



***THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY IN  
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## **Relationships Between Adult Attachment Style, Adoptees' Motives for Searching, and Reunion Satisfaction with Birthmothers**

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### **Abstract**

The present study investigated the relationship between attachment styles and motives for searching among 109 adoptees who had searched for birth relatives. Searchers who had experienced face-to-face reunions with their birthmothers ( $n = 57$ ) also completed items relating to their reunion satisfaction. Participants rated themselves on Bartholomew and Horowitz's (1991) four attachment prototypes. They also completed the Attachment Style Questionnaire (ASQ; Feeney, Noller, & Hanrahan, 1994) and the Motives for Searching Questionnaire, which identifies three search motives (i.e., searching to gain background information, to reconnect with birth relatives, and to resolve personal issues). While searching to reconnect with birth relatives and to resolve personal issues were both positively correlated with a preoccupied attachment style, differences also emerged between these two motives. Searching to reconnect with birth relatives was negatively correlated with a dismissing attachment style, while those who searched to resolve personal issues had a greater need for approval and less emotional closeness with their birthmothers. A secure attachment style was generally associated with better reunion outcomes, while those who saw relationships as secondary or had a higher need for approval were more likely to experience some negative reunion outcomes. Implications for counselling are discussed.

A number of researchers have demonstrated the usefulness of investigating adult relationships from an attachment perspective. For example, secure attachment has been positively associated with emotional trust (Feeney & Noller, 1992), and negatively correlated with loneliness (DiTommaso, Brannen-McNulty, Ross, & Burgess, 2003) and risk in intimacy (Feeney & Noller, 1992). There is also some evidence that secure people are more socially skilled and that their friends report greater satisfaction with the friendship (e.g., Bippus & Rollin, 2003; Weimer, Kerns, & Oldenburg, 2004).

Borders, Penny, and Portnoy's (2000) study of adoptees and their non-adopted friends is one of the few that has explored adult attachment style in an adoption setting. They found that fewer adult adoptees were classified as secure compared with their non-adopted friends. Conversely, adoptees were more likely than non-adoptees to be categorised as preoccupied or fearful. We obtained similar results in a study comparing Australian adoptees and non-adoptees (Feeney, Passmore, & Peterson, 2004). However, when attachment was measured by the Attachment Style Questionnaire (ASQ; Feeney, Noller, & Hanrahan, 1994), we found a different pattern of results depending on whether or not the adoptee had actively searched for one or more birth relatives. Compared with non-adoptees, searchers were less confident in self and others (i.e., less secure), and reported higher levels of discomfort with closeness, preoccupation with relationships, and need for approval. Interestingly, nonsearching adoptees did not differ from the non-adoptees on any of the attachment scales. Conversely, Borders et al. (2000) found that searching and non-searching adoptees did not differ in terms of attachment style.

Edens and Cavell (1999) argued that attachment variables may help to explain "the often contradictory evidence concerning the meaning of the search for adopted persons" (p. 60). One possible explanation for the conflicting results noted earlier is that adoptees search for different reasons and that these search motives correlate with attachment measures in different ways. Therefore, our first aim was to investigate the relationships between attachment style and search motives in a group of searching adoptees. Due to a lack of previous research in this area, hypotheses remained tentative. However, we speculated that searching in order to resolve personal issues may be correlated with the more insecure attachment styles. Edens and Cavell also noted that pre-existing working models of self and others, as reflected in attachment styles, may explain how adoptees respond to reunions with birth relatives. Thus, our second aim was to explore the relationships among attachment style, search motives, and reunion outcomes in a subset of searching adoptees who had met their birthmothers. Again, there was a lack of relevant previous research in the adoption area. In view of previous research in the general relationship literature supporting a link between secure attachment and positive relationship outcomes,

however, it was hypothesised that secure individuals would report more favourable reunions with their birthmothers than would insecure individuals.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 109 searching adoptees (i.e., searchers), including those who were currently searching for birth relatives and those who had searched for birth relatives in the past. These searchers were drawn from a sample of 144 adoptees who had taken part in a larger study comparing adoptees and non-adoptees on various measures. All were born in Australia and had an Anglo-Australian background. All were adopted by non-relatives within the first two years of their birth, with the majority (94.4%) being adopted within the first 12 weeks. Following their adoptions, all lived with both adoptive parents until at least the age of 16. Ages ranged from 18 to 66, with a mean age of 39.21 years. Most of the participants were female (76.1%), were married or in a de facto relationship (62%), and had completed some further education beyond high school (79%).

Some analyses also focused on a subset of those adoptees who had searched for their birthmother and had had a face-to-face reunion with her. These reunited searchers comprised 57 adoptees. Demographics were generally similar to the larger group, with most being female (82.5%), married or in a de facto relationship (67.9%), and having some education beyond high school (78.9%). Ages ranged from 24 to 63, with a mean age of 39.35 years.

### Measures

All participants completed measures of adult attachment style and motives for searching. Adoptees who had met their birthmothers also completed measures regarding reunion outcomes.

*Attachment measures.* Two attachment measures were used in the current study. First, participants read descriptions of the four attachment prototypes proposed by Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991); namely secure, preoccupied, dismissing, and fearful. They then rated the extent to which each paragraph described their relationship style on a scale from 1 (*not at all like me*) to 7 (*very much like me*).

Participants also completed the 40-item Attachment Style Questionnaire (ASQ; Feeney et al., 1994), with each item being rated on a scale from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 6 (*totally agree*). The ASQ yields five subscores. The confidence in self and others subscale is similar to Bartholomew and Horowitz's (1991) secure dimension (e.g., "I find it relatively easy to get close to other people"). The other four subscales reflect various kinds of insecure attachment styles: discomfort with closeness, relationships as secondary to achievement, need for approval, and preoccupation with relationships.

*Motives for searching.* The Motives for Searching Questionnaire (MSQ; Passmore, Feeney, Peterson, & Shimmaki, 2005) was developed specifically for the larger study of which this research is a part. It consists of 13 items that tap various reasons an adoptee may have for searching for birth relatives. Each item is rated on a scale from 1 (*not at all important*) to 4 (*very important*). The MSQ includes three subscales: background information (4 items; e.g., "To find out about family history"), reconnect with birth relatives (4 items; e.g., "To establish a relationship with your birthparent/s"), and resolution of personal issues (5 items; e.g., "To help resolve some personal problems").

*Reunion outcomes.* The 57 participants who had met their birthmothers also completed three items pertaining to their satisfaction with that reunion: "How satisfying was your initial reunion with your birthmother?", "How satisfied are you with the amount of contact you have with your birthmother?", and "How satisfying is your current relationship with your birthmother?". Each of these items was rated on a scale from 1 (*extremely dissatisfying*) to 6 (*extremely satisfying*). Participants also rated their current relationship with their birthmother in terms of emotional closeness on a scale from 1 (*extremely distant*) to 6 (*extremely close*).

### Procedure

Participants were recruited from various sources, including advertisements in the print and electronic media, psychology classes, university newsletters, flyers left in doctors' and counsellor's waiting rooms, adoption support groups, and networks available to the researchers. Those who met the inclusion criteria (e.g., Anglo-Australian, adopted by non-relatives within two years of birth) were sent a pack that included a cover letter, an informed consent form, the questionnaire, and a reply-paid envelope. They were also asked if they would be interested in participating in a follow-up questionnaire in six months time and an interview. Only data from Phase 1 are included in the current paper. While no incentives were offered for participation in Phase 1, participants received either movie vouchers or \$20 if they completed the follow-up questionnaire.

## Results

Using the full sample of 109 searching adoptees, adequate alpha coefficients were obtained for all subscales of the ASQ (alphas range from .76 to .90) and the MSQ (alphas range from .67 to .82).

To address our first aim, Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were computed in order to explore the relationships between attachment style and search motives. Searching to resolve personal issues was positively correlated with need for approval ( $r = .29, p < .01$ ) and both preoccupation measures ( $r = .20, p < .05$  for Bartholomew and Horowitz's prototypes;  $r = .41, p < .001$  for the ASQ). Searching to reconnect with birth relatives was also positively correlated with both measures of preoccupied attachment ( $r = .26, p < .01$  and  $r = .35, p < .001$  respectively), but negatively correlated with a dismissing attachment style

( $r = -.29, p < .001$ ). The only other significant correlation indicated that individuals who viewed relationships as secondary were less likely to search in order to find background information ( $r = -.19, p < .05$ ).

In keeping with our second aim, Pearson product-moment correlations were computed in order to investigate the relationships among attachment style, search motives, and reunion outcomes in the subset of searching participants who had met their birthmothers. Results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1  
*Intercorrelations Among Attachment Measures and Reunion Outcomes (n = 57)*

	Reunion Outcomes			
	Initial sat.	Contact sat.	Current sat.	Closeness
<b>Attachment prototypes</b>				
Secure	.31*	.31*	.23	.30*
Preoccupied	.04	-.14	-.00	.03
Dismissing	-.08	-.04	-.06	-.02
Fearful	-.18	-.27	-.09	-.20
<b>ASQ measures</b>				
Confidence	.36**	.31*	.23	.19
Discomfort	-.24	-.15	-.08	-.12
Rel. as secondary	-.30*	-.10	-.18	-.27*
Need for approval	-.27*	-.22	-.21	-.03
Preoccupied	-.23	-.09	-.12	-.12
<b>Search motives</b>				
Information	-.23	-.29*	-.41**	-.24
Reconnect	.06	-.18	-.18	-.03
Resolution	-.16	-.25	-.26	-.27*

*Note.* Initial sat. = satisfaction with initial reunion, contact sat. = satisfaction with amount of contact, current sat. = satisfaction with current relationship, closeness = emotional closeness in current relationship. Due to missing data,  $n$ 's for these correlations range from 43 to 57.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

## Discussion

Our first aim was to explore the relationship between attachment style and search motives in a group of searching adoptees. It was tentatively hypothesised that searching in order to resolve personal issues would be correlated with the more insecure attachment styles. There was some support for this hypothesis in that those who were more preoccupied with relationships and those who reported a higher need for approval were more likely to search in order to resolve personal issues. Perhaps not surprisingly, those who were more preoccupied with relationships were also more likely to search in order to reconnect with birth relatives, while those who had a more dismissing attachment style were less likely to search in order to reconnect with birth relatives. In contrast to the results for insecure attachment styles, secure attachment did not correlate significantly with any of the search motives.

It is interesting to speculate on reasons for the positive correlation between need for approval and searching to resolve personal issues. We had previously found that those who searched in order to resolve personal issues scored higher on depression and emotional arousability and perceived their adoptive mothers as less caring and

more controlling (Passmore et al., 2005). A link between depression and need for approval has also been established in previous literature (e.g., Strodl & Noller, 2003). Perhaps those individuals whose need for approval was not met by their adoptive mothers were more likely to search for their birthmothers in the hope of gaining that approval. Indeed, three of the items on the "resolve personal issues" factor tapped needs for belonging and a desire to find whom the adoptee resembled. Unfortunately, subsequent reunions did not always fulfil these hopes, as evidenced by the findings described below.

Our second aim was to investigate the relationships among attachment style, search motives, and reunion outcomes in a group of adoptees who had searched for, and subsequently met, their birthmothers. Some support was found for the hypothesis that secure individuals would report more favourable reunions than insecure individuals, particularly with regard to the initial reunion and the amount of contact. Secure individuals were also more likely to report emotional closeness with their birthmothers. Conversely, those who viewed relationships as secondary were less satisfied with their initial reunion and less emotionally close to their birthmothers. A higher need for approval was also associated with less satisfaction with the initial reunion.

Some relationships were also found between the search motives and reunion outcomes. Those who searched for information were less satisfied with the amount of contact and their current relationship with their birthmothers, perhaps because the information they wanted was insufficient, not forthcoming, or contrary to their expectations. Interestingly, those who searched in order to resolve personal issues reported less emotional closeness with their birthmothers.

These results have implications for counselling adoptees who are deciding whether or not to search or are currently undergoing a search. While many adoptees report that reunions have been beneficial for them personally (e.g., Pacheco & Eme, 1993), not all adoptees are satisfied with their reunion outcomes. Those who have a higher need for approval and/or search to resolve personal issues may be particularly vulnerable to disappointment if their reunion with their birthmother does not fulfil these needs. Counsellors should prepare adoptees for possible reunion outcomes, while concurrently helping them work through personal concerns. It may also be useful for the adoptee to consider the issues facing his or her birthmother, as she will also come to the reunion with her own hopes, fears, needs, and expectations (see Affleck & Steed, 2001). Once a reunion has taken place, the counsellor can assist adoptees and their birthmothers to work through their emerging relationship.

The current research has some limitations. First, we only considered search and reunion from the adoptee's perspective. As the sample used to address our second aim only included those searching adoptees who had had face-to-face reunions with their birthmothers, we may have inadvertently excluded adoptees with the most dissatisfying outcomes (e.g., those whose phone or letter contact with the birthmother was not reciprocated or was terminated before a reunion could take place). Third, the cross-sectional and correlational nature of the study precludes definitive conclusions regarding causation. In view of the large number of correlations, it may also have been advisable to use a more conservative alpha level. However, given that this study was largely exploratory, it provides an interesting starting point for future research.

In our ongoing research program, we will be looking more specifically at adoptees' search and reunion experiences through qualitative analysis of both our interview data and open-ended items from our questionnaire data. If larger sample sizes could be obtained in future research, it would also be possible to use structural equation modelling to assess relationships between various predictors of adoptees' search motives. The dyadic nature of the reunion relationship could also be explored by investigating the attachment styles and search motives of both the adoptee and the birthmother. Moreover, researchers could investigate outcomes for those who have had unsuccessful searches and those whose contact with birthmothers was either not reciprocated or terminated. Such studies would benefit those involved in the search and reunion process, particularly those who may be at risk for relationship problems.

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