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# Reunions between Adoptees and Birth Parents: The Adoptees' Experience

**I**N THE PAST decade, more and more adoptees have begun to ask openly about their origins. Initially, adoptive parents and mental health professionals saw this quest as a failure in the adoption or as a sign of pathology in the adoptee. Now, adoptees' need to know about their birth origins is seen increasingly as a legitimate need (Nickman, 1985; Sachdev, 1989), and reunions between adoptees and their birth parents are becoming more commonplace. Adoptees also are joining together in an effort to reform adoption practice.

This article is part of a series dealing with reunions between adoptees and their birth parents. The first article (Silverman, Campbell, Patti, & Style, 1988) looked at the experience from the birth parents' perspective. Another article will examine the adoptive parents' point of view (Silverman, Campbell, & Patti, 1991). In this article, the reunion experience is examined from the point of view of the adoptee.

The literature on reunions has drawn primarily on autobiographical reports of adoptees who have searched for their birth parents (Fisher, 1973; Lifton, 1975). Triseliotis (1973) studied 70 adoptees whose reunions were arranged through a registry in Scotland. He suggested that adoptees who searched for their biological parents were a very small proportion of all adoptees and that they seemed dissatisfied with their adoptive families. Sorosky, Baran, and Pannor (1978) saw adoptees as more vulnerable than other adolescents to an identity crisis and saw the decision to search as a way for some adoptees to deal with this crisis. In their study of searching, Aumend and Barrett (1984) found that those who searched learned of their adoptive status when they were older, were unhappy with their adoptive parents, and had poorer self-images as adults. In a study of adoptees who approached social agencies or search groups for assistance in finding their birth parents, Kowal and

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*One hundred fourteen adult adoptees who had reunions with their birth parents responded to a mail questionnaire about these reunions. Some had been found by their birth parent, and others had searched for this parent. Those who searched were stimulated to do so by a life-cycle transition, by a need to get background information, and by a need to complete their sense of identity. For most of these adoptees, their self-esteem improved and their relationship with their adoptive parents was strengthened as a result of the reunion. These respondents advocate open adoption and better preparation for the adoptive family about adoptees' need to connect with their birth families.*

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Schilling (1985) found that more women than men searched, that most knew little about their birth parents, and that they searched to satisfy an existential need to know their origins. These findings are similar to those of Sorosky et al. (1978) and to the recent findings of Burgess (1989) and Sachdev (1989).

As more adoptees seek their birth origins, additional research is needed to understand their motives and the ways a reunion might affect their self-esteem and identity. The study reported here examines the experiences of a sample of adoptees from the United States who had reunions with their birth parents. These reunions came about from a range of efforts: Some adoptees worked through a social service agency, some searched using their own resources or those of a peer group, and some adoptees did not search but instead were found by their birth mothers.

## Method

The authors developed a questionnaire composed of precoded and open-ended questions about the respondent's background, the circumstances of the adoption, the search, the reunion, and the aftermath of the reunion. The questionnaires were distributed in an opportunistic fashion through adoption organizations and in the newsletter of a birth parent organization, Concerned United Birthparents. In addition, *Family Circle* magazine carried a description of the study and an invitation to write for a questionnaire. All respondents were encouraged to photocopy the questionnaire and share it with others. In this manner, data were gathered from birth parents, adoptees, and adoptive parents.

A total of 133 adoptees responded to the mail questionnaire. Responses came from members of approximately 33 adoptee organizations in 18 states. Most subjects ( $n = 114$ ) had had reunions with at least one birth parent; 19 had not. Of the 19 respondents who had not had a reunion, five were still searching, and four had learned that their birth parents were dead and were searching for other relatives. Four respondents had identified women who denied they were the birth mothers, and four had identified women who acknowledged they were the birth mother but did not want contact with the adoptee. Two adoptees were received warmly on the phone but had not yet met their birth mothers because they lived on separate continents and were financially unable to make the trip. This article reports only data on those adoptees who actually had a face-to-face meeting with one or both of their birth parents.

Of the 114 subjects who had reunions, 101 (88.6 percent) had actively searched for their birth parents. Thirteen (11.4 percent) were "found"; that is, the reunion took place as a result of the birth parent's initiative. In some instances,

adoptees who were found indicated that they also had been searching. These were counted as searchers, regardless of who made the first contact.

## Results

### Demography

The sample consisted primarily of Caucasian married women; the average age of respondents was 35 (Table 1). They had an average of 2.6 years of schooling after high school and an average income (in 1986) of more than \$20,000 a year. The vast majority (74.6 percent,  $n = 85$ ) were adopted before they were six months old, and the adoptions were arranged primarily through agencies.

Although only a small number of adoptees were found by their birth parents, chi-square tests of significance were done to see if any of the variables distinguished the adoptees who were searching from those who were found. The most striking difference between the two groups was that searchers were on the whole older (32.8 years) than those who did not search (22.5 years) ( $\chi^2 = 19.39$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .0001$ ). This finding is consistent with the earlier finding that birth parents who searched were likely to do so when the child was a young adult (average age 21), but birth parents who did not search were likely to be found by adult children (average age 27) (Silverman et al., 1988). This finding may indicate that a level of independence and maturity may be necessary before an adoptee is ready to search.

Only one of the adoptees who did not search was affiliated with an adoption reform organization, whereas 62 percent ( $n = 63$ ) of those who were searching were affiliated, indicating that the role of adoption reform organizations in the decision to search is important.

All 11 men in the sample had initiated the search. It is commonly believed in the adoptee movement that men are far less likely to search than are women (Lifton, 1988; Sorosky et al., 1978). The behavior of men in this study may indicate a changing trend. However, men still were a small proportion of those who searched in the current sample, given that birth parents search for male and

Table 1.  
Characteristics of the Study Sample

Characteristic	Mean	Range	<i>n</i>	%
Current age	35.4	18-58		
Age at contact	31.7	16-54		
Years of education	14.6	9-22		
Age at placement ( $n = 114$ )				
Younger than 6 months			85	74.6
Older than 6 months			29	25.4
Gender ( $n = 114$ )				
Female			103	90.4
Male			11	9.6
Marital status ( $n = 114$ )				
Married			78	68.4
Never married			21	18.4
Separated or divorced			14	12.3
Widowed			1	.9
Occupation ( $n = 108$ )				
Professional			3	2.8
Managerial			25	23.1
Sales or clerical			38	35.2
Skilled			12	11.1
At home			22	20.4
Students			8	7.4
Household income ( $n = 111$ )				
Less than \$10,000			15	13.5
\$10,000 to \$20,000			22	19.8
\$20,000 to \$30,000			28	25.2
More than \$30,000			46	41.4
Religion ( $n = 109$ )				
Catholic			25	22.9
Protestant			44	40.4
Other Christian			16	14.7
Jewish			5	4.6
Other			2	1.8
None			17	15.6
Member of adoption group ( $n = 113$ )				
Yes			64	56.6
No			49	43.4
Searchers			101	88.6
Nonsearchers			13	11.4
Adoption arranger ( $n = 112$ )				
Doctor			6	5.3
Lawyer			21	18.8
Private or religious agency			61	54.5
Public agency			24	21.4

female children in equal proportions (Deykin, Campbell, & Patti, 1984; Silverman et al., 1988).

### Treatment of Adoption in the Adoptive Family

Some researchers have reported that the decision to search is related to dissatisfaction with the way the fact of the adoption was handled in the adoptive family (Aumend & Barrett, 1984; Triseliotis, 1973). To learn if this was true in this sample, three questions were asked: (1) How open was the adoptive family

about the fact of adoption? (2) Did this approach change over time? (3) Was any information about the birth family given to the adoptee? The researchers were particularly interested in learning if the way the adoption was treated changed as the child matured. They assumed that children ask different questions about the meaning of adoption as they get older. On the whole, the results indicated that those who searched were not unhappy with the way adoption was dealt with in their adoptive families.

**Openness about Adoption.** Most of the respondents (70 percent,  $n = 80$ ) had

always known of their adoption. Some adoptees did not know they were adopted until they were adolescents. One respondent said, "I was teased at school by a girl who knew my adoptive family, and when I confronted my adoptive mother she said I was not adopted. She later told me, very briefly, that I was."

Most adoptees reported that their families were generally communicative, loving, and supportive. A smaller group said that their families were secretive, judgmental, distant, cold, or abusive. Adoptees from both backgrounds were searching.

**Adoption Discussed over Time.** Respondents reported that the nature of their questions about their adoptions changed as they matured. Generally, parents seemed unready for children's questions about their conception and their birth family. In most instances, the adoptees reported that no change took place in the way the fact of the adoption was treated over the years. Taking into consideration the small numbers of respondents, the data seem to indicate that if change occurred, the family members of those who did not search became more closed, whereas those who were searching experienced more openness. This finding could indicate that it may be easier to initiate a search if family members are more open and able to modify the way they talk about adoption as the child matures.

One adoptee who did not search described her parents' initial openness and later negativity: "When we were younger, my parents read us stories about adoption and discussed it openly, but as soon as I wanted to look for my mom and started asking questions, my parents became defensive and would not talk about it anymore." A woman who searched reported, "I became more curious, and they responded to an extent and then clammed up. We grew apart."

Adoptees who reported that change resulted in greater openness in the adoptive family noted that this change did not always come easily. A woman who had not searched wrote the following:

As my curiosity became more intense, my parents sought guidance from professionals. They advised me to forget. Nonetheless, my parents gave me all they

knew about the adoption, but they could not help my frustration with the whole ordeal and my curiosity. Even though they became frustrated with my anger, they were very supportive overall.

As might be expected with any couple, the adoptive parents studied did not always arrive at the same place in their understanding at the same time. There were other parents who, as a couple, were less ambivalent and who, together, encouraged and helped their children search. A woman who searched talked about the differences in the way each of her adoptive parents responded to her questions:

When I was 14, my adoptive mother, during a fight, called me a bastard and expounded on the word, and later I got more information from her (however, the information she got from Catholic Charities was not the entire truth). . . . My father came very close many times to looking for my birth mother. . . . Her name at the time of my adoption was listed on the adoption papers. My parents shared this with me at age 18. . . . When I started to search, my father was very ecstatic. We didn't tell Mom for a while. When we finally did, she was able to handle it.

**Information about the Birth Family.** Family members' attitudes toward the adoption seemed to be reflected in their willingness to talk about their child's origins. Adoptive parents told 32 percent ( $n = 31$ ) of the adoptees that they had no information and gave background information to 45 percent ( $n = 43$ ). Twenty-three percent ( $n = 22$ ) of the adoptees said that their adoptive parents had identifying information. Only half of those adoptive parents who had identifying or background information shared it with their children.

For those who were searching, most of their information was obtained during the search. One respondent, who had initiated the search, wrote the following:

I didn't ask my adoptive parents anything because I thought they didn't know. My adoptive parents had extremely detailed information but did not share it with me until I was 54 years old. They thought I wasn't interested. They also told me that my birth mother had died when I was born. I believed them for half a century.

Although the adoptive family may have had little specific information about the birth family of their child and did not share easily what they did have, the birth parents' presence was, nonetheless, felt in one way or another in the family. Some families openly acknowledged the birth parents:

My parents always told me that my birth mother loved me very much and wanted the best for me and that's why she gave me up. I was worried at first that they wouldn't want me to find my birth mother, but I soon realized they did. I started feeling a love for my birth mother . . . and a feeling of "Thanks, you've made our life wonderful."

Other adoptive parents used the "chosen child story," which emphasized that the adoptive parents personally selected their child from among many others, without mentioning the child's origins:

[My] adoptive parents used phrases such as, "You're special because we picked you out of many other children," and "We wanted you so badly we went and asked for you."

In contrast, a few parents were punitive in the way they used the fact that the adoptee was conceived "illegitimately." One adoptee reported that "Everytime I misbehaved, I was informed of coming from the gutter." Other adoptive parents, although acknowledging the adoption, were secretive, either at home or in the community. Some adoptees noted that they were not allowed to mention their adoption. Apparently some families could not acknowledge their difference from others (Kirk, 1964, 1985) and felt that their child's adoption was something to be denied.

### Deciding to Search

Most of the searchers (71 percent,  $n = 70$ ) reported that they made the decision to search on their own. In response to a question about what factors led to the decision, many (40 percent,  $n = 39$ ) reported that the most important factor was that they "needed to search." Thirty one percent ( $n = 30$ ) said that it "now seemed possible," indicating that they were personally

ready and that they were able to get help in the process. These findings suggest that, for many, something in the adoptee experience itself led them to search. However, without the appropriate social climate, they could not accomplish their goal. One woman wrote, "When I was 16 I found my birth certificate. That was 30 years ago. I had no idea what to do with it." The adoptees' motivations for searching and what they hoped would result from the reunion seemed intertwined. Four types of motives emerged from the data: life-cycle transition, desire for information, hope for a relationship with the birth parent, and wish for self-understanding.

For many, the idea to search was stimulated by a life-cycle transition, such as the birth of a baby, that made them aware of the birth mother and her feelings. One respondent reported,

When my baby was born, I realized for the first time that a woman who had borne a child would always want to know that person was alive and well, no matter what else might be going on. I was no longer afraid to "intrude" into my mother's life.

Sixty-five percent ( $n = 86$ ) reported that they wanted information. Some wanted medical information. For example, one respondent became diabetic and needed medical background information. Others wanted more specific information about why they were adopted: "I wanted to know what happened to my mother, why she had given me away."

Sixteen percent ( $n = 21$ ) hoped for a relationship to develop with the birth parent, and 6 percent ( $n = 8$ ) wanted to understand themselves better. This wish for self-understanding also was expressed in the wish for an historical sense of themselves: "I needed peace within myself. I had a normal curiosity and wanted questions answered. I was looking for a personality similar to mine and a look-alike mother image." The need to know seemed to be tied to a sense of loss the adoptees experienced, which they felt would be healed by making a connection with their origins.

## The Search

**Telling Others.** Most adoptees (71 percent,  $n = 69$ ) were open about the

decision to search even before they initiated the search. This fact did not mean that they did not have some second thoughts about what their adoptive parents might be feeling. One respondent noted,

The search occasionally made me uneasy with my adoptive parents. Even though they supported me totally, I couldn't help but feel guilty once in a while. I was looking for another set of parents and the parents that my adoptive parents could not ever be—birth parents.

Eleven percent ( $n = 11$ ) told others only after they had begun searching: "I told my adoptive mother when she brought up the subject about four years after I started." Thirteen percent ( $n = 13$ ) told others only after they had found their birth parent:

I was open about it except to my adoptive father because I thought he would be upset. What a mistake on my part! My adoptive Dad wanted to meet my birth mom and let her know the joy she put into his life by surrendering me. They are very comfortable with each other and are becoming good friends.

Four percent ( $n = 4$ ) were still keeping the search and reunion a secret: "My adoptive family is unaware of the search, though the seven-year search literally consumed my entire life." The decision to share the news of their search activities seemed to be related to how accepting respondents thought others, especially their adoptive parents, would be.

**Obtaining Identifying Information.** Respondents had a variety of reactions to learning their birth parents' names. Seventy percent ( $n = 76$ ) expressed feelings of excitement and a sense of having won a great victory: "I feel as if a part of me was placed back inside me (like a puzzle). I felt relief, excitement, and some anger over this information being withheld from me."

Another 22 percent ( $n = 24$ ) reported feeling scared, nervous, and even a bit guilty in addition to their joy. Whatever the feeling, the effects were so profound that sometimes a change in how they felt about themselves was evident even to the unaware observer. One respondent reported, "My self-image and self-confi-

dence greatly improved, so much that people noticed and commented about the change in me. Even my adoptive mother."

Eight percent ( $n = 9$ ) had a negative reaction, which usually meant that they felt fear, guilt, or disillusionment. These feelings most often were transient. The adoptee who was told she came from the gutter reported, "I was upset because I wasn't a WASP. But over time, I saw that they were handsome and bright, not trash, which is what my adopted parents had told me."

**Making Contact.** For the most part, once the searchers had identifying information, they moved quickly to make contact. Seventy percent ( $n = 72$ ) acted on the information immediately. Twelve percent ( $n = 12$ ) acted on the information within a week of receiving it. By the end of one month, another 8 percent ( $n = 8$ ) had made contact. By the end of six months, everyone had made contact.

Before making contact, 50 percent ( $n = 53$ ) received some kind of counseling. Of these, 41 percent ( $n = 44$ ) received counseling from their peers in adoption groups. Only 5 percent ( $n = 5$ ) sought counseling through an adoption agency, and 4 percent ( $n = 4$ ) saw a mental health counselor. No relationship was found between the willingness of the person to meet the birth parent and whether the searcher received counseling.

Sixty-nine percent ( $n = 74$ ) of the adoptees made their initial contact with their birth mother and 4 percent ( $n = 4$ ) with their birth father, and 8 percent ( $n = 9$ ) contacted both because their birth parents were married to each other. The remaining 19 percent ( $n = 21$ ) contacted other people such as a grandparent or an aunt or whomever they could find from the birth family.

Respondents indicated that much thought went into deciding how to make the approach sensitively. Ultimately, 73 percent ( $n = 82$ ) called on the phone. One respondent described the experience as follows:

I was very scared and very nervous making that call. It seemed at the time that it was the most important thing I had ever done in my life and I wanted so much so bad and didn't want to screw up—luckily my birth mother was wonderful and happy to be found.

Twenty percent ( $n = 22$ ) wrote a letter: "A search group person helped me write a letter to my birth mother. Her husband (not my father) called me first. Then she called that night." Six percent ( $n = 7$ ) went in person:

I gave her no warning with either a letter or a phone call, for I feared rejection. I feel it is much more difficult in person to turn away. She has shared with me that she would never have searched for me. We both have peace. There is an instant love affair and a bonding.

In retrospect, some were pleased with the method they chose, and some were not: "I just rushed in on my birth mother and blurted out who I was. That was just plain dumb. It worked out okay, though."

**Initial Reactions to Contact.** Many adoption professionals are concerned that a found adoptee or birth parent may feel intruded on. The experience of this sample does not support this concern.

Seventy-five percent ( $n = 75$ ) of birth parents were warm and welcoming at the initial contact; 22 percent ( $n = 22$ ) initially were fearful, reserved, or unsure; and only 3 percent ( $n = 3$ ) were described by the adoptee as indifferent, hostile, or rejecting. A similar pattern was found in the responses of the adoptees when they were found. An adoptee who did not search talked about how it felt to hear from her birth mother, who called on the telephone: "At first I thought it was a friend playing a joke. As the conversation went on, I began to realize that this was my mother on the other end of the phone, and I couldn't talk any longer because I was crying so hard."

Even those who were not very welcoming became more comfortable over time with the idea of meeting their birth parent or their child. A searching adoptee had to work at helping her birth mother feel comfortable: "Finding her was pure joy! Then there was a disaster! She said she didn't want to talk to me. So I hung up. I sent her flowers and wrote her a nice letter. Then she responded positively."

## The Reunion

The reunions were, for the most part, planned by the adoptee and the birth parent together. They met for the first

time in the adoptee's or the birth parent's home or in a public place such as a restaurant, a hotel room, or one of their offices.

Most people met as soon as possible, often within the first month after the initial contact. One respondent wrote, "She worked and we had to wait until she had time from work. She also had to tell my brothers and her husband about me. It took about a week." Another respondent reported, "I was very nervous at first but as soon as I talked with my birth mother it was like we were old friends catching each other up on what was happening. It took us two weeks to get together."

Various reasons were given for waiting. Most of those who waited at least a month to meet did so for practical reasons such as distance, money, or work schedules. Others, such as the following respondent, waited because they needed time: "My mom told her husband before she was married but they had two children who didn't know they had a half-sister. It took her three months to tell them, but once they were told, everything went uphill."

The respondents painted scenarios of the reunions that were vividly emotional. Some used single words, such as "exhausting," to describe the meeting. Others elaborated on the event in greater detail: "Nervous, emotional (cried and laughed)"; "Shared pictures, stared at one another—kissed and hugged when we parted"; "I knew my birth mother and she, me. We looked just alike. This alone was wonderful."

## Outcomes

Several indicators were used to determine the effects of the reunion on the adoptees. Respondents were asked to rank how the reunion affected each of the following: their marriage, sexuality, relationship to their children, self-esteem, and educational and career goals. Almost no negative effects were reported in these areas: only two people thought that the reunion had affected them negatively. Self-esteem was greatly improved. The reunions had almost no reported effects on sexuality or on respondents' relationship with their own children. Of those who were married, 55

percent ( $n = 78$ ) responded that the effects on their marriage were positive.

Respondents also were asked how the reunion affected the adoptive family. Only 53 people answered this question—one of the shortcomings of a mail questionnaire is that researchers could not determine why so many respondents failed to answer this question. However, the range of responses from those who did answer provide some ideas about how adoptive families receive news of a reunion between their child and his or her birth mother. Forty-two percent ( $n = 22$ ) reported that the search had affected their adoptive families positively. One respondent said, "My adoptive family was supportive—I feel more open with them now, and it's easier to talk with them about many things."

Thirty percent ( $n = 16$ ) reported that the reunion had no effect on their adoptive family, and 28 percent ( $n = 15$ ) of respondents reported negative effects. One adoptee reported an extreme response from her adoptive family:

My reunion was fantastic and horrible at the same time. The relationship with my birth family is the most wonderful thing that could have happened to me. On the other hand, my adoptive family's reaction was horrible; it's practically ruined us. I've been disowned, but there may be a spark of hope. I hope so. I love them!

Even when the effects were negative, most adoptees hoped that such effects would be temporary.

## Reflections Afterward

Adoptees were asked to reflect on their reunion and the effects it had on their lives. They were asked, "What would you change, if you could do it over again?" Most people said they would not change anything, and about a third said they would search sooner. Another third added additional comments stating that they would have chosen not to be born, to be raised in an open adoption, or to better prepare themselves and their adoptive parents to understand their needs as adoptees.

The respondents also were asked to consider the question, "If you could do it all over again but not change anything, would you still search, contact, and have

a reunion?" Of those who searched, 100 percent ( $n = 114$ ) said they would search again. Eighty-one percent ( $n = 9$ ) of those who were not searching said that they would now search if they had to do it over again. These findings echo those in the birth parent data (Silverman et al., 1988). Despite any problems along the way, respondents who searched were so satisfied with the outcome that they would do it again, and most people who were not searching would now initiate a search.

### Conclusion

Because of the many ways in which reunions are arranged and because of the secrecy that traditionally surrounds adoption records, it is not possible to systematically sample adoptees to identify a representative population of adoptees who have had reunions. This is an opportunistic sample, and because the questionnaires were distributed in an open fashion, there is no way to estimate a response rate. Caution must be used in generalizing from the results presented here to the whole population of adult adoptees.

The data do not support others' findings that dissatisfaction with adoptive families is a factor in the decision to search (Aumend & Barrett, 1984; Triseliotis, 1973). The data presented here indicate that it may be easier to search when the adoptive family is supportive.

Reunions do not seem to disrupt the lives of the participants. Even adoptees who did not take the initiative to search were on the whole pleased to be found. Respondents frequently cited ways in which the reunion enhanced their lives and the lives of their birth families. One wrote,

I like my real mother, but that is like icing on the cake. The real thing is being alive, being from human born. For me seeing the name of a great-grandfather on the landing list at Boston Harbor in 1871 was very moving. It was my first ancestor.

Respondents recommended that adoptive parents be prepared to meet the special needs of their children. If the adoptive parents know from the beginning that the fact that they did not give

birth to their child will be an issue for the child as he or she grows, they can be prepared to deal with this reality (Pannor & Baran, 1984; Pavao, 1986). Preparation might prevent some of the negative effects reunions have on some families. In many ways, birth parents are part of the adoptive family whether they are physically present or not. Some adoptees recommended open adoptions, which would make the whole issue of reunions academic.

Adoptees who search seem to be looking for ways to build an extended nuclear family, not to replace their adopted family. They seem to need to bring the two parts of themselves together so that they can build a sense of self that feels complete to them. From their view, meeting this need should not jeopardize the integrity of the adoptive family or the adoptee's relationship to that family.

Social work practitioners become involved in adoption at several levels. Usually, they arrange adoptions. When the issue of reunion comes up or when any of the members of the adoption triad need help with psychological difficulties, they often come to a social worker. The findings of this study are relevant to several aspects of practice. When the adoptee asks that adoptive family members be better informed about the needs of adoptees to know about their origins, they are supporting the move toward open adoption. The adoptees who responded to this study see openness as strengthening the adoptive family rather than disrupting it.

Many agencies recognize the inevitability of reunions between adoptees and birth parents. They advocate, however, that social workers be intermediaries to ensure that all the parties involved have been prepared and are interested in a meeting (Sachdev, 1989). Sachdev noted the importance of a social worker maintaining control to protect the interests of the adoptive parents. Among the reunions studied here, the success of the reunion had little to do with the presence of an agency as intermediary. Those adoptees and birth parents who were left to their own devices were able to work out a meeting that respected their various needs and was productive as well. Some social workers are beginning to

recognize that adoptees and birth parents are adults who are able to represent their own needs to each other and that the integrity of the adoptive family is rarely jeopardized. The danger seems to result more from the adoptive parents' insecurity than from anything in the reunion itself.

Finally, when adoptive families seek professional help, clinicians should consider the role of the absent member of the triad in the presenting problem. Children who have experienced the death of a parent construct a memory of the deceased parent that they carry with them throughout their lives. As these children mature, this sense of the deceased matures as well (Silverman, 1988). In adoption, birth parents are phantom members of the family. The child needs to make this person real, with appropriate characteristics relative to the child's developmental stage. The data reviewed here seem to indicate that adoptees have room for several parental images that frame who they are. These relationships do not compete, but together make up the adopted person's identity. In addition, knowing a birth parent may strengthen the tie between adopted children and their adoptive parents. These factors must be considered in creating a treatment plan for the adoptive family.

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