

## POST-ADOPTION REUNION: A SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

*This article explores the adoptee's desire for and experience of reunion with the birth mother, from within a psychoanalytic framework and within the South African context. The study was conducted from within a non-probability framework and is an empirical, ethnographic study with a predominantly qualitative, inductive approach, which is exploratory and descriptive in nature. The quantitative research provides width to the in-depth, qualitative data and takes the form of a content analysis of the adoption register of a Cape Town-based adoption agency. The quantitative aspect of the study employed an in-depth, face-to-face, unstructured interviewing technique, followed by an interview schedule. The qualitative sample is comprised of 8 adult adoptees, who experienced face-to-face reunion with the birth mother, while the quantitative sample is comprised of 207 contacts in the post-adoption register of Cape Town Child Welfare between 1989 and 1995. The conclusion drawn from the study is that the adoptee's desire for reunion is a health-promoting process, which is motivated by both external, social factors as well as intrapsychic forces. The process of reunion enables the adoptee to establish a new sense of self, and assists in placing the adoptee within an historical and biological narrative. The adoptee, whilst seeking to reclaim the 'lost object', does so as a means of reclaiming and completing the self, the development of which was disturbed as a result of premature interruption of the primary infant-mother bond. The value of reunion does not lie in the "success" or outcome of the reunion, but in the process or personal "journey" of the adoptee.*

### INTRODUCTION

There are numerous international studies on different aspects of adoption; however South African studies are sparse. This study explores, within the South African context, the adoptee's desire for, and experience of, reunion with the birth mother. It deals with two aspects. Firstly, the adoptee's experience of reunion with the birth mother is explored through in-depth interviews and the administration of an interview schedule. Secondly, the data recorded in the post-adoption register kept by the Adoption Centre of Cape Town Child Welfare between 1989 and 1995 were examined through a content analysis. A literature review places the topic within a wider context, as well as providing a critical framework within which to analyse the data collected in the study. The study furthermore aimed to unite the dialectic of the clinical practitioner, with its focus on the internal, intra-personal experiences of the individual adoptee, with that of the adoption practitioner, which focuses on the inter-personal and case management framework as it relates to the reunification of the various parties.

As the adoptee has, historically, been the passive and most disempowered member of the adoption triad, the researcher sought, through this study, to provide the adoptee with a 'voice'. This was achieved through employing a narrative approach to the in-depth interviews with adoptees, as the use of narrative enables us to "...explain ourselves to ourselves and others and to consolidate a sense of self" (Laird, in Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1989). The narrative approach is a 'self-constructive process', which enables the adoptee to 'redefine himself' (Gergen & Gergen, in Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1989:23). The telling of their stories thus becomes for adoptees "...a powerful act of healing [the] child within... Perhaps the most healing feature is that they [the story

tellers], get to hear their own story" (Campbell, 2001:96-97). The research and the power of narrative may be seen as a means to redress the impact of adoption upon the adoptee.

## **RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY**

The researcher's professional experience as an adoption practitioner motivated the choice of the research topic and provided the opportunity for gaining entry into a field which is usually difficult to access. As the possibility of post-adoption contact has existed in the South African context for the past 19 years, it is now possible to establish the long-term outcome of post-adoption reunion in this country. The dearth of research and information on post-adoption reunion in South African suggests that such a study could provide valuable information to both clinical and adoption practitioners, as well as making it possible to compare the South African data with research and information from other cultures and countries. It is furthermore the researcher's contention that a psychoanalytic and object relations perspective offers valuable insights that may enhance our understanding of the adoptee's desire to search for and establish reunion with the birth mother.

## **MAIN RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The qualitative aspect of the study addresses the question of why adoptees wish to establish reunion with the birth mother; how they experience the reunion, and what constitutes a 'successful' reunion. The quantitative aspect of the research investigates how the adoptee's experience of adoption and adoption revelation affects their views of adoption and desire for reunion. The question of whether contacts established through reunion are ongoing is addressed in both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the research (Scordilis, 2002).

## **THE RESEARCHER'S ASSUMPTIONS**

A number of assumptions regarding post-adoption reunion were examined against the findings of this study. These may be summarized as follows.

The adoptee's need for reunion is inextricably bound up with the early, peri-natal experiences, including the losses sustained as a result of adoption. Post-adoption reunion is an attempt, on the part of the adoptee, to recover 'the lost object' and establish essential connections with the past. Adoptees who have experienced their adoption as negative and unsatisfactory are more likely to desire reunion. Post-adoption reunion allows the adoptee to revisit, and thus to come to terms with, the trauma of separation and complicated loss and grief which results from adoption. As a result of these factors, most reunion contacts are discontinued after an initial honeymoon period.

## **SUMMARY OF THE BACKGROUND AND HISTORY OF ADOPTION PRACTICE**

According to the Child Welfare League of America (1978) in Starke (1986:11) legal adoption is the "...method provided by law to establish the legal relationship of parent and child between persons who are not so related by birth". Cole and Donely (in Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1989:274) assert that adoption is an 'age-old institution in fact and myth'; it is a social construct, and as such is value laden and shaped by cultural forces. Early adoptions were usually effected for a religious or political purpose, and in many cultures adoption was a means of ensuring a male heir who could meet the demands of religious ceremonies and beliefs, as well as to ensure the perpetuation of the family. Today there are still certain cultures and religious groups who are similarly motivated to adopt. The earliest written laws relating to adoption are to be found in the Code of Hammurabi (an early Babylonian code of law), which dates from around 2800 BC (Cole & Donely, in Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1989). This document indicates that this early society shared contemporary concerns

such as the suitability (matching) of adopter and child to each other; the impact and trauma of separation from the first caretaker upon the child; and the issue of adoptees searching for birthparents. The Code also highlights an important difference between past and present adoption practice in that, while birth parents had no right to demand the return of their child, transgressions by the adoptee against the adoptive parents constituted grounds for the adoptive parent to return the child to the birth parents. In contrast, contemporary law views adoption as a *permanent* social and psycho-legal process.

## HISTORY OF ADOPTION PRACTICE IN SOUTH AFRICA

Legalised adoption in South Africa is a relatively recent phenomenon, and adoption legislation and practice in South Africa are aimed at protecting and ensuring the best interests of the child. As in the rest of the world, adoption practice has been significantly affected by socio-political changes which have taken place over the years. The various prohibitions of the apartheid era were reflected in the laws governing adoption. Changes that developed in the post-apartheid era of South African history were reflected in the laws governing adoption practice. Unfortunately, changes in the law have not always been accompanied by changes in attitude and thus prejudice continues to exist, and is often vociferously expressed, most particularly in respect of the cross-cultural adoption and in the placement of children with gay and lesbian parents.

The Child Welfare Society of Cape Town Golden Jubilee Report (1958) states that as early as 1915 twelve children were placed in adoption and that a large number of children orphaned by the great influenza epidemic of 1918 were placed for adoption with 'kindly people coming forward to offer homes'. In 1923 the first Adoption Act was passed and made provision for legalised adoption in South Africa; this Act made no provision for disclosure/non-disclosure of information in an adoption, neither did it cover the need for investigating the suitability or preparation of prospective adoptive parents. In 1937 the Children's Act was passed and made provision for non-disclosure and thus also ensured confidentiality. This Act introduced the requirement of matching the race of the child to that of the adoptive parents. In 1941 the government agreed to issue an abridged birth certificate for the adopted child, giving only the adopted name and not reflecting the fact of adoption or illegitimacy. As in other parts of the world, the First and Second World Wars led to an increase in adoption and in 1948 the first international adoptions were effected, when eleven war orphans from Jersey were brought to South Africa and placed in adoption here. The post-war years resulted in an increased interest in adoption and by 1955 it became necessary to impose certain restrictions and criteria in respect of prospective adopters as the number of prospective adopters exceeded the children available for adoption. In 1960 the passing of the Children's Act brought into being the requirement that the race, religion and language of the parties involved in an adoption be matched. These requirements reflected the socio-political climate of the time. South Africa's people and communities were divided along racial and cultural lines. The impact of the apartheid era, the prohibition of mixed marriages, the policy of segregation and the Group Areas were reflected in the laws governing adoption as well as in adoption practice.

More recently, significant changes in South African adoption practice were instituted with the passing of the Child Care Act 74 of 1983. According to this legislation, the requirement that parties be matched according to race was replaced with the requirement in Section 40 of the Child Care Act, that *due regard be paid to the matching of culture, religion and language*. In addition, the adoptee is allowed access to the adoption records subject to certain provisions. In 1998 the Child Care Act 74/83 was amended and adoption practice in South Africa was altered to meet the requirements of these legal changes. These amendments came into effect in February 1999 and brought the Child Care Act and adoption procedures into line with the Rights of Natural Fathers of

Children Born Out of Wedlock Bill. This change has had a major impact on adoption practice and, although it grants fathers rights, it has also created many problems for these same fathers, whom it serves to empower as well as impacting significantly on adoptive parents and children being given up for adoption. This amendment to the law instituted a mandatory sixty-day period within which birth parents consenting to an adoption are able to change their mind and withdraw their consent to the adoption. According to the amendments, the sixty-day period applies to birth fathers as well as birth mothers. If the birth parents do not sign consent at the same time, this period increases as their consents do not run concurrently. The practical difficulties in tracing birth fathers or proving that their whereabouts are unknown often delays the finalisation of adoption. The amendment has also impacted on the placement of babies for adoption. In some instances, birth mothers are reticent to consider adoption as they do not wish to involve the birth father in their decision; adoptive parents may also be reticent to accept the added risk which accompanies the involvement of the birth father. It is unfortunate that, as a result of this new legislation, the rights of the birth father may, in some cases, take precedence over the rights of the child. These amendments to the Child Care Act also made it possible for birth parents to seek information about, and reunion with, the child whom they relinquished. South African law sets out broad criteria for the acceptance of adopters as suitable parents. The changes in socio-political values are reflected in our laws and have been an important factor in bringing about significant changes and developments in South African adoption practice and legislation. While there has been much debate regarding the new legislation that will replace the existing Child Care Act 74 of 1983, the intended legislation may bring about further changes in adoption practice, one of the most significant being that common law partners as well as gay couples will be able to adopt a child jointly. To date this has not been possible legally.

## **THE CONTRIBUTION OF PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY IN THE UNDERSTANDING OF POST-ADOPTION REUNION**

Brodzinsky and Schechter (1989:71) remind us that "...very little is known about the complex psychological meaning of search behaviour". There are, however, a number of contributions from the literature which may help to clarify and explain the adoptee's search for the birth mother and experience of reunion. For the purpose of this article, these contributions are summarised in three main sections, namely the implications of peri-natal factors including intra-psychic forces and early psychic processes; identity and the development of the self in the adoptee; the impact and experience of grief and loss.

### **The implication of peri-natal factors**

The literature suggests that early peri-natal history impacts significantly on the future development of the individual (Machter, 1985; Mayman, 1968; Peterfreund, 1978). The impact of the premature interruption of early psychic process is variously viewed by theorists such as Freud (1938), Mahler (1975) and Winnicott (1965). Psychoanalytic developmental theory highlights the powerful impact of early relationships on the future development of the individual and asserts that the relationship with the first mother, in utero and in the days and weeks immediately following birth, will leave an indelible impression on the individual. The mother's importance to the psychological development of the child is a basic tenet of psychoanalytic theory. Bowlby (1956) and Stern (1985) have confirmed the existence of psychic and mental life in the infant, while the theoretical contributions of Balint (1994), Freud (1938), Klein (in Segal, 1973), Mahler (1975) and Winnicott (1965), and suggest that there is a unique and primal bond between infant and mother during the earliest days and weeks of the infant's life. This bond "...which is already established in utero, further develops out of the daily interactions and inter-connections of the mother-infant unit, and is of critical

importance in the development of the individual" (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983:11-12). Michael Balint (1994) asserts that the infant-mother relationship is an intense and intimate one; he is of the opinion that its roots lie firmly in intra-uterine existence.

Psychoanalytic and Object Relations theory thus provide substantial arguments for the existence of a unique and intense mother-infant bond which consists of both conscious and primitive, unconscious interconnections and interactions. In addition, the literature supports the theory that a disturbance of these early primitive ties will impact significantly on the development of the individual. During the 1940s and 1950s extensive research by psychoanalysts resulted in the establishment of a comprehensive body of knowledge on attachment and separation. The theory thus asserts that the first and most basic object relations develop out of this primary relationship and underlies all others relationships (Wirz, 1990). A study of the psychoanalytic literature thus indicates that the adoptee, in his/her quest for reunion, is not simply responding to external factors in his/her life experience, but rather is motivated by intra-psychic forces resulting from the interruption of early psychic processes.

### **Identity and the self**

The major themes in the literature include the adoptee's search for identity, need to belong and desire to resolve a sense of emptiness, confusion and chaos. Brodzinsky and Schechter (1989:74) assert that the literal object of the search, the birth parent, is seen as a means to another end. It is "...an attempt to repair aspects of the self that have to do with the sense of disconnectedness from the human race and with the sense of disadvantage vis-à-vis people who are 'born' rather than adopted". In addition, "...the adoptee through searching attempts to bring the locus of control from 'out there' to inside him/herself" (Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1989:81). It is a way the individual can experience the self as capable of actively "acting upon" the environment, rather than passively being acted upon. This is a major factor in the establishment of a healthy identity.

Lerner (in Frankiel, 1994) notes that early loss of a parent is traumatic and impacts significantly upon the emerging sense of self and other, while Tyson (in Frankiel, 1994:273) asserts that when there is deprivation of a significant object prior to maturity, the "...structure of the personality is more vulnerable as the object is needed to supply experiences essential for normal growth and development". He further states that the pain of self-without-the-object "...threatens the constancy of the not yet stabilized sense of self, and a childhood loss of a significant object incorporates the loss of part of the self".

Spitz (in Pine 1985) highlights the importance of the pre-oedipal period in the child's development and the concomitant, early mother-infant object relations and theories of the self. Wirz (1990) asserts that the individual psyche consists of internalised images of self and others, and that these are formed out of the infant's primary relationship with the mother. According to Brinch (in Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1989), some theorists assert that "...telling a child of his adoption inflicts a psychological injury which cannot be mastered without certain inner, emotional and cognitive resources; resources which are not usually available to the child before the developmental period of latency". This concurs with the view of Verrier (1993), who asserts that adoption inflicts upon the adoptee a narcissistic wound. In contrast to those who approach reunion as psychopathological, there are a number of theorists whose views indicate that reunion is a healthy, transformative and creative experience. According to Simos (1979 in Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1989:44) "Loss always incorporates some degree of threat to our self-esteem, and an unrieved loss remains alive in our unconscious, which has no sense of time". Thahka (in Frankiel, 1994:478) suggests that pre-structural object loss is experienced as a loss of the self-function rather than as the loss of a whole person. According to Joffee and Sandler (in Frankiel, 1994:42) "...what was lost in object loss is



ultimately a state of the self for which the object is a vehicle. When a child loses the mother, he loses the sense of well-being that occurs as a result of that relationship". Thus, search behaviour can also be seen as an effort on the part of the adoptee to reclaim a part of the self that was lost.

### Grief and loss in adoption

The psychology of loss and separation is rooted in psychoanalytic theory and observation (Bloom-Fesbach & Bloom-Fesbach, 1988:8). However, whether the child is able to mourn in the same sense as the adult is somewhat controversial, and some (Freud, 1917; Nagera in Frankiel, 1994) assert that children are incapable of mourning as the complex ego functions involved in mourning are not yet sufficiently developed in young children, and as the developmental needs of children oppose the normal mourning process. Learner (in Frankiel, 1994) states that there is generally a consensus that early loss of a parent is traumatic, and impacts significantly upon the formation of intra-psychic structures and emerging sense of self and other. He asserts that early loss may result in a need for control, defensive use of compliance, yearning for a sense of belonging as well as a tendency to rediscover and symbolically reclaim the lost object (in Frankiel, 1994:470-471).

Marais (in Lendrum & Gabrielle, 1992) states that "...grief works itself out through a process of reformulation rather than substitution". According to Brodzinsky (in Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1989:314), this reformulation is seen as "...finding one's way back to what originally happened, taking a good, hard look at everything that happened, and coming to an understanding of the roles of everyone, including one's self". According to Bloom-Fesbach and Bloom-Fesbach (1988:3) "...coping with loss is inextricably tied to creative transformation". Mourning and grief may thus be seen to be a healthy, indeed creative, process rather than being psychopathological in nature. Eisenstadt (in Frankiel, 1994:528) seems to echo this when he asserts that "The bereavement reaction can be an impetus for creative effort, a force for good... In the creative mourning process there is a sequence of events whereby the loss triggers off a crisis requiring mastery on the part of the bereaved individual". *The creative effort is seen as a restorative act.* Bollas (1987:22), speaking of the adult's search for the transformational object, refers to this as a "...somewhat manic search for health". Bowlby (in Holmes, 1993:90-91) "places the search for the lost object at the centre of the mourning process..." and asserts that the search is an attempt to recover the lost object. Freud however, saw the purpose of this mental search as that of detachment. He argued that internalising or identifying with aspects of the lost object is part of the process of mourning (Freud, 1917) and he does not regard grief and mourning as pathological. Similarly, Engel (in Frankiel, 1994:10-11) also states that "...grief is a healthy, adaptive and reparative process which corrects or overcomes a stress".

Klein (in Frankiel, 1994:95-122) suggests that "...the loss of a loved figure has a profound effect on the sense of well-being..." and that the process of normal mourning reinstates the "...sense of once again possessing the internal good object despite the loss of the external object" (Klein in Frankiel, 1994:95). According to Klein (in Frankiel, 1994:95), through mourning the individual "...overcomes his grief, regains security, and achieves true harmony and peace". The experiences of reunion would appear to simulate this process.

### INTRODUCTION TO THE METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The study has been conducted from within a non-probability framework and is an empirical, ethnographic study with a predominantly qualitative, inductive approach, which is exploratory and descriptive in nature. The dominant-less-dominant model of Creswell, as outlined in De Vos (2001), was employed and provides insights into the subjective experiences of adoptees as well as objective data regarding adoption and reunion. The combination of methods employed in the study

provide methodological and data triangulation, which enhances the validity and reliability of the study. It furthermore ensures a degree of objectivity, while at the same time preventing the sensitive human experiences related to adoption from being translated and understood simply in terms of cold numbers and statistics.

Data gathered from the qualitative aspect of this study are presented in the form of themes, categories, words and quotes, and offer an 'insider perspective' of the people and phenomenon being studied and provides a thick, in-depth description of the adoptee's experiences of, and motivation to secure, reunion. The qualitative aspect of the study is comprised of eight adult adoptees, who experienced face-to-face reunion with the birth mother. Subjects in the qualitative research were selected according to criteria representative of the general population of adoptees. In-depth interviews were conducted with these adoptees. An interview schedule, which followed an open-ended approach, was presented to the subjects after they had narrated their (hi)story. Data obtained from the quantitative aspect of the study explore and describe, as well as quantify the various aspects of post-adoption searches conducted through the Adoption Centre of Cape Town Child Welfare. These data are presented in the form of tables and charts and places the data obtained in the qualitative aspect of this study within a broader context.

The quantitative sample is comprised of 207 contacts noted in the post-adoption register of Cape Town Child Welfare and entailed a content analysis of the register. This aspect of the research enabled the researcher to ascertain whether there is any correlation between different aspects of the adoption and reunion experience.

A non-empirical aspect of this study is the analysis of the word and concept 'successful' as used to refer to adoption and reunion experiences. The use of non-empirical research has provided clarity on the concept of 'success' upon which much of the research is based. This facet of the research has been approached by discussing, clarifying and elaborating the dimensions of the concept during the in-depth interviews and the survey of data from the adoption register.

## REASONS FOR SELECTING THE PARTICULAR TYPE OF STUDY

The exploratory and descriptive nature of qualitative research makes it flexible, open to change, and allows a detailed illumination of the topic, as well as allowing new research questions to be identified as the research progresses. The use of inductive research enables the building up of theory from the data as they are collected in the course of the research. This is important as such grounded research makes allowances for the fact that this particular area has, to date, received little attention in the South African context, and thus the research was being developed as it was conducted. This approach allowed the researcher to capture, understand and portray the richness and diversity, complexities and similarities noted in the experiences of the adoptees who were interviewed.

## SAMPLING

The study sample was derived from adoptees who had contact with the researcher or the Adoption Centre between 2000 and 2002. As it was impossible to trace all adoptees represented in the period under review, random sampling could not be employed. The qualitative research employed aspects of convenience, purposive and quota sampling, and focused on collecting a small sample of particular cases, which served to clarify and deepen the researcher's understanding of the topic under investigation. The use of purposive and quota sampling provided a degree of representativity. The quantitative sample was 'macroanalytic' and enabled the researcher to examine the category as a whole for important features. The use of eight in-depth case studies enabled the researcher to

"...connect the micro level or actions of individual people, to the macro level, or large scale social structures and processes" (Vaughn, in Neuman, 2000:391-392).

## LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

The disadvantages of qualitative, descriptive and exploratory research are that the measures used are largely interpretive. Qualitative data gathering and analysis also lack standardisation of measurement. The limited size of the samples means that findings cannot be generalised to the wider population. It should, however, be noted that this is an accepted limitation of qualitative research (Neuman, 2000). Finally, the use of secondary data (adoption register) did not allow the researcher to control or check for errors in collection of the original data.

## DATE ANALYSIS: RESULTS AND MEASUREMENT

The analysis of data followed the approach described by Rubin and Rubin (in Mouton, 2001:198). Analysis of data commenced with the first interview and continued throughout the study. The approach put forward by Tesch (in De Vos, 2001:343) was utilised in the analysis of qualitative data.

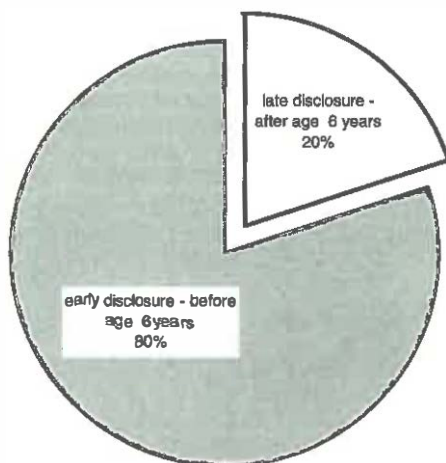
The final data analysis commenced with categorisation of themes and concepts, followed by a comparison across categories; this was aimed at discovering similarities, connections and variations in the themes. The themes were then integrated into an accurate and detailed interpretation of the data (Mouton, 2001:198-199).

## Quantitative data obtained from the adoption register

The data indicate that 'unsuccessful' or discontinued contact, in the majority of cases, occurs within the first two years after reunion and in many instances sooner. A total of 35 out of 44 adoptees (80%) who went on to establish reunion had been informed of their adoptive status at a young age (see Figure 1). This comprises 14% of the total sample of 207 adoptees. Of the 94 adoptions that were rated as unsuccessful, 32% indicated that disclosure occurred at a young age. Non-disclosure of adoption was noted in 9% (21 cases) of the total of 207 adoptions. The data indicates that, in 12% of adoptions rated successful, disclosure had not occurred. From the 207 entries in the adoption register, two adoptees developed 'unhealthy relationships' with the birth mother, and both had moved in to live with her. In both cases the adoptions were rated as unhappy and unsuccessful. The majority of post-adoption enquiries did not proceed beyond initial information seeking. A total of 60% of adoptees did not continue beyond enquiry, while 40% of adoptees went on to search. The data indicate that, of 44 reunions established, 14 enquiries were from male adoptees and 30 from females, and the majority of searchers were young adults. This concurs with findings of other studies which also indicate that the majority of searchers are female and in young adulthood (Bertocci & Schechter, 1987, in Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1989; Sorosky, Baran & Panor, 1978; Triseliotis, 1973). The present study indicates that of the 207 contacts noted in the adoption register, 8% of adoptive parents were noted as being supportive of the adoptee's search to establish reunion. The remaining 92% of adoptive parents were either not supportive, were deceased or had not been informed of the adoptee's search for reunion.



**FIGURE 1**  
**AGE OF DISCLOSURE IN THE SAMPLE OF 44 REUNIONS EFFECTED**



n = 44 reunion contacts established from the 207 post-adoption enquiries noted in the adoption register.

### **Qualitative data obtained from the in-depth interviews**

The following major themes and categories were established through the in-depth interview transcripts: experiences of loss and abandonment, expressed as a sense of incompleteness or unconnectedness; a need for knowledge; issues around belonging and need for connection; identity/ sense of self; issues of control and power; the adoptee's tendency to compliance and conformity; and feelings about the success and value of reunion.

Figure 2 (below) outlines a summary of data obtained from the in-depth interviews, followed by a discussion of major themes.

**FIGURE 2**  
**OUTCOME OF REUNION CONTACTS OF THE 8 ADOPTEES IN THE QUALITATIVE SAMPLE**

Contact between adoptee and birth mother	Number of adoptees	Age at which disclosure occurred	Manner in which disclosure was made
Contact ongoing, but at a distance	3	Young Remembers Young	Parents / positive Not "told" - negative Parents / positive
Contact soured or fizzled out & thus ended	3	Young / positive 18 yrs/ negative Young	Parents / positive Discovered at age 18 / extremely negative. Adopt. Mother / positive
Contact discontinued after initial meeting	2	Remembers Young	Always known / no negative connotation Parents / positive
Contact continued on a close, personal basis	0		

- i. All the adoptees interviewed indicated satisfaction at having participated in reunion regardless of its outcome. In addition, they all stated that the *worth* (value) of reunion is not related to the 'success' of reunion. Adoptees who classified reunion as disappointing or traumatic nevertheless rated it as worthwhile. All of the adoptees indicated that reunion had made a difference to their lives in one way or another.
- ii. Adoptees related 'success' of reunion to feeling 'more whole', having 'filled the gaps' and having achieved a sense of completeness and connection, and to the birth mother having in some manner indicated acceptance of them. All adoptees stated that they would recommend that other adoptees seek reunion. This confirms that the responses regarding the worth and success of reunion are valid.
- iii. Three adoptees expressed a feeling of embarrassment regarding the person of their birth mother and felt that they would rather not be connected to the kind of person she was seen to be.
- iv. A repeated theme which surfaces in the interviews is that of the adoptee 'dutifully wishing to avoid hurting' the adoptive parents (Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1989:76). One adoptee expressed it as feeling torn between the adoptive and birth parents and feeling the need to 'keep both parties happy'. Another adoptee stated that reunion would not be 'successful' or 'worthwhile' if it meant losing or alienating the adoptive parents.
- v. Adoptees indicated that reunion provided *a sense of roots and of belonging*; that reunion has helped to deal with the sense of *'never having been born'*, of *'feeling like an alien on a strange planet'*, of *abandonment* and of *feeling worthless*. One adoptee captured this feeling when he said: "I was shaken to my very core to think that I was nothing more than a mere allocation". Another adoptee, who did not experience the reunion as particularly successful nevertheless expressed a newfound sense of worth and belonging; she stated: "The fact that my birth mother was hurting made a huge difference to me because it meant I mattered to her". Two adoptees stated that they were saddened by the fact that the birth mother had

- rejected them, and indicated a desire (yearning) for restoration and restitution of this relationship. This desire exists, although they realize that it is hopeless and impossible.
- vi. The theme of identity is indicated in various ways, sometimes directly, at other times indirectly and probably not consciously. Comments include the following:
- “Reunion has completed my identity and tied up the loose ends”;
- “It has made me feel more whole”;
- “I feel less like an alien on a strange planet”.
- vii. Some social workers are experienced as *intrusive and controlling*, others were described as *wonderful and supportive*. Comments indicate that regardless of how social workers are experienced, their impact in the process of reunion is nevertheless significant. Adoptees who experienced social workers negatively seem to strive to understand and make allowances for this. It seems that this may be related to the tendency of adoptees to put a ‘positive spin’ on things and to ‘make good’ and thus to the compliance noted in adoptees as seeming to underscore a *false-self* (Winnicott, in Newman, 1995).
- viii. To some extent the reunion seems to be motivated by a desire to express this gratitude to the birth parent (“I wanted to thank her”). One adoptee expressed this as being grateful that her birth mother had ‘*given her a chance at life*’, while another felt that she was grateful for the way she had turned out and that growing up in her biological family was unthinkable as her parents seem to be from “*the wrong side of the tracks*”.

## SYNTHESIS OF MAJOR FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The data gathered in this study appear to support the notion that the adoptee's desire for reunion is a health-promoting process which is motivated by both external, social factors as well as intrapsychic forces, the latter resulting from the interruption of early psychic processes. Reunion is seen to be a response to these forces and enables the adoptee to establish a more coherent and integrated sense of self, and to place him/herself within an historical and biological narrative. The adoptee, whilst seeking to reclaim the ‘lost object’, does so as a means of reclaiming and completing the self, the development of which was disturbed as a result of premature interruption of the primary infant-mother bond. The value of reunion does not lie in the ‘success’ or outcome of the reunion, but in the value of the experience. Adoptees express reunion as having an empowering and healing effect, regardless of outcome of reunion contact. Reunion in itself appears to constitute a form of retrospective mourning, and is a healthy (rather than a pathological) experience. This can set the adoptee free to take up the ‘True Self’ and to cast off the ‘False Self’ which the adoptive status has conferred upon him/her, resulting in the adoptee's tendency to conformity and compliance. This process has the potential of contributing to a more coherent self-identity. Whilst reunion does constitute a reclaiming of the ‘lost object’ (in the form of the birth mother), it is not in itself the aim or ultimate value of reunion. This study provides strong evidence that there is a positive relationship between reunion and the adoptee's desire to fill a sense of emptiness, to achieve a sense of connection, belonging and improved self-understanding, and to order the confusion and chaos which are felt.

The outcome of this study indicates that the age at which disclosure occurred, and how the adoption itself was experienced do not, on their own, result in search behaviour. Furthermore, the data suggest that the majority of reunions are discontinued after an initial ‘honeymoon phase’, and that a negative adoption experience is not more likely to result in the adoptee seeking reunion. The outcome of this study supports the view that the degree of perceived similarity between adoptee

and adoptive family bears no relationship to the adoptee's search activities. Findings from a study by Sobol and Cardiff (1983, in Brodzinski & Schechter, 1989) concur with this. The majority of reunion contacts are discontinued, and reunion contact maintained over a distance, or indirectly, appears to be more satisfactory than direct, ongoing contact.

## MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS STEMMING FROM THE STUDY

Adoption reunion should be acknowledged as a normal and healthy process, which enables the adoptee to establish a new and more stable sense of self. The adoption practitioner should, in the process of the search and reunion, supportively accompany the adoptee in his/her journey, ensuring that the adoptee is not disempowered. The reunion should remain the personal journey of the individual adoptee, who should be allowed to control the process as far as possible, even if this results in the 'outcome' of reunion being less satisfactory. It is important to remember that the outcome of the reunion is less important than the process or 'journey'.

The use of narrative therapy should be acknowledged and understood as a useful adjunct to traditional methods employed in adoption practice, and practitioners should become acquainted with the use and value of this form of therapeutic intervention in order to maximise its use in adoption work. Narrative therapy can facilitate the adoptee in reworking his/her history.

While it is accepted that the adoption practitioner does not enter into therapy with the parties involved in reunion, s/he should nevertheless be aware of the therapeutic value and effect of the reunion process and experience in order to maximise the value of reunion for the adoptee.

A further recommendation relates to future research in the field of adoption. Firstly, the experiences and profile of the non-searcher (the adoptee who does not wish to establish reunion) should be explored. Secondly, the experiences of pre-structural loss in adoption should be compared with similar early experiences of loss within a non-adoption context.

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