Helping Adults Who Were Adopted as Children

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Introduction

Like most other western countries, there was something of a boom period in adoptions in Australia between the 50s and the mid-70s, with those adopted children of course now being adults. Although changes to legislation in the early 90s have made it easier to access adoption records, those adopted in the closed era still continue to teach us about the lifelong nature of adoption. For the last 10 years, my colleagues and I have been conducting research on issues facing these adult adoptees. In this paper, I will focus mainly on two of those studies. The first involved a comparison of 100 adult adoptees and 100 non-adoptees in terms of self-esteem, identity processing styles, and perceptions of the parenting they received from their adoptive parents. The second study involved comparisons of a further group of adoptees and non-adoptees, and included two questionnaire phases and an interview phase. We looked at variables such as attachment, adult relationships, secrecy, depression, emotional arousability, and search and reunion issues. Both studies focused on Anglo-Australian participants because (a) they were the most common adoptions in Australia during that era, and (b) indigenous and international adoptions raise a host of other issues unique to those situations. However, many of the points I cover would also be relevant to other groups of adoptees. In this paper, I'll be focusing on some of the main findings and the implications of those findings for practitioners. More details about the methodologies can be found in the publications listed at the end of this paper.

PART 1: DO ADULT ADOPTEES DIFFER FROM NON-ADOPTEES?

The Problems with Deficit Research

Even though I am an adopted person myself, I really didn't know what I was getting myself into when I first started researching this issue. For the first study (Passmore, Fogarty, Bourke, & Baker-Evans, 2005), it seemed like a good idea to simply compare adoptees and non-adoptees to see how they differed. Like a number of previous researchers, we found that adoptees fared worse than their non-adopted counterparts on some variables. In particular, we found that adoptees reported lower self-esteem than non-adoptees and that the adoptees perceived that their adopted mothers were less caring and more controlling compared with non-adoptees' perception of their mothers. However, when we looked more closely at the data, it became clear that we were losing a lot of information by simply comparing the groups. Let me use self-esteem as an example. While the adoptees as a group had lower self-esteem than the non-adoptees, the difference was relatively small in real terms. On a scale that could range from 10 to 40, with higher scores indicating greater self-esteem, the mean for the adoptees was 31.65 and for the non-adoptees 33.92, indicating that both groups were scoring well above the mid-point on the scale. Indeed, when we looked at the distribution of the scores for both groups, 8% of the adoptees and 9% of the non-adoptees obtained the highest possible score of 40. Still, it was interesting to note that there were also more adoptees than non-adoptees scoring less than 25 (15% vs 2%).

It soon became clear that adoptees were not an homogenous group. For example, a different pattern of results emerged when we divided adoptees into those who had been reunited with their birthmothers and those who had not. We found that it was only the reunited adoptees who differed from the non-

adoptees. Specifically, the reunited adoptees had lower self-esteem and viewed their adoptive mothers as less caring and more controlling than the non-adoptees. However, adoptees who had not reunited with their birthmothers did not differ significantly from the non-adoptees. From our own research and that of others, it seems likely that it was the search status rather than the reunion status that made the difference to the scores. Specifically, those who had lower self-esteem and poor relationships with their adoptive mothers in the first place, may have been more likely to search and subsequently have a reunion. In a further study we found that searchers reported less secure attachments than non-adoptees, though non-searchers and non-adoptees did not differ on any of the attachment scales (Feeney, Passmore, & Peterson, 2004). We also found that searchers reported lower parental care, acceptance, and supervision by their adoptive parents while growing up compared to non-searchers (Passmore, Feeney, Peterson, & Shimmaki, 2006).

From these results, it seemed likely that search status was the problem rather than adoptive status. It was only those who searched who experienced more difficulties. However, the story is not as simplistic as that because there were also differences among the searchers depending on their motives for searching (Passmore, Feeney, Peterson, 2005; Passmore, Feeney, Peterson, & Shimmaki, 2006). We found that motives for searching could be broadly grouped under three categories: Searching for background information, searching to reconnect with birth relatives, and searching to resolve personal issues (e.g., to resolve problems, find a sense of belonging, gain peace, or find who they resemble). It was only those who were searching to resolve personal issues who fared worse. Searching to resolve personal issues was associated with higher depression and emotional arousability, and less favourable perceptions of the adoptive parents (e.g., less parental care and more control from the adoptive mother).

As parental variables were important in both studies, we also looked more specifically at the possible buffering effects that a well-functioning adoptive family might have in protecting adoptees from adjustment problems. In the first study (Passmore, Fogarty, Bourke, & Baker-Evans, 2005), we found that parental variables were more important in predicting self-esteem than simply knowing whether a person was adopted or not. In the second study (Passmore, Feeney, Peterson, & Shimmaki, 2006), we found that adoptive status alone did not significantly predict depression. Once parental variables were added to the equation, however, they did significantly predict depression, particularly parental control. However, both adoptive status and the parental variables were significant predictors of emotional arousability.

To summarise thus far, adoptees as a group seem to have less favourable outcomes than non-adoptees on some psychosocial variables. However, when you distinguish between adoptees who have searched and those who have not, it is primarily the searchers who experience more difficulties. When you go a step further and take into account motives for searching, it is only those who search in order to resolve personal issues or problems who seem to fare worse. Moreover, a well-functioning adoptive family (i.e., one which provides high levels of care, acceptance and appropriate supervision rather than control) can buffer adoptees against adjustment difficulties. Indeed, parenting variables were more important than adoptive status in predicting variables such as self-esteem and depression.

The Right Question

These studies, and others in the field, have led me to believe that we are often asking the wrong question in adoption studies. Rather than asking "How do adoptees differ from non-adoptees?", which I did in my first study, we should be asking "Why is it that some adoptees are well-adjusted and lead happy and fulfilling lives while others do not?".

Adoptees are not an homogenous group. Some have had very favourable adoption, search, and reunion experiences; some have had very unfavourable adoption, search, and reunion experiences; and there is every shade in between. Two contrasting comments by participants in our first study really bring this

point home. One male participant wrote that adoption had totally ruined his life and left him with primal wounding. He said he wouldn't wish adoption on a dog. However, since he'd met his birthmother and birth siblings, he felt his life was starting to get back on track and that things were improving. Contrast that with another participant who wrote that she really gets annoyed when adopted people blame all of their problems on adoption. She then described the wonderful childhood she had experienced with very loving adoptive parents. For her, the only bad point had been meeting her birth relatives, which she described as "more grief than it was worth". You couldn't get two more different accounts of adoption and reunion experiences than those two participants, yet they are indicative of the diversity among adoptees.

Individual differences in terms of such things as resilience, decision-making abilities, coping strategies and so on may also affect the way in which people adapt or respond to their adoption, search, and reunion experiences. One area of individual difference that I've been particularly interested in is that of religious faith and the way that could intersect with coping. In particular, I've had an article published in which I look at identity and loss issues in adoption from a Christian perspective and suggest how Christian resources could be utilised to help empower the adopted individual who may feel abandoned or rejected (Passmore, 2004). Time doesn't allow me to elaborate on that here, but please contact me for a copy of the article if you are interested in exploring this topic further.

So where does that leave us? If each adoptee has a unique adoption, search, and reunion experience, does that mean we can't draw any meaningful conclusions about issues facing adult adoptees and how to help them? No, of course not. Even though there is certainly a lot of variability among adoptees, there are some common issues that may be important for some adoptees. In the remainder of this paper, I will briefly look at some of the key findings from our research and suggest ways in which practitioners can assist adult adoptees with their adoption, search, and reunion issues.

PART 2: SOME KEY ISSUES FOR ADOPTEES

In this part of the paper, I will focus on five key issues that we have addressed in our research:
(a) identity, (b) loss, (c) secrecy, (d) relationship issues, and (e) search and reunion issues. Although I will address each of these separately, there is quite a lot of overlap.

(a)   Identity Issues

While identity issues are something that everyone faces at some time or other, the journey to identity is typically more complex and presents more challenges for adoptees, particularly those who were adopted in the closed era. For example, Grotevant (1997) argues that adoptees face the challenge of "integrating their history as an adopted person into their emerging sense of identity" (p. 9). This emerging sense of identity is inextricably linked to self-esteem (Erikson, 1980). However, it can be difficult for adoptees to develop a healthy self-esteem if they are unable to establish a coherent identity. I've already noted that adoptees in our first study had poorer self-esteem than non-adoptees, though it was also shown that the adoptees were not an homogenous group (Passmore, Fogarty, Bourke, & Baker-Evans, 2005). In that same study we also investigated the different ways in which people can go about establishing an identity. In particular, we used the three identity processing styles suggested by Berzonsky (1989). A person with an *informational* processing style, would gather lots of information and weigh up different options. For example, if they were trying to decide which career to choose, they might attend career markets, research different occupations, talk to people about their occupations and so on. They would then make an informed choice. Relating this to adoption, someone with an informational processing style, might be more likely to read books and articles on adoption, attend conferences such as this, search for information and so on. It is a very proactive style. In contrast, someone with a *normative* processing style tends to go along with the opinions of significant others.

For example, a person might choose to become a teacher because their parents are teachers. While this is not as proactive as the informational style, it can be adaptive in traditional communities where there are set guidelines or structures (Berzonsky & Adams, 1999), or where significant others have been good role models. For example, if someone has a warm, loving relationship with their parents, it is not surprising that they might want to pursue "the family business" with which they are familiar. However, it could be a maladaptive style if the person is denying themselves and just going along with others for fear of making a decision or because they just want to keep a false peace. Relating this to adoption, an adoptee with warm, loving adoptive parents may choose not to search because they are happy with the life they have and do not want to do anything that could potentially hurt their relationship with their parents. This could be an adaptive response if the adoptee is secure in their sense of self and identity. However, another adoptee from a dysfunctional adoptive family may really want to search but decide not to because they are afraid of negative repercussions from their adoptive family. In that sense, using a normative identity processing style and "going along" with the adoptive family may be a more maladaptive approach. The third style, a *diffuse* orientation, is almost always maladaptive. Those with a diffuse processing style are more likely to procrastinate and avoid making decisions until the decision is made for them. In the case of an adoptee, someone who avoids thinking about search and reunion altogether may have the decision to search taken out of their hands by a searching birth relative.

In our study, we didn't find any differences between adoptees and non-adoptees with regard to identity processing styles. However, identity processing styles for both groups did significantly predict self-esteem. Those with a higher self-esteem were more likely to use a normative processing style and less likely to use a diffuse processing style. Knowledge of the different identity processing styles could be helpful in a counselling situation. If the counsellor understands the type of processing style the adoptee uses, he or she could help the adoptee move towards more adaptive ways of decision-making. For example, someone with a diffuse processing style could be taught more adaptive ways of working through identity issues. This does not necessarily mean that the adoptee will initiate a search, but he or she will be in a better position to make an informed and active choice about whether or not to search.

(b)   Loss

Loss is something faced by all members of the adoption triangle. For adoptees, these losses typically involve loss of identity or background information, loss of the biological relatives, and loss of biological connection to the adoptive parents. In the case of unsuccessful searches or reunions, or lack of support from their adoptive families, the person can also experience a double loss. Again there are individual differences, with some experiencing these losses much more acutely than others. One of the problems is that adoption in the closed era typically involved ambiguous losses (e.g., Abrams, 2001). According to Boss (1999), an ambiguous loss is a situation whereby a family member is physically absent but psychologically present (e.g., missing persons cases) or physically present but psychologically absent (e.g., cases of workaholism, dementia, or substance abuse). If someone experiences the death of a parent, there are clear markers for grieving (e.g., a funeral) and a certain amount of closure can be achieved even though the grieving process itself might be prolonged. In closed adoptions, however, grieving can sometimes be difficult because of the ambiguous nature of the loss. For example, the adoptee knows that he or she has a birthmother; however, if they are unable to obtain information and/or reunite with their birthmother, the grieving process is less clear. A loss has taken place, yet it is not acknowledged by the usual public markers and its impact can be underestimated (Brodzinsky, 1987; 1990; Jones, 1997). There can also be a lack of closure in cases of ambiguous loss. For example, is there a point at which the adoptee should stop searching and accept that there is some information they will never know? If their birth relatives do not want contact, is there a point at which the adoptee should let go of the reunion dream?

While the general grief and bereavement literature certainly has a lot to offer counsellors in this area, there are other unique aspects of adoption that need to be recognised. Acknowledging and validating

the losses felt by the adoptee is extremely important. While this of course would be well-known among adoption practitioners, counsellors who do not generally work in the adoption area may be less attuned to these losses. Once the particular losses are identified, the counsellor can help the adoptee work through the grief associated with those losses. In doing this, however, it is important to remember that people have different grief reactions and experiences. Some may find it useful to explore their grief further and to use one or more concrete strategies to deal with that grief (e.g., writing a poem, song, or letter that expresses what they wish they could say to their birth relatives). However, if some adoptees do not seem to be grieving, it does not necessarily mean that they are "not in touch" with their true feelings. Indeed, Bonanno, Papa, and O'Neill (2002) note that people can be very resilient in the face of grief and that absence of grief may actually be a healthy response in some individuals. Well-meaning counsellors may sometimes do more harm than good if they encourage resilient clients to confront their grief. As Bonanno and colleagues note, such a response could "undermine the very protective mechanisms that had up to that time helped these individuals maintain equilibrium and continuity" (p. 202).

Forgiveness is also an issue that can arise in counselling, not only with regard to losses, but with regard to adoption issues in general. For example, some adoptees may feel that others are to blame for their situation: the birthmother for relinquishing the adoptee, the birthfather for not standing by the birthmother, the adoptive parents for not understanding the importance of identity issues, adoption workers for their part in the adoption process, the "system" for blocking information, and God for allowing it all to happen in the first place. Forgiveness used to be thought of as a primarily religious concept. However, in recent years, it has gained more credence in the general counselling and psychological literature (e.g., Baskin & Enright, 2004; Ferch, 1999). Forgiveness of self and others can be an important part of the healing process. It does not mean that a hurt or injustice has not taken place, but that the person is willing to let go of that hurt or injustice and move on with their lives. Even though some adoptees may feel that they were wronged, they can still take responsibility for their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. Forgiveness is also not necessarily a one-off event, but usually involves a process. Baskin and Enright (2004) provide a good model of the steps involved in the forgiveness process, while Ferch (1999) provides a good explanation of intentional forgiving in the counselling setting.

If you are interested in reading more about identity and loss issues, please refer to my 2004 article listed at the end of this paper.

(c)   Secrecy

The negative effects of secrecy in the closed adoption era have been well-documented. For example, adoptees were typically denied access to identifying information regarding their birth relatives, thus making search and reunion difficult if not impossible. In spite of legislative changes, some adoptees are still denied information about their backgrounds. For example, in Queensland where I live, the law changed in 1991 so that adoptees and their birthmothers can now have access to identifying information once the adoptee turns 18. However, for adoptions that took place prior to 1991, either party can place a veto such that their information is not released. For those who search only to find that their information has been vetoed, the secrecy of the closed era continues to have an effect. Regardless of whether adoptions are closed or open, however, adoptive parents can still choose the levels of secrecy and openness they will encourage in their families. Indeed, Brodzinsky (2005) argues that it is not the closed or open nature of the adoption that is most important, but the extent to which the adoptive parents are open regardless of the available information.

In our second study, we looked at the extent to which openness or secrecy in the adoptive family affected adult adoptees, particularly with regard to relationship issues (Passmore, Foulstone, & Feeney, 2006). Greater secrecy in adoptive families was associated with less emotional closeness to the

adoptive parents, perceptions of greater control by the adoptive parents, greater loneliness within both the family and friendship domains, greater risk in intimacy, and higher levels of avoidant and anxious attachment. Interestingly, secrecy within the adoptive family was not significantly related to outcomes in the romantic domain such as romantic loneliness, trust in close relationships, relationship satisfaction, or relationship commitment.

In the interview phase of the study, we explored relationships in greater depth and identified some themes regarding the impact of openness and secrecy on the adult relationships of adoptees. Openness within the adoptive family helped adoptees in their (a) resolution of adoption-related issues such as identity and belonging, (b) search and reunion experiences, and (c) relationships with others. For example, one 31-year-old adopted male noted that his romantic partners always knew he was adopted: "We were always pretty open about talking about things. I suppose that's just the way that ... because I grew up that way. It certainly helped in a relationship to be able to sit down and say, "Hey, I've got a problem with this, can we work things out?". Conversely, secrecy and/or lies or misinformation within adoptive families impacted negatively on adoptees' (a) relationships with adoptive parents, (b) identity, search, and reunion experiences, and (c) relationships with other people. For example, one adopted woman said that the secrecy in her adoptive family had made it difficult for her to trust people: "... there's definitely a trust issue with it, like in my life I can see that very much. Like I've never gotten married, I've never sort of had a lot of key milestone markers that most people have had, and I don't mind that so much, but I just find it's hard to trust people". However, again there are individual differences. Another adoptee noted that the "total cone of silence" surrounding her adoption had actually prompted her to be more open with people, perhaps even too open at times.

Although adoption practice has moved towards a more open system in recent years, counsellors still need to deal with those who came through the closed system. As noted earlier, however, the actual openness or secrecy within the adoptive family may be more important than whether the adoption itself was closed or open. Some adoptees may experience relationship difficulties as a result of the secrecy they experienced in their adoptive families, and counsellors could help them to rebuild more adaptive ways of relating to others. However, counsellors also need to be attuned to the needs of adoptive parents. They may have been secretive or even lied in order to protect themselves or their children or to hide shame (Schooler & Norris, 2002). In some cases, adoptive parents were also lied to by adoption agencies so that they also feel betrayed (Schooler & Norris, 2002). A word of caution is also needed when addressing openness or secrecy in the therapeutic context. It is typically assumed that openness is always good and that secrecy is always bad. However, openness and secrecy may be thought of as a continuum that can change over time depending on the developmental stage of the child and the needs of each member of the adoptive family (Brodzinsky, 2005; Wrobel, Kohler, Grotevant, & Roy, 2003).

(d)   Relationship Issues

In the previous section, I looked at the effects of secrecy and openness on the interpersonal relationships of adult adoptees. However, we also looked at differences between adoptees and non-adoptees in terms of their interpersonal relationships.

Although adult attachment has been conceptualised in a number of different ways, most authors distinguish between secure and insecure attachment styles. When we compared adult adoptees and non-adoptees on the five subscales of the Attachment Style Questionnaire (Feeney, Noller, & Hanrahan, 1994), adoptees obtained lower scores on the confidence subscale (i.e., less secure attachment) and higher scores on the four insecure attachment styles. However, when we divided the adoptees into searchers and non-searchers, it was only the searchers who differed significantly from the non-adoptees. Specifically, the searchers reported lower confidence, but greater discomfort with closeness, preoccupation with relationships, and need for approval. The non-searchers did not differ from the non-adoptees on any of the scales (Feeney, Passmore, & Peterson, 2004). Further analyses indicated that

attachment security was not simply a by-product of adoptive status (i.e., whether or not the person was adopted). As with previous results in the self-esteem area (Passmore, Fogarty, Bourke, & Baker-Evans, 2005), adoptees' perceptions of the parenting they had received from their adoptive parents were stronger predictors of attachment than adoptive status per se. Specifically, lower maternal and paternal care predicted avoidant attachment, and lower paternal care predicted anxious attachment (Feeney, Passmore, & Peterson, 2007). Moreover, attachment styles may actually mediate the effects of adoptive status. Adoptive status significantly predicted risk in intimacy, and both family and social loneliness, with adoptees having more negative outcomes than non-adoptees on these measures. However, adoptive status no longer predicted any of the relationship measures once the attachment dimensions were added into the equation. Both anxious and avoidant attachment were associated with perceptions of more risk in intimacy and greater loneliness. Avoidant attachment was also associated with a lower quality of romantic relationships.

In separate analyses, we investigated the possible impacts of changes in romantic relationships that had occurred during the six-month period between the two questionnaire phases of the study. As expected, attachment scores at Time 1 and the length of the relationship were strong predictors of attachment at Time 2, confirming the relatively stable nature of attachment. For non-adoptees, neither relationship improvement nor deterioration added further to the prediction of attachment at Time 2. For adoptees, however, recent relationship deterioration predicted higher levels of anxiety and avoidance at Time 2.

These findings are interesting because they show that the mere fact of being adopted doesn't mean that someone will necessarily have attachment difficulties. Parenting variables were stronger predictors of anxious and avoidant attachment than adoptive status alone. Moreover, attachment mediated the relationship between adoptive status and relationship outcomes, such that higher levels of anxious and avoidant attachment predicted poorer relationship outcomes. However, adoptees did seem to be more vulnerable to the effects of relationship deterioration. These findings have implications for counsellors working with adoptees. Strategies aimed at strengthening adoptive families would be particularly useful. Adoptees who do experience attachment difficulties could also be helped to develop a more secure attachment style. Such interventions have been used in couples therapy (e.g., Davila, 2003). Levy and Orlans (2003) have also described a model of attachment therapy that can be used with adopted children. We are unaware of any particular attachment therapy that has been used with adult adoptees; however, such an intervention could be derived from attachment principles to help adoptees develop more secure attachments in their adult relationships. The finding that adoptees were more vulnerable to recent relationship deterioration is also something that could be addressed in counselling, as it may stem from more deep-seated feelings of abandonment and rejection resulting from the adoption. Again, this will not apply to all adoptees, but can be a significant issue for some.

(e)   Search and Reunion Issues

I have left search and reunion issues until last, because they overlap with all of the other topics. For example, some adoptees may search to fill in the gaps in their identity or to help overcome a sense of loss. Whether the adoption took place in a closed or open system will also affect the ease of searching for birth relatives. The extent of secrecy or openness in the adoptive family may affect whether adoptees involve their adoptive parents in their search and reunion experiences, while the extent of secrecy or openness within the birth relative's family may affect whether a reunion takes place and/or the way in which the reunion progresses. Also I've been stressing throughout this paper that there is a lot of variability among adoptees. However, the same can be said about search and reunion experiences. Adoptees may have had a good or bad adoption experience, and every shade in between; the search may have been relatively easy or very complicated, with every shade in between, and the reunion may have been wonderful, terrible, or every shade in between. Add to that the fact that reunion experiences with some birth relatives may have been more successful than with other birth relatives, and there are a myriad of factors in the mix that can affect the overall reunion experience. A complete

discussion of search and reunion issues is beyond the scope of this paper. I'll just highlight a few of the main findings from our second study.

We asked adoptees who had reunited with their birthmothers to rate the extent to which they were satisfied with (a) their initial reunion, (b) the amount of contact they had with their birthmother, and (c) their current relationship with their birthmother. We also asked them to rate their emotional closeness to their birthmothers. Interestingly, those adoptees who were more secure in their attachment style indicated higher satisfaction with both their initial reunion and the amount of contact, and also tended to be emotionally closer to their birthmothers (Passmore, Feeney, & Peterson, 2005). Perhaps not surprisingly, those adoptees who viewed relationships as secondary were less likely to be satisfied with the initial reunion and were less emotionally close to their birthmothers. Those with a higher need for approval were also less likely to be satisfied with their initial reunion, and those who searched in order to resolve personal issues or problems were less emotionally close to their birthmothers. These findings again highlight the importance of helping adoptees to address any attachment issues they may have and to also explore motives for searching. If someone is searching in order to gain approval from their birthmother or to resolve personal issues or problems, he or she is likely to be disappointed if the reunion does not live up to expectations. Indeed, when asked what advice they would give to those who were about to enter a reunion, adoptees in another unpublished study strongly advised that they should not have too many expectations. Counsellors can help adoptees in the task of developing realistic expectations.

In the interview phase of the study, we also collected qualitative data regarding reunions. In particular, we looked at the issues and challenges that can arise when more family members are added to the adoptee's network as a result of a reunion. We found there could be benefits and difficulties with these larger family networks post-reunion (Foulstone, Feeney, & Passmore, 2006). The positive features of a larger family network included (a) positive interactions and relationships that emerged between the adoptive and birth families, (b) benefits that resulted from having a larger support network, and (c) benefits for significant others such as the adoptee's romantic partner or children. For example, one adoptee noted that as a result of their partner gaining extra knowledge or insight about the adoptee via the reunion, their overall relationship improved. However, the larger family networks resulting from a reunion can also present the adoptee with certain difficulties and challenges. These included (a) negative interactions between adoptive and biological families, (b) issues adapting to a new family (e.g., anxiety associated with meeting new people, time and effort needed to develop new relationships), and (c) difficulties in negotiating roles and boundaries. Interestingly, over half of the searchers in our sample had not told one or both of their adoptive parents of their search. This secrecy can exacerbate problems in negotiating roles and boundaries. For example, if the reunion has been kept secret, difficulties can arise around special occasions. As one adoptee noted: "I had a party at my home and I invited everybody I knew but I couldn't invite them [biological parents] because my parents were there. One time I invited a birth aunty and it was really weird because she was talking to my parents and they didn't know who she was".

It was also interesting to note how adoptees described the relationships they had established with their birthmothers. Only 8% of adoptees described it as a mother-daughter relationship, though 29.3% did regard it as a family relationship, though not mother-child. The remaining 63.7% did not view their relationship with their birthmother as a family relationship: 17.3% described her as a friend, 24% as an acquaintance, 18.7% as a stranger, and 2.7% said that a relationship was not established or that they couldn't describe the relationship.

These findings have implications for those seeking to help adoptees with their search and reunion experiences. Some adoptees cannot see past the initial reunion and have not really worked through the repercussions of suddenly having an extended family. Counsellors can help adoptees work through

these different scenarios to prepare them for the joys and difficulties of adding more relatives to their social networks.

Concluding Comments

I've tried to cover a lot in this paper and I know I've only scratched the surface on some of these issues. If I could leave you with one main point, it would be that adoptees are not an homogenous group. Some adoptees certainly do have difficulties relating to their adoption, search, and reunion experiences; but there are also many adoptees with very positive adoption, search, and reunion experiences. Rather than looking at ways adoptees differ from non-adoptees, I think we need to focus more on why it is that some adoptees fare really well on a range of psychosocial variables, while others experience more difficulties and challenges. When working with adoptees, it's important not to over-pathologise and see every problem as the result of the adoption experience, but it's also important not to under-pathologise and miss connections between adoption experiences and personal problems and issues when these do exist (Passmore, 2004). There is still much work to be done, but as practitioners and researchers collaborate and learn from each other, we will gain even greater resources to help all members of the adoption triangle.

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