | _____ | _____ |
| 6) separation or divorce | _____ | _____ |
| 7) other | _____ |

_____

_____


10 c) How long before your search did they occur?  (Note categories above.)

10 d) Do you think that this event(s) may have had an effect on your desire to search?

1) Yes _____    2) No _____    3) D.K. _____    4) No Ans. _____


10 e) (If yes) In what way? (Probe for impact on question "Who am I?")

Event                                          Effect

_____          _____

_____          _____

_____          _____


10 f) (If no) Why do you think this event may have had little or no effect on your desire to search? (e.g. took all my energy and interest to cope with the event itself) (use categories above)

12 a) This question considers the idea that people often
experience various stages and/or emotional feelings during major
life change events. Do you think that this process occurs during
one's search. In other words, do you think that the search
involves a sequence of emotional reactions which affect one's view
of oneself and the way that the search is conducted?

    1) Yes _____   2) No _____   3) D.K. _____   4) No Ans. _____

12 b) (If yes) Can you describe to me the various stages that you
went through during your search and the different re-evaluations
of yourself that may have occured at each stage?

Stage                                    Re-evaluation

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____


Reunion Experiences:

13.  How long has it been since you have had your reunion?

        1) under 2 years                    _____
        2) between 2 to 3 years             _____
        3) between 3 to 4 years             _____
        4) between 4 to 5 years             _____
        5) over 5 years                     _____
        6) write in no. of years            _____

14. How did you contact your birth mother?

        1) by phone                         _____
        2) by letter                        _____
        3) through a relative               _____
        4) directly-in person               _____
        5) through a newspaper ad.          _____
        6) through the CAS                  _____
        7) through Parent Finders           _____
        8) other _____

Explain:   _____

_____

_____

_____

15. Can you describe your birth mother's immediate reaction to this initial contact?

       1) disbelief                       _____
       2) worry                           _____
       3) rejection, denial           _____
       4) great joy and excitement   _____
       5) cautious and suspicious    _____
       6) other _____

Quote:

_____

_____

_____

_____

16. How soon after this contact did you meet with your birth mother?

       1) within 24 hours           _____
       2) within 2 or 3 days       _____
       3) within 1 week            _____
       4) within 1 month           _____
       5) between 2 to 6 months    _____
       6) between 6 months and 1 year _____
       7) over 1 year later        _____

17. Why did the two of you choose this particular time to meet?

       1) we couldn't wait          _____
       2) she had to get herself together _____
       3) she had rejected me at first   _____
       4) she lives so far away from me  _____
       5) she had to tell her family    _____
       6) other _____

Explain: _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

18 a) Where did your initial reunion meeting take place?

        1) at the CAS office                        _____
        2) in a restaurant                          _____
        3) at my home                               _____
        4) at birth mother's home                   _____
        5) at a friend's home                       _____
        6) at a member of Parent Finder's home      _____
        7) other_____

_____


18 b) Who selected this place?

        1) adoptee                                  _____
        2) birth mother                             _____
        3) friend/relative                          _____
        4) member of Parent Finders                 _____
        5) social worker                            _____
        6) other  _____

Explain: _____

_____

_____

_____


19 a) How did you prepare yourself for this meeting?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

19 b) Before meeting your birth mother, did you experience second thoughts about your decision to reunite with her?

    1) Yes _____ 2) No _____ 3) D.K. _____ 4) No Ans. _____

19 c) Why? (Probe for feelings about self e.g. she might not like me; I was secure in my decision etc.)

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

    1) nervous, excited _____
    2) calm and secure _____
    3) doubtful about reuniting _____
    4) felt she wouldn't like me _____
    5) other _____

19 d) Do you think that you could take a few minutes to describe your first reunion meeting for me?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

22. What did you expect your birth mother to be like before you met her?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

22 b) When you were a child what did you think she would be like?

_____

_____

_____

_____

23 a) Did she meet your expectations at this initial reunion meeting?

    1) Yes  _____   2) No  _____   3) D.K.  _____   4) No Ans.  _____

23 b) In what way did she meet your expectations?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

24 a) How would you say you responded to your birth mother at that initial reunion meeting?

        1) warm and accepting            _____
        2) uncomfortable, nervous        _____
        3) hostile and rejecting         _____
        4) hostile at first but later okay  _____
        5) warm at first but later hostile  _____
        6) other _____

Comment: _____

_____

_____

_____

24 b) Can you explain why you think that you responded in this way?

_____

_____

_____

_____

25 a) How would you describe your birth mother's response at this first reunion meeting?

        1) warm and accepting            _____
        2) uncomfortable                 _____
        3) guilt-ridden                  _____
        4) hostile and rejecting         _____
        5) hostile at first but okay later  _____
        6) accepting at first but hostile later  _____
        7) other _____

Comment: _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

25 b) Was her reaction different than the one she showed in your first contact with her?

    1) Yes  _____     2) No  _____     3) D.K.  _____     4) No Ans.

25 c) (If different) In what way do you think it was different?

        1) less nervous and uncomfortable     _____
        2) more open and accepting     _____
        3) more hostile and suspicious     _____
        4) less emotional and guilt-ridden     _____
        5) more relaxed and natural     _____
        6) other  _____

Explain: _____

_____

_____

_____

25 d) How do you think that this change/lack of change affected your view of her and the possibility of maintaining a future reunion relationship?

        1) made it stronger     _____
        2) made it weaker     _____
        3) helped me understand her better     _____
        4) made me re-evaluate my expectations     _____
        5) made me realize we couldn't continue     _____
        6) other  _____

Comment: _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Present Reunion Relationship:

Now I would like to ask you some questions about your present relationship with your birth mother, some of the characteristics of that relationship and the way that you have been able to integrate your birth mother into your life.

26 a) Before meeting your birth mother, what type of relationship did you hope to form with her?

    1) parent-child                    _____
    2) intimate friendship             _____
    3) companion relationship          _____
    4) two strangers                   _____
    5) no relationship at all          _____
    6) other _____

Comment: _____

_____

_____

_____

_____


26 b) How would you describe your present relationship with your birth mother?

    1) parent-child                    _____
    2) intimate friendship             _____
    3) companion relationship          _____
    4) two strangers                   _____
    5) no relationship at all          _____
    6) other _____

Explain:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

27. How often do you and your birth mother get "in touch"?

      1) every day                   _____
      2) 2 or 3 times a week       _____
      3) once a week              _____
      4) 2 or 3 times a month      _____
      5) once a month            _____
      6) once every 2 or 3 months   _____
      7) only on special occassions  _____
      8) rarely                  _____
      9) never-contact stopped     _____
   10) other _____

(N.B. IF CONTACT STOPPED, SKIP TO QUESTION NO. 33.)

28. In what way, do you generally maintain contact? (N.B. may be multiple ticks.)

                           Contact     How Often

      1) by phone        _____     _____
      2) by letter       _____     _____
      3) visits          _____     _____
      4) other _____

Explain: _____

_____

_____

_____

29 a) Which one of you is most likely to make the contact first?

1) Adoptee \_\_\_\_\_   2) Birth Mother \_\_\_\_\_   3) Equal interest \_\_\_\_\_

29 b) Why do you think this is the case? (Probe for character of bonding)

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

30 a) What name does your birth mother usually call you?

     1) birth name  _____          2) adopted name  _____

30 b) How do you feel about her use of this name rather than the other? (N.B. probe for effects on identity and on bonding.)

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

30 c) Why do you think she uses this name when addressing you? (N.B. probe for links with the type of bond birth mother is trying to develop.)

_____

_____

_____

_____

31 a) By what name are you most likely to identify yourself to her?

     1) birth name  _____          2) adopted name  _____

31 b) Why do you use this name rather than the other? (Probe for links with how adoptee identifies self as a person and how defines reunion relationship.)

     1) that is who I am          _____
     2) she prefers my birth name     _____
     3) I feel closer to her using my birth name     _____
     4) I do not recognize my birth name     _____
     5) other  _____

Comment: _____

_____

_____

_____

32 a) How do you address your birth mother?

      1) by her first name           _____
      2) as mother (mom)            _____
      3) by her nickname            _____
      4) other _____


32 b) Why do you call her by that name? (Probe for links with how adoptee defines self and reunion relationship.)

      1) she isn't my real mother      _____
      2) I think of my adopted mother as "mom"   _____
      3) we aren't that close          _____
      4) it goes with our friendship relations  _____
      5) she prefers me to use this name    _____
      6) other _____

Comment: _____

_____

_____

_____


32 c) How do you think she feels about you using this name to identify her? (Probe for impact on reunion relationship.)

      1) she would prefer "mother"      _____
      2) she prefers her first name     _____
      3) she understands our relationship   _____
      4) she doesn't want to be my mother  _____
      5) other _____

Comment: _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

33. (If contact dissolved) How many times were you able to meet
with your birth mother before contact was broken?

       1) only met the one time          \_\_\_\_\_
       2) 2 or 3 times                  \_\_\_\_\_
       3) 4 or 5 times                  \_\_\_\_\_
       4) other   _____

Comment: _____

_____

_____

_____


34 a) Which one of you decided to break off contact?

1) Adoptee \_\_\_\_\_   2) B. Mother \_\_\_\_\_   3)Both \_\_\_\_\_   4) D.K. \_\_\_\_\_
5) No Ans. \_\_\_\_\_


34 b) (If adoptee) Why did you sever contact with your birth mother?

       1) didn't like what I saw          _____
       2) she was too demanding           _____
       3) I only wanted information       _____
       4) I had too many other concerns  _____
       5) my husband/family did not like it _____
       6) my adoptive parents were hurt   _____
       7) we have nothing in common     _____
       8) other  _____

Explain:(Probe for links between identity and reunion expectations.)

_____

_____

_____

_____

34 c) (If birth mother) Why do you think she severed the contact?

        1) it was too hard for her to handle          _____
        2) she was afraid others would find out        _____
        3) her husband/family did not like it          _____
        4) we had little in common                     _____
        5) she had other personal problems             _____
        6) other _____

Explanation:

_____

_____

_____

_____


35 a) Many adoptees have noted specific similarities in physical
characteristics and personality traits between themselves and
their birth mothers.  Have you noticed any similarities of this type?

    1) Yes _____  2) No _____  3) D.K. _____  4) No Ans. _____

35 b) (If yes) Can you give me some examples of any similarities?

SIMILARITIES:

    Physical                          Effect

_____          _____

_____          _____

_____          _____

_____          _____

_____          _____

_____          _____

36 a) We all know that people tend to change as we get to know them
Do you think that your birth mother has changed in any way
from the way that she presented herself at your first reunion
meeting?

   1) Yes _____   2) No _____   3) D.K. _____   4) No Ans. _____


36 b) (If yes) In what way has she changed?

        1) more open and accepting of me       _____
        2) less guilty                         _____
        3) less demanding of me                _____
        4) less hostile and suspicious         _____
        5) less interested in me               _____
        6) more interested in me               _____
        7) more realistic about our
           relationship                        _____
        8) other _____

Explain:
_____
_____
_____
_____


36 c) How do you think these changes have affected your reunion
relationship?

        1) made it easier                      _____
        2) made it more difficult              _____
        3) put it into perspective             _____
        4) made us break contact               _____
        5) no effect                           _____
        6) other _____

Explain:
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

37 a) Do you think that you have changed?

1) Yes _____  2) No _____  3) D.K. _____  4) No Ans. _____

37 b) (If yes) In what way do you think that you have changed?

1) more open and accepting of her/myself _____
2) less guilty _____
3) less demanding of her _____
4) less hostile and suspicious _____
5) less interested in her _____
6) more interested in her _____
7) more realistic about our relationship _____
8) other _____

Explain: _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

37 c) How do you think these changes have affected your reunion relationship?

1) made it easier _____
2) made it more difficult _____
3) put it into perspective _____
4) made us break off contact _____
5) other _____

Explain: _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

38 a) As noted earlier, people often experience emotional reactions or stages when they experience major life changes. Do you think that this is also true in the case of a reunion?

1) Yes _____    2) No _____    3) D.K. _____    4) No Ans. _____

38 b) (If yes) Can you describe to me the stages that you went through as your developed a reunion relationship with your birth mother and the various emotions that you may have experienced at each stage?

| Stage | Description | Emotion |
|-------|-------------|---------|
| _____ | _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ | _____ |

38 c) How do you think these stages affected your reunion relationship and the way that you viewed yourself?

Stage (Use no. from above)          Change in Self

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

39 a) I have met some birth mothers who have tried to search for child that they had relinquished. Do you know if your birth mother ever tried to contact you?

1) Yes _____   2) No _____   3) D.K. _____   4) No Ans. _____

39 b) Do you think that your knowledge of her searching (not searching) has had an effect on your reunion relationship? (Probe for effects on self-concept eg. made me feel more valued and loved.)

1) Yes _____   2) No _____   3) D.K. _____   4) No Ans. _____

Explain:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

40 a) How do you think the reunion relationship may have been affected if she had made contact rather than you?

1) I would have been happier            _____
2) I would have been unprepared         _____
3) I would have resented her            _____
4) I would have been angry              _____
5) I don't think birth mothers should search  _____
6) other _____

40 b) Why?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

41 a) After your reunion, what reason did your birth mother give for placing you for adoption? (use multiple ticks if necessary)

      1) not married                                     _____
      2) too young                                        _____
      3) no financial means of support       _____
      4) no family support                       _____
      5) social stigma of illegitimacy       _____
      6) parental pressure                      _____
      7) other  _____

Comment: _____

_____

_____

_____


41 b) Are you satisfied with these reasons? (Probe for impact on character of bond developed between birth mother and adoptive.)

  1) Yes   \_\_\_   2) No   \_\_\_\_   3) D.K.   \_\_\_\_   4) No Ans.   \_\_\_\_

Comment: _____

_____

_____

_____


42 a) After their reunion, some adoptees discovered that some of the background information that was given to them was wrong or inaccurate. Did this happen to you?

  1) Yes   \_\_\_\_   2) No   \_\_\_\_   3) D. K.   \_\_\_\_   4) No Ans.   \_\_\_\_

42 b) (If yes) Can you give me some examples of these types of inaccuracies?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

42 c) Where did you get this inaccurate information?

    1) from the adoption agency                              _____
    2) from my adoptive parents                              _____
    3) it was part of my original background information     _____
    4) from a close relative                                 _____
    4) other _____


42 d) What effect has this "new" information had on the way that
you have come to think about yourself?

    1) no effect at all—only additional information          _____
    2) it was a minor inaccuracy and of little consequence   _____
    3) made me re-evaluate my entire identity                _____
    5) it was a shock                                        _____
    6) other _____

Comment:

_____

_____

_____

_____


42 e) How do you think that it has affected the reunion
relationship formed with your birth mother?

    1) no effect                                             _____
    2) it made me expect something I did not find            _____
    3) it made my adjustment difficult                       _____
    4) if I had known the truth I wouldn't have searched     _____
    5) other _____

Explain:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Thoughts on Reunions:

So far, we have been discussing your reunion specifically and focusing on the effects that your search and reunion have made on you. However, this section of the questionnaire focuses on your views and attitudes on reunions in general.

43 a) If a person was trying to decide whether to search or reunite, would you advise them to do it or not?

1) Do it _____    2) Don't _____    3) Can't advise _____

43 b) Why?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

44.  What type of advice would you be most likely to give them to prepare them for some of the changes that a reunion may entail?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

45.  How would you describe a successful reunion?

_____

_____

_____

_____

46. How would you describe an unsuccessful reunion?

_____

_____

_____

_____

47 a) How would you describe your reunion?

1) Successful _____  2) Unsuccessful ____ 3) D.K. ____ 4) Both _____
5) No Ans.  _____

47 b) Why? _____

_____

_____

_____

48 a) If you had your search and reunion to do over again is there
anything that you would change?

    1) Yes _____  2) No _____  3) D.K. _____  4) No Ans. _____

48 b) Explain.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

49 a)  Is there anything about your reunion relationship that
makes you happy?

_____

_____

_____

_____

49 b) Is there anything about your reunion relationship that bothers you?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

50. Do you think that you could take a moment to describe to me the type of person that you were like before your reunion in comparison to the type of person that you are like now.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

51. Do you believe that God or fate had a hand in the way that your life evolved and in bringing you and your birth mother together?

   1) Yes _____   2) No _____   3) D.K. _____   4) No Ans. _____

Comment: _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Adoption Information Section:

Now, I would like to ask you some questions about the procedures of your adoption and how you think these procedures affected your experience as an adoptee, some of the feelings that you have about yourself and how it might have affected your desire to search for your birth mother.

52.  In what year were you adopted?

_____

53. Under what type of procedure was your adoption performed?

    1) CAS                    _____
    2) CCAS                   _____
    3) Jewish CAS             _____
    4) Private                _____
    5) Jewels for Jesus       _____
    6) Latter Day Saints      _____
    7) other  _____

54. How old were you at the time of your adoption?

    1) Newborn                _____
    2) 4 to 6 weeks           _____
    3) 3 to 5 months          _____
    4) 9 to 12 months         _____
    5) 1 to 2 years           _____
    6) 2 to 5 years           _____
    7) 6 to 10 years          _____
    8) 11 to 14 years         _____
    9) other  _____

55 a) Do you think that your age at the time of your adoption had any effect on your adjustment into the adoptive family?

    1) Yes ___  2) No ___  3) D.K.  _____   4) No Ans. _____

55 b) Explain (N.B. Probe for effects on character of bonding between adoptive parents and adoptee.)

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

56 a) Do you know why your parents decided to adopt?

1) Yes _____ 2) No _____ 3) D.K. _____ 4) No Ans. _____

56 b) Explain: (Probe for how these reasons may have
stimulated a desire to search.)

_____

_____

_____

_____

57 a) Do you know anything at all about your placement with your
adoptive parents and the adoption procedure that was followed?

1) Yes _____ 2) No _____ 3) D.K. _____ 4) No Ans. _____

57 b) (If yes) How do you know?

1) I was old enough to remember it _____
2) my adoptive parents told me _____
3) my birth mother told me _____
4) it was part of my background info. _____
5) other _____

Explain: (Probe for information that may have stimulated desire to search.)

_____

_____

_____

_____

57 c) (If yes) Can you describe what you know about that procedure?
(Probe for effects on bonding between adoptee and adoptive parents.)

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

58 a) How old were you when you learned that you were adopted?

        1) 1 to 2 years               _____
        2) 2 to 5 years               _____
        3) 6 to 10 years              _____
        4) 11 to 14 years             _____
        5) other     _____

  Write in age: _____

59 b) How did you learn about your adoption?

        1) learned from parents                        _____
        2) learned from other relatives                _____
        3) learned from children in neighbourhood      _____
        4) other  _____

_____


59 c) Could you describe the situation for me?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____


60 a) How did your adoptive parents respond to any curiosity that
you might have demonstrated about your adoption? (Probe to see how
it may have affected the bonding relationship and the desire to search.)

                                              Mother              Father
1) openly and honestly                      _____           _____
2) didn't like to talk about it             _____           _____
3) typical 'saved baby' story               _____           _____
4) made me feel grateful                    _____           _____
5) didn't know very much themselves         _____           _____
6) made me feel truly wanted                _____           _____
7) other  _____

Comment:  _____

_____

_____

_____

60 h) How did your adoptive parents respond to any curiosity that you might demonstrate about your birth mother? (Probe for effects on bonding and desire to search.)

|  | Mother | Father |
|---|---|---|
| 1) tried to understand her situation | _____ | _____ |
| 2) gave me information they were told | _____ | _____ |
| 3) didn't talk about her | _____ | _____ |
| 4) were upset to mention her | _____ | _____ |
| 5) painted her as a 'negative' type | _____ | _____ |
| 6) other _____ |  |  |

Comment: _____

_____

_____

_____

41 a) Do you think that adoptive families are different than biological families? (N.B. Probe for any way that might stimulate desire to search.)

1) Yes _____ 2) No _____ 3) D.K. _____ 4) No Ans. _____

Explain: _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

62 a) Do you think that your experience of being raised as an adopted child is very much different than the experience of being raised as a biological child? (N.B. Probe for links with desire to search.)

1) Yes _____ 2) No _____ 3) D.K. _____ 4) No Ans. _____

Explain: _____

_____

_____

_____

Effects of Search and Reunion on Adoptive Parent-Child
Relationship:

Now, I would like to ask you some questions about the effects
that your search and reunion may have had on your relationship
with your adoptive parents and how you think they view the idea of
your searching for your birth mother.

63. Do your adoptive parents know about your search and reunion?

1) Both _____ 2) Ad. Mother only _____ 3) Ad. Father only _____
5) Neither know _____

64. (If neither adoptive parent knows of the reunion) Why do you
think that you are unable to tell your adoptive parents about your
reunion with your birth mother?

    1) both are deceased                              _____
    2) I would hurt them terribly                     _____
    3) they would never understand                    _____
    4) I do not want my reunion to affect our
       relationship                                   _____
    5) I had so little contact with my birth mother
       that the issue has been put aside              _____
    6) other _____

Explanation: _____

_____

_____

_____

_____


(N.B. IF ADOPTIVE PARENTS DO NOT KNOW ABOUT SEARCH AND REUNION
SKIP TO QUESTION NO. 74)

(N.B. IF TOLD ONLY ONE PARENT USE THE TERM ADOPTIVE MOTHER OR
ADOPTIVE FATHER INSTEAD OF ADOPTIVE PARENTS IN THE FOLLOWING
QUESTIONS.)


65 a) At what stage of your search did you tell your adoptive
parent(s) that you planned to search for your birth mother?

      1) from the very beginning                    _____
      2) when I found that I needed my adoption order   _____
      3) after I contacted my birth mother         _____
      4) after my birth mother & I were reunited    _____
      5) other _____


65 b) Why did you decide to tell your adoptive parent(s) at that
particular time?

      1) we have always been open and honest        _____
      2) there was no other way to continue my search   _____
      3) I don't like to deceive people           _____
      4) I knew that they would want to know      _____
      5) other _____

65 c) Explain: _____

_____

_____

_____

_____


66 a) (If both adoptive parents know) Which adoptive parent did
you tell first?
      1) my adoptive mother          _____
      2) my adoptive father          _____
      3) both together                _____
      4) other _____

_____

66 b) (If only told one parent first)  Was there any particular
reason that you approached this person rather than the other?

1) we were always closer                          _____
2) he/she is more understanding                   _____
3) the other is uncomfortable with my
   adoptive status                                _____
4) I always approach that person first            _____
5) this was the person who always dealt
   with any issues concerning my adoption
   (e.g. "telling")                               _____
6) the other adoptive parent is deceased          _____

7) other _____

Explain: _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

67 a) Did your adoptive parent(s) help you in your search in any
way?

1) Yes _____     2) No _____     3) No Ans. _____

67 b) (If yes) Which adoptive parent helped you?

1) Ad. Mother _____     2) Ad. Father _____     3) Both _____

67 c) In what way did he/she help you?

|  | Ad. Mother | Ad. Father |
|---|---|---|
| 1) gave me adoption order | _____ | _____ |
| 2) background information | _____ | _____ |
| 3) emotional support | _____ | _____ |
| 4) searched with me | _____ | _____ |
| 5) other | _____ | _____ |

Explain: _____

_____

_____

_____

68. How do you think that your adoptive parent(s) responded to
your reunion?

|  | Mother | Father |
|---|---|---|
| 1) no negative reaction | _____ | _____ |
| 2) mildly upset and hurt | _____ | _____ |
| 3) very upset and hurt | _____ | _____ |
| 4) upset but trying to understand | _____ | _____ |
| 5) happy for me | _____ | _____ |
| 6) other _____ | | |

Comment: _____

_____

_____

_____

69. How do you think their response affected your relationship
with them? (Probe for effects on character of bonding.)

|  | Mother | Father |
|---|---|---|
| 1) no effect | _____ | _____ |
| 2) made me feel closer to them | _____ | _____ |
| 3) sad that he/she can't understand | _____ | _____ |
| 4) made me more 'their' child | _____ | _____ |
| 5) indifferent—we were never close | _____ | _____ |
| 6) it is a sore topic between us | _____ | _____ |
| 7) other _____ | | |

Comment: _____

_____

_____

70. How do you think their response has affected your reunion relationship?

|  | Mother | Father |
|---|---|---|
| 1) I hide my contact with my birth mother from them | _____ | _____ |
| 2) it allows me to be more open about it | _____ | _____ |
| 3) puts pressure on it | _____ | _____ |
| 4) separates my two family connections | _____ | _____ |
| 5) other _____ | | |

Comment: _____

_____

_____

_____

71 a) Do you think that your reunion has changed the way that your adoptive parents view you and your position as their child?

   1) Yes _____   2) No _____   3) D.K. _____   4) No Ans. _____

71 b) (If yes) In what way?

|                                              | Mother | Father |
|----------------------------------------------|--------|--------|
| 1) made us closer                            | _____  | _____  |
| 2) made us realize the strength of our bonds | _____  | _____  |
| 3) made him/her more tolerant of my ideas    | _____  | _____  |
| 4) weakened the bonds between us             | _____  | _____  |
| 5) other _____       |        |        |

Comment: _____

_____

_____

_____

71 c) (If no) Why not?

   1) we are who we are                        _____
   2) nothing can change our relationship      _____
   3) they didn't know                         _____
   4) we were never close                      _____
   5) other _____

Comment: _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

72 a) Do you think that the process of searching and reunion have changed the way that you view your adoptive parents and your position as their child?

   1) Yes _____   2) No _____   3) D.K. _____   4) No Ans. _____

72 b) (If yes) In what way?

   1) made it stronger                              _____
   2) made me realize how much I belonged there     _____
   3) severed an already precarious relationship     _____
   4) made us much more open and honest             _____
   5) reaffirmed our parent-child relationship       _____
   6) other _____

Comment: _____

_____

_____

72 c) (If no) Why not?

      1) we are who we are                                   _____

      2) nothing can change our relationship           _____

      3) we both realize the implications of adoption   _____

      4) other _____

Comment: _____

_____

_____

Background Information:

73. Sex:

      1) Male   _____

      2) Female   _____

74. How old are you?

      1) 20 years or under   _____

      2) 21 to 30 years   _____

      3) 31 to 40 years   _____

      4) 41 to 50 years   _____

      5) 51 to 60 years   _____

      6) 61 to 70 years   _____

      7) 71 and over   _____

Write in number of years   _____

75. What is your marital status?

      1) Single   _____

      2) Married   _____

      3) Widowed   _____

      4) Separated or Divorced   _____

      5) Living with someone   _____

      6) Other   _____

76. What grade have you completed in school?

      Grade:   _____

78. Have you had other training?

      1) some trade or business school   _____

      2) graduated trade or business school   _____

      3) some college or university   _____

      4) grad. college or univeristy   _____

      5) some post-grad. or professional   _____

      6) grad. post-grad. or professional   _____

      7) other _____

79. What is your present occupation? (N.B. code to Pineo-Porter scale)

_____

1) professional                          _____
2) proprietor, manager or
   official, large firm                  _____
3) semi-professional                     _____
4) proprietors, manager or
   official, small firm                  _____
5) clerical and sales                    _____
6) skilled                               _____
7) semi-skilled                          _____
8) unskilled                             _____
9) farmer                                _____

80. Are you self-employed or employed by others?

1) self-employed  _____          2) employed by others  _____

81. What is your religious affiliation?

1) Anglican                   _____
2) Baptist                    _____
3) Greek Othodox              _____
4) Jewish                     _____
5) Lutheran                   _____
6) Presbyterian               _____
7) Roman Catholic             _____
8) Ukranian Catholic          _____
9) United Church              _____
10) Other  _____
11) None                      _____

82. Where did you grow up? _____

83. What was your gross income for the year 1984?

1) under 10,000
2) 10,000 to 14,999          _____
3) 14,999 to 19,999          _____
4) 20,000 to 24,999          _____
5) 25,000 to 29,999          _____
6) 30,000 to 34,999          _____
7) 35,000 to 39,999          _____
8) 40,000 to 44,999          _____
9) 45,000 to 49,999          _____
10) 50,000 and over          _____

APPENDIX B

July 10, 1985

Dear

My name is Karen March. I am a Ph.D. student in the department of Sociology at McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario. For my thesis, I have chosen the topic of adoption reunions. I am interested in discovering what happens to people who are reunited with their birth families. I would like to know more about the way that the reunion has affected the lives of those people who are involved in a reunion and their relationship with each other.

For the past year, I have been attending Parent Finder meetings in Hamilton. Because of my research interest and my knowledge in the area of adoption, the Hamilton Parent Finder Board members have given me the names of those members who have been reunited. This is with the understanding that all names and information be kept strictly confidential. They have also stated that I cannot contact either your birth parents or your adoptive parents without your express permission.

I would be very interested in meeting you at a time and place that is convenient to you so that I may ask you some questions about the way that you searched for your birth mother and the results of that search.

Everything that you say will be kept completely confidential and your name will not be mentioned to anyone. The results of my research will be written in the form of an academic study and presented to the university as part of the requirements for my Ph.D. degree. No one will know that I have interviewed you and only my supervisor and myself will ever see my interview notes.

I will be contacting you by telephone some time in the next week to arrange an interview with you. This interview will take only about an hour or so of your time. I would be prepared to meet you either at your home or my home or at a place that is most convenient to you. As mentioned before, all of your responses are competely confidential. If you have any questions, however, or if you have moved to a different address and changed your telephone number, please call me at the following number:                    If this number is long-distance, please reverse the charges.

Thank you for your consideration.


                              Sincerely,


                              (Mrs.) Karen March, M.A.

**McMASTER UNIVERSITY**

Department of Sociology

1280 Main Street West, Hamilton, Ontario, L8S 4M4
Telephone: 525-9140 Ext. 4481

March 5, 1985

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

This letter will introduce Karen March who is a
doctoral student in Sociology at McMaster University. As part of her
degree requirements Karen must undertake research on some aspect of
society. For her research project Karen is studying the process of
adoption searches. She is particularly interested in examining the long
term impact of searches in which adopted persons come in contact with
their birth mothers. To do this she hopes to talk to a number of adopted
persons who have been in contact with their birth mothers for at least
**two** years.

In an attempt to reach such people Karen has been
in touch with the Parent Finders organization of Hamilton. They have
cooperated with her and have given her your name with the understanding
that she will not make it public. According to their records you have
been in contact with your birth mother for a fairly lengthy period. I
know that Karen would like to talk with you about your experience and I
sincerely hope that you will see this research as important and agree to
spend a little while talking with her. In doing so you will also provide
invaluable assistance in helping Karen complete her university degree
requirements.

In her conversation with you, Karen will be part-
icularly interested in learning about the process you went through in
order to contact your birth mother, and about any help you received in
doing so. She will also ask you some questions about what it was like to
meet your birth mother, and about the long term impact of this contact
on you. In addition she will ask you questions about the long term
relationship you have with your birth mother, and about the impact of
this on your relationship with your adoptive parents.

Karen will ultimately interview approximately 60
to 70 persons such as yourself. She will also interview a smaller sample
of birth mothers and adoptive mothers to see how they have adjusted to
the whole process of adoption searches in which they have been involved.
When Karen has completed these interviews she will write up her findings
in a book length manuscript. However, her report will present the over-
all picture rather than information on any particular person. Though she
may occasionally quote a comment from one of her interviews, she will
not quote or include any information that could in any way identify a
particular person. Thus, anything that you say to Karen will be kept in
strictest confidence by her and she will not use anything that you say
in any way that you can be identified. I will be the only person other
than Karen who will see any of the notes that she makes during her

1

conversation with you, and I assure you that I will also maintain the confidentiality of the information you provide.

The report that Karen provides will be available to the public, and if you wish it she can send you a brief summary of her findings when she completes it about a year and a half from now. It is our hope and belief that the information provided by persons such as yourself can be particularly helpful to other persons contemplating an adoption search. It will also provide information which may help birth mothers and adoptive mothers adjust to this process. Because of this, and because of the benefit that Karen will receive from your cooperation, I sincerely hope that you will agree to talk with her when she gets in touch with you.

If you have any questions about this research either before or after your talk with Karen and would like to talk to me about them, please feel free to get in touch with me. I can be reached by phoning McMaster University 525-9140 and asking for extension 3603. If I am not present when you call, simply leave your name and telephone number and I will return your call.

Thank you for your attention and consideration.

Sincerely yours,


Ralph Matthews, Ph.D.,
Professor

I, _____ understand the nature

of this study on Adoption Reunion.  With the understanding that I remain

completely anonymous, I give my consent for the use of the information obtained

from me to be used in general papers and reports on this research.


date: _____     Signed: _____