

**An Exploratory Study  
of the  
Search and Reunion Dynamics Experienced by Adoptees**

**by  
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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
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**BY**

**JAN-MARGARET SPARROW**

**A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University  
of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree  
of  
MASTER OF SCIENCE**

**Jan-Margaret Sparrow      1997 (c)**

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## **Abstract**

**Previous adoption literature is plagued by a lack of information regarding the search and reunion process experienced by adoptees who have made contact with their biological mother/father. Adoption reunion studies have typically involved the use of standardized measures and questionnaires containing fixed choice responses and have often not included the perspective of the adoptee him/herself. This study improved on the weaknesses of past studies through the use of in-depth, unstructured interviews with eight adoptees who had been through the search and reunion experience and who were able to share this experience in their own words and from their own point of view.**

**The grounded theory method of analysis was used in order to generate theory that would explain the dynamics of the search and reunion process. This emerging theory was termed "claiming acknowledgment." Four concepts were developed in the search for the core variable "claiming acknowledgment." They were "solving the identity puzzle", "threat of betrayal", "drivenness", and "control". It was discovered that adoptees have identity gaps as a result of their lack of biological historical information. The search for their biological parents was a quest for completeness; to fill in those gaps. The search process often involved a threat of betrayal toward the adoptee's adoptive parents, who felt that the adoptee's loyalties might shift toward the biological parent(s). Regardless of this threat, adoptees were driven to find their answers in the form of a face to face meeting with their biological mother/father. They had a desire to restore control into their lives by conducting a search on their own terms, that would restore their natural birthright (their biological history and the identity of their biological parents) back to them. These concepts fit together to form the core variable called "claiming acknowledgment". Regardless of the outcome of the reunion, the adoptees were able to claim acknowledgment from their biological parent(s).**



## Introduction

What does it mean to be adopted? What is it like for an adoptee to wonder about and then search for his/her roots? As the stigmas of illegitimacy and adoption have slowly disappeared, more people feel comfortable discussing the subject of adoption. It has now become socially acceptable to embark on a search for one's biological parents. Many adoptees have a desire to seek more historical information about themselves, either by trying to open their adoption records or by searching for one or both of their biological parents. The recent media hype surrounding the plight of "searchers" and the new wave of adoption support groups have likely encouraged other adoptees to search for their biological parents (Dukette, 1984).

Why do they search? There are also many adoptees who do not search, hence, we may ask, "why do they not search?" Perhaps, the most important, but all too often ignored, question is "what happens after one finds one or both biological parents?" More and more adoptees have searched for and been reunited with one or both of their biological parents and we know nothing of the consequences of their actions. The many television talk shows that reunite biological children and parents would have us believe that they all live happily ever after. Rarely, do we see the same people back on the show a month, a year or even years later, to share with us what transpired after that initial meeting. The same could be said for academic literature, which does little to delve into the post-reunion dynamics between an adoptee and his/her biological parent(s).

The adoption reunion studies that do exist do little to help us understand the searching/reunion phenomenon. Research is very limited in the area of searching and reunions between adoptees and their biological parents (Sachdev, 1992) as very few studies have focused on the process and aftermath

of adoption reunions. There is little information about the processes involved in actually finding and making contact with one's birth mother/father. What happens during that first meeting between the adoptee and the biological parent(s)? Do the adoptee and the biological parent(s) remain in contact and develop a relationship? Does the adoptee's life change as a result of the reunion? If so, how does it change? All questions for which very few answers exist.

### **Overview of the Research**

Adoption reunion studies have typically involved the use of standardized measures and questionnaires containing fixed choice responses. Some studies have provided information on whether the reunion experience was positive or negative for the adoptee, but fail to pursue what happens after the initial reunion. For example, Campbell, Silverman and Patti (1991) found that most of the adoptees in their study found the reunion with their biological parent(s) to be a positive experience for them, even if they did not remain in contact with or were not warmly received by their birth parent(s). Silverman, Campbell, Patti and Style (1988) studied birth parents and found the same thing; that the reunions were positive for the majority of the respondents. Other researchers have found that the adoptees were somewhat divided in that some found the reunion to be positive, but others found it to be negative (Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota, 1968; Triseliotis, 1973; Sorosky, Baran & Pannor, 1978).

Hence, we know that the reunion experience is positive for some adoptees and negative for others, but we do not know anything about the initial meeting with the biological parent(s) or what happened after the initial meeting. Such questions as "what was the first meeting like?", "why are you no longer in contact with your biological parent(s)?", "what type of relationship do you

presently have with your biological parent(s)"? are either glossed over or completely ignored.

One need only peruse a few studies to discover a serious void in the literature - the adoptee. There is a clear lack of research that is concerned with the experiences and attitudes of the adoptee. Instead, many researchers have chosen to approach their adoption studies from the point of view of accessible detached observers, such as the adoptive parents, social workers and teachers.

While there is a lack of academic literature concerned with the experiences of the adoptee, there is no lack of popular literature addressing the same subject. One must be careful not to confuse the two. One may find several adoption centered books at the local bookstore, but many of these books (e. g. Lifton, 1988) contain many self-help testimonials and unanalyzed anecdotal statements which should not be confused with academic research. For example, Lifton (1988) admitted to writing her first adoption book more as a catharsis for her own experience of searching for and being reunited with her biological parents. This author's book (Lifton, 1988) surrounding the subject of the adoptee experience contains anecdotes from a series of rather troubled adoptees who serve to confirm the author's opinions and experiences. The author would have us believe that the problems these adoptees have (i. e. some were suicidal, drug addicted or homosexual) are due to their adoptive status when, in fact, the same situations are found in the non-adopted population. There is no evidence that troubled people are any more represented in the adoptee population than in the non-adoptee population as the author would have us believe.

When adoptees are studied, they are often "assessed" using standardized indicators, such as IQ tests and other psychological development tests (e.g. Seglow, Pringle & Wedge, 1972). Such tests provide standardized questions

with fixed sets of responses. The use of such instruments, at times, involves an underlying assumption; that there is a potential "problem" to be evaluated.

### **The Problem Orientation**

**Much of the adoption literature is written by social workers and psychologists, who tend to view adoptees as having deep psychological problems, especially if they undertake a search for one or both of their natural parents (e.g. Foster, 1979). Some of these authors are adopted themselves and in some instances, appear to let their own opinions colour their research in terms of the labels they apply to adoptees and to the reasons for searching (e.g. Small, 1987; Andersen, 1989). Quite possibly, the 'trouble' orientation of these professions may also influence the 'what troubles the adoptee?' perspective.**

### **Being adopted: Problems**

**Many researchers seem to assume that adoptees have problems (or at least should have problems) and seem surprised when they find well-adjusted adoptees with happy family lives (Seglow et. al., 1972). Almost every article on the subject of adoption implies the same thing; that there must be something wrong with adoptees. Why would adoptees search for their biological parent(s), if they did not have something clinically wrong in their lives? Small (1987) notes that we have treated adoption as though it were some sort of disease in that we use the word 'adopted' much the same way we use the words epileptic or diabetic. Small (1987) feels that "by placing the word 'adopted' before the word 'child' we make associations about the conditions prior to adoption, for example, abandonment, rejection and illegitimacy" (p.35). This author even goes so far as to suggest that the term "adult child of adoption" should be used instead of the word "adoptee" because it "refer(s) to conditions subsequent to an adoption and reflects the fact that adoption is a socially created condition, like marriage and divorce, and not a disease" (p. 35).**

This idea of adoption as a disease is evident in another article by the same author. Small (1979) details the vast discrimination faced by adoptees who would like to open their adoption records, but are denied access. Legislation frequently denies adoptees access to sealed adoption records. As well, there are child psychologists and lawyers who do not think adoptees have any right to know anything about their biological roots. For example, Small (1979) writes about a lawyer who felt that adoption records should not be available to adult adoptees because the adoptee might utilize this information to search for and murder his/her biological parent(s). Why an adoptee would want to murder his/her biological parent(s) is never made clear. It is just another example of how the system and the people in it treat adoptees like fragile children who are incapable of speaking for themselves or making rational decisions.

All too often labeling the adoptee as having some kind of condition appears to hinder the researcher in his/her attempt to understand the adoptee. Perhaps, it is for this reason that some researchers assume the perspective that adoptees are incapable of understanding themselves, therefore they approach another source, such as a family member, instead of the adoptee, for information about the adoptee. Again, could it be that they believe that adoptees are too fragile to discuss their adoption experience?

Given the lack of information on adoptees and searching, it would seem warranted to design research to address their motivation for searching and whether they would recommend searching to other adoptees. If their reason for searching was to resolve some sort of problem in their life, did it accomplish what they thought it would? It seems to me that if we truly want to understand what motivates adoptees to search, we need to listen to them without putting some type of clinical judgment on them first or placing their responses into a clinical framework. We ought to let them tell their stories from their own point of

view. This research is about these life stories. As such, this research may be viewed as ethnographic in character.

### **Characteristics of Searchers and Nonsearchers**

It is interesting to note that the majority of adoptees search only for their birth mother with the birth father being viewed as some sort of "phantom figure" (Sachdev, 1992, p. 58). Adoptees tend to become more interested in finding their birth fathers only after they have found their birth mothers (Sorosky et al., 1978). Research also indicates that searchers are most likely to be females, although the number of male searchers is steadily increasing (Campbell et al., 1991).

The act of searching for one's biological parents(s) appears to be related one's current familial relationships. Triseliotis (1973) found that those with unsatisfying relationships with their adoptive families commonly became searchers. Aumend and Barrett (1984) concluded that nonsearchers had more positive attitudes toward their adoptive parents and felt that their adoptive parents were more emotionally involved in their lives than did the searchers. Nonsearchers were also characterized as possessing a higher level of self esteem than searchers, perhaps due to the supportive relationships they had with their adoptive parents (Aumend & Barrett, 1984).

Aumend and Barrett (1984) contradict the belief that all adoptees have esteem and identity problems, but they do caution that their sample was small. It is as if they are indicating that there ought to be problems with adoptees and that a larger sample would have provided the evidence. It is yet another example of researchers focusing on problems that they think should be there.

## **Searching**

### **Problems**

Those who hope for a relationship with their birth parent(s) typically do so out of a desire to fill the void left by unsatisfactory family relationships (Triseliotis, 1973; Sachdev, 1992), especially in the event of an unsatisfactory relationship with their adoptive mother (Sachdev, 1992). In contrast, Campbell et al. (1991) found that the searchers in their sample of one hundred and fourteen participants were not generally dissatisfied with their relationships with their adoptive family. It is important to note that those with unsatisfactory mother-child relationships were not seeking to replace their adoptive mother, but rather, desired only to be friends or acquaintances, if possible, with their birth mothers (Sachdev, 1992).

It is also worth noting that many researchers characterize adoptees, searching or not, as having psychological and/or emotional problems. For example, Jaffee and Fanshel (1970) studied New York area families, who had adopted children between 1931 and 1940. They characterized their sample as either low problem, middle range or high problem. They then set out to find problems within their sample, assuming that families with adopted children would have more problems. This is very typical of many researchers who assume that something is inherently wrong with adoptees, especially if they search. Adopting a problem centered approach, they introduce a bias which seems to permeate the research.

### **Reasons for Searching**

First, I will elaborate on identified reasons for searching for one's biological parent(s). Andersen (1989) noted, on the basis of clinical and personal experience, that the most consistent reason that adoptees give for searching is



"that they hope for a change in the way they experience themselves as people" (p. 623). Evidence of this desire for self understanding and identity cohesion has been found in several studies that employ the use of interviews and/or questionnaires (e. g., Campbell et al., 1991; Sachdev, 1992; Aumend & Barrett, 1984; Triseliotis, 1973; Sorosky et al., 1978). According to Campbell et al. (1991), adoptees who search seem to desire a historical sense of themselves in order to be at peace. Many adoptees consider it a normal curiosity that is connected to their sense of loss of their roots. However, one cannot thereby assume that every adoptee feels something less than whole.

Many adoptees want medical information when they are having their own children (Campbell et al., 1991; Sachdev, 1992). Andersen (1988), however, described the desire for medical information as the least politically offensive reason for searching. Andersen also considered it a 'poor excuse' for searching because by the time one is old enough to consider searching, he or she is often past the age where one develops most hereditary diseases and is unlikely to pass them on to their children.

Campbell et al. (1991) identified four types of motives for searching; "life-cycle transition, desire for information, hope for a relationship with the birth parent, and wish for self-understanding" (p. 332). This is consistent with data provided by other researchers. Triseliotis (1973) also indicates that life-cycle transitions lead to searching, but he termed his transitions 'crises', some normative, others unexpected. These crises include such events as death of one or both adoptive parents, separation, divorce, marriage, childbirth, adolescence, and middle age. Apparently, death of a parent constitutes the feelings of a second loss and further abandonment. Triseliotis (1973) thought that all adoptees feel rejected by their birth mothers and that a positive, supportive adoptive family can help heal this wound. The wound reopens with

the loss of an adoptive parent, but those with more positive home lives are better able to cope with the death.

Childbirth often leads to a search as it reawakens the desire to know more about oneself (Triseliotis, 1973). Adoptees begin to identify with their birth mothers and sense how hard it would be to relinquish a child. They become preoccupied with the question, "why did she give me up?" (Campbell et al., 1991).

Triseliotis (1973) found that the other life cycle transitions of separation, divorce, marriage, relationship break-ups, adolescence, and middle age produce self-examining tendencies, wherein adoptees begin to seek outside support for information about their roots. It is interesting to note that much of the adoption literature suggests that adoptees do not feel that they have any traditional sort of roots established with their adoptive families and that they seek them from their birth families who know nothing about them. Curiously, the research does not indicate *why* adoptees feel they lack roots. For all intents and purposes, besides blood ties, birth parents are total strangers who adoptees seem to think will become instant loving parts of their extended family. Can you really regain all those years worth of experiences? Some adoptees have described their adoptive identity as living a lie and really believed that they could make up for all the lost years in a very short period of time (Sachdev, 1992).

There are other questions to consider, such as, "once you find out your 'true' identity, then who are you?" "Can you ever go back to your adoptive status identity if you discover your roots and discover your original name?" "Does a dual identity become even more confusing than not knowing your original identity?" It is not clear as to whether adoptees think about any or all of these issues before they embark on a search for their biological parent(s).

## **Policy**

**The search for one's biological roots amounts to a very arduous task. For example, the law of Manitoba is written as if the adopted child is actually the natural child of the adoptive parents (Child and Family Services Act, 1988). According to the statutes (Child and Family Services Act, 1988), all birth records are confidential and after the order of adoption the records are put into a separate file and placed into a safe depository by the director of the agency. An adoptee or his/her adoptive parents can issue a request for the decree of adoption if they so wish. This decree indicates the adoptee's given birth name (only the first and middle name) and the new name (if it was changed) that the adoptive parents chose for him/her. The practice of including the child's birth surname on the adoption decree was abolished in the late sixties in order to protect the privacy of the biological parents. Therefore, adoptees are identified only by the birth registration number of the birth record.**

**Adoptees are entitled to apply for non-identifying information (information gathered about the biological parents that does not include their names) by going to Child and Family Services and filling out a request form (Child and Family Services Act, 1988). Some adoptees are unaware of their right to this information. The time to secure non-identifying information is dependent on the social worker's case load and may last from a few months to over a year. This information can be very vague and is dependent on the questions that the social worker posed to the birth parent(s) at the time of the adoption. Non-identifying information may contain the physical description of the biological parents, the nature of their relationship, their age, their health history and their interests. Hence, the detail of this information really depends on the social worker and the types of questions that s/he asked of the biological parents. Some adoptees**

receive very detailed information while others receive information of a very sketchy nature.

Only the director of Child and Family Services can open adoption records by written court order (Child and Family Services Act, 1988). Child and Family Services will only provide the adoptee with identifying information if the birth parent(s) also wishes to have contact with the adoptee. The only way an adoption record could be opened would be if the birth parent has a life threatening illness and wishes to inform the adoptee or if an adoptee was dying and had a wish to meet the birth parent(s). If the birth parent refused to consent to meet the adoptee, no identifying information would be provided to the adoptee. It is possible, in some cases, to receive identifying information if the biological parent is deceased.

Currently, the majority of families opt for an open adoption, in which identifying information is provided upon adoption. The adoptive parents often meet with the birth parent(s) and some limited visitation, in the initial stages of the child's life, is provided to the biological parents. This eliminates the governmental red tape as the adoptive parent is able to tell the child about the biological parents. The child then knows the names of the biological parents and, to some degree, what they were like.

If an adoptee wishes to search for her/his biological parent(s), one thing the adoptee can do is apply to be on the post-adoption registry. This registry became active in 1981 (Child and Family Services Act, 1988). To do this the adoptee must pay a one time fee of thirty-five dollars (unless they are receiving some form of government assistance) to take care of the paper work involved. In Winnipeg, prior to 1994, this service was free. The adoptee would register his/her name indicating that s/he wishes contact with the birth parent(s). At such time that the birth parent(s) also registers with the same intent, a match is made

and interviews are then arranged. A social worker would interview both parties to make sure that each party is emotionally and psychologically stable enough to experience a reunion. If so, a reunion date is set, with a social worker as an intermediary. Unfortunately, this registry is not very active. If only one party registers, no effort is exerted to find the other party to see if they would agree to a reunion. However, the adoptee can request that a search be carried out, through the post adoption registry, in order to find his or her birth parents and/or biological siblings. This service is available at a cost of \$265 for the initial search and \$180 for each additional search that may be carried out, should the first search prove unsuccessful. There is a large backlog of adoptees who have requested that a search be done, hence, an adoptee currently requesting a search, would have to wait two to three years for his or her search to be implemented.

### **Not Searching**

Foster (1979) noted that many adoptees would love to satisfy their curiosity about their biological parents, but at the same time they are aware of the difficulties and the emotional damage that could arise from a search and therefore, decide against searching. Some adoptees are swayed by the belief that a search would be disloyal to their adoptive parents and an unwelcome intrusion into the lives of their biological parents (Foster, 1979). This conclusion is corroborated by other researchers (e.g., Small, 1987; Triseliotis, 1973; Sachdev, 1992; Sorosky et al., 1978). However, Sachdev (1992) found that adoptees' relationships with their adoptive parents were either unaffected or strengthened by a search.

Some adoptees are frightened of what they may find when their search is over. They fear that their biological parent may reject them or that the parent

might not be what they expected (Triseliotis, 1973). Sachdev (1992) found that some (it is not clear as to how many) of the adoptees in his study feared that their biological mothers would not be interested in them and that they would be rejected for the second time. This seems to indicate that some adoptees feel rejected by their biological mothers because these mothers gave them up for adoption. However, in Sachdev's (1992) study this issue was not afforded much attention. Nonsearchers seem to be aware of the fact that their image of their parent(s) may, indeed, clash with reality. However, Triseliotis' (1973) study indicates that some searchers also think about these things, but search anyway, fearing that not knowing anything about their history is worse than discovering something negative about their biological history.

Some adoptees are very pessimistic about a reunion, stating that their biological parents are complete strangers and that they would probably have nothing in common with them (Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota, 1968). Some that have searched and found their biological mothers expressed deep regret after discovering that the biological mothers were not what they expected and indicated that it was hard to close the door on the experience. Some of these adoptees found that they disliked their biological mothers and in some cases the reverse was true, as some of the biological mothers were very unreceptive toward the adoptees. If they could go back, they would not do it again (Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota, 1968). This is in contrast with Sachdev's (1992) study, which indicated that regardless of the outcome of the search, the majority of the adoptees, if they could go back, would make the same decision to search.

One can easily see just by the length of this section that not as much is known about nonsearchers as is known about searchers. Researchers have not seemingly deemed it necessary to probe further when a nonsearcher states that

s/he is afraid of hurting her/his adoptive parents or that s/he is afraid of what s/he may find upon meeting her/his biological parent(s). Rather this is accepted as logical and the focus then turns to those 'deviant' searchers.

### **The Research Focus**

**I believed that there was a need for research into the processes involved in the reunion between an adoptee and his/her biological parent(s). The existing literature on adoption reunions is largely lacking in content and abundant in surface details. Demographics take up a large amount of space in such studies and serve to add little substantive information to the subject of reunions. What was needed was a study that focused on the dynamics of the reunion experience.**

**The purpose of this study was to explore the adoption reunion experience from the perspective of the adoptee. The focus centered on the adoptee's reunion experience with his/her birth mother/father from the time the adoptee decided to search for his or her birth parent(s), through the reunion itself to the post-reunion experience. It is very important to note that each adoptee's experience was unique and that it was the common underlying processes and experiences that were of interest.**

**The objective of this study, was to understand the searching and reuniting experience by going directly to the adoptees and asking them to talk about their experiences. Given that each adoptee's experience was unique, pre-determined questions were not utilized.**

**Since adoption reunions have received little attention in the research field, researchers and lay people know very little about the dynamics surrounding the reunion experience. I wanted to know more about this unique experience. I wanted to understand the experience of finding one's biological mother and/or father from the standpoint of those adoptees who have gone through the experience. The goal of the analysis was to discover theory that elucidated the dynamics of the adoption reunion experience (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).**



It is of deep concern to me that so much of the adoption literature has a 'problem' bias. Researchers appear to assume that all adoptees have problems and therefore, attempt to center their approach toward problems they may find. This problem orientation in itself, is problematic. A problem orientation, therefore, was not assumed in the focus of this research.

The goal of this research was discovery. This study sought to discover theory that was grounded in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The information was generated from participants who shared their experiences in their own words and from their own point of view. A study aimed at discovering theory necessarily approaches the subject matter as devoid as possible of preconceived notions or hypotheses.

In order to grasp this complex experience, it was necessary to let the information speak for itself, to let the adoptees share their adoptive meaning structure and their reunion experience with us, so that we could gain a greater understanding of this experience as lived by adoptees.

## **The Method**

### **Ethnography**

I believe that in order to understand adoptees and their lived experience, one must approach the people best suited to share this experience, the adoptees themselves. Only adoptees can convey what it really means to be adopted and what it is like to be reunited with their biological parent(s). Those adoptees who have searched for and found their biological parents have "been there"; meaning they have had an experience that is foreign to myself, even though I am adopted, (I have not embarked on a search for my biological parents) and much of the general public who are not adopted. Therefore, I felt

that an ethnographic framework would be very appropriate to understanding the adoption reunion experience from the point of view of an adoptee.

Ethnography "starts with a conscious attitude of almost complete ignorance" (Spradley, 1979, p. 4). "The essential core of ethnography is (the) concern with the meaning of action and events to the people we seek to understand" (Spradley, 1979, p. 5). Meanings can be directly expressed through the use of language, however, many meanings are taken for granted and are only expressed indirectly through our words and actions. As a society, people use these complex meanings to organize and understand their own behaviour and that of others with the ultimate goal of making sense out of the world around them (Spradley, 1979). According to Spradley (1979), "ethnography yields empirical data about the lives of people in specific situations. It allows us to see alternative realities and modify our culture bound theories of human behavior."

Adoptees who search for and find their biological parents(s) find themselves in the potentially traumatic situation of self redefinition, where one must redefine one's self in light of new information about one's biography. By virtue of being aware of one's adopted 'status', certain "taken for granted" meanings about self, about family, and other self defining experiences are challenged.

Definitions of self prior to knowing one's adopted status necessarily must be altered. The process of searching can be viewed as a necessary consequence of this challenge to what one once thought to be true.

To a certain degree, it would appear that many researchers hold to popular beliefs when it comes to the study of adoptees, which has been demonstrated by many researchers who view adoptees as fragile problem prone people, a problem prone subculture. This is especially well illustrated by those researchers who do not approach adoptees directly, but rather interview their adoptive parents or others close to them for information about the adoptees.

Outsiders, such as adoptive parents, cannot possibly provide an accurate account of how adoptees feel. Only adoptees can provide such information. If one interviews adoptees directly, besides finding that adoptees are not so fragile that they cannot discuss their own personal meaning structures, one can gain access to 'their story' as lived experience.

Researchers who adhere to a problem centered or therapeutic approach to the study of adoptees also often assume that adoptees' reports cannot be fully trusted. They may assume that adoptees are simply hiding their 'problems' in order to appear normal. I did not assume that any of my participants had any 'problems'. I felt it necessary to take their description of their experiences at face value. It was their personal lived experience; therefore, I had no reason to believe that what they told me was not true, or that it belied deep, subconscious, unknown meanings.

Many studies are carried out with the goal of testing formal theories , wherein the theory is either supported or refuted (Spradley, 1979). In many cases it is difficult to discover new information because there is no room for theory development, as one has already hypothesized what one may find. Not all adoption studies test formal theories; some are exploratory in nature and others take more of a 'position paper' stance.

An alternative to formal theory and hypothesis testing is grounded theory, theory that is grounded in the data of those providing the description of the experience under study (Spradley, 1979). It is important, I think, to note that a grounded theory also inherently rejects the belief that the therapist or researcher's perspective is innately superior to another perspective (Lundy & Warne, 1988). "Any explanation of behavior which excludes what the actors themselves know, how they define their actions, remains a partial explanation that distorts the human situation. The tools of ethnography offer one means to

deal with this fact of meaning" (Spradley, 1979, p. 13). Hence, ethnography forces one to approach a study from the standpoint of complete ignorance and helps to facilitate the discovery of grounded theory, which is derived from this direct source information (Spradley, 1979).

Recently, March (1995) conducted an ethnographic study of sixty adult adoptees and her findings were similar to those of this study. However, March (1995) applied symbolic interactionist concepts to the results of her data, while this study has used an ethnographic, grounded theory approach in order to generate new theory. It would be of discredit to this author to omit the fact that she significantly improved the existing adoption literature by capturing the lived experience of adoptees who have experienced a reunion. However, our approaches were different in that I wanted to generate a new theory, while March (1995) elected to apply a theory to the analysis of her data.

## Data Collection

### Research Participants

The participants in this study consisted of eight adoptees; six males and two females, between the ages of twenty-six and fifty. All of the adoptees in this study had searched for, located and met with one or both of their biological parents on more than one occasion. The length of time that had passed since the first initial contact with the biological parent(s), ranged from a couple of months to several years. All of the adoptees gave their informed consent to participate in this study and knew that they were adopted prior to the study. In keeping with theoretical sampling technique (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), some of the participants were found through word of mouth and others were found through an adoption support/search group called 'LINKS.' Initially, I set out to find adoptees who had found and been reunited with one or both of their

biological parents. The technique of theoretical sampling is very important as the developing theory points to gaps in the emerging theory. Interviewees often provide answers that spark new research questions in the mind of the researcher; new directions for the research to take (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). At this point it is necessary for the researcher to find additional participants to answer these new questions. As part of the constant comparative analysis, the researcher collects, codes and analyzes his or her data, and then must decide in what direction to turn for new data in order to further develop his/her emerging theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Theoretical sampling became important at several points in this study. For example, at one point it became clear to me that I needed to interview an adoptee who did not have a successful reunion with his or her birth mother, as at that point in time, all the people I had interviewed had experienced positive reunions. In the beginning stages, I also found that it would be necessary to interview people who had long searches and people who had relatively fast searches to examine the different dynamics that had taken place in both situations. I ended up with a good representation of people who had experienced both types of searches and who had both positive and negative reunions. It is important to note that I did not embark on a search for additional interviewees or data based on a preconceived theoretical framework, or in consideration of statistical sampling requirements, but rather on emerging questions and ideas (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

It was necessary to develop a set of minimum criteria for participation in this study in order to narrow the focus of the study for manageability. Three of the criteria were designed to control for extreme variability. For example, I might have been getting into a completely different study with different issues if I include people who have been inter-racially adopted or adopted at an older age or who have been adopted by an extended biological family member. All of the

adoptees who participated in my study had to give their informed consent to participate in my study (they signed an informed consent form) and had to know that they were adopted prior to the study. They also had to be over the age of eighteen.

The total number of participants was small due to the amount of data that was collected from each individual. Eight participants provided enough information to saturate the categories developed in the on-going analysis (Charmaz, 1983). I was not discovering any new ideas, therefore, it was not necessary to solicit any more participants.

#### **Description of the participants**

The following is a brief description of the eight adoptees who participated in this study. Their real names have been changed to pseudonyms in order to protect their identities and to ensure confidentiality.

##### **Jim**

Jim is a male in his late twenties. He had an adoptive mother and father and a sister who was also adopted (but not biologically related to Jim). Jim's parents did not inform him of his adoptive status until he was twenty-six years old. He then gave his adoptive parents the ultimatum of telling his sister that she was adopted or else he would tell her. He met his biological parents four months after discovering his adoptive status. His biological parents had actually married each other a few years after Jim's adoption and had two more sons. Hence, not only did Jim discover that his biological parents were still together, but he also found that he had two biological siblings who resembled him to a great degree. Jim found his biological parents through the post-adoption registry. They had put their names in the registry ten years earlier hoping that Jim's genetic make-up might be able to help a sick relative. His biological family resided just outside

of Winnipeg and have welcomed Jim as though he had always been a part of their family. The reunion has made his relationship with his adoptive parents much stronger and both his adoptive family and his biological family have a great relationship with each other.

### Jessica

Jessica is a fifty year-old female adoptee. Her adoptive father is deceased and her adoptive mother has Alzheimer's Disease. Jessica felt free to embark on a search knowing that her adoptive parents would never find out about her search and, therefore, never be hurt by her actions. She has one brother, who is also adopted, but not biologically related to her. Jessica's search lasted over twenty years. She became her own private detective and at one point, she hired a lawyer to try and assist in her search. She was on a registry list for seventeen years until Child and Family Services contacted her to indicate that they had found her biological mother. Jessica's biological mother lives halfway across Canada, so they have only visited a few times. Jessica felt that the distance in the relationship was good because her biological mother was having a lot of regrets about the past and about being unable to fulfill her mother role. Jessica felt that if she were in the same city, she would try to be too much of a mother, whereas Jessica felt she did not need another mother and only wanted a relationship based upon friendship. At the time of our interview, Jessica was planning to visit her biological mother a few months later, but was not sure where the relationship was headed. Jessica found out that she had three half-siblings, two of whom know of her existence. Her biological father was deceased, but Jessica still wanted to make contact with any of his family members in order to learn more about him.

### Patrick

Patrick is a male adoptee in his early forties. His adoptive father was deceased and his adoptive mother did not live in Manitoba. He did not tell his adoptive mother about his search as he feared her disapproval. His adoptive mother was offended when she eventually learned of the reunion as she felt that Patrick "owed her" because she had invested in him by raising him. Therefore, she felt that he should not have engaged in the search and reunion process. His brothers and sisters, who are not adopted, did not approve of his search either. He spent roughly thirteen years searching for his biological mother, the last six of them in earnest. He joined a few search groups, used a private investigator and eventually became an amateur detective himself. He found his biological mother thousands of kilometres away and descended on her in surprise fashion. He had two half-brothers and was excited to find that they looked and acted much like himself. One had even attended the same graduate school a few years behind him. He had a friendly relationship with his biological mother and his half-siblings, but he was not sure how or if his birth mother fit into his present life. He felt that the fact that she did not live in Manitoba made their lives less complicated because he did not need another mother or want to feel obligated to her.

### Ashley

Ashley is a female adoptee in her early thirties. Her adoptive parents were aware of her search and supported it. She put her name on the post-adoption registry, joined a search group and became an amateur detective. She spent about two years searching until she met two women in her search group, who happened to know her biological parents. Her birth mother lived in Manitoba and was married with two children, one of whom was adopted. Ashley's relationship with her birth mother lasted about a year. Her birth mother refused



to tell her children of Ashley's existence and her birth mother's husband did not approve of any type of relationship between Ashley and her birth mother. Ashley decided that she was not welcome and terminated the relationship. Ashley later found her birth father who lives halfway across Canada. He is divorced, with no children and was absolutely ecstatic to hear from his "daughter." They had a great friendship and have kept in close contact. Her adoptive parents were supportive of their relationship and like her birth father.

#### Jeff

Jeff is a male adoptee in his late twenties. He had a great relationship with his adoptive family who were very supportive of his search. He found his birth mother through the post-adoption registry as both of them were registered. He was adamant that he would not have employed any other searching techniques had she not been on the registry. He had a sister, but it was unclear to me whether she is a full biological sibling or a half-sibling. His biological mother lived several provinces away and Jeff enjoyed that distance. He felt that if his biological mother lived in the same province she would try to be too motherly, as they would be in closer contact. In the beginning of their relationship his biological mother did try to take on the mother role, but eventually she understood that Jeff did not need another mother and they became good friends.

#### Steve

Steve is a male adoptee in his early thirties. He had a good relationship with his adoptive parents, especially his adoptive mother, who was his confidant. Steve had always felt incomplete due to his lack of biological information. Steve suffered from chronic depression and he wanted me to emphasize the fact that he did not blame his depression on the fact that he was adopted. Rather, his depression resulted from a combination of factors. When he sought treatment for that condition, it was suggested to him that resolving his adoption issues

might alleviate some of his depression. Steve joined a search group and became an amateur detective, pouring through archives and Henderson directories until he was sure he had found his biological mother. Steve discovered that he did not have any full or half biological siblings. His biological mother had kept his existence a secret and wanted to keep it that way. She would only meet him in public places (they only met a few times) and refused to answer any of his questions. He felt rejected by her a second time due to her refusal to let him into her life or to fill in his biological blanks. The last time they spoke, Steve's biological mother was supposed to call him back with some information that he had requested, but she failed to call him. Steve just let it be and never tried to contact her again. Despite the experience with his biological mother, he still wanted to try and find his biological father.

### Joe

Joe is a male adoptee in his early forties. His adoptive mother died prior to his search and he had not told his adoptive father about his reunion, even though most of his other family members knew of the reunion. He knew that his adoptive parents would not approve of the reunion as they had taken steps to make sure that it would never happen. When Joe found his adoption decree his birth name had been blacked out in dark ink by his adoptive parents. Joe eventually hired a forensic expert to decipher the name on the document. He then became an amateur detective sifting through archives and Henderson directories until he found a relative of his birth mother's who was able to put Joe and his birth mother in contact with each other. Joe's search took about two years and he had only met his birth mother for the first time a couple of months before our conversation. At that point in time, he had only had a few meetings with his birth mother, who was quite elderly and was, therefore, not sure where the relationship was headed. He was fond of his birth mother, but felt that he did

not have a lot in common with her due to the large generation gap between them. However, he did feel that they would maintain a friendship. Regardless of what might happen with his birth mother, Joe planned to keep in touch with his half-sister. He is now in the process of trying to find his birth father.

### Tom

Tom is a male adoptee in his late twenties. He had always had an interest in searching, but it was his wife who really encouraged him to search due to his lack of health history. He had known his full birth name for some time and ended up finding his birth mother through an acquaintance who had lived in the same town as his birth mother and recognized her last name. He discovered that he had no full or half biological siblings. He had no desire to find his birth father, who terminated his relationship with Tom's birth mother when she got pregnant. He had nothing in common with his birth mother who was very quiet and suffered from depression. After five years of contact, she still had not answered all of Tom's questions. He did not know how she fit into his life, but felt that if he was going to end their relationship, he should have done it shortly after they first met.

### Technique

#### Grounded Theory Method

All participants took part in an open-ended interview conducted by myself. Each interview lasted roughly one to two hours before or after which a more informal conversation took place. The interviews took place in a quiet, private setting of the participant's choosing. The interviews were audio tape recorded and transferred from the tape to paper as soon as possible after the interview. The tapes were then destroyed. All names were changed to pseudonyms in order to protect the identity and confidentiality of the participant.

Oakley (1981) recommends that interviews be conducted in a non-hierarchical manner, so that the interviewee feels comfortable with the interviewer and is not treated as just another statistic or as a 'subject'. The interviewer must also be "prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship" (Oakley, 1981, p. 41). In other words, interviewers should not be detached and afraid to invest any of their personal opinions into the interview session if asked for them. However, the interviewer should not try to 'lead' the participant into giving certain desired answers or make the participant feel that despite the answer they were going to give another one would be preferred by the interviewer. Bogdan and Taylor (as cited in Cowles, 1988) indicate that some detachment and objectivity are necessary for the researcher to be able to use the data for the generation of knowledge. Therefore, in this study individuals were informed of their right to ask questions at any time and were assured that there are no right or wrong responses to the questions asked.

The interviews were transcribed from the tape to paper as soon as possible after the interview. The most paramount ethical obligation that a qualitative researcher has is to report the experiences of others exactly as they described them even if this may be in opposition to the aims of the researcher (Munhall, 1988). I also made separate memos that described my interpretation of the course of the interview and the information obtained. "In order *not* to miss anything that may be salient... the investigator must analyze the first bits of data for cues. All seemingly relevant issues must be incorporated into the next set of interviews and observations" (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 6). New data were constantly compared to existing data in order to "capture all potentially relevant aspects of the topic as soon as they [were] perceived" (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 6).

The interviews were guided by a minimal set of open-ended questions that encouraged respondents to speak freely about their experiences, in their own language and from their own point of view. A few of the questions were necessarily closed-ended in order to establish a direction for subsequent open-ended questions (i.e. a certain question followed based on a yes or no answer). Additional questions were asked to respondents, which were based on previous answers they had given. Therefore, each interview was unique, driven by the interviewee and therefore, contained questions that were only asked to *that* particular respondent. Later, I gave the participants an opportunity to read their transcriptions, so that they were able to delete or edit any information prior to analysis.

A computer program called qualpro was utilized in the organization of my data. Qualpro allows one to put the data into blocks with corresponding line numbers. Hence, each answer the participants provided became a separate block of data. This aids in the ease of coding and makes the transcript easier for the participant to edit. For example, they could tell me to delete block number four, lines three to eight, rather than writing out all of the lines that they wished to delete. Therefore, qualpro was used as an organizational tool rather than an analytical tool.

The standard of publicness applies to the methods, data and conclusions of my study. Publicness means that the methods employed in a study must be fully described, evidence must be presented and conclusions must be based solidly on the evidence provided (Katzner, Cook, & Crouch, 1982). The analysis was conducted in the manner of a disciplined inquiry. This involved the establishment of an audit trail, so that the process and product of the analysis can be publicly scrutinized (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Ethical Considerations**

The technique of theoretical sampling was used in order to identify characteristics of individuals needed for the study. Participants were located by self-identification and by way of referrals. People who met the criteria of the theoretical sample were sought and added as the study progressed. After I contacted these individuals and received their consent for participation in this study, the interviews were carried out in a comfortable, private setting of their choice and at their convenience. One cannot possibly expect a participant to give informed consent at the beginning of the interview when the participant is not privy to the types of questions the interviewer may ask, questions which may be too sensitive for the participant (Cowles, 1988). Therefore, the interviews took place with the on-going consent of each participant (Cowles, 1988; Munhall, 1988). This means that the participant's permission was obtained before each new question is asked. Each participant, as part of the on-going consent process, was also informed as to how the research findings may be used (Munhall, 1988). Participants were also constantly reminded of their right to not answer any questions that they did not wish to answer. As well, each participant was informed of their right to withdraw at any time.

Due to the nature of the interview, a list of predetermined questions that I might have asked each participant could not be developed in advance. I did not enter into this study with any preconceived notions and I did not use any specific questions in order to test a theory. The design of the study virtually insured that each participant was not asked the exact same set of questions. I did, however, ask each participant to share their experience of searching for and meeting with their biological parent(s). Each following question then became pertinent to their own specific experience.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were organized and analyzed in keeping with the grounded theory approach. Strauss (as cited in Gaskins & Brown, 1992):

Referred to grounded theory methodology as a style of doing qualitative research that includes theoretical sampling, constant comparisons, and the use of a coding paradigm. The purpose of using grounded theory methodology is to discover categories and properties of a phenomenon which emerge from the subjects' reports and describe these data in detail. The theory that emerges is 'grounded' in the subjects' data. (p. 112)

It is noted that the grounded theory method is most suitable "when the research problem involves understanding of social psychological processes" (Bailey & Khan, 1993, p. 58). In this study, the adoption reunion experience was definitely a social psychological process that must be understood from the adoptees' point of view. "By starting with data from the lived experience of the research participants, the researcher can, from the beginning, attend to how they construct their worlds. That lived experience shapes the researcher's approach to data collection and analysis" (Charmaz, 1990, p. 1162).

### **Coding Process**

Each transcribed interview was coded in order to categorize and sort the data. Coding is important as leads, ideas, and issues are defined in the data. One should look for what is emphasized by the informant as well as what is lacking or "glossed over" by the informant (Charmaz, 1983). As one proceeds, new codes are constantly being compared to the rest of the interview and to other interviews in order to discover similarities, trends, or differences. This constant comparison then leads to the clustering of similar codes that pertain to

the same phenomenon, which can then be grouped to form categories (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

Focused coding is the second, more conceptual phase of the data in which the researcher takes the developed codes and applies them to larger amounts of data. This phase is more conceptual as the sorting of data is heightened to an analytic level as opposed to simple summarization. "The purpose of focused coding is to build and clarify a category by examining all the data it covers and variations from it" (Charmaz, 1983, p. 117). Sub-categories may also be developed to account for all of the material (Charmaz, 1983).

Memos are written to put all of the questions and ideas that develop during coding into an analytic context. For example, in the beginning stages of this study most of my memos consisted of questions I had after the first few interviews. One of the memos said, "thus far, the adoptees have had a positive reunion with their biological mothers. What is it like to have a negative outcome? I should look for an adoptee who did not have a successful reunion." Another memo said, "these adoptees were all on a registry. I wonder if anyone makes contact with their birth parents through the post-adoption registry? Does this eliminate the search process? Memos aid in raising the code to a category which can then be treated analytically. Memos are then sorted and used to help distinguish categories from each other (Charmaz, 1983).

The categories are studied in terms of how they are related or interconnected. One, then tries to discern how these linkages explain the phenomenon under study. "Grounded theorists aim to create categories from the data and then analyze relationships between key categories" (Charmaz, 1990, p. 1162). This leads to the development of a theory which is solidly grounded in the data.



It is noteworthy that because grounded theorists believe strongly in studying process, they realize their theories are not written in stone, nor "frozen in time." Analyses from grounded theory can be adapted to changing conditions and provide an abundant source of conceptual, explanatory and predictive comparisons for future researchers (Charmaz, 1990). It is important, however, to note that "theory based on data can usually not be completely refuted by more data or replaced by another theory. Since theory is too intimately linked to data, it is destined to last despite its inevitable modification and reformulation" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 4). Hence, due to the lack of adoption studies and the abundance of "holes" in existing research, it was my hope that my study would not only answer my questions and generate theory, but that it would also be used as a stepping stone for further research and as encouragement for other researchers to delve into previously unstudied areas in the adoption sphere.

## Findings

### Motivation to Search

All of the adoptees in this study, except Jessica, were in possession of their birth mother's maiden name, which made it easier for them to search for her first. They all, regardless of sex, wanted to meet their birth mothers. Only two adoptees subsequently met their birth fathers (Jim met both of his biological parents at the same time), two participants, after meeting their birth mothers, wanted to meet their birth fathers (or in Jessica's case, make contact with his family) and the rest were not interested in meeting their birth fathers.

There are a wide range of reasons that compel an adoptee to search for his/her birth parents. The majority of the adoptees in this study were initially motivated by the 'unknown factor'. They ranged from having a curiosity about their biological history to being consumed and driven by the absolute need to fill

in their biological blanks. For Jim, the motivation to search was solely based on curiosity. His case is unique in the sense that his adoptive status was not revealed to him until he was twenty-six years old. Once this status was discovered he embarked on a search to fill in the blanks of his biological history. He stated:

I'm a very curious person, so the minute I found out that there was somebody else there or was supposed to be somebody else there or possibly somebody else there...I just felt that I had to find out what they were all about and to see if...and see what parts of my intellect are from them and what parts are from mom and dad from raising me. (17, 90-96)

For the rest of the adoptees, all of whom knew of their adoptive status quite early in life, the motivation to search was essentially the same. Ashley always wanted to search for her biological parents and indicated that, "ever since I can remember I always wanted to find out who they were" (3, 9-11). Ashley, like Jim, also wanted to fill in the blanks, to have her questions answered by her birth mother. Jeff and Tom were also motivated by curiosity and the desire for medical information. When Jeff was asked about why he wanted to search for his biological mother he replied:

....there were some medical issues I wanted to find out about. Just curiosity. I was thinking that all my life I've looked in a mirror and wondered where does this face come from, where do I get my hairline from, where do I get my nose from? I just wanted to know. (9, 34-39)

Tom described his motivation as, "a want to know, but not a need to know" (7, 45). He was also motivated by his wife, who thought that gathering some medical history would be of benefit. Joe, on the other hand, *had* to search. Joe stated, "something told me I had to do it" (29, 396)...I was struggling with my

identity and always knew that I had this waiting for me. I just had to start the process rolling" (31, 406-408). Joe was also motivated by the fact that his wife, an adoptee herself, had been reunited with her birth mother, whom she had formerly known as her aunt. It is not uncommon for a significant other to be a motivating factor in the decision to search (March, 1995).

Jessica had always wanted to embark on a search for her biological parents, but found that the desire to do so was heightened when she was about to become a mother for the first time. The fact that she did not have any medical history greatly bothered her at this important time in her life. Patrick was on a quest to fill in the blanks of his biological history and his search was a means of restoring some control into his life. He emphatically stated that, "what was very much in my consciousness was I wanted an ability to control this investigation, control being very important" (11, 103-105). Patrick felt that his adoptive mother was embarrassed that he was adopted and wanted to keep it a secret from the public. Her attempts to keep Patrick from ever finding out about his history are illustrated by the fact that she burned all of his adoption papers (except for a little corner of paper that contained his biological surname). Patrick suggested that his desire to search "stems from fantasizing that you weren't the bastard, that you were just as good as any other Smiths or anybody else" (11, 111-114). He felt somewhat different and undervalued because he was not a biological member of his adoptive family. Hence, he had a need to validate himself by finding someone who shared his biological traits and qualities and to exert some control over his own destiny and right to the truth by searching for his biological mother.

On the far end of the continuum was Steve, who felt that his adoptive status made him different from those who grew up with their biological parents. Steve's adoptive status made him feel incomplete to the point that he had suffered from

various addictions and was chronically depressed. He did not blame his adoptive status, alone, for his depression. Rather, it was a combination of factors that were heightened by the fact that he was adopted. He felt that finding his biological parents would resolve some of his problems and round out his identity. Steve stated:

I suffer from chronic depression and I don't necessarily blame it on any one thing, it's just a fact. I got treatment for it and it sort of came out that, you know, perhaps the fact the adoption experience had occurred maybe would be an idea to resolve it in some way, at least to come to terms with it. (7, 36-43)

Hence, the adoptees in this study had some similar motivations for searching for their biological parents, but they also had their own unique experiences based upon their own life histories that propelled them to search. It is probably safe to say that, given each adoptee's experience, curiosity about one's biological roots is a driving factor in the motivation to search. March (1995) interviewed sixty adult adoptees and found that the decision to search may manifest itself at any given time in an adoptee's life. The adoptees in this study all searched at various stages of their lives and did not necessarily experience the crises that Triseliotis (1973) thought would motivate them to search (i.e. separation, divorce, break-ups, adolescence, middle age). He thought that these crises produced self examining tendencies that would motivate adoptees to search for their roots. The adoptees in this study had all wondered about their biological history for a long time before any of these crises could contribute to further curiosity.

### Reflections on the search

The type of search experienced by the adoptees ranged from a short, passive, registry assisted successful search, to a long, drawn out, years long search that possessed a great amount of drivenness. Jeff and Jim went through the type of search that one can assume is dreamed about by many adoptees because it involved so little effort. They both put their names on the Post-Adoption Registry and found out that their biological mother and biological parents, respectively, were also on the same list waiting to hear from them. In the case of this registry, a biological parent and child must be registered before a match between them is made by Child and Family Services. If a biological parent is registered, they must wait until the adoptee registers before a match can be made. However, if an adoptee is registered and the biological parents are not, Child and Family Services will initiate a search (for a fee), on behalf of the adoptee, for the biological parent(s) and/or siblings. The catch is the waiting period for this type of service; roughly seven years. In the case of Jeff and Jim, the match was made within about a two month period, which was not bad for Jim who only discovered his adoptive status three months before making contact with his biological parents.

I refer to the registry assisted search as a passive search because compared to the other adoptees, there is not as much effort required to pay a thirty-five dollar registry fee and wait a short time to discover that one's biological parents are also on the registry, as there is to embark on a months to years long private investigative type search.

Tom's search was aided by word of mouth as was Ashley's. Tom went to Child and Family Services in the small town he then resided in and put his name on the Post-Adoption Registry. He discovered that one of his co-workers knew of his biological family who were from a nearby small town where she once lived. With the information from his co-worker, it took Tom little time to locate his birth

mother. Ashley also went through the registry process and decided to join an adoption search group to aid in her search. A member of her search group and her friend recognized both of Ashley's biological parents' names as people they had grown up with and contacted both of them on Ashley's behalf. The difference between Tom's search and Ashley's search was time. Ashley spent a lot of time, about a year, following up on false leads before she joined a search group where she met the two women who knew her biological parents.

Jessica's search took much longer than those of the aforementioned adoptees. She began her search seventeen years before actually meeting her birth mother. When she began her search there was no such thing as a post-adoption registry. She went to Child and Family Services and obtained what little information she could and then hired a lawyer to aid in her search. However, the lawyer was of little help in providing her with any additional information. Finally, in 1993, she was able to get onto the post-adoption registry list in the province in which she was born and Child and Family Services found her birth mother a short time later. If she had been on the adoption registry in Manitoba where one has to wait seven years or more for a search to be implemented, Jessica would likely still be waiting. Jessica was the only adoptee who was not in possession of her biological surname, which may have made her search more difficult.

Patrick was also on a registry and like Jessica, had to do the search himself. This involved six years of searching in which he joined a search group, hired a private investigator and collected information he kept in a binder that was more than an inch thick. Through all of this combined effort he finally found his birth mother who lived halfway across the country from him. He then staked out her apartment and rehearsed the speech he was going to recite to her many times before he actually went to her apartment and made contact with his birth mother.

Steve put his name on the post-adoption registry and joined a search group. A member of this group was very instrumental in giving Steve the help and guidance he needed to initiate and to carry out his search. Steve became his own private investigator spending many hours pouring over old Henderson Directories, yearbooks and public archives until he was sure that he had found his birth mother.

Joe also joined a search group and entered his name on the post-adoption registry. Like Steve, Joe received a lot of assistance from his group regarding how to search. He spent two years searching for his birth mother, six months of which it took to find a particular forensic expert who could decipher his birth name, which had been crossed out in heavy ink on his adoption decree. He spent many hours pouring through Henderson Directories and at the library tracing his family name. He had a few false leads regarding the heritage of his birth name that threw him off of the right track for a period of time. Finally, he figured it out and made contact with his half-brother's ex-wife (the only one he was able to trace through the Henderson Directory), who led him to his birth mother.

Hence, all of the adoptees in this study had one thing in common; all of their names were on the post-adoption registry list. Tom, Jim and Jeff found their birth mothers quite quickly as a result of the list and in Tom's case, word of mouth. These adoptees embarked on a passive search rather than an aggressive search and did not have to wait very long before their reunions took place. Jeff felt that adoptees should not go any further in their search than putting their name on the registry because he felt that if a biological parent truly wanted to meet their biological child, they would also be on the registry. Tom, like Jeff, was willing to cease his search process after he discovered that his birth mother was not on the post-adoption registry. Eventually, of course, he met

his birth mother through word of mouth. It is difficult to say whether or not Jeff or Tom would have taken an aggressive, private investigative approach if they had not found their birth mothers so easily.

The rest of the adoptees in this study took a more aggressive approach to their search by hiring private investigators or becoming one themselves and spending hours pouring through Henderson directories and following up on possible leads. Joe became addicted to the highs and lows of the search process. He is likely at the most extreme end of the search process wherein one becomes consumed with and almost controlled by the search itself. For example, Joe stated:

....you're on a high, like it's just very addicting and it just seems to be...you want to get more information, you just have to get more information and you have to search. It's a never ending pulling. Sometimes you walk away and you feel totally defeated because you haven't come across anything. It's just a dead end, it's a road block and you just kind of go away just totally drained and exhausted. Mentally exhausted because you spent hours or days and you've come up with nothing. So, you go through a lot of ups and downs; a lot of highs and lows. (37, 426-438)

Ashley also felt the frustration of searching and said:

I went on for about a year searching and couldn't come up with anything. Every time I got close or I thought I was getting close, it was just like, oh, no, I'm back to where I started. So, Christmas came and I decided that was it. I was going to pack it up and put it aside and I wasn't going to search anymore. I was maybe just going to leave it and see what happened. My name is in the registry. (13, 150-159)

She joined a search group a short time later and that was where she met a woman named Grace who was friends with both her birth mother and father (and



had a friend that knew where she might find her birth father) and helped her find them. Ashley said, "It was just like, oh, what a weight, oh my God. I just couldn't believe it was happening" (13, 188-190). Without Grace, Ashley would still be on the registry waiting for Child and Family Services to search for her biological parents. In fact, all of the adoptees who had their names on the post-adoption registry found their birth mothers, either by a positive match or by arduous searching, before Child and Family Services could get around to searching for them. Ironically, even though they have found their birth mothers (and in one case the birth father) their names are still on the list. Some have left their names there in hopes of finding their birth fathers, while others have not bothered to let Child and family Services know of their reunion.

### The Reunion

#### *The first meeting*

Each reunion, had one thing in common; they were laden with emotion. Jessica described her reunion: "the door opened and we stood face to face and then a great big hug and started to talk like we had known each other all our lives". (89, 825-827). She spent almost four hours with her biological mother on their first meeting. Jessica described herself as just 'floating' after her first meeting with her biological mother. She said:

I think I was sort of floating because it was such a positive meeting. There was a lot of genuine warmth and we clicked right away. We have the same interests, which I found wonderful. There were a lot of similarities in our character, more than I would say, perhaps, maybe physically. I was really floating. I thought, wonderful, now I can relate to somebody who would understand me because her interests, her philosophy of life is very similar to mine, whereas my adoptive mother and I think very differently. (99, 915-925)

Jeff, in a sense, also had that floating feeling, but he described it as like being at the top of a roller coaster. As he was driving to the airport to meet his biological mother he was wondering what she was like, if he would like her, if he would know what to say. He described the first meeting as very emotional for both him and his biological mother. He said:

...she looks a lot like me and when I met her at the airport we both just stood there looking at each other dumbfounded. It was such a weird feeling. It was the first time in my life that I was able to look at somebody, touch somebody who made me who I am. (33, 165-170)

The rest of the first meeting was almost a blur for Jeff. He reported:

We both started blubbing. It's hard to vocalize. I remember images and feelings associated with it, but I don't remember specifically. I know we went out for dinner. We talked for hours on end about everything. It was like meeting your best friend for the first time in your life. A rapport developed...it's hard to vocalize. (35, 177-182)

He felt as though the roller coaster had come down after the first meeting giving way to a smooth ride for he and his biological mother.

Ashley described her reunion as "very emotional. I cried a lot and she was very emotional and it wasn't, I don't think, the greatest reunion as far as conversation went because I just couldn't believe I was sitting across from her and I was just trying to take it all in" (15, 229-234). Ashley's first reunion with her birth father took place on the phone. Her reunion with her birth mother, in the end, had not gone well, so she was totally shocked that her birth father had initiated contact with and had been so ecstatic about the prospect of having her in his life. Ashley said, "we talked for about four hours and he was just...he was ecstatic. He was just like, blown away, which really threw me for a loop because

I didn't expect it. I really didn't. I was in total shock. I wasn't prepared for the reception I was getting" (27, 443-447).

In contrast, Tom described his birth mother as being more emotional than he was during their first meeting. He found his birth mother to be very quiet and difficult to talk to and found that they just did not click with each other. What he discovered was a mentally ill birth mother who was nothing like himself. He had a difficult time in getting her to answer any questions about his history. Five years later, he still found communicating with her to be a difficult task.

Steve also found his birth mother difficult to talk to upon their first meeting and every subsequent meeting. Rather than being a quiet person like Tom's birth mother, Steve's birth mother was just very evasive. They first made contact over the phone and she seemed excited about meeting Steve, but when they met in person it was only for a half an hour and she made sure that it was in a public setting. This was safe ground for her because she did not wish to talk about the past at all. She slanted the conversation toward Steve so that she could find out about his life, but avoided talking about her own past and answering any of Steve's identity seeking questions.

Jim met both of his biological parents, who were married, at the same time. He said, "I've never been that nervous in my entire life. I've never been that shaky. It was not emotional, maybe because my emotions kind of shut down for a period of time just to make it easier to deal with, but it was quite interesting, really unusual" (45, 347-352). The meeting took place at the Child and Family Services office, but after Jim and his birth parents got comfortable with each other, he went back to their place for dinner and met his biological brothers that evening.

Joe described his first meeting with his mother as 'good'. They sat and talked and shared their life stories with each other for about four hours. He described the experience as interesting rather than emotional.

Patrick's initial meeting with his biological mother happened when he and his wife made a surprise descent on her apartment and caught her completely off guard. They had a short emotional meeting full of hugs and tears, as his birth mother had prior plans to meet a friend for lunch. So, they made plans to get together for dinner later that evening. After this short meeting Patrick told me that he and his wife:

...went for some long walks on beaches and we went for a drive and half of me was really down and deflated and drawn down and woozy and a lot of the angst and anxiety and just this tension was gone and a lot of it was the other half of me, was extremely anxious to get on with dinner, to meet and sit down and talk because this was going to be...I had lots of questions. I wanted to fill in the blanks. (49, 516-523)

Hence, for Patrick, the meeting was emotional, but his anxiety would not disappear until he had filled in the blanks.

### ***First contact***

Each adoptee had some prior contact with their birth mother/father before they actually came face to face, either by way of a letter or a phone call. Patrick, Jessica, Jim and Jeff all corresponded with their biological mothers by letter before the actual reunion took place. Ashley, on the other hand, spoke to both of her biological parents on the phone before meeting them. Her phone reunion with her birth father lasted about four hours as he lived halfway across Canada.

Jeff and his birth mother had their letters handled through Child and Family Services until she decided that she was going to phone him. Jeff's birth mother, like Ashley's birth father, lived several thousand kilometres away and came to meet him a short time later.

Steve had someone from his search group make the first contact with his birth mother as the member thought that that approach might be less of a shock for his birth mother. He said, "that way, you know, if it doesn't go well the first time, there's always the future opportunity" (17, 132-133). Unfortunately, his birth mother did deny her status at first, but later she called Steve and admitted the truth. Steve stressed that he would "never forget that day. It was an evening at home, it was quiet and we just talked, both of us really rambling" (21, 164-166). He found out that his mother had lived through a life of suffering and pain and had never told anyone that she had relinquished a child. Steve, in turn, told her of the sadness in his own life. Afterward he was ecstatic about his first contact with her, but the feeling was not to last.

Joe's situation was slightly different. He decided to phone the only biological relative that he was able to track down through the Henderson Directories. He made first contact with his biological half-brother's ex-wife by saying that he was some sort of distant relative, rather than indicating his true identity. Eventually, he told this person who he was and she arranged for him to meet his biological

mother. Tom had somewhat of a similar experience. He made contact, by phone, with his biological mother's sister and she set up a meeting for him and his birth mother. Therefore, Joe and Tom did not have any phone or written correspondence with their biological mothers prior to their first meeting.

After a Child and Family Services social worker made the initial contact with Jessica's birth mother, Jessica took the initiative of writing a letter to her birth mother. In the letter, Jessica introduced herself and provided her birth mother with a history of her life through the use of pictures beginning when she was a child until she was forty-eight. She used the pictures to illustrate the events of her life and to introduce various family members to her biological mother. She felt it was important to not upset her birth mother and therefore, did not include pictures of her adoptive parents. She then received a similar picture documentary letter from her birth mother. Jessica was full of tears after reading the letter, but was relieved to find out that the reason she was given up for adoption was not so different from what she had made herself believe (that her birth mother was young and had no support, no choice). Through the pictures she was able to see where she and her son inherited their looks and was very excited to have another piece of the biological puzzle solved. The social worker was used as an intermediary for these letters as neither Jessica, nor her birth mother knew each other's last names or addresses at that point in time. After several letters they felt comfortable enough with each other and did not need the social worker anymore.

Patrick's situation was slightly different in that he did not have an intermediary. He wrote the first letter to his birth mother explaining who he was and waited for her reply. At first his mother was shocked to receive a letter from him because she assumed that those types of situations were usually handled by social workers. She did not immediately admit that she was Patrick's birth

mother and requested that he send her evidence confirming that fact. Instead of providing her with proof through the mail, Patrick showed up on her doorstep two weeks later.

Jim wanted to write a letter to his birth mother after they were matched through the post-adoption registry, but found himself hesitant as he had no idea what to say as he did not expect to find her so quickly. He said:

I thought that it was going to take some time, so I didn't really know what to say or how to say it or what. I ended up getting a letter from her first, which was good. It helped me have a little bit of an idea of what kind of questions I should be asking and she already asked a whole bunch of questions, so it gave me something to answer and something to talk about at first and then of course I had a bunch of questions for her. (33, 226-233)

They wrote a few more letters to each other and then set up a meeting at the Child and Family Services office to have a face to face reunion.

The above clearly shows that all of the adoptees, with the exception of Patrick, exercised some caution before meeting their biological mothers. Written correspondence was transferred from biological parent to child and vice versa, through a Child and Family Services office until the biological parent and child were comfortable enough to exchange full names and addresses. Other adoptees like Ashley, Tom and Joe, got other people who knew their birth parents to make contact with them over the phone in order to assess biological parent's responsiveness and set up a possible reunion meeting.

### Post-Reunion

One of the objectives of this study was to find out what transpires after the reunion takes place. None of the adoptees in this study elected to never see

their biological parents again after the first meeting and vice-versa. However, it is safe to say that, as time progressed, although not all of the reunions were successful some of the reunions have produced strong relationships between the adoptees and their biological parents. After the first meeting with her mother, Jessica described herself as being very settled. She reported, "it had been, oh, probably months of sitting on the edge, a mixture of emotions and it was a pleasure to have it work out so well, a real pleasure because it could have been just the opposite too" (107, 964-968). Jessica described her birth mother as being much more open in person than she was in her letters. She went on to say:

I got to know from that meeting a lot more about the details leading up to my natural mother and father's parting of the ways. Things she would never have written in a letter, very personal things and we continued on with letter writing and sending pictures, that sort of thing and occasional phone calls and of course, you know, the Christmas things and in July of this year I chose to go back again and so, I had a second meeting and it wasn't as successful. (111, 1002-1011)

The reason why the meeting was not as successful is common to some of the other adoptees in this study. It is either a case of the adoptee wondering where or how this biological parent fits into their life or vice versa.

However, Jessica seemed to be realistic in preparing for some change as time went by. She noted that:

...people are not consistently the same. They are evolving emotionally and working through things because once you open a can of worms, you're not going to stay there in bliss. There are things to work on there. There, uh, are certain uncertainties, fear of what does she think of me. The initial meeting is wonderful and great and you know in your heart that person loves you and you love them, but I found that she became very insecure after awhile, very insecure



about her position in my life and I guess she had to review a number of things and work through a lot of very painful things in her life at the age of seventy-three, which wasn't easy. (113, 1015-1029)

Jessica described her birth mother as feeling somewhat guilty for giving her up for adoption, perhaps wondering if she had done the right thing. After that particular meeting Jessica felt frustrated because she felt as though her mother was stuck in the past, unable to move forward. Jessica stated her position clearly when she said,

I will not stay there. You know what I mean? I won't mourn for the years that weren't because today is today and tomorrow is tomorrow and let's be really thankful that we had the chance to reunite, get to know about one another, touch on things that for a long time were on our minds, but let's use today and onward as a base for developing a great friendship because I don't need another mother. (113, 1071-1079)

All of the adoptees in this study would agree with Jessica in that sense. All of them were adamant at who their *real* mothers were; their adoptive mothers. She described it best by saying, "my mother was the woman that raised me and looked after me and did everything for me..." (115, 1104-1106).

Due to the fact that Jessica's birth mother lived several thousand kilometres away, it was more than a year between their first and second meeting. During that time, Jessica felt that her birth mother had a lot of processing to do and she also had to inform some of Jessica's biological siblings that Jessica existed. Jessica had experienced so much secrecy all of her life with her parents hiding from their friends and associates, the fact that she was adopted, that she did not want to be a secret to anyone else. She described that feeling when she said,

...a reunion means that I do not go in the back door. If I'm not welcome in the front door, I don't see any reason for the reunion. In

other words, I won't carry on the secret. I don't mind getting touch and writing a letter, but I couldn't see it as a long term relationship, if I have to come through the back door. (127, 1183-1189)

She decided she would let it be for awhile and maybe visit her again the following year.

Like Jessica, Steve and Ashley did not see any benefit in continuing a 'back door' relationship with their biological mothers. Steve did not have a successful reunion with his birth mother. They did not really ever develop a relationship and were not in contact at the time of our interview. Steve had felt incomplete his whole life because he was adopted and felt he was rejected at birth, which might have, in part, led to his chronic depression. He was hoping that finding his birth mother would restore some sense of completeness. He said:

...it was a search for my identity and part of that was finding the missing parts and to sort of round out what was then and hopefully, in an ideal scenario would have been to have discovered an extended family. That would have been something that I was prepared to wait for, you know, until people were ready. (27, 242-248)

He felt a certain amount of regret in having searched for his birth mother because the experience of meeting her did not add anything positive to his life. If anything, it made it worse.

Steve's birth mother always insisted on meeting him in public places, so that, perhaps, she could keep the conversation away from an intimate level. She was not of much assistance in answering Steve's questions and tried to keep the focus on Steve instead of herself. He said:

...she was very reticent of about talking about any of the past and didn't want to. She had tried to put it in the past where she figures it belongs and uncovering any of this is very painful for her and [she] wanted to avoid it, except for trying to give me some sort of peace of

mind, but didn't want to examine her emotional state. It's like she's sealed that off to herself many years ago and had gotten on with her life. That was just dandy for her, but it didn't do me any good. Part of the whole search for me was finding out her perspective and how it has affected her. (25, 226-237)

Steve found little in common with his birth mother and found that this was heightened by the fact that she was almost two generations older than he. She insisted that Steve keep their relationship a secret, as she had not and did not, plan to tell anyone of his existence. He lamented that:

...she never wanted me to have any contact with her personal life. So, I'd sit there wondering if she would ever phone. It was never any real relief from the pain because the big 'R' word, rejection, the second round of abandonment thing kept hovering over me, thinking it could come, it could come at any time and I didn't want to have to go through that again. (29, 263-270)

Steve wanted to search for his birth father too, but his birth mother refused to give him any information. Steve, feeling that he needed to have some sense of being accepted by a biological family member, pleaded with his birth mother just to give him his birth father's last name, so that he could conduct the search himself. She said that she would see what she could do. He has not heard from her since and is not going to take any further steps to keep any contact alive.

Like Steve, Ashley, by her own initiative, no longer has any contact with her biological mother. Ashley's biological mother's husband was not in favour of any type of relationship between Ashley and her biological mother. This made things difficult for Ashley, who did not want to come between her biological mother and her husband, nor did she want to have to meet her biological mother secretly. Her biological mother had never told her own children (one of which was a half-sibling of Ashley's; the other was adopted) of Ashley's existence and asked

Ashley for some time to figure out a way to tell them. She kept telling Ashley that she was going to tell her children, but somehow never seemed to get around to it. Ashley said:

The way the relationship was going she would say well, phone me, phone me and I didn't feel comfortable as it was phoning her at home and it was always a one way relationship. So, I thought maybe it would be better if it was left alone. So, I wrote her a letter, a long letter, saying that I was very disappointed that she didn't tell her kids and how I felt and that maybe someday she will and that she knows where I am and I know where she is and if I was to move or anything like that I would let her know and if anything happened in my life, I would let her know and we left it at that. I never heard back from her. (19, 367-381)

Their relationship lasted about a year and it has been a year since Ashley last had contact with her biological mother. She said, "I met her. That's what I wanted. It wasn't...my biggest fear was rejection. I didn't get that, so anything else after that was a bonus type of thing. So, I met her and it was great. It just wasn't meant to be any further than that" (25, 398-403).

After this experience Ashley was not prepared for the welcome reception she received from her birth father when he made the first contact with her by phoning her out of the blue one night . She said:

I was in total shock. I wasn't prepared for the reception I was getting. I think the birth father is always just kind of an afterthought. He's just kind of thrown in with the birth mother, unfortunately. I think differently now, now that I've met him and the relationship that we have. We have a wonderful relationship. It's great. (27, 446-453)

Both reunions have brought a sense of completeness to Ashley's life. She said, "I don't feel adopted anymore. I know exactly where I came from. I know all my

background. I know everything I need to know. I feel really complete" (45, 609-612).

The person who could relate to Ashley's sense of completeness the most, was quite likely to be Jim. Within three months after discovering that he was an adoptee, Child and Family Services located his birth parents, who had actually married each other and had two more sons. Jim's situation was unique because he has a full biological family that has remained intact. It is, perhaps, one thing to wonder about your biological roots all of your life, but is completely another thing to wonder about them only for three months and then meet both of your biological parents. It does not seem like the dynamics are quite the same in Jim's case. He noted:

...the most positive part has been finding out that there is a whole second family, that they have been concerned about me. I think one of the main things is just the relationship that I've established, re-established, with [my adoptive] mom and dad; much more adult, much more open and very honest and that's something that because there's no hidden, hidden little secrets anymore from any side. It's gone a great deal to having a much more honest relationship with them. (87, 889-898)

Jim shared a great relationship with his biological family as they have welcomed him with open arms. Further, his adoptive and biological parents got along well with each other and sometimes got together without him. Jim said, "my life has been very calm and very much at ease since this whole thing has gone through. I'm feeling very comfortable with pretty well everything, very relaxed, happy...I don't have any unanswered questions about things really anymore" (73, 770-774).

For Patrick, the post-reunion scenario has involved some confusion. He went to great lengths to find his birth mother, but was not sure how she fits into

his life, if she does at all. He has somewhat distanced himself from both his adoptive mother and his biological mother since the reunion took place.

Referring to his biological mother, Patrick said:

...we professed our love to each other the first time we met and I would move to the island and stuff and then reality sunk in and she has family obligations and a written narrative history that doesn't include me and I have the same and if nothing else the kids have a narrative were Mary doesn't fit in and to change things would be so disruptive. (63, 801-807)

He was adamant that he already had one mother and did not need another and was in fear of feeling obligated to his biological mother.

The icing on the cake, for Patrick, seemed to be making contact with the only people in this world who look like him, his biological family, and the experience of being able to be physically close to these people. He is more content with himself as a result of the reunion. Patrick had resolved to restore control to his life and meeting his biological family was his crowning glory. He explained that when people are born, they know who their biological parents are and where they came from, but adoptees are not afforded the same luxury. Adoptees have lost control in the sense that they are not privy to this information.

Guilt was definitely part of the reunion and post-reunion process for Patrick. He felt guilt toward his adoptive mother for ever having searched for his biological mother and his biological mother felt guilty for giving him up. He concluded that his reunion was successful because he was able to hug and to get to know his biological family. His future with his biological mother was up in the air due to the fact that the airfare to visit her is expensive and he still had other debts.

Tom post-reunion situation was not very different from Patrick's, in the sense that, like Patrick, he had no idea how to fit his biological mother into his life. Tom discovered that he and his biological mother came from two different worlds and had absolutely nothing in common. His mother suffers from chronic depression, is divorced and on welfare, whereas Tom was quite stable and was raised by two educated parents who provided well for him. He felt that he would not be the same person today if he had been reared by his biological mother. He stated, "the only real thing we have is that she gave birth to me and that's it. There's no other similarity, that's it. We're totally different. I totally believe that environment molds your behaviour..." (39, 435-439).

He was very disappointed in his biological mother's inability to communicate with him in the fashion that he would have liked. His biological mother was a very quiet person and did make every effort to answer Tom's questions, but only to the bare minimum, meaning that she offered no additional information. Tom thought it was very strange that she did not even ask him any questions about himself; things like where he grew up, what schools he went to, what his life has been like, etc.. They have been in contact now for about five years and have communicated mostly by telephone (they do not live in the same city) about four times a year. He had no idea what his obligation to his biological mother was, but felt that he might have one. His fear was that if she ever lost her mother, who she was dependent upon, she may turn to Tom for financial support and he was not sure how to handle that situation, as he had his own family and personal responsibilities. When asked about what the reunion has brought to his life, Tom responded:

...probably more confusion, more things to deal with in life than probably I was ready for, but have to deal with, just work it out as best I can, probably just more confusion. In retrospect, it probably wasn't

the best decision, but you don't know until you proceed with it... (55, 563-568)

He went on to lament the fact that he never did receive any medical history from his biological mother, which was one of the driving forces behind his motivation to search. Tom admitted that he probably could have received that information from his biological aunt, without ever having to meet his biological mother. This is true of most of the adoptees in the study as everyone communicated with their biological parents by phone or by letter, prior to meeting them. It is safe to say that none of them would have been satisfied with that amount of limited contact. They had to meet them, as Jessica would say, 'in the flesh' because a reunion is so much more personal and emotional than a letter, picture or phone call. Jessica felt that people are more spontaneous in person and that you could not acquire a true sense of one's personality until you meet them.

Patrick and Steve were motivated to search by the need to validate themselves as people. Meeting their biological parents proved to them that they do exist, they came from somewhere, they have a history and they have met one of the only people in the world who look like them.

### Parental concerns

There was, in the minds of most of the adoptees, an overwhelming desire to avoid hurting their adoptive parents by embarking on a search and partaking in a reunion. Most of the adoptees had told their parents of their search, which served to make some of these adoptive parents very nervous, perhaps threatened in some way.

For example, Ashley told her parents of her search because she knew that they had her adoption decree, with her full birth name on it, hidden away somewhere. They had always been supportive of her and expressed to her that



they would be of every assistance should she decide to embark on a search. Ashley conceded that her adoptive mother who is somewhat controlling, was threatened by the relationship that she had with her biological mother and father. This was expressed by the fact that she wanted both of their phone numbers and wanted to be a part of Ashley's relationship with them, relationships that Ashley felt she had to cultivate on her own. She described her adoptive father and her husband of being somewhat jealous of her relationship with her biological father until they realized that she was not going to leave either one of them to go and live with her biological father.

For Jim, the hardest part of the reunion experience was not offending his adoptive parents. He said:

I think that's the hardest part in all honesty, is just making sure that they were still comfortable in the fact that they took care of me all those years they raised me. I'm a product of them, not a product of biology. I think not making them feel that they're going to be left out or left behind. If anything I have such good respect for them now. I didn't want to hurt them. (79, 806-813)

Jim's situation was unique because he was the only adoptee in this study whose biological parents married each other. This, understandably, made his adoptive parents a little nervous as Jim discovered a whole other family with two full biological brothers. His adoptive parents were nervous about meeting his biological parents, but his biological parents were very reassuring toward his adoptive parents. Jim's biological mother wrote a letter to his adoptive mother reassuring her that she had no intention of trying to become Jim's mother. She felt that Jim's real mother was the woman who had raised him for twenty-six years. Subsequently, the two sets of parents became good friends, often getting together without Jim.

Jeff received a lot of support from his adoptive parents during his search, even though some of his adoptive relatives feel he has betrayed his adoptive parents by searching. He defended himself by indicating that, "ever since I started this, I've been very open and up front. I've never hidden anything from them. They've [his adoptive parents] always encouraged me and they know where they stand in my life. I've made it clear to them that they're my mom and dad." (17, 95-99). His parents had encouraged him not to search until he was a little older and more emotionally stable. Jeff agreed with them and when he was ready, they provided him with the papers he needed to begin his search.

Steve's situation was unique in that his adoptive mother was one of his best friends, the person to whom he could tell anything. She was very supportive of his search for his biological mother, hoping that it would help him resolve some of the problems in his life. Steve's adoptive mother was the first person he called after meeting his biological mother.

In the case of some of the other adoptees, their adoptive parents were the last people they wanted to call after the search and reunion. Some of them knew nothing of either endeavor. Joe's adoptive parents had taken his adoption decree and crossed out his birth name in heavy ink in hopes that he would never be able to decipher it. Joe felt that his adoptive father would go so far as to write him out of his will if he knew Joe had made contact with his birth mother. Needless to say, Joe was not planning to ever tell his adoptive father that he had met his biological mother.

Jessica felt adamant about not hurting her adoptive mother by telling her that she was searching for her biological mother. Anytime she would ask her adoptive mother anything about her biological history, it would make her cry. Eventually, Jessica just stopped asking her any questions. She searched on and off for about seventeen years, never telling her mother of her endeavor. In

the last two years preceding her reunion with her biological mother, Jessica felt more free to search because her adoptive mother was stricken with Alzheimer's Disease. Her mother was in her own little world and, therefore, Jessica felt she was not hurting her in any way.

Patrick's and Tom's adoptive mothers represent the opposite end of the spectrum. They did not respond favourably to their searches and felt that their sons owed them something because they had invested in them by raising them for so many years. Hence, loyalty was expected and breached by the reunion. Tom's mother eventually accepted that he had searched, but Patrick's mother has not forgiven him, which has created much distance between the two of them.

Hence, we can say that the adoptees did not wish to hurt their adoptive parents by embarking on a search, but their adoptive parents' reactions did not deter them from wanting to have a reunion. March (1995) found similar results in her study and noted that adoptees often wait until their adoptive parents die before they feel comfortable searching; or if the adoptive parents are alive, the adoptees often elect never to tell their adoptive parents of the search or reunion.

### Would they do it again?

Knowing what they learned and given the chance to do it all over again, all of the adoptees would still strive for a reunion. Steve was the only adoptee to regret meeting his biological mother due to the unpleasantness of the experience. He explained:

I think having just the non-ID, knowing now in hindsight, I mean it's everything hindsight. If I had an idea that she would react the way she has I would have just been content with just knowing certain facts and not having the emotional consequence that followed, you know, saving myself from being rejected twice and abandoned twice. (43, 380-387)

However, upon further thought, he conceded that he was stronger for having had the experience. Steve took his biological mother's rejection much harder than the other adoptees whose reunions were unsuccessful, probably because he expected that the reunion would possibly solve some of his personal problems.

In contrast to Steve, Ashley's reunion with her biological mother was unsuccessful in that a relationship was not maintained. It did not bother Ashley that it did not work out because she was able to fill in the blanks of her biological history and she knows where to find her biological mother should she need her for anything. The added bonus for Ashley was the great relationship, in the form of friendship, that she has maintained with her biological father. She did not harbour any regrets and felt complete as a result of her reunions.

Even though Tom's reunion was not what he had hoped for, he would still do it all over again. He explained that curiosity got the better of him and that one never knows what one may find until they initiate a search. Meeting his birth mother made him appreciate his adoptive parents and the upbringing they gave him to a much greater degree.

Joe cautioned that adoptees must take their biological parents' ages into consideration when they search. Joe's biological mother could almost be his grandmother and was not in full possession of her faculties. Hence, she had some memory gaps that prohibited Joe from receiving all of the details of his biological history. In addition, Joe felt it would be easier to relate to a biological parent that is a bit younger, but would not trade his experience for the world. He hoped to keep a friendly relationship with his birth mother.

Neither Jessica, nor Jeff had any regrets about their search and reunion experience. However, Jeff cautioned other adoptees who are beginning to search to go into the experience without any expectations and not to aggressively push one's way into one's biological parents' lives for fear of

alienating them. Jessica felt much stronger as a person and even though she was not sure where her relationship with her birth mother was headed, she would not trade her experience for the world.

## Conceptual Analysis

### Solving the identity puzzle

It was previously noted that there are many factors involved in the motivation to search for one's biological parent(s). Although many adoptees express that they are mainly motivated due to a lack of medical history, there appears also to be a desire for identity cohesion. Adoptees may ask themselves, "what makes me who I am - is it nature or nurture?" They may also wonder "who I might have been if I were not adopted." The search and reunion, then, become a quest for these answers. Analysis of my data produced several codes that were prominent in the majority of the interviews due to the frequency of their appearance. A few of them included *curious*, *questions*, *blanks*, and *puzzle pieces*. These codes fit together to form the foundation of a concept called "solving the identity puzzle."

The adoptees in this study had a curiosity (coded as *curious*) about their biological history. They were filled with questions (coded as *questions*) and each bit of information gathered along the way to the reunion became a piece of their biological puzzle (coded as *puzzle piece*). The key to solving this puzzle was the biological parent(s) and the information that they could provide to the adoptee. In some cases the biological parent(s) provided the adoptee with much information and in two cases, the biological mother was very vague, leaving the adoptees with many unanswered questions.

What was it that the adoptees wanted to find? It appears that they were seeking to identify a link between their biological history and their current life. This link ranged from wanting information, to wanting to see themselves reflected in somebody else by seeing what their biological parents looked like (coded as *look like*), to wanting to find someone who had the same interests,

philosophies and mannerisms, as if to justify their own. Steve described all of these sentiments when he said that he had hoped to find somebody who:

...look[s] like me, someone who is kind of like me in a lot of ways, you know had the same ideology, the same philosophy of life. I mean where did I get all this? How am I who I am? Where did it all come from? There's a lot of genetic predisposition involved. You're definitely influenced by your environment, which is not involving the birth family, but I link a lot of who you are to the womb and your genetic make-up. (53, 471-479)

Steve emphatically stated that his search was a search for his identity (coded as *who am I*). The nature versus nurture debate is well supported by other researchers (e.g. March, 1995; Sachdev, 1992). It is as if some adoptees believe that only their birth mothers can confirm their true identities (March, 1995). Such was the case with both Steve and Patrick.

Most of the participants did some fantasizing (coded as *fantasy*) as to what their biological parents were like and hoped that their imaginary image would be accurate. Jeff admitted that when he was younger, he had an unrealistic view of his biological parents. He said:

I created a fantasy world for myself that my biological parents are living together and they're loaded and they're going to find their long lost son and lavish me with gifts and money and that sort of thing and it took me awhile to get over that illusion. (65, 391-396)

Jeff had long matured and grown out of that fantasy by the time he began his search. Most of the fantasizing engaged in by the participants, Jeff included, was directed towards what the biological parents looked like, what they were like as people and whether they ever wondered about the adoptee.

The participants in this study clearly indicated that a phone call or letter from their biological mothers/fathers was not sufficient. They all had a strong desire to meet their biological parents personally, so that they could see what they were like 'in the flesh' (coded as *in the flesh*). Jessica expressed this type of longing when she said, "I wanted to see her in the flesh, not just her picture. I wanted to meet her. I wanted to hug her. I wanted to talk to her face to face, not just by letter" (81, 781-784). Other participants, Jessica included, felt that an in person meeting was more spontaneous than a carefully scripted letter and it gave the adoptees a better indication of what their biological mothers/fathers were really like. Therefore, it is logical to conclude, based on my research, that if adoptees were presented with their entire updated biological medical history, they would still continue to search for their biological parent(s). A search based upon garnering one's medical history becomes insufficient. However, a search based upon medical reasons is the most socially acceptable motive for a search. This idea is well established within the adoption literature (i.e. Andersen, 1988). A desire for medical history is, therefore, a 'rational' reason for searching, rather than an emotional one. However, the participants in this study have illustrated that the search and reunion are both emotional events. A participant in another study described the emotional nature of the search as having come too far to not follow through with the reunion (March, 1995).

Adoptees are different from biological children in the sense that they were given two names. Their adoption decrees reveal the original name that their birth mothers gave them, while they are currently known by the name that their adoptive parents gave them. March (1995) believes that one's birth name is the first significant proof of an alternate identity to one's adoptive identity. This information gives rise to the idea that, had they been raised by their biological parents, they may have grown up as a completely different person. Logically,



this idea begs the aforementioned question, "what makes me who I am?" In other words, if they were raised in their biological environment, would they still exhibit the same behaviour and have the same goals, ideals, interests and values? Several of the adoptees who participated in this study were pleasantly surprised to find that their biological mothers had the same interests and philosophies of life. The same could be said about one's friends, so whether interests and philosophies are genetic is debatable. Credibility became further stretched for the adoptees who used some of the same expressions or slang as their birth families and for the adoptee whose birth mother had the same interest in literature. I am doubting how far these similarities extend, although they may not be impossible. We cannot deny the fact that these occurrences were important to the adoptees. All their lives they have wondered who they look like and what their biological parents are like as people. Therefore, any similarity they may have found feels like a connection between their biological history and their current identities. March (1995) indicated that this kind of connection is important to the personal identity issues that adoptees may possess, as it may lead to a more cohesive identity.

However, we should not lose sight of the true genetic link; inherited traits. Jessica, Jeff and Patrick all provide a solid illustration of this link. Jessica described the elation that she felt when she made a connection between her biological past and present. For years she could not understand where her son's facial features came from because, in many ways, he did not physically resemble her or her husband. When she saw a picture of her biological father, she found herself staring at the spitting image (coded as *spitting image*) of her son. She described this moment as one of the pieces of the puzzle that finally made sense (coded as *puzzle solved*). Jeff had a similar experience. He said:

I found that I'm the spitting image of my grandfather at my age and my nose has a long and proud heritage on my grandmother's side. It was really weird, it was like for years I had this weight or something on me, questions I couldn't answer and all of a sudden I knew everything. The weight was off. I can't describe it. I was very moved. We'd made contact, I'd heard the voice. I got to meet these people flesh and blood. (21, 117-124)

Patrick described the same sentiment when he found out how similar he looked to both of his half-brothers and that they were all exercise-induced asthmatics. He referred to this genetic link as a 'commonalty' and was just ecstatic that this commonalty finally existed because it was as he said, "a major blank." It is interesting to note that Patrick said that he felt "included" because he looked like his half-brothers. He was so dissimilar from his adoptive family in every way that he never felt included in the family and was not close to them.

In contrast, Ashley felt that her sense of identity was more contingent upon sitting across from her biological mother and having her questions answered. She described the meeting itself as more important than what her birth mother looked like or what similarities they possessed. Tom would agree with Ashley, however, in his case, he was absolutely amazed to find out how completely dissimilar he and his biological mother were in every facet of life. Although not preoccupied with the issue of what she looks like, Ashley did, however, say that she found it fascinating to meet her biological grandmother because now Ashley had a sense of what she herself might look like at the age of eighty.

A review of the above clearly demonstrates some of the ideas and codes that support the concept called '**solving the identity puzzle.**' Adoptees are *curious* about their biological history. They have *questions* they need answers to, *blanks* that need to be filled in and are on a *quest* to have their biological history *puzzle solved*. They need answers to the questions, "*who am I*" and what makes me

who I am?" They may have fantasies (*fantasy*) about what their biological parents *look like* and have a strong desire to meet them *in the flesh* to see what they are really like as people and to see how similar they are to them in every respect. Some adoptees may even discover that they are the spitting image of one of their biological relatives, which allows them to finally make a link with their biological history. As Jeff put it: "It was the first time in my life that I was able to look at somebody, touch somebody who made me who I am" (33, 168-170). One of March's (1995) interviewees put the identity puzzle in a different light by saying about her birth mother, "I'm different. And she made me different. She gave me to my parents and gave me that life and made me different from her. She just had answers to questions that I needed to know." (p.223). Hence, those participants that were unlike their birth mothers, may be unlike them due to their adoptive family upbringing. It would appear, then, that identity is contingent on both genetics and environment. The adoptees in this study already had their own identities as a result of their familial upbringing and were searching for their biological parents who could provide them with biological information needed to complete their identities.

### Threat of Betrayal

Embarking on the search and reunion process appears to place a threat of betrayal onto both the adoptee and the adoptive parents. In other words, the adoptees may feel as though they are betraying their adoptive parents by choosing to search and their adoptive parents may, indeed, feel betrayed by the adoptee's apparent misplaced sense of loyalty. It is as though the adoptive parents fear the threat of role shift, wherein their adoptive children might mentally and emotionally separate from the adoptive family. It is perhaps comparable to the threat of adultery wherein the adoptee becomes the adulterer

whose allegiance or faithfulness shifts to the biological parent(s). Further, the adoptive parents may fear the ultimate betrayal; that they will be replaced by the biological parents and that their children will refer to the biological parents as "mom" and "dad". These ideas together form the basis of the concept **"threat of betrayal"**. However, the adoptees in this study have clearly demonstrated that they were not seeking to find "mom and dad" because those positions, in their minds, were already inherently claimed by their adoptive parents. Therefore, there was no need for any type of role shift.

Many of the adoptees in this study were afraid to tell their parents that they either wanted to search for their biological parents or that they were already searching for their biological parents. They felt a sense of loyalty to their parents and did not wish to disrespect them or hurt them by embarking on a search. This is clearly indicated by the number of times that the codes *no hurt* and *respect* appear in the analysis of all of the interviews. In other words, most of the adoptees had a tremendous amount of respect for their adoptive parents and sought to avoid hurting them in any way. March (1995) described the threat of betrayal, as I refer to it, as a detriment to the "[adoptive's] role performance as a devoted [child]" (p.57). This concept receives further grounding with the inclusion of such codes as *real mom*, *dad jealous*, *husband jealous*, *mom nervous*, *fear*, and *parents unaware*. The adoptees had to deal with family members who were nervous in regard to the outcome of the reunion and who were jealous of the biological parents once the reunion had taken place. Both Ashley and Jim talked about the fear their adoptive parents and/or spouses had that they would leave them in favour of their new found birth parents. They also stressed that their adoptive parents were their real parents (coded as *real mom* and *real dad*); a fact that would never change.

Tom referred to his relationship with his birth mother as a balancing act, which was coded as *balancing act*. It is important as it exemplifies the frustration that one feels when perceives that one is caught between one's adoptive and biological parents. Patrick also felt the same frustration, which led him to distance himself from both his adoptive mother and his biological mother. This was illustrated with the use of the code *at a distance*. It is noteworthy to mention that Patrick was the only adoptee who did not try to allay his mother's fears. In a way, he used the threat of role shift against her because she felt betrayed by his search and that he "owed her" because she had "invested" in him by shelling out the money to raise him. It was probably his dislike for his adoptive mother that caused him to put forth a threat to her. Tom's parents felt somewhat the same in that they had been Tom's providers. Jessica knew how much it would hurt her mother to know of her search, so she never told her of her multiple year search and will never have to, given that her mother has Alzheimer's Disease. Prior to her mom having Alzheimer's, any questions that Jessica posed to her adoptive mother about her biological history were met with tears from her mother, which indicated to Jessica that she should back off as this was a closed subject. These feelings were illustrated through the use of the codes *tears*, *back off* and *closed subject*. Joe's parents made his search more difficult by taking his adoption decree and scribbling out his given birth name in indelible ink.

Perhaps these parents feared the ultimate threat of role shift, wherein an adoptee ceases to be the child of the adoptive parents and becomes the child of the biological parents. They may question the adoptive child's allegiance and faithfulness to the adoptive family, as depicted by Patrick and Tom's adoptive mothers. They may ask themselves whether their adopted child will still be their child after a reunion or whether the adopted child will reject his/her role as their child, which is coded as *fear of desertion*. They may have feared that the

adoptee would like the biological parents better or that they would refer to *them* as "mom" or "dad". Ashley indicated that sometimes she did call her biological father "dad", for his benefit, but that she had to be careful not to do that in front of her adoptive father because she knew that would hurt him. After all, she was adamant that her adoptive dad was her *real dad*. It is interesting to note that contrary to adoption literature (e.g. Triseliotis, 1973; Sachdev, 1992), the adoptees in this study did not embark on a search for their biological parents due to negative relationships with their adoptive parents. With the exception of Patrick, whose relationship with his adoptive mother was further strained by the reunion and those adoptive parents who were unaware of the adoptees' reunion, the rest of the adoptees felt that their relationship with their adoptive parents remained just as strong, if not stronger, as a result of the reunion.

Some of the adoptive parents were thought to be threatened or betrayed by their child's search because they felt that they had provided for the child and that it was the child's duty to be loyal to them. Although Joe's adoptive father was never informed of his search, Joe felt quite strongly that his dad would disown him and write him out of the will if he ever discovered that he had searched. It seems as if Joe's parents tried to remove the threat of role shift long ago by concealing Joe's birth name on his adoption decree.

Other adoptive parents were outwardly supportive of the search and reunion, but at the same time were a little apprehensive as in Ashley and Jim's cases. Perhaps Jim's adoptive parents tried to guard against the threat of betrayal by not disclosing his adoptive status to him until he was twenty-six.

The above clearly demonstrates the combination of the following codes in the formation of the concept of betrayal: *no hurt, respect, real mom, real dad, dad jealous, mom nervous, fear, parents unaware, balancing act, at a distance, tears, back off, closed subject, and fear of desertion*. The codes *no hurt, respect, real*

*mom, real dad, parents unaware* and *balancing act* indicate the adoptee's conscious effort not to want to hurt their parents. *Tears, back off* and *closed subject* indicate the feelings that some adoptive parents have when approached by the adoptee regarding the biological history of the adoptee or the subject of the adoptee's adoption in general (i.e. some adoptive parents try to keep their child's adoptive status a secret from the public). Therefore, some adoptees avoid telling their adoptive parents of their search (*parents unaware*) because they fear that their parents will be hurt and feel betrayed. Once the reunion has taken place the threat of betrayal appears to heighten, as now the adoptee has two sets of parents to balance (*balancing act*). At this point in time the adoptive parents may be feeling the threat of role shift (*fear of desertion*) that only intensifies their sense of betrayal. Some post-reunion distance between the adoptee and the biological parent(s) may or may not be warranted as the adoptee begins to struggle with an important question: "how do my biological parents fit into my life or do they at all?" It perhaps begs the question, "is the balancing act worth it?" Most of the participants in this study found that it was worth it, while a few were not sure and for a few others it was not an issue as no adoptee/biological parent relationship developed as a result of the reunion.

Hence, some distance may also develop between the adoptee and adoptive parents and may result by virtue of the search and reunion process because the adoptive parents feel betrayed. It may also be instigated by the adoptee who does not wish to keep hearing how s/he has betrayed the adoptive family every time they talk to or visit with their adoptive parents. These consequences are not enough to make an adoptee regret their reunion. They did not want their adoptive parents to be hurt by the search and reunion, but if they could go back in time and do it all again, they would not change a thing.

### Drivenness

Many adoptees were driven and compelled to see the search to the end, regardless of the years that it may take or the consequences that may ensue as a result of the search. Sometimes adoptees became so caught up in the search process that they experienced somewhat of a let down after the reunion. This idea forms the foundation of the concept of "drivenness", where an adoptee may become 'addicted to' or consumed by the search and immersed in its highs, lows, leads and dead ends. March (1995) used the term 'obsession' to describe the addictive nature of the search. I believe that the term "drivenness" better describes the participants in my study, as not all of my participants went to the same lengths to find their birth parents. They had similar search experiences, but experienced varying levels of drivenness during the process of the search. To say that adoptees become obsessed with the search could imply that they all become obsessed and could apply a negative connotation to the adoptee's mental state. After all, the participants in this study did carry on with their daily lives during their search and were able to focus on other activities aside from their search. The fact that adoptees possess varying levels of drivenness is somewhat understandable in light of the steps an adoptee must take as part of the search and reunion process. These steps form the basis of the experience of the search process. Not all adoptees will have to take exactly the same steps or face the same road blocks during their search, but it is likely, as the participants in this study indicated, that most will have similar experiences in some respects. The level of drivenness experienced by adoptees appears to be directly related to the amount of red tape and road blocks that one must eliminate on the road to a reunion. This concept is clearly illustrated and supported by the participants in this study.



One of the biggest barriers adoptees face is the legal barrier to obtaining their biological histories. Once adoption has taken place, adoptees are no longer privy to the same information as that of a biological child who is raised by his or her biological parents. To anyone who is not adopted, it is "taken for granted" that one knows one's biological parents, extended family, medical history and the origin of one's facial features and physical stature.

All of the participants in this study met with a caseworker from Child and Family Services in order to obtain their non-identifying information. In terms of the caseworker/adoptee relationship, the caseworker is the all-knowing, all-powerful gatekeeper (coded as *gatekeeper*) who is in possession of the adoptee's complete family history, including the names of the adoptee's biological parents. The gatekeeper also decides when the adoptee is emotionally ready to meet their biological parents and is present to screen the first meeting between the two parties. Hence, the first roadblock is having to apply for this information and then receiving an extremely edited small amount of biological history.

Drivenness can take many forms. It ranges from the adoptee who staked out his biological mother's house, to the adoptees who hired lawyers and private investigators, to those adoptees who became amateur detectives themselves, right down to the adoptees who wanted to search for the other biological parent after a rejection from the first biological parent. The most common form of drivenness, as demonstrated by the participants in this study, is tenacity. It is likely that very few adoptees are reunited with their biological parents as a result of their biological parents also being on the post-adoption registry (coded as *post-adoption registry*). It is more common for a search to take many months or years prior to a reunion. As observed in this study, participants spent a good portion of their time consumed by the search and were unable to just drop it.

Jessica was a good illustration of this point by the sheer length of time that she spent searching; almost twenty years. Patrick was a close second to Jessica with his search taking roughly thirteen years, six of which were spent seriously dedicated to the search on almost a daily basis.

Some adoptees, as evidenced by the participants in this study, showed extreme forms of tenacity by becoming amateur detectives. They spent hours, days, weeks, months and years pouring through Henderson directories (coded as *Henderson directories*), yearbooks (coded as *yearbooks*) and family trees (coded as *archives*) trying to find their biological parents. Some adoptees in this study joined search groups (coded as *search group*), went to the Court of Queen's Bench (coded as *Court of Queen's Bench*) for their adoption papers (coded as *decree*), hired detectives (coded as *private investigator*) and lawyers (coded as *lawyer*), and in Joe's case, a forensic expert (coded as *RCMP expert*).

Joe was, perhaps, the best exemplification of the concept of drivenness. After all, he described the search process as, "just very addicting and it just seems to be... you want more information and you have to search. It's a never ending pulling" (37, 427-430). In Joe's case the search took two years. He joined a search group, hired a forensic expert to help him decipher his blacked out birth name on his adoption decree, spent hours pouring over archives trying to trace his birth family and pretended to be someone else (coded as *covert*) in order to obtain information from the first biological family member with whom he made contact. He now wants to search for his father, which will be even more difficult as his birth mother cannot provide him with very much information about him due to health problems that have caused her memory failure. Joe appears to have been more interested in the dynamics of the search than the reunion itself. He did not know where his relationship with his birth mother is headed and would not be upset if it did not continue.

Patrick, like Joe, was also a clear example of the concept of drivenness. However, unlike Joe, Patrick went to such great extremes because, to him, the reunion and making sure that a reunion did happen was more important than the search itself. This is perhaps related to the motivation for searching. One will remember that Patrick felt a strong need to validate himself by searching, whereas Joe was just more curious than anything else. Patrick joined a search group, went to the Court of Queen's Bench to apply for his adoption decree, hired a private detective, worked closely with a woman in his search group who helped him discover a great deal of information about his birth mother and then found her living halfway across Canada. He demonstrated the most extreme form of drivenness by staking out (coded as *stakeout*) his birth mother's home before making contact with her by descending on her in a surprise fashion. He wanted to make sure that she was not provided with a chance to refuse to meet him. Referring to a conversation with his wife, he said, "we'll just go there and introduce ourselves and we'll present her with these little notes, documentations, pictures of me and see me etc., and if nothing else, I'll maybe be able to see her before she shuts me out" (47, 438-442). Hence, Patrick was driven to carry the search and reunion through even if it were to mean a negative outcome.

Steve and Jessica both demonstrate another facet of drivenness that is somewhat related to the tenacity of the search: those who search despite rejection or the death of a biological parent. Steve spent quite a bit of time playing amateur detective in his search for his biological mother and was not prepared for her rejection of him. Despite suffering from chronic depression and being somewhat regretful of his search and reunion experience, Steve found himself driven to now find his biological father even if it meant being rejected again. Unlike some of the other adoptees in this study, Steve seemed more addicted to the feeling of completeness a search and reunion may provide, than

he did to the search itself. Jessica also desired that sense of completeness. Though there is no chance of meeting her biological father, who has been deceased for years, she still wants to travel over seas to find his relatives and learn all that she can about him, so that "gnawing feeling", that curiosity about him, will go away.

The negative case (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), in terms of this study, would be an adoptee who spends a couple of months searching and then just gives up. However, the participants in my study did not give up. In some cases the search went into remission for awhile, so to speak, where the adoptee gave up for awhile, but eventually they began searching again. Jessica and Patrick both provided evidence of this phenomenon.

The concept of drivenness is therefore, clearly supported by the following codes: *post-adoption registry, documents, gatekeeper, Court of Queen's Bench, search group, decree, lawyer, fee, counsel, motives, amateur detective, Henderson directories, stakeout, RCMP expert, library, covert, non-identifying information, and private investigator*. Each code represents a small step in the search process. These steps are also indicative of the barriers an adoptee must face in order to discover the pieces of the puzzle that fit together to form his/her biological history. It took some of the adoptees in this study years to complete all the steps of putting their names on the post-adoption registry, obtaining their adoption decrees and non-identifying information, hiring lawyers and private detectives, dealing with caseworkers, joining search groups, and spending hours pouring over old Henderson Directories and archives thereby becoming amateur detectives themselves.

## Control

Many adoptees suffer from a lack of control in several aspects of their lives. Their journey begins with a loss of control at birth and a determination to restore some control into their lives by way of the search and reunion process. Thus, the concept of "control" is derived to describe this phenomenon.

The first loss of control that an adoptee experiences occurs at the point at which they are given up for adoption (coded as *loss of control*). Of course, it is not until later in life that they are aware of this loss of control. They had no choice in this decision and no control over where they would be placed for adoption. The fact that adoptees are adopted deprives them of basic information that is naturally afforded to all biological children; a biological history; and to know from where one came. For an adoptee to not be able to just turn to his/her adoptive parents and ask them a simple question about their biological history (because they honestly do not have that information or will not provide it) makes an adoptee feel something less than whole (coded as *incomplete*).

Adoptees attempt to restore some control into their lives by initiating a search for their biological parents. This type of control, as evidenced by the participants in this study, ranged from the adoptee who sought to validate himself by searching (coded as *validate*), to the adoptee who thought a reunion might help to cure him of his ills (coded as *resolve*), to those who thought the reunion would bestow them with a sense of completeness. Patrick, in his own words, is the best illustration of the concept of control. When explaining what he called the "control issue" (coded as *control issue*), he said:

...the control is that I was given up. I was conceived in a relationship of which I have no control and facetiously you can't pick your parents, but when you are born and brought into the world, you know where you came from so, it's, it's a...everybody's equal. They give birth to

you and they're your parents, so tough, you're stuck with it. In my relationship, I was given up and I lost control in that and I've resented that ever since, I guess subconsciously, and if you read what's her name, Lifton (Lifton, 1988), um...so, that there was a control issue. I wanted to be in control and I wanted to know and I didn't want to be left out anymore and I wanted to see who my half-brothers were and so, that was very important. (67, 840-855)

An adoptee's loss of control is intensified when they must face the gatekeeper (coded as *gatekeeper*) at Child and Family Services. A biological child will never sit across from a social worker and have to defend their motives for wanting to search for a biological parent. Further, the adoptee is given a few pages of carefully edited non-identifying information and asked to pay a thirty-five dollar fee in order to put their name on the post-adoption registry. Hence, this roadblock that an adoptee must face represents the information allowed to a biological child.

In reference to the above, all of the adoptees in this study had to participate in a meeting with the gatekeeper at least once. However, in some cases, there appears to be a group of people that we may refer to as "secondary gatekeepers" - the adoptive parents. To understand their point of view, one must, perhaps, refer back to the concept of betrayal. The adoptive parents often do not hold all of the cards, so to speak, as the gatekeeper does, but they do possess the power to wield control over the adoptee. They may be wielding this control in order to protect against being betrayed by the adoptee; self protection, if you will. One must look no further than Jim, Patrick, Tom, Jessica or Joe's experience to see the truth in the above statement. Jim's adoptive parents exerted control over his life by not disclosing his adoptive status until he was well into adulthood (coded as *deception*). Patrick's adoptive mother burned his adoption papers (coded as *destroy*), while Joe's adoptive parents tampered with

his (coded as *destroy*), both doing so to try and prevent a search and reunion from happening. Jessica's adoptive mother made her feel so guilty for ever asking questions about her adoption, that it made Jessica stop approaching the subject. This lack of information probably helped to increase the length of time that it took Jessica to search for her biological mother. Therefore, one's own adoptive parents can also serve as a roadblock to the search and reunion process by trying to keep some control out of the adoptee's hands. Ultimately, as the participants in this study indicated, the adoptive parents may make the search more difficult, but they do not prevent it from happening.

Ultimately, at least some control is restored to the adoptee upon completion of the search and reunion process. Keep in mind, for instance, what Patrick said about the control issue. He felt he had no control at birth, so he was going to restore it by controlling the search and when and how the reunion would take place. All of the adoptees in this study would probably agree with him. Each adoptee did what they had to do in order to discover their biological parents' identities and then find them. Each adoptee was then in control of when they would write that first letter or make that first phone call or have that first meeting. The only time that full control is not restored appears to be due to a lack of information from the biological parent. Tom and Steve both illustrate this point as neither of their biological mothers were willing to answer all of their questions and fill in all of their blanks. Tom does not seem that bothered by it, but Steve's sense of incompleteness has only deepened as a result.

Restoration of control seems to leave the adoptee with a greater sense of completeness and perhaps a sense of power. While Patrick talked about having no choice over being given up for adoption, Jim put a bit of irony in the situation by saying that now it is the adoptee's turn to walk away if need be. He provided an excellent example of the concept of control when he said:

...that's the beauty of an adopted situation, searching for them you have the opportunity to just walk away at any given time if you don't like them. They're not really your parents. They didn't raise you. You don't feel that need to have any respect or need to have any contact with them at all because your mom and dad are the ones who really count. So, there's sort of a certain freedom with the biological thing, take it or leave it. It's your choice. Mom and dad you're stuck with. (89, 918-928)

Now the adoptee has some power. The adoptee has a choice. The adoptee has control. This sentiment is supported by those adoptees who initiated contact with their biological mothers and then decided to distance themselves from them or end the relationship altogether. This tended to happen when the relationship was not on the adoptee's terms or when the adoptee did not want to shoulder the burden of "another mother."

The above clearly illustrates the concept of control. Control initially began as just a code, but its frequency combined with the fact that all of the above codes and a few others can be grouped under its heading, elevated control to a concept. The loss of control that an adoptee may feel can be supported with such codes as *loss of control*, *control issue*, *bastard*, *validate*, *incomplete* and *resolve*. One must be careful at this point not to assume that every adoptee feels the sting of illegitimacy, feels totally incomplete and hopes that a reunion will solve any problems that they may face. The code *bastard*, for instance, appears strongly only in one interview, but it does illustrate the idea that many of the adoptees in this study do feel 'different' by virtue of being adopted.

'*Different*' is also code, but we cannot attach a good or bad label to it; that perception is left up to each individual adoptee. The perception that the adoptees in this study appear to have is that being adopted/different makes them feel somewhat *incomplete*. Therefore, they have a desire to *resolve* that



sense of incompleteness by finding their biological parents. There are also degrees of incompleteness and resolve. This idea ranges from the participants that simply have a curiosity about their history to the participant who felt that a reunion would *validate* himself (i.e. he felt so mentally, artistically, philosophically and physically different from his adoptive family), to the participant whose life has been negatively affected by his adopted status. *Resolve* overwhelmingly appears, in this study, in the form of peace of mind and satisfaction, wherein the adoptees' questions are answered; their history complete. Hence, adoptees do not seem to set out on a search because they want to solve all of the problems in their lives. One participant just felt that meeting his mother might help his depression (which he did not completely blame on his adoptive status), but he was fairly realistic in that he did not absolutely expect that would happen.

The above indicates the adoptee's lack of control and their desire to restore that control. The *gate keeper* and sometimes the secondary gatekeepers hinder the adoptee's plight to restore that control. Codes such as *stakeout* and *plotted* indicate a more extreme attempt to restore control to the adoptee. One need only look back at the concept of drivenness and reacquaint themselves with codes such as Henderson directories, amateur detective etc. to obtain an idea of how control may be restored.

Once a reunion has taken place the adoptee has the power to decide what will happen. The adoptees in this study were not looking to continue a relationship with their biological parents unless it was on their terms (coded as *my terms*). Those adoptees who were not welcomed into every aspect of the biological parents life ended their relationships with them. These adoptees felt like they were only allowed in through the "back door" (coded as *back door*) in that some or all of the biological mother's family did not know about the

adoptee's existence and the biological mother refused to disclose that information. In this case total control is not afforded to the adoptee because they do not have total acceptance from their biological mother/father. Steve is a prime example. He was a secret to everyone else in his biological mother's life and felt rejected by her twice; first at birth (he was the only adoptee to indicate that because he was adopted, he felt rejected by his birth mother) and then when she refused to let him into her life. Rather than rejecting him right away upon the reunion, she was just evasive at every subsequent meeting. It had been awhile since Steve had heard from her, so he decided to let it be and not try to make contact again. Adoptees also have the power to keep their biological parents at arm's length (coded as *at a distance*) until they can figure out how to fit them into their lives, or if they should at all.

### Why

Contrary to the adoption literature (i.e. Triseliotis, 1973), the adoptees in this study were not preoccupied with *why* their biological parents gave them up for adoption. Therefore, the concept of "why" emerges by virtue its absence in the course of this study. None of the adoptees in this study were overly concerned with the reason why their biological parents gave them up for adoption. Jeff, however, did say:

I had always questioned in my head what had happened. Was my biological mother raped, was she a fifteen year old kid who had too much coke on a Friday night or something? I never knew. I didn't let myself question it too much. I always, I guess, painted a fairy-tale for myself, you know. There was some terrible accident and I was put up for adoption or something. (53, 321-328)

However, he was not consumed with why he was given up or angry in any way about being adopted. Eventually he received his non-identifying information, which indicated that his biological mother felt she had no choice but to give Jeff up for adoption. That satisfied him and made him think that, perhaps, she would want to know how he was doing.

Other participants in this study also received their non-identifying information, which, in some cases, indicated why the adoptee was relinquished for adoption and in other cases the adoptee had formed a notion of why they were given up for adoption. For example, Jessica stated that previous to meeting her biological mother, she had felt that her biological mother probably was young and had no choice in the matter of her adoption. Other adoptees confirmed the same idea. Some adoptees had an idea as to why they were given up, but wanted to see if what they had believed for all those years was, indeed, correct. Most of them were more concerned with having their questions

answered than they were with *why* they were given up for adoption. This goes against much of the adoption literature that suggests the contrary (e.g. Triseliotis, 1973).

The most extreme case was likely Ashley. Ashley herself is a birth mother. So, it was easy for her to relate to her biological mother. She knew that adoption was likely the only choice that her biological mother possessed and therefore focused her efforts on solving the puzzle that would fit together to form her biological history. Many of the adoptees in this study followed suit, with none of them being overly preoccupied with why they were given up for adoption. In fact, both Steve's and Patrick's biological mothers were in their thirties when they were born and neither one of them were concerned with why they were given up when their parents were in such an adult stage. They did think it was odd, but were more concerned with meeting their biological mothers, rather than dwelling on why they were relinquished.

The question of "why was I given up" appears to only be important to those who are not adopted (read, 'some adoption researchers'). According to my results, some adoptees do want to know why they were given up, to see if it matches with their idea of why they were given up, but it is not the driving force of their search. Therefore, adoptees seem more intent on solving the identity puzzle than finding out why they were relinquished. Some of the codes that form this concept include, *to meet, part of her, no choice, her side, in the flesh, curious, who am I, and puzzle solved*. Adoptees have a desire to meet their biological mothers in the flesh because they are curious about them. They feel they are a part of this person who will be able to answer their questions and provide them with a link between the past and present, thereby solving their identity puzzle. Many participants in this study felt or knew, via their non-identifying information, that their biological mothers had no choice to put them up

for adoption and they were curious to hear their side of the story and hear about their lives. Not one participant claimed that they had to meet their biological mother because they were consumed by and needed to know why they were given up for adoption.

### **Acknowledgment**

Why do adoptees want to have a reunion? What were they looking for? It has been established that adoptees were anxious to solve their identity puzzles thereby restoring a certain amount of control into their lives. The adoptees in this study were not preoccupied with why they were given up for adoption, so what had they hoped to accomplish? The answer forms the crux of the concept of "acknowledgment."

No matter what the response of the biological parent(s), the reunion meeting claims acknowledgment. Whether the adoptee searches for medical history, for answers to their questions or to see what their biological parents look like, the end result upon the reunion or first phone call or letter is that the biological parent is forced to acknowledge the adoptee's existence. Even if biological parents deny their status to the adoptee, they still acknowledge the adoptee by virtue of the fact that they have something to deny. In fact, acknowledgment can be divided into three categories that represent the point of view of the biological parent.

First, there is '*active acknowledgment*', which describes biological parents that have desired contact with their biological children by putting their names on the post-adoption registry. This describes Jim's biological parents and Jeff's biological mother. Secondly, there were biological parents who were '*open to acknowledgment*'. These biological parents did not have their names on the registry list, but were receptive to the adoptee when they were found. This

category characterizes the biological parents of the rest of the adoptees who participated in this study. However, some of the biological parents did request some time to inform family members of the adoptee's existence. Lastly, some biological parents can be *'opposed to acknowledgment'*. These biological parents deny their role as biological parents and would rather that the adoptee leave them alone. In the case of this study, none of the biological parents were opposed to acknowledgment. A few of them denied their role at first, but eventually came around and wanted to meet the adoptee.

It is, perhaps, necessary to qualify the difference between acknowledgment and acceptance. A few of the adoptees in this study, especially Steve, had a strong desire to be accepted by their biological parent(s) and to have a relationship with them. Whether an adoptee is accepted or not, they still have to be acknowledged, as acknowledgment precedes acceptance. Let us use Steve as an illustration. At first his biological mother was opposed to acknowledgment by telling him that he had found the wrong person; she was not his biological mother. She then came around and was somewhat open to acknowledgment in that she admitted her status as Steve's biological mother. However, she was unwilling to tell anyone in her family of Steve's existence, thereby denying him acceptance by anyone else in her family. She did not accept Steve into her life either, by refusing to answer his questions and by being unwilling to form a relationship with him. Eventually, contact between them ceased. Hence, even though Steve was hoping for a different end result (acceptance), he still received acknowledgment.

While, acknowledgment can evolve into acceptance, the adoptee cannot control acceptance. An adoptee can, however, control acknowledgment. Patrick provided a clear example of the control of acknowledgment by descending on his biological mother in surprise fashion. He made her acknowledge him and

had prepared for the possibility that he might not be accepted. In his mind, at least he would be acknowledged.

One will remember that adoptees, upon adoption, lose their right to know their biological history. When they search, it is as if they are saying to their biological parents, "I have a right to meet you and to know you. Acknowledge me and the fact that I have blanks in my history." The participants in this study did not want their biological parents to be parents to them as they already had real parents; their adoptive parents. Hence, those that were looking for acceptance, if they received it, wanted it on their own terms, more in the form of friendship. This was seen as a bonus to acknowledgment.

Acknowledgment leads to either integration or rejection. Integration can be divided into two categories. *Full integration* is established when the adoptee is accepted by the biological parent(s) as one of the family. Jim achieved full integration and claimed to be just as close to his biological family as he was to his adoptive family. He was, perhaps, the best example of full integration because his biological parents did marry and had two more biological children, who all treat Jim as though he were one of the family. *Partial integration* is attained when the biological parent is willing to meet with the adoptee. This idea would describe most of the adoptees in the study. Most of the adoptees in this study probably are somewhere between partial and full integration. For example, Jessica was not sure how to fit her biological mother into her life and vice versa. Her mother kept her from being fully integrated by failing to inform all of her family members of Jessica's existence and keeping her somewhat at arm's length. *Rejection* accounts for the biological parent who wants nothing to do with the adoptee. This describes Steve's situation. Steve's biological mother did meet with him, but wanted to keep his existence a secret from all of her family.

She refused to answer any of his questions thereby denying him any integration into her life.

The idea of acknowledgment seems to summarize the aforementioned concepts. The adoptees in this study possessed varying amounts of drivenness in their quest for a reunion and tried valiantly, sometimes to no avail, to keep their adoptive parents from feeling betrayed by the search. They were driven by a need or a want to restore some control into their lives by solving their identity puzzles. Acknowledgment was the minimal end result of their efforts. The maximum result was full acceptance into the biological family. Hence, acknowledgment has been elevated to a higher category with all of the other concepts in full support of it.

Codes such as *database*, *registry*, *search group*, *to meet*, *stakeout*, *available* and *control* support the concept of acknowledgment. They describe the adoptee's desire *to meet* their biological parent(s) and to have some *control* over the search and reunion process that ultimately culminates in acknowledgment. Adoptees put their names into a *database* and/or a *registry* in order to make themselves *available* for contact with their birth parents. An extreme example of forced acknowledgment is the participant who *staked out* his biological mother's house resulting in a forced meeting between the two of them. One will notice that in this case the concept is more important than the codes that form it, for all of these same codes have previously formed the basis of one or more of the previous concepts.

There may be an exception to acknowledgment in the form of people who do not qualify for my study. The ideal negative case is someone who has no desire to search for their biological parents, has had years to search, but has opted not to, and whose biological parents, due to the age of the adoptee, are likely to be dead. This only accounts for people who truly did not want to search and not for



people who did want to search, but were restricted by society's view of a search being taboo.

### Searching for the core variable

The above conceptual analysis has clearly established the fact that acknowledgment has been elevated to a higher category that serves to encompass all of the other concepts. Acknowledgment became more than just the concept of acknowledgment. It evolved into the core variable of this study: **"claiming acknowledgment."** The search and reunion experiences of the participants in this study clearly indicated that acknowledgment from their birth parents was insufficient. By virtue of the search and reunion process itself, the adoptees in this study actively sought out to "claim" acknowledgment from their birth parents. The adoptees in this study all had a desire or a need to fill in the blanks of their biological history and were all well aware of the threat of betrayal that a search and reunion would pose to their adoptive parents. Each adoptee possessed a varying degree of drivenness in their individual searches, ranging from the adoptees who simply put their names on the registry and had a match, to the participants who became amateur detectives leaving no stone unturned, to those who were unwilling to give up even after more than a decade of searching had taken place. The search and reunion process served to reestablish control into the lives of the adoptees, as they were able to reclaim the right to know who their biological parents were and to fill in their previously blank biological history. Some adoptees had a fairly intense desire to restore control into their lives by controlling the search and the time and place of the reunion. This desire for control contributed to an increased level of drivenness. Hence, control and drivenness are linked to each other in a reciprocal fashion. As we begin to digest this data, we may wonder, what is going on here? The answer is simple and logical: **"claiming acknowledgment."**

This study has illustrated the fact that adoptees, do indeed, have a desire for a more historical sense of themselves, which is in keeping with the findings of

other researchers (e. g. Triseliotis, 1973; Sorosky et al., 1978; Campbell et al., 1991; March 1994; March; 1995). Hence, they have a want or a need to solve their identity puzzle. My findings have illustrated that biological information, such as detailed non-identifying information is not enough. The participants in this study had a desire for an 'in the flesh' meeting with their birth parents. This type of meeting allowed for the participants to verify, validate or perhaps discover where some of their traits had originated. It also allowed them to discover what kind of people their birth parents had turned out to be.

The desire to solve one's identity puzzle created a threat of betrayal (either real or imagined) towards one's adoptive parents. Some of the adoptees did not make their adoptive parents aware of their search for fear of being disloyal to them. Others did not make their adoptive parents aware of the search because they *knew* that they would be disowned by their adoptive parents. Adoptive parents who were aware of the adoptees search often supported the search and reunion, but still felt somewhat nervous about the whole experience. This was such an interesting discovery due to the fact that the threat of betrayal was so unlikely. The participants were all adults between the ages of twenty-six and fifty who wanted answers and possible friendships with their birth parents. None of them were seeking another mother or father role in their lives.

Regardless of the threat of betrayal, the participants in this study all possessed a certain amount of drivenness in their search for their biological parents. Further, the concepts of drivenness and control can be linked together as they act back upon one another. For example, it has been established that adoptees possess varying degrees of drivenness in the search for their biological parents. They may be somewhat driven to restore some control into their lives by reclaiming the right to know who their biological parents are (a right that was stripped of them due to their adoptive status) and having these same

parents answer their questions. Reciprocally, adoptees may also find that the need to restore control into their lives *drives* their search. Those adoptees whose searches and reunions have taken many years can attest to the fact that drivenness is not simply something that just disappears. It stays with adoptees until they claim acknowledgment. Based upon my research, it is not likely that adoptees are willing to just 'give up' their searches. There were a few participants in this study who found their biological mothers quite quickly as a result of both the adoptees and the biological mothers being matched through the post adoption registry. One of these participants stated that he would have done nothing further to find his biological mother were she not already on the registry. However, I suspect, based on my research that he and adoptees like him would, perhaps, be driven to take further steps if their biological parents had not been on the registry.

All of these concepts can be grouped together to form the core variable: ***claiming acknowledgment***. The original concept of acknowledgment was not quite broad enough in its scope to be an explanation of the basic social process of this study. In other words, adoptees did not just seek acknowledgment from their biological parents; they actively claimed acknowledgment from them. Hence, the core variable of claiming acknowledgment was derived from the concept of acknowledgment. By virtue of their actions all of the adoptees in this study claimed acknowledgment. They all had identity gaps; questions that needed to be answered in order for them to feel complete. They all initiated the first step toward claiming acknowledgment by putting their names on a registry with the exception of one participant who was successful in finding his biological mother through word of mouth. They poured through Henderson directories, yearbooks and archives, joined search groups, hired lawyers and private detectives, and some ultimately became private investigators themselves. They

initiated first contact through letters or phone calls and eventually had a face to face reunion. The acknowledgment they received from their biological parents was a direct result of their efforts; they made it happen. In this particular study, claiming acknowledgment was demonstrated in its most extreme form by the participant who descended on his biological mother in surprise fashion after she had requested he send her proof of who he was in the form of documents and pictures. This participant exhibited a solid demonstration of the core variable because he did not give his biological mother a chance to deny her status. He went across the country and showed up on her doorstep to claim acknowledgment. Part of the control issue is that when an adoptee acts to claim acknowledgment, they and they alone are claiming acknowledgment. Even if a biological mother denies her status or does not wish to meet the adoptee, she is still forced to acknowledge the adoptee by virtue of the fact that she has something to deny. Denial or not, acknowledgment has taken place. It is as if the adoptee is saying, "you will not acknowledge me, so I will claim acknowledgment." Control is wrested from the biological parent once acknowledgment is claimed. The birthright of the adoptee is restored once s/he knows the identity of his/her biological parents. Adoptees may never regain full control, but they can claim some control. For example, some adoptees claimed acknowledgment, but their biological mothers were unable to or refused to answer all of their questions. One adoptee's experience left him feeling worse than he did before he claimed acknowledgment because of his biological mother's refusal to accept him into her life and to fill in his identity gaps. Hence, some control was restored due to meeting his biological mother, but the relationship ended with him receiving very little historical information.

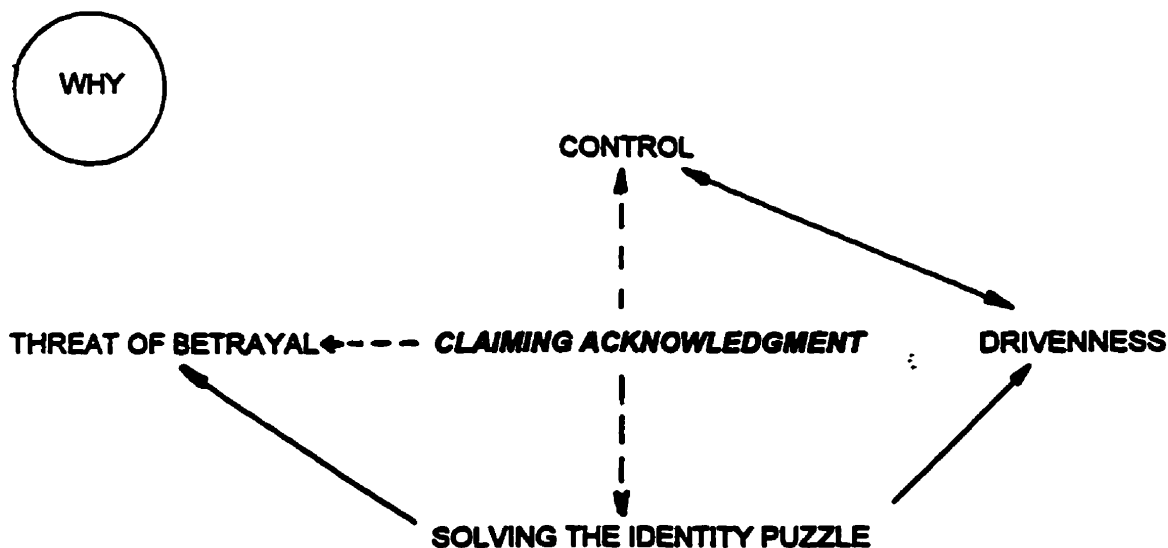
The prior conceptual analysis demonstrated that acknowledgment and acceptance do not go hand in hand. Adoptees can meet their biological parents

and have their questions answered without ever being accepted or welcomed into the lives of their biological parents. Therefore, an adoptee can claim acknowledgment; that is all they can do. A relationship with the biological parent, if that is what the adoptee wants, is a bonus to claiming acknowledgment and not a part of claiming acknowledgment. One must remember that none of the adoptees in this study wanted their biological parents to take on the role of mother or father, as those roles belonged to their adoptive parents. The adoptees desired friendship from their biological parents, if there was to be any relationship at all.

The above is a clear demonstration of the linkage of the above concepts. Grouped together, they form the core variable of **"claiming acknowledgment."** Alone, they contribute to the core variable, but are not solely responsible for its inception. However, the core variable and some of the concepts do have their reciprocities (see figure 1). All adoptees desired to solve their identity puzzle and by virtue of the reunion, this puzzle was solved in the majority of cases. It was not completely solved for the participants who did not receive all the of the answers to their questions. Similarly, control is restored to those who are able to fill in the blanks of their biological history. Hence, the need to solve one's identity puzzle and the control issue lead to claiming acknowledgment. Conversely, claiming acknowledgment often solves one's identity puzzle and restores the adoptee's birthright. While the threat of betrayal, itself, does not actually lead to claiming acknowledgment (i.e. according to a diagram, a straight line would not exist in this direction), claiming acknowledgment can often heighten the threat of betrayal. Drivenness leads to claiming acknowledgment and the reciprocal is true for those adoptees who are more determined than ever to find and make contact with their birth fathers after meeting their birth mothers.

At this point one may notice that the concept of "why" is mysteriously absent. Its' absence is explained by the fact that it simply does not fit with the conceptual analysis and has, therefore, been discarded. It initially became a concept due to the near absence of curiosity on behalf of the participants; curiosity as to why they were given up for adoption. None of the participants in this study were preoccupied with why they were given up for adoption, contrary to past research that indicated the reverse was true. Most of the participants knew why they were given up as this information was provided in their non-identifying information. One participant wanted to know if the reason why she thought she was given up, was actually the true reason, but this was not in any way, a motivating factor in her search.

**Figure 1: Graphic conceptualization of the Core Variable**



The following is an interpretation of the graphic representation of the core variable. The solid arrows represent the pre-claiming acknowledgment experience, while the dashed arrows represent the post-theoretical experience.

The first concept that emerged as a result of my data analysis was "solving the identity puzzle." The adoptees all had questions about their biological history. The search process was implemented as a means of getting the answers to these questions. Embarking on a search for one's biological parent(s) created a "threat of betrayal" toward the adoptive parents. Therefore, a solid arrow has been drawn from "solving the identity puzzle" toward "threat of betrayal." The need to find answers "drives" the search process. Hence, a solid arrow has been drawn from "solving the identity puzzle" toward the concept of "drivenness." Adoptees are driven to restore some control into their lives and this quest for control also drives their search. A two headed solid arrow has been drawn between the concept of "drivenness" and the concept of "control" in order to represent the reciprocal nature of these two concepts. The concept of "why" is alone in the top left corner in representation of its absence in the conceptual analysis. An arrow does not exist from the "threat of betrayal" toward any other concept because this concept does not cause any of the other concepts.

Conceptual analysis has demonstrated that "solving the identity puzzle", "threat of betrayal", "drivenness", and "control" have been linked together to form the core variable "claiming acknowledgment." However, as represented by the dotted lines, the core variable 'acts back' on some of the concepts. A dotted line between "claiming acknowledgment" and "solving the identity puzzle" indicates that the identity puzzle is solved as a result of "claiming acknowledgment." The adoptee is able to restore some control into his or her life upon "claiming acknowledgment" and the threat of betrayal can often be heightened (the adoptive parents may feel jealous of or threatened by their child's relationship with his or her biological parent(s)) as the result of the reunion. Hence, dotted lines are drawn between the core variable and "threat of



betrayal" and "control." The graphic representation of the core variable clearly demonstrates the link between the conceptual analysis and the core variable.

### Synopsis

For all intents and purposes, biological parents are complete strangers to adoptees. Blood is, therefore, not enough. Blood does not make a successful relationship. Just ask those participants whose biological mothers were so different from them that they could not believe they were genetically related. Some of the adoptees did not receive the answers they had sought, while others did and were able to form successful relationships with their biological parents. Some adoptees formed relationships with their biological parents, but were not sure if these parents really fit into their lives. Regardless of the outcome the adoptees found that the search and reunion experience made them stronger people. Those adoptees who got the answers they sought felt more complete. One participant even indicated that filling in the blanks made her feel like she was no longer adopted because she no longer wondered about her history. In the majority of cases, meeting one's biological parent(s), made the adoptees appreciate their adoptive parents and the life they had to a much greater extent.

Hence, claiming acknowledgment served different purposes for each adoptee. Some adoptees became close to their adoptive parents, some did not know how to fit them into their lives, some ended their relationships, but none of the adoptees ever let these biological strangers ever reclaim the role of mother or father. March (1997) reinforced this outcome when she found that adoptees "lacked the social history needed to engage in such [an intimate parent/child relationship]" (p. 102). The participants in this study and their birth parents were essentially strangers who could be little more than friends and, at times, they did not know where they stood with each other. Patrick, perhaps, put this idea into

perspective when he said, "she may want to come into my life, but...she's got her own problems, her own narrative and her stories are such that I'm not in any of her pages so, coming in now is nice" (65, 842-845). In other words, he and his birth mother do not really share a history other than being biologically related. All they can do is share today. He wished only to be her friend, rather than a son who is obligated to yet another parent. March (1997) has gone so far as to say that the term "adoption reunion" is improper as it "suggests an isolated event...and also implies a pre-existing relationship based on strong emotional ties and mutual experience" (p.104). I would tend to agree with March for the simple fact that these adoptees sought to claim acknowledgment; to have their questions answered; to meet their birth parents for the *first* time. There is no pre-existing relationship; just a pre-existing genetic make-up. As Jim said, "take it or leave it. It's your choice." (89, 928). Thus, adoptees and their birth parents are strangers who might form a relationship the same way that any other set of strangers would form a relationship. This relationship either develops or for lack of common interest, it may fizzle. Regardless of the outcome, the adoptee has claimed acknowledgment.

### Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to explore the adoption reunion experience from the perspective of the adoptee and to discover a theory that is grounded in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This study utilized an ethnographic framework in order to gain the adoptee's perspective of the dynamics of the reunion experience. It has improved on the weaknesses of other studies due to its lack of excessive demographic data. Rather, data were pieced together from the unknown. The result was intimate insight into the search and reunion process from the point of view of a small group of adoptees.

An interesting factor of this study was the ratio of male to female participants. March (1995) found that females have a greater desire to meet their birth mothers than their male counterparts and that females volunteer for studies more often than men do, which accounts for the appearance of more searching females than males. In this study, more males than females volunteered. The males were just as interested in meeting their birth mothers as their female counterparts. It was, perhaps, easier for the participants to search for their birth mothers because they were all in possession of the maiden last name of their birth mothers. However, most participants wanted to find their birth mother first and then their birth father (some male participants had no interest whatsoever in finding their birth fathers), if their birth mother could provide them with some information about the birth father, which is in keeping with other research findings (e.g. Sorosky et al., 1978; Sachdev, 1992). March (1995) noted that males and females tend to employ somewhat similar search techniques and have similar responses to the reunion, therefore, gender becomes irrelevant in the data analysis.

I feel that there is a need for more studies that approach the subject of search and reunion from an ethnographic, qualitative perspective. March (1995) conducted a large reunion study using a symbolic interactionist perspective to analyze her data. Her results focused solely on identity issues between the adoptee and the outside world and the adoptee and the birth mother. While my study recognized that identity did play a role in the search and reunion experience, it was not the sole focus of the analysis the study. All of the participants who were able to garner answers from their biological mothers (two did not) had their identity puzzles solved. They felt complete. However, those who did not have their questions answered were still in possession of some

identity gaps. For one participant, this was not of concern, but for another it was the catalyst to further emptiness.

The participants in this study were able to shed new light on the adoption reunion experience as the results of this study clearly show that solving the identity puzzle is not the ultimate goal. Solving the identity puzzle could never function as the core variable as these participants had to meet their biological parents in person. They could have had all the information they had desired provided for them in the form of phone calls and letters from their biological parents, but it was the in-person, face to face meeting when "acknowledgment was claimed" that was deemed as most important by the adoptees. True, acknowledgment could be garnered via the telephone, but it was "claimed" in-person. The adoptees in this study possessed varying amounts of drivenness, with most of them having invested too much time playing amateur detective to not go all the way and actually meet their biological parents in person. They controlled their searches and upon "claiming acknowledgment" control was restored to them in the form of a complete history (except in two cases) and knowledge of their biological parents' identities. Those who were not provided with a complete history still had some control restored as they had at least claimed acknowledgment. They met their birth mothers face to face and knew where they came from even if they did not receive the answers to all of their questions.

It is important to note that this study sought to understand the adoption search and reunion process in terms of the lived experience of a group of adoptees who had been reunited with their birth mothers and/or birth fathers. I was interested in the experience as it had occurred up to the time that each individual interview had been conducted. In light of the fact that some of the reunions had only taken place a short time before the adoptees were

interviewed for this study, it would be interesting to interview the participants of this study a few years from now to see how or if their relationships with their biological parents have progressed. It would also be of interest to see if any of the adoptees who had desired to meet their birth fathers had actually had any contact with these men. Did anyone who did not wish to meet their birth father change his/her mind and decide to search for him? Did anyone who had severed contact with his/her birth mother resume their relationship with his/her birth mother? A long term study involving the same participants might provide further insight into the reunion experience. For example, the participants in this study had not been in contact long enough (five years was the largest time span between the initial reunion and the time of the interview), for a true long term relationship to have developed. Some participants were still in the "honeymoon phase" of their relationships with their birth parents, in that the relationship was fairly new. Some participants felt they had a great relationship with their birth parents while others were still not sure of the positions that they and their birth parents should occupy in each others' lives. Did anything change? If so, what was the catalyst of this change?

This study has improved on the weaknesses of previous adoption reunion studies as it utilized informal interviews that elucidated the adoptee's own personal search and reunion experience, his/her perception of this experience and what it meant to them. Therefore, the reporting of the research remained faithful to the manner in which it was described by the participants. The constant comparison of codes highlighted the similarities, trends and differences of each adoptee's experience, which led to the development of concepts, that grouped together, formed the core variable "*claiming acknowledgment*." This core variable is unique in that it has not surfaced in previous studies. It has been discovered due to a lack of preconceived hypotheses and to a lack of an

application of an existing theory (i.e. symbolic interactionist theory) to the results of the research, which would have guided the research in a different direction. In other words, the discovery of a theory that was grounded in the data was paramount. Data were not forced to fit an existing theory or explained in terms of an existing theory. It is important to remember the study of process is salient to the grounded theory perspective. Therefore, "claiming acknowledgment" may not be written in stone or "frozen in time", but because it is a theory that is based on data, it will likely "not be completely refuted by more data or replaced by another theory. Since theory is too intimately linked to data, it is destined to last despite its inevitable modification and reformulation" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 4).

I suggest that the above results could be used as a positive catalyst for systemic change. Government policy-makers might review the results of this study in terms of possible policy changes that could be implemented in regard to the current adoption law in Manitoba. Presently, the adoption law in Manitoba contains a sealed adoption record policy, which legally prevents adoptees from knowing their biological history. An open record policy would almost certainly eliminate the need to solve the adoptee's identity puzzle and the lengthy search process that often ensues as a result of the adoptee's lack of information. Today, Child and Family Services employs a very small staff who will, for a fee, search for the adoptee's biological parents on behalf of the adoptee. Perhaps, Child and Family Services could increase the number of staff members in this capacity in order to substantially decrease the waiting period for this type of service. Lastly, adoption support social workers should be more sensitive to adoptees who request background information or a search. Some of the adoptees who participated in this study felt like this meeting was somewhat interrogative. They felt that they and their motives for searching were being

overanalyzed by the social worker and it made them feel uncomfortable.

Perhaps Child and Family Services should commission a study on the process of open-adoption in order to see the flip-side of the sealed record policy. Then, one day, adoptees, like biological children, might be *allowed* to know their biological history, rather than having to search for it.

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**APPENDIX A**

**LETTER: PURPOSE OF STUDY AND REQUEST FOR VOLUNTEERS**

Hi\_\_\_\_\_:

\_\_\_\_\_, 1996

**My name is Jan Sparrow and I am a graduate student in the department of Family Studies at the University of Manitoba. The focus of interest for my thesis topic is the search and reunion experience of adoptees who have been reunited with one or both of their biological parents. My request is to interview you about your search and reunion experience.**

**The interview will be open-ended, while the length of the interview will be dependent on each participant, likely one to two hours in duration. There will be no right or wrong answers to any of the questions posed to you and you do not have to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer. It is also your right to withdraw from the study at any point in time, if you so wish. The interview will be tape recorded and then transcribed, word for word, to paper as soon as possible after the interview. Once the interview has been transcribed, the tape will be destroyed. All records will be kept confidential and all names will be deleted and replaced with pseudonyms to protect your identity and maintain your privacy. A copy of the transcript will be given to you, so that you may edit any part of it prior to analysis. You may also be contacted for a second interview, which would likely be much shorter in duration than the first interview. This interview may be used to clarify or expand on information you have already provided or it may be used to ask you a few new questions that may have arisen as a result of my on-going analysis of your first interview and subsequent interviews with other participants. You will also receive a copy of my finished thesis, which will be yours to keep.**

**If you are interested in being a part of this study, or if you have any questions feel free to contact me at 895-0666.**

**Sincerely,**

**Jan Sparrow**

**APPENDIX B**  
**INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

**INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

I have read the enclosed letter, and agree to participate in a tape-recorded interview under the conditions that the tape recording of the interview will be destroyed immediately after the interview has been transcribed, my identity will remain confidential, names mentioned in the interview will be deleted or substituted with pseudonyms, and I will have the opportunity to edit the written transcript of my interview to meet my approval before the data is analyzed. I also understand that I may withdraw from participation, or withhold information at any time during or after the interview.

I am also willing to be contacted for a possible second interview to which the above conditions also apply. I understand that the second interview may take place several weeks or months after the first interview. I am aware of the fact that during this interview, I may be asked several new questions or I may be asked to expand on or clarify information that I have already provided.

NAME.....

PHONE NUMBER.....

SIGNATURE.....

DATE.....

**APPENDIX C**  
**TRANSCRIPT APPROVAL**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, 1997

I have enclosed a written transcript of our interview on \_\_\_\_\_. As I informed you, I require your approval for this transcript to be used for data analysis. Please be reminded that your identity will remain confidential. In addition, all names have been substituted with pseudonyms.

If this transcript meets your approval for data analysis, please sign below:

SIGNATURE \_\_\_\_\_ DATE \_\_\_\_\_

Or, if changes must be made to meet your approval, please indicate on the reverse side of this letter, what revisions you wish to make, and on which pages of the transcript they should occur.

If this transcript meets your approval, provided the requested revisions are made, please sign below:

SIGNATURE \_\_\_\_\_ DATE \_\_\_\_\_

\*\*\*\*\*

Also, to ensure that I have all the necessary demographic information, may I request that you answer the following questions?

1. What month of which year did you begin your search?
2. What month of which year did your reunion with your biological parent(s) take place?
3. What is your age?

\*\*\*\*\*

Please return this letter only, as soon as possible, in the stamped envelope which I have enclosed. This enclosed copy of your transcript is for you to keep.

Thank you again for your participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Jan Sparrow



**APPENDIX D**  
**RESEARCH TOPIC:**  
**LETTER TO RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE**

**SUBMISSION TO ETHICS COMMITTEE**  
**FACULTY OF HUMAN ECOLOGY**

**TITLE.**

An exploratory study of the search and reunion dynamics experienced by adoptees.

**INVESTIGATOR.**

Sparrow, J. M.

**GRADUATE ADVISOR.**

Berg, D.

**DEPARTMENT.**

Family Studies

**PURPOSE.**

The goal of this research is to explore the experiences of adoptees who have been reunited with one or both of their biological parents. Research is very limited in the area of searching and reunions between adoptees and their biological parents (Sachdev, 1992) as very few studies have focused on the process and aftermath of adoption reunions. There is little information about the processes involved in finding and making contact with one's biological parent(s) and the dynamics that take place after the initial reunion. In order to grasp this complex experience, it is necessary to let the information speak for itself, to let the adoptees share their adoptive meaning structure and their reunion experience with us, so that without prejudgment, we may gain a greater understanding of this experience as lived by the adoptees.

**SUBJECTS.**

Subjects for this research project will be ten to twelve adoptees who have searched for, located and met with one or both of their biological parents on at least one or more occasions. The length of time that has passed since the first

initial contact with the biological parent(s) (i. e. several years may have passed), is not critical, but ideally should be sufficient in order for the adoptee to have had some time to process, reflect on and deal with any changes the reunion may have produced.

### **BENEFITS AND RISKS.**

There are no direct known benefits to the participants in this study other than they are participating in providing valuable information to others. The benefits derived from this study will apply mainly to that section of the public that chooses to read the results of this study. The findings may be of use to other adoptees who are already searching or who may be in the position of trying to decide whether or not to search for one or both of their biological parents.

The research will not pose any risks to the informants as those interviewed will have been self-selected and will have expressed a willingness to discuss the experience of their reunions with their biological parents. All records will remain confidential, and will be coded for identification by the researcher only. Names will be deleted, or replaced with a pseudonym. Each participant will also receive a copy of the findings when the research is completed.

### **PROCEDURES.**

A letter which explains the purpose of the study, outlines the procedure of the interview and assures confidentiality will be given to each suitable participant. Interested participants can then contact me by telephone.

After contact has been made with a participant, a convenient time and location for an interview will be arranged. The format for the interview will be open ended. Some general questions have been prepared as a guide during the interview. Participants will be assured that there are no right or wrong answers to the questions.

The interview will be tape recorded and transcribed, word for word, as soon as possible after the interview has taken place. Names will be deleted from the transcript or substituted with a pseudonym. The tape will then be destroyed. Each participant will receive a copy of their transcript for editing purposes. A number will be used to code the written transcript, which corresponds with the participant's name. A record of the codes that identify participants will be securely kept in a different location. Only the researcher will have access to these records. The records will be destroyed upon completion of the research project.

#### **INFORMED CONSENT.**

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Participants will be asked to sign a consent form indicating that they have agreed to participate under certain specific conditions. The technique of on-going informed consent (Cowles, 1988; Munhall, 1988) will be used throughout the interview. Each participant will be informed of their right to refuse to answer any questions that they do not wish to answer and of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

#### **REMUNERATION.**

Participants will receive no payment for their participation in this study. A copy of my research findings will be presented to each informant.

#### **INFORMATION FROM NON-PERSONAL SOURCES.**

Not applicable.

#### **CONFIDENTIALITY.**

This has been discussed above under the Procedures section. Each participant will also receive a letter ensuring them of complete and total confidentiality.

## REFERENCES

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**APPENDIX E**  
**RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE APPROVAL**

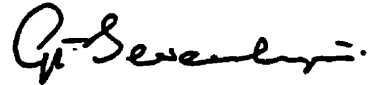
**THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA**  
**INTER-DEPARTMENTAL CORRESPONDENCE**

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**DATE:** November 24, 1995

**TO:** Dr. D. Berg, Family Studies

**FROM:** G. P. Sevenhuysen, Chair Ethics Review Committee



**RE:** Ethics Review: Search and Reunion dynamics experienced by adoptees.

The Ethics Committee has reviewed the proposed research procedures you submitted on 20 September 95. The procedures meet ethical guidelines with exception of the following addition:

1. The researcher must provide details to the Ethics Committee in writing about the process used to identify subjects, including any approvals from agencies who are involved in this process.
2. The researcher must explain in detail how interviews are scheduled (by phone?) and exactly what is said to the subjects at those times.
3. The researcher must provide an outline of the content of the "general questions" used in the interview. At least a question guide needs to be submitted with additional explanation where relevant.
4. The researcher must confirm the name of the ONE person who has access to the data (page 3, line 11), because two names are associated with the submitted text. If more people have access these need to be identified.
5. The researcher needs to provide evidence that subjects will be told of the possibility of a second interview before they are asked to sign the consent form. Information about the procedures to be followed, purpose, content, timing and duration of a second interview need to be explained and included in the introductory letter and in the follow-up letter seeking transcript approval.
6. The researcher needs to mention the estimated duration or time commitment required for the first interview.
7. The researcher should clean up the consent form (7th line: change withdraw to withhold) and Transcript approval form (8th line: correct 'pleas'; questions: adequate spacing; question 4: gender not already known after face-to-face interview?)

Please provide the documentation requested in order for the Committee to complete its processing of the project.

**APPENDIX F**  
**INITIAL CODES**



### Initial Codes

#### Curious:

an adoptee is curious about his/her biological history.

#### Curiosity:

an adoptee has a curiosity regarding the identity of their birth parents and what they are like as people.

#### Blanks:

there are blanks, or gaps in the adoptee's life due to a lack of information regarding his/her biological history.

#### Puzzle Pieces:

pieces of biological information that aid an adoptee in filling in the gaps of their biological history.

#### Look like:

an adoptee's desire to see what his/her parents look like; to see who *they* look like.

#### Who am I:

an adoptee's search for her/ his identity.

#### Fantasy:

adoptees have fantasies about what their biological parents are like.

#### In the flesh:

the adoptee's strong desire for a face to face meeting with their biological parent(s).

#### Spitting image:

an adoptee finding out that either they or their children are the spitting image of someone in their biological family.

**Puzzle solved:**

finding out that one's traits or philosophies are similar to those of the biological family.

**Quest:**

the search for one's biological parents is a quest for answers.

**No hurt:**

the adoptee's steadfast desire not to hurt their adoptive parents while embarking on the search and reunion process.

**Respect:**

the adoptee have a great amount of respect for their adoptive parents.

**Real mom/dad:**

the adoptive mother/father is considered, by the adoptee, to be the adoptee's real mother/father.

**Dad jealous:**

refers to an adoptive father being jealous of his adoptive daughter's relationship with her biological father.

**Husband jealous:**

a husband who is jealous of his wife's relationship with her biological father.

**Mom nervous:**

an adoptive mother who is nervous about her son's/daughter's first meeting or developing relationship with his/her birth parent(s).

**Fear:**

adoptive parents who fear they will lose their child to the biological parent(s).

**Parents unaware:**

refers to adoptive parents who were not told of the adoptee's search for or reunion with his/her birth parent(s).

**Balancing act:**

the feeling an adoptee has when s/he feels that s/he is caught between his/her biological parents and his/her adoptive parents.

**At a distance:**

keeping one's adoptive mother and biological mother at a distance.

**Tears:**

the reaction some adoptive mothers have to discussing the subject of the adoptee's adoption.

**Back off:**

the adoptee relents and does not ask the adoptive parent for anymore information regarding their adoption as a result of the adoptive parent's emotional reaction.

**Closed Subject:**

an adoptive parent's refusal to discuss the facts surrounding the adoptee's adoption.

**Fear of desertion:**

the adoptive parent's fear that his/her adopted child will reject his/her role as their child after meeting his/her biological mother/father.

**Gate Keeper:**

refers to people who are in possession of historical information regarding the adoptee's biological history and birth parents' names. This person can be an adoptive parent, but in this study the term mostly applies to social workers who control the flow of biological information to the adoptee and oversee the reunion.

**Post-Adoption Registry:**

a list of adoptees and biological parents. An adoptee or birth parent puts their name on this list to make the other aware that they wish to make contact.

**Henderson Directories:**

a list of names, addresses and phone numbers that the adoptee uses when searching for his/her birth mother/father by last name.

**Yearbooks:**

An adoptee in possession of his/her birth mother/father's last name may use yearbooks as a tool in location their birth parent(s).

**Archives:**

Adoptees may look through archives during their search, in order to trace their biological family name.

**Search Group:**

an adoption support/search group that aids adoptees in their search for their biological parents.

**Court of Queen's Bench:**

adoptees can apply to this court for a copy of their adoption decrees.

**Decree:**

a legal document indicating the adoptee's given birth name and their adoptive name.

**Private investigator:**

an adoptee sometimes hires a private investigator to aid in his/her search.

**Lawyer:**

an adoptee may hire a lawyer to aid in his/her search.

**RCMP expert:**

one adoptee had to hire an RCMP forensic expert to help him decipher his damaged adoption decree.

**Covert:**

describes adoptees who pretend to be someone other than themselves when they first make phone contact with their birth parents or a member of their biological family, in an attempt to avoid scaring that person away.

**Stakeout:**

describes the adoptee who cased his biological mothers apartment complex prior to meeting her in order to plot the best way to execute the surprise meeting he had planned.

**Fee:**

adoptees have to pay a fee in order to put their names on the post-adoption registry.

**Counsel:**

adoptees have to go through a counselling session with a social worker before they can put their names on the post-adoption registry.

**Motives:**

during their counselling sessions with social workers, adoptees are questioned as to their motives in wanting to find their birth mother/father.

**Amateur detective:**

the adoptee often becomes his/her own private investigator during the search for his/her biological parents.

**Library:**

adoptees may use the library as a source of information when trying to find their birth parents.

**Non-identifying information:**

the adoptee is entitled to this document that contains varying degrees of biological information without revealing the identity of the birth parents.

**Loss of control:**

the adoptee experiences this by virtue of being adopted and not knowing their biological history.

**Incomplete:**

an adoptee feels incomplete due to his/her lack of biological historical information.

**Validate:**

some adoptees hope that a reunion will validate them as human beings and confirm that their interests and philosophies of life are reflected in their birth parents.

**Resolve:**

some adoptees hope that the reunion will resolve some problems they may have and provide them with a sense of completeness.

**Control issue:**

there is a control issue in the search process in that adoptees are searching for information that is rightfully theirs and they are conducting these searches on their own terms.

**Deception:**

an adoptive parent's refusal to disclose the adoptee's adoptive status to him or their attempt to alter birth documents.

**Destroy:**

the adoptive parent's attempt to tamper with or destroy birth documents.

**Bastard:**

some adoptees feel illegitimate and different from the rest of their family, like they do not belong.

**Different:**

describes adoptees who feel different from everyone else due to their adoptive status.

**Plotted:**

describes the actions of one adoptee who staked out his biological mother's apartment in order to find the best possible way and time to descend on her.

**My terms:**

adoptees want a relationship with their birth parents that is based on their own terms and is not controlled solely by the birth parent.

**Back door:**

adoptees want to approach their relationships with their birth parents by going in the "front door" where they are welcomed with open arms as opposed to the "back door" where they are kept a secret from everyone in the biological parent's family.

**To meet:**

the desire to meet one's biological parents.

**Part of her:**

adoptees want to meet their birth mothers as these women are a part of themselves.

**No choice:**

adoptees often feel that their birth mothers were without financial and emotional support and that they had no choice but to give them up for adoption.

**Her side:**

adoptees wish to hear about their birth mother's life from the time of the adoption to the present.

**Database:**

could include the post-adoption registry or any other list that the adoptee can put their name on in hopes of being matched up with their birth parents.

**Registry:**

a list an adoptee puts his/her name on in hopes of being matched up with his/her birth parent.

**Available:**

the adoptee makes his/herself available for contact with the birth parent by putting their name on a registry.

**Control:**

to actively control the search process; or control over the reunion, i.e. the adoptee can end the relationship with the birth parent if they are not satisfied with it.