

Constructing Adoptive Identities:

The Accounts of Adopted Adults

by

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A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to explore the experience of adoption through the narratives of adult adoptees. The accounts provided by the adopted participants furnished the context in which I examined the continual processes of negotiation, construction and interpretation of their identities.

A process-oriented symbolic interactionist approach informs the discussion of identities. This perspective contends that subjectivity is pivotal in the analysis of identity formation.

A review of empirical adoption research indicates that the subjectivity of adoptees has for the most part been absent. In addition, this research has tended to be "problem-focused" in its orientation and has presented a dichotomous and limited view of adoptees as either "Searchers" or "Non-searchers."

I employed a qualitative methodological approach to allow participants to discover their own language with which they could construct and describe their subjective realities. My research strategies followed closely the principles of grounded theory methodology. I conducted individual, semi-structured, focused interviews with ten adult adoptees. Through the systematic processes of "open" and "axial" coding, I performed a comparative analysis of the adoptees' accounts, identifying several themes or categories therein. I have conceptually ordered these categories to create a theoretical map of adoptive identities.

The Model of Adoptive Identities is comprised of the following categories: Conceptions of Family, Conceptions of Adoption, Communication, Roots, Information Gathering, and Connections. The model indicates that an adoptee's Conception of Family, informed either by a social constructionist or a biological attitude, is the lens through which she/he views the other components of her/his identities. In other words, the meaning that adoptees attribute to the institution of family interacts with and affects the meaning they ascribe to the practice and experience of adoption, the extent and manner of their communication with others about adoption, the meanings they assign to their biological Roots, the strategies they employ to gather information about those Roots, and the extent to which they feel connected to other adopted people.

Recognizing the weaknesses of the Model of Adoptive Identities, I present an alternative configuration which attempts to address the binary mode of thinking that has shaped theoretical formulations about adoption, family and identity.

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INTRODUCTION

This study has its genesis in my personal experience of adoption. I am a twenty-seven year old, white, able-bodied woman adopted in infancy by a white, married, middle-class couple who are not related to me biologically. I have one older brother (white and able-bodied) who was also adopted in infancy. My brother and I are not biologically related.

Throughout my development in and outside of this family, I have struggled with the meaning of my adoptive status and the impact that it has had on my identity. The following questions have come into focus over the years: is the status of adoptee positive or negative in my social world? How do I (or should I?) connect myself to a network of biological relations? What does "family" mean and what are its limits and possibilities? Although this struggle has, over the years, alternately occupied the forefront of my thoughts and receded into the background, I remain intrigued by the life experiences of adoptees and the processes by which they make sense of those experiences. I attribute this interest in part to my own reflection on adoption, as well as to my feelings of isolation from others who share the label "adopted."

In my review of adoption literature, which has focused on the development and adjustment of adoptees, adoptive kinship, and problems and variations in adoption practice, I have discovered that much of the material is written from the perspective of either adoptive parents or "impartial observers" (for example, family therapists,

social workers, or academics),¹ with little attention paid to the personal viewpoints of the adopted people themselves. In order to evaluate adoption as an experiment in family-building and legitimate the continuing practice of adoption within the social service sector, research is often devoted to discovering how adoptees have "turned out" as adults.

"Success" in adoption cannot be properly measured for there is no yardstick. [...] Nevertheless, if adoption is to be seen as an appropriate way of helping a wider range of deprived, unwanted and handicapped children, it must prove itself on the basis of the eventual outcome of these placements. (Raynor, 1980:vii-viii)

This type of research tends to use two sources of data to measure the adjustment of adoptees: 1) objective indicators such as performance in school, IQ tests, or other psychological development tests, or 2) subjective accounts of teachers, adoptive parents or other observers proximal to the adoptee(s) being studied (Benet, 1976; Raynor, 1980; Seglow et al., 1972; Shaw, 1984). Often, the researchers do not solicit accounts of the adoption experience from the adoptees themselves.

Further, a large portion of the work addressing adoption prescribes to a problem-focused perspective, in which the problem is located "in" either the adoptee or the adoptive family. Seglow et al. (1972) report with some surprise: "Often the research team looked for problems, but found none!" (p. 10) (see also LeShan, 1963; Jaffee & Fanshel, 1970; Kornitzer, 1973; Triseliotis, 1973; Sorosky et al., 1978; Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990). In his review of adoption research, Shaw (1984) also notes this pattern.

¹ Some of these categories overlap; for example, Kirk, Feigelman and Silverman are both researchers and adoptive parents.

Having established that adopted people are not flocking into prisons and mental hospitals, it nonetheless remains all too easy to settle for a problem-centred stance -- 'what do you find difficult about being adopted?' -- perpetuating a situation where adopted people are seen only as having (or being) problems. Sociological research to date has offered a less individualized but still somewhat pathological perspective on adopted people as a minority group. (Shaw, 1984:123)

The "problems" identified in this research include those of transracial adoption, international adoption, adoption of older children, adoption of differently-abled children, "failed" adoptions or "adoption disruption" (Brodzinsky & Schecter, 1990), "poorly adjusted" adoptees, and adopted people who search for their birth parents. (The latter two categories are often combined -- if not explicitly, then by implication.)

One technique common in problem-focused research on adopted people is the classification of adoptees into two categories: Searchers and Non-searchers (for example, see Triseliotis, 1973 or Feigelman and Silverman, 1983). Ordinarily, the qualifications for the Searcher category require that the adoptee actively inquire about information regarding biological relatives, and/or seek a meeting with these relatives. The class of Non-searchers includes all adoptees who do not meet the criteria of the Searcher category. I believe that because the category of Searchers is significantly smaller than that of Non-searchers, there is a tendency in research to focus on the former to find out why they deviate -- why do they search for bio-historical information when their (statistically) normal counterparts (Non-searchers) do not? In this instance, a rather arbitrary two-category framework describing adoptees neglects to examine the complex reasons for an adopted person *not* searching for birth history information. In general, a problem-centred approach fails to consider adoption in its

wider context as a routinely subjective, everyday lived experience.

Given the inadequacies in the research outlined above, the goal of this study was to explore the experience of adoption through adoptees' subjective interpretations. The description provided by the adoptive participants furnished the context in which to examine the continual process of identity negotiation and construction in adopted people. According to a symbolic interactionist approach, identity determines the nature of our interaction with others, and our interaction with others, in turn, affects our identities (Gecas, 1982). In the same way, the experience of adoption affects an adopted person's identity, and her/his identity affects how she/he interprets that experience. Thus, identity was central to this study.

Furthermore, as Weigert and Hastings (1977) point out, the development of identity is closely linked to the institution of family.

The basic relationships of the nuclear family, viz. conjugal love, parental support or filial piety, and sibling ties, are central to the processes of identity formation. (Weigert & Hastings, 1977:1172)

Adoptees can offer a unique perspective on identity development in this context because their relationship to the very institution which is for most people the first, if not the most important arena of identity development (i.e. the family), is different from that of members of biologically-related families; in the process of adoption, biological (genetic) and adoptive (social) relationships are frequently split into separate kin groups. This split affects how the adoptee negotiates her/his identity(ies).

Thus, the purpose of this study was *not* to contrive a definitive statement on

the "normal" adoption experience, but to examine the range of subjective interpretations of that experience by adopted people themselves. In this process my aim was to discover if and how adoptees incorporated this label into their identities, and how they made sense of their adoptee status in the context of biological and adoptive kin groups.²

In the following chapter, I review relevant social-psychological literature on identity in order to establish the following: 1) that identity construction is a dynamic and interactive process; 2) that the negotiation of personal identity is a complex interplay between individuals and social structures; and 3) that the interpretation and expression of personal identity, although influenced by social structure, is ultimately subjective. At the end of the theoretical chapter I briefly describe the type of data that must be collected in order to illuminate the process of identity formation in adoptees.

In the third chapter, I review pertinent empirical research on adoption and show how its orientation does not address the issues raised in the theoretical discussion on identity.

In the fourth chapter, I outline my methodological approach to the research study.

In the fifth chapter I present the research findings and a theoretical model

² For the purpose of this study, one's biological kin group is the group of people to whom one is genetically related; one's adoptive kin group is the group of people designated as kin solely on the basis of social contract. There are exceptions to this rule, such as in the case of one's genetic relative(s) (for example, an aunt and/or uncle) becoming one's adoptive parent(s).

which provides a conceptual map for the territory of adoptive identities.

In the sixth chapter, I describe how different variations of the Model of Adoptive Identities are manifested and illustrate the connections between the model and relevant sociological theory.

In the concluding chapter, I address apparent weaknesses in the Model of Adoptive Identities, and discuss implications of the present research.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Identity

A variety of theoretical perspectives populates the territory of identity. Each of these positions reflects different basic ideologies about human behaviour.

Psychoanalytic and neoanalytic perspectives, for example, are essentially rooted in biology. That is, the developmental stages through which a "normal" or "healthy" individual progresses in the formulation of their identity are marked by phases of biological development such as infancy, childhood, adolescence and adulthood (see Erikson, 1963; Ryckman, 1982). Feminist accounts of identity, on the other hand, such as those presented by Celia Kitzinger (1987) and Marilyn Frye (1983) tend to focus on identity construction within marginalized groups. Describing the way in which lesbian identities are rendered not only invisible, but impossible by dominant "phallogentric" ideology, Frye notes:

If a conceptual scheme excludes something, the standard vocabulary of those whose scheme it is will not be adequate to the defining of a term which denotes it. (Frye, 1983:154)

Thus, feminist approaches to identity attempt to acknowledge and account for the structural inequalities that impinge upon the development of personal and collective identities. Many feminist theories of identity, like that of Kitzinger (1987) incorporate a social constructionist perspective which suggests that human beings create their own realities, and are in turn created by world they have constructed.

One way in which the social construction of identities can be described is through symbolic interactionism. As an alternative to the other viewpoints outlined above, I have chosen this perspective to frame my approach to the negotiation of adoptees' identities.

I suggest that Weigert's (1975) perspective, described as "sociological psychology" and influenced by symbolic interactionist and phenomenological viewpoints, offers a useful explanation of identity for a study which focuses on the intrapersonal or subjective interpretation of an identity-laden experience (in this case, adoption) and how that interpretation is negotiated in a social context. The experience of being adopted, the interpretation of that experience and the negotiation process are all dynamic, and require a dynamic understanding of identity for their analysis. To put Weigert's explanation in context, I will provide a brief summary of the social-psychological tradition's viewpoints on identity.

The social-psychological tradition posits identity as derivative of self-concept, which in turn originates in the notion of self. Self is an experiential *process* in which a human being's subjective (I) and objective (Me) awareness are in a reflexive relationship; that is, subjective and objective awareness are concurrent and mutually defined (Weigert, 1975; Gecas, 1982). Self-concept, in turn, is the *product* of this reflexive activity of the self; it refers to the labelling of self in objective terms by the individual agent. Self-concept is comprised of two dimensions: self-conceptions (which include components such as identity) and self-evaluations (which "refer to the evaluative and affective aspects of the self-concept" [Gecas, 1982:4]). Identity, then,

focuses on the meanings comprising the self as object, gives structure and content to self-concept, and anchors the self to social systems. (Gecas, 1982:4)

In symbolic interactionist theory, identity is addressed from two perspectives: the processual school of thought, and the structural school of thought. Processual interactionists tend to emphasize the "social *situation* as the context in which identities are established and maintained through the process of negotiation" (Gecas, 1982:10, emphasis in original). Here, the individual negotiates identity as she/he constructs meaning and defines relationships in social interaction. To structural interactionists, however, identity is

viewed mainly as internalized roles. [...] This connection directly links self-conceptions to social structures because roles are seen as elements of social structure [...] The structure of self-concept is viewed as a hierarchical organization of an individual's role-identities. (Gecas, 1982:14)³

Thus, the more central a particular role or social position is to a person's overall activity, the higher its rank in the hierarchy of the self-concept, and the more instrumental it is to defining that person's identity. The structuralist position posits roles in social structure, external to the individual, and thereby suggests that roles have an existence independent of human agency. To date, most of the adoption research I have encountered has relied on a structural interpretation of identity and examines adoptive relations within the context of social roles (for example, see Kirk, 1964, 1981). This perspective is limited in its application because it does not allow for an examination of the interaction in which the roles in adoption are created.

³ Roles represent expectations of behaviour for a particular position or status in a social system.

Subjective experience and interpretation is lost in the discussion of structural components. While the existence and significance of social roles is undeniable, I favour the dynamics of human interaction as the key determinant of identity construction. I believe this is also the bias of Weigert's "sociological psychology," and I have chosen, therefore, to highlight his explanation of the social production of identity.

In his account, Weigert (1975, 1986) dispenses with the notion of self-concept and suggests that identity is directly derivative of self. The "substantial self," whose fundamental characteristic is that of a "concomitant awareness" of subjectivity simultaneous to action, is the constant amid situational identities which are assumed and cast off in the course of everyday life (Weigert, 1975:47). Thus, self provides the underlying unity and continuity of experience, constant and dynamic at once, while identity "is self socially situated [...] i.e. as an object" (Weigert, 1975:51). In other words, self is an awareness of being in action, and identity is the social naming of self. Weigert (1986) proposes "metatheoretical foundations" to explain the modes, sources, and processes of identity.

The three modes or forms of identity -- subjective, objective and intersubjective -- comprise a person. The subjective, or "I" mode, is represented by the immediate knowledge of the self as agent. The individual names the self "I" using social symbols and thus self becomes the object (I) of subjective awareness. In the objective mode, the act of communicating this knowledge of self to others requires the objectification of the self.

Concomitant awareness, as awareness, is private. It's symbolic *content*, however, is socially produced. [...] As we shift from concomitant awareness to its social content [i.e. meaningful symbols], we move from individual subjective identity, the *I* mode, into social objective identity, the *Me* mode. (Weigert, 1986:167, emphasis in original)

Objective identities such as gender or physical attractiveness are thus attributed to self in social interaction. Intersubjective identities -- the third mode -- are also social; actors assign a mutual category of "We" to themselves and others with whom they share one or more common feature(s). Identity is constantly defined and redefined in social interaction as actors and audiences change. When subjective and objective identities agree, social interaction and the rules that govern it are affirmed, creating a collective notion of "We" (Weigert, 1986).

Identities are actualized through situational factors (such as negotiation) and structural factors (such as the institution of family). Weigert proposes that there are limits to the identities that can be realized at a particular historical juncture, and he conceptualizes these limits as *sources* of identity. The three sources that he indicates are: embodiment (or organism), structure (i.e. socially created structure), and dialectic (the relationship between social meaning and individuals). First, the body provides a locus for self, but has no meaning outside of a particular social order. "Personal identity is realized at the interface between the social and the physical and transforms 'the body' into 'my self.'" (Weigert, 1986:171) For an adopted person, the meanings loaded onto the body (for example, the historical importance of the blood tie [Benet, 1976; Kirk, 1964], particularly in determining fitness for inheritance) may have a significant impact on her/his personal identity, especially if

those meanings are at odds with her/his structural situation (i.e. located in an adoptive kin group rather than a biologically-related one).

Structure, the second source of identity, is socially created to govern human action.

Structured identity [eg. adoptee] [...] is an institutionalized identity demanded by the recurrent problems [eg. childlessness/"illegitimate" birth/lack of parenting figure] and solutions [eg. adoption] that make up everyday life. [...] Structurally, we are only who we can legitimately claim to be; who we can say we are and have others accept; and who others can say we are and have us accept or force upon us. (Weigert, 1986:172)

Identity may be structured in terms of class, gender, race, occupation, education, and so on.⁴ Structured identities are part of a taken-for-granted framework or lens through which individuals perceive their reality. As such, structured identities are not usually closely examined unless they become problematic for the individual to whom they apply. This leads to the dialectical source of identity.

Dialectical identity arises out of an awareness that meaning is socially constructed and that society is a human product.

The dialectic appears empirically as interaction that is formally meaningful and generates subjective identities, even as objective identities are reproduced. Dialectical identity is a mode of consciousness within the sociological attitude [that humans are "created" by the meanings they create] that suspends belief in sources of identity. It is made possible by stepping outside [...] naturally occurring identities. (Weigert, 1986:173)

When an individual reconsiders (either by choice or in some crisis) the meanings

⁴ There are many institutions operant in the adoptee's life. However, given that adoption occurs in the context of family and inherently refers to family, the institution of family can be considered significant to an adoptee's structural identity(ies).

which have supported a particular identity, that individual gains some insight into the production of identities and questions the "natural" or "supernatural" imposition of identities. "Dialectically, *all* identities are continuous precarious constructions" (Weigert, 1986:173, emphasis in original). The advantage of dialectical identity is that it reveals the social basis of identity and opens the way to an insightful exploration and critique of society. Weigert proposes that "[n]ew knowledge of the social world is done through praxis, or theoretically informed action" and that when an identity is discarded after re-evaluation, "we must 'do' a new identity, not merely think about it" (Weigert, 1986:174). This enactment is the subject of the metadynamics of identity.

The metadynamics of identity provide a basis for one's sense of continuity throughout change. Each metadynamic links a mode of identity (subjective, objective, intersubjective) with a source of identity (embodiment, structure, dialectic).

Reflexion, the first metadynamic, "links the *I* [subjective mode] with the body [embodiment] as the primitive source of identity through self-awareness" (Weigert, 1986:175, emphasis in original). In this process one is cognizant of oneself as both the subject and object of awareness.

Reflexive awareness links raw experience to the production of identity. In reflexion, self translates subjective self-awareness into objective meanings and vice versa. (Weigert, 1986:166)

In the condition of reflexion the individual may realize that the embodiment of the self is actually rich with social meaning, and in this realization, adopt a tendency to critically examine her/his identities and alternatives to them, in an attempt to render

the production of social meaning a conscious activity. In other words, the individual cognitively "tries on" alternative identities to see which one(s) "fit" the best. This evaluation of identity is particularly commonplace in modern Western societies. "The modern context makes problematic what in traditional societies is natural -- the realization of a stable identity" (Weigert, 1986:176).⁵ The resolution of this "problem" is the realm of the next metadynamic.

The metadynamic of "presentation-attribution" deals with the process of connecting self as subject (I), self as object (Me), and the Other; that is, it concerns the presentation of self to others (making self as subject [I] accessible to others as an object [Me]) and the interpretation of that representation by the audience. For the most part, identities generated in this symbolic interaction are accepted as a taken-for-granted reality -- individuals do not tend to question the process by which it happens. In this dynamic, identities are interpreted as being generated in a natural (purely physical) frame of reference.⁶ This deterministic context places identities outside of the realm of human will and action and thus defines the limits within which identity construction takes place; however, the natural frame of reference "must be complemented by the process of negotiation" (Weigert, 1986:176).

Society is partially a negotiated order along with coerced orders,

⁵ This difficulty is also addressed by Zurcher (1977) in his discussion of the "mutable self," a human adaptation to a rapidly changing social context.

⁶ The natural frame, however, is dependent upon socio-historical context. That is, what is considered to have a natural source in one value system may be considered to be socially constructed in another (eg. gender-appropriate behaviour).

traditional orders, etc. Negotiation occurs within structural and negotiation contexts that provide the links, conditions, and content for interaction. (Weigert, 1986:176)

The structure or frame defines the negotiation process that can occur within it. In negotiation, "[a]s both producers and products, humans are precariously stretched between individuality and sociality in a dialectic of self-realization and estrangement" (Weigert, 1986:177). Negotiation is a process of compromise. The third metadynamic of identity addresses this dialectic.

The metadynamic of "development-routinization" highlights the dialectic link between *I* and *We* (or self and collectivity). It is observed in the processes of biological and social-psychological development, and the rituals or status passages associated with those developments.

Self emerges as a symbolic construction, albeit a paradoxical one able to be aware of and to join in the process of developing itself. Both concomitant awareness and its content are derived from available forms of meaning. [Self can be known only through identities that are available in socially defined stages of development.] Developments routinized into typical meanings constitute an individual's life story.⁷ (Weigert, 1986:177)

Social timetables regulate the identity process, even to the extent that there are periods allowed for "normal 'crises,' such as adolescence, mid-life, and old age" (Weigert, 1986:177). Agencies are established to regulate and maintain normal scheduling, and to help individuals become realigned with the social agenda if they have somehow gone astray. "A person's sense of becoming and integration" (Weigert, 1986:178) is a measure of the coincidence between an individual's

⁷ These meanings surround concepts such as time and space, and events such as birth, marriage and death (Weigert, 1986).

interpretation of their subjective experience and the interpretation or explanation of that experience by an external social order. If there is a discrepancy between the individual's interpretation and that of the governing social order, there is a tendency to discount the former and/or supply treatment to the errant individual until the discrepancy disappears (see Berger & Luckmann, 1967). As mentioned above, a substantial portion of adoption research is devoted to identifying and correcting "problems" in either the adopted person or the adoptive family. This may in fact be linked to the routinization process of developing socially appropriate adoptive identities.

Weigert's "metatheoretical foundations" offer a detailed description of the forms, sources and dynamics of identity from a processual symbolic interactionist perspective. His framework provides a useful foundation on which to build a discussion of identity. However, there are shortcomings in Weigert's model. In particular, he does not directly address how power affects the social process of identity construction. The significance of power relations is diluted as he mentions briefly that "[s]ociety is a partially [...] coerced order" (Weigert, 1986:176) but then relies on the process of negotiation at the micro level to correct structural imbalances of power in social interaction, as if systemic power differences do not impinge significantly on interpersonal relations.⁸

⁸ For instance, Weigert notes: "In traditional male-female interaction, [...] gender identities carry a conventional expectation of male dominance. Within the structure of marriage, however, each spouse negotiates for power with his/her employment, sexuality, talent, etc." (Weigert, 1986:176)

We can anticipate that the imbalance of power among participants in the adoption process (Benet, 1976; Feigelman & Silverman, 1983) will affect the manner in which identities are negotiated within adoptive relations. Power imbalances (based on factors such as socio-economic status, age and legal status) are evident between social service workers and prospective adoptive parents, between adoptive parents and adoptees, between birth parents and social service workers, and so on. The actors in the adoption dynamic who have comparatively greater power, such as social service workers and adoptive parents, may control access to identity material such as birth history for adoptees, or updates on adoptees' development for the birth parents who relinquished them. For example, Feigelman and Silverman point out that

many social workers and their agencies continue to favor sealed [adoption] records. Such practices are felt to be consistent with general policies of client [in this case, adoptive and birth parents] confidentiality. They also enhance the power and authority of the social service professional. (Feigelman & Silverman, 1983:223-224)

Adoptees' subjective accounts about their experience of being adopted can illuminate how these structural power relations may be retained in interpersonal adoptive relations and how they may affect the identity development of adopted people.

Finally, to review, experience, interpretation and negotiation are all dynamic processes. Individuals are constantly defining and re-defining self and others in a social context. According to a processual symbolic interactionist perspective, identities are created and maintained in negotiations between agents in social interaction. Roles and social structures (such as institutions) provide a context in which this negotiation occurs, but the meanings attached to the identities are created

and refined in the interaction itself. According to Weigert (1975, 1986) identity is created on three levels: subjective, intersubjective or small-scale interaction, and collectivity or large-scale social constructions. On each of these levels, he emphasizes the activity of the individual agent in the negotiation of personal identity with self, other, or society. Subjectivity remains central in his analysis of identity formation.

In the following section, I will discuss the role of subjective accounts in the documentation of personal identities, and how such accounts may be constructed.

Accounts of Identity

As mentioned above, the objectification of the self makes an individual's identity/ies accessible to others. The individual interprets and defines her/his experience in internal and interpersonal dialogues which use the socially-created symbols of language. Because of this process, only the individual agent has immediate access to her/his experience.

We can never know completely another's experiences, although we have many clues and make inferences all the time. [...] Expressions are encapsulations of the experience of others ... (Bruner, 1986:5)

Thus, the closest one can get to an adopted person's subjective interpretation of experience is her/his account.

In a study on the social construction of lesbianism, Kitzinger (1987) illustrates the relationship between subjective identity and interpersonal account:

A lesbian identity is a woman's subjective experience or intrasubjective account of her own lesbianism. [...] [A]n account of lesbian identity is the story (or one of the stories) a woman tells about her subjective experience of her lesbianism. (Kitzinger, 1987:90)

I have followed Kitzinger's approach for the study at hand, and used the accounts of adoptees to forge an understanding of how they "construct, negotiate and interpret" (Kitzinger, 1987:71) their experience of being adopted.

Like language symbols, stories about personal experiences are constructed in the social world.

We create the units of experience and meaning from the continuity of life. Every telling is an arbitrary imposition of meaning on the flow of memory, in that we highlight some causes and discount others; that is, every telling is interpretive. (Bruner, 1986:7)

In personal accounts, individuals focus on significant incidents from their experience that, to them, reflect the meaning of the whole. The events they recount do not necessarily follow chronological order -- the temporal frame may shift as meanings from the past are connected to or reinterpreted by meaning in the present.⁹ Of the many possible versions of the story to be told, the one finally constructed depends on the point of view of the teller, as well as the intended audience. Thus, the story of adoption reported by an adopted person could differ markedly from that told by a birth parent, adoptive parent, social service worker, or another adoptee. Additionally, the story of adoption told by any of the above to a researcher could differ from that told to a friend, a family member, a counsellor, and so on.

⁹ Bruner points out that "[a]lthough stories may be universal, they are not necessarily linear, because narrative structures are culturally specific" (1986:17-18).

Accounts of experience are also defined by the range of socially available narrative forms. In any historical period, there are dominant modes of accounting which provide an interpretive framework for experience. According to Bruner (1986),

The importance of dominant narratives is that they become the major interpretive devices to organize and communicate experience, but they remain largely unexamined. (Bruner, 1986:18)

These taken-for-granted guidelines generally do not admit all versions of reality, which is problematic for the individual whose interpretation falls outside the bounds of the framework.

Ardener (1975), in his study of "muted groups," suggests that alternative versions of reality must first undergo a process of "translation." According to his analysis, both dominant and subdominant groups in any society create their own distinct paradigms or interpretive models of reality. Each group generates specific categories within these models to order experience. *Expressions* of experience, however, are generated only by the dominant model.

[Subdominant groups] find it necessary to structure their world through the model (or models) of the dominant group, transforming their own models as best they can in terms of the received ones. (S. Ardener, 1975:xii)

The subdominant or "muted" group must then form an alternative and indirect link between the concept in their model and its expression in the dominant one.

[...] the insertion of an extra step may be required of muted groups after a thought is conceived and before it is realized in speech. This process usually operates at an unconscious level and may be so rapid as to be collapsed into "simultaneity." The effect is to stifle statements which have no acceptability in the dominant field of discourse. (S.

Ardener, 1978:21)

Thus, those interpretations of experience which do not coincide with the dominant narrative form are not generally given a voice. Addressing the implications of this process, Bruner (1986) indicates that

[...] dominant narratives are units of power as well as of meaning. The ability to tell one's story has a political component; indeed, one measure of the dominance of a narrative is the space allocated to it in the discourse. Alternative, competing stories are generally not allocated space in establishment channels and must seek expression in underground media and dissident groupings (Bruner and Gorfain 1984). (Bruner, 1986:19)

In my efforts to give adoptees a voice in communicating their experiences, I encouraged participants to define their own realities as much as they are able within the limitations described above, and worked with them to create expressions adequate to their interpretation of their identity development. I inquired how the participants currently identify themselves; how their perception of their identities has changed or remained the same over time and/or across social situations; with which individuals and/or institutions they have aligned themselves throughout their lives; what they see as formative influences on their identities; what influences the manner in which their identities are expressed; and how certain social structures or institutions (such as education, work, religion, family, and adoption) have affected their identities. The institution of family emerged as a particularly important element in their identity construction.

Family

Both adoption and identity development are fundamentally linked to the institution of family. As the issues of the "private" sphere of family life have entered into the "public" sphere of political debate, monolithic, conservative, sexist and functionalist ideologies have become the targets of (especially feminist) criticism (Thorne, 1982; Eichler 1988). In this section I shall focus on two ideologies which are particularly relevant to adoption. In many areas of the social sciences, the debate over what determines behaviour -- nature or nurture, genetics or environment -- is still hotly contested. In the context of adoption, the ideologies of social constructionism and biological determinism are brought into opposition. The influence that these theories have on the conceptualizations of family figures prominently in the accounts of the adoptees encountered in the study at hand.

Theories of biological determinism, represented in the discipline of sociology by "sociobiology," have asserted that there is a biological basis for social relations. The corollary to this assertion is that families are, at the base, biological units, and thus are ultimately "natural."

Families deal with root biological events -- birth, sickness, death. They are a place of sexuality, eating, sleeping, and of thick and close forms of relatedness imaged by biological ties of kinship. (Thorne, 1982:6)

Alice Rossi (1978), a feminist who proposes a "biosocial perspective on parenting," defends

the central biological fact that the core function of any family system is

human continuity through reproduction and child-rearing. (Rossi, 1978:2)

She contends that the survival of the species has been enabled by physiological processes of bonding between mother and newborn infant. Pregnancy, birth and breast feeding are integral components of this maternal-child bonding:

[U]ntil relatively recent times, breast feeding assured close physical and emotional ties between women and their offspring for several years after birth. Modern obstetrical management of pregnancy and birth was examined as a technological intervention in that natural process, an aberration in human history which may be impairing the most important relationship in human society. (Rossi, 1978:24)

Rossi presents anthropological and endocrinological evidence to support her claims.

Nancy Chodorow (1978) points out that in this ideology of family, "women's mothering as a feature of social structure [...] has no reality separate from the biological fact that women bear children and lactate" (Chodorow, 1978:14). This seeming inevitable connection between biological mothers and their offspring's development can become problematic in the scenario of adoption where infants and their birth mothers are usually separated soon after birth.

A social constructionist view of family counters biological determinism by arguing that family is a construct of social interaction rather than a biological given. Referring to human realities in general, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann suggest that

humanness is socio-culturally variable. In other words, there is no human nature in the sense of a biologically fixed substratum determining the variability of socio-cultural formations. [...] While it is possible to say that man [sic] has a nature, it is more significant to say that man constructs his [sic] own nature, or more simply, that man produces himself [sic]. (Berger & Luckmann, 1966:49)

Hence, critics of biological determinism "challenge beliefs that family arrangements are biological in any direct or immutable way" (Thorne, 1982:6). Margrit Eichler (1988) proposes that we shift from a conception of family that focuses on its functions (biological or otherwise) to a conception which emphasizes the dimensions of familial interactions. The elements that she outlines are the procreative, socialization, sexual, residential, economic and emotional dimensions of family dynamics. Although the procreative dimension refers to biological processes, clearly she assigns the most importance to the social construction of the family through its members' interaction with each other and related social institutions.

Both biological determinism and social constructionism account for the constitution of kinship relations. The circumstance of adoption provides a forum in which the tension between these opposing ideologies is expressed. In a critique of sociobiology, Marian Lowe (1978) proposes that

theories of human behaviour have the potential, in themselves, to affect behaviour. If people believe that a certain characteristic is innate [or not], they tend to act in accordance with that belief. [...] The important thing is what people believe to be true, not what is in fact true. (Lowe, 1978:123)

Thus, in the study presented here, adoptees used these competing conceptions of family to frame their experience of adoption and the development of their identities.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Accounts of Adoption

The stories most often told about adoption tend to be provided by social service agents and adoptive parents; the accounts of other members of the so-called "adoption triangle"¹⁰ (Sorosky *et al.*, 1978) are underrepresented.

One of the ways in which social service/adoption agencies define the narrative of adoption is through the control of "identifying" information about adoptees and birth parents. This refers to the sealing of birth and adoption records, and the official alteration of adoptees' birth certificates. The bio-historical information available to adopted people is restricted to varying degrees across Canada because adoption is regulated provincially, not federally. In Manitoba, these regulations have been revised to allow adult adoptees limited access to "non-identifying information" about birth relatives. Identifying information can be acquired or contact with birth relatives arranged through Child and Family Services only upon the consent of both the birth relative(s) and the adopted person.¹¹ The disclosure of non-identifying information (the volume of which may vary significantly from case to case) provides an

¹⁰ The "adoption triangle" consists of adoptive parents, adopted people, and birth parents. If a geometric model is useful, it may be more appropriate to refer to an "adoption square" which would at least acknowledge the involvement of social service professionals in the dynamic.

¹¹ If the adoptee is under 18 years of age, her/his adoptive parents must give consent for the information to be passed on.

opportunity for social service agencies not only to control the amount of information available to their clients, but to participate in active story-telling. That is, information provided by birth parent(s) at the time of relinquishment is interpreted for the agency's files by a case worker, and many years later is reinterpreted by the case worker who withdraws that information for an adoptee. In an interview recorded in December 1987, an adoption case worker from Child and Family Services in Winnipeg, Manitoba explained the practice of retrieving file data for adoptees requesting information about birth relatives:

Sometimes, when you're interpreting [file data], the background isn't the most positive, so you have to take the negative and make it positive ... I won't lie, but on the other hand, ... I don't think you'd want to know ... your birth mother or birth father was a drug addict who ... was an alcoholic ... I might say they had used drugs and they did drink heavily, which is a positive way of saying -- ... you don't want to give them [adoptees] an impression -- a negative impression ... You as an adopted person have to form your own impression. (CFS Interview, 1987:2)

This social worker's practices do not necessarily represent those of all adoption case workers, but they do illustrate how the account of adoption from the social service perspective may profoundly differ from that provided by, for example, a birth parent.

Drawing on the stories of adoption provided by adoptive parents, Kirk (1964, 1981) has provided an extensive description of the unique complexities of adoptive parenting. Adoptive parents' contributions to the range of accounts about adoption are not limited to their own experiences, however, as they are often called upon to report the experiences of their adopted sons/daughters.

A notable feature of most [adoption] follow-up studies is that questions concerning the children's 'adjustment' or the overall satisfactoriness of

the adoption are almost exclusively directed towards the adoptive parents or other adults such as teachers. (Shaw, 1984:120)

For example, Seglow et al. (1972), in their research entitled Growing Up Adopted, use the following sources of data: 1) the Perinatal Mortality Survey, which gathered sociological, obstetric and medical information on the mothers of every baby born in England, Scotland and Wales in one week of March, 1958; detailed information about each baby was also collected at the time of birth and within a few weeks of birth; 201 of these children were subsequently adopted by people other than their birth parents and thus were eligible for inclusion in the Seglow et al. (1972) study; 2) the National Child Development Study (1958 Cohort), in which children from the Perinatal Mortality Survey were tracked and studied in 1965 and 1969 using four main sources of information: teachers' assessments, interviews with adoptive mothers and (sometimes) fathers, a School Health Service medical examination, and attainment tests completed by the children under the supervision of a teacher at school; 3) an intensive follow-up study eighteen months after the children's seventh birthdays, in which researchers interviewed the adoptive mothers and (about 50% of) fathers "to obtain their views of the child's development as well as on the adoption process itself" (Seglow et al., 1972:19-20); 4) a postal inquiry in which adoptive parents were surveyed to obtain their views on proposals made by the Departmental Committee on the Adoption of Children; the survey solicited the adoptive parents' views on six areas: consent, the court hearing, telling children of their adoptive status, religion, placement and supervision, and marriage.

Seglow et al. describe their research as "primarily a study of adopted children

and their development, rather than of the kind of people adoptive parents are" (p. 135); nevertheless, they did not consider the personal accounts of any adoptees. Adoptive parents reported the following on behalf of the adoptees tracked in the study: attitude to being adopted; relationships with siblings; emotional adjustment and social competence; family atmosphere; and adoption outcome. Despite the youth of the adoptees (approximately nine years old at the time of the study), it is conceivable that the researchers could have sought some personal comment about their experience.

The motive for studying the development of these adopted children seems to be to establish that the practice of adoption is a feasible alternative to other means of caring for illegitimate and otherwise "socially handicapped" (Seglow et al., 1972:20) children.

We know from the study that has been made of illegitimately born children that this group is at a particular disadvantage but that this disadvantage is overcome, in general, for those children who are in the event fortunate enough to be adopted. [...] The study does show [...] that adoption as a contemporary institution can be entirely vindicated by a comparison of the groups of children born illegitimate who were adopted and who were not adopted. (Seglow et al., 1972:161)

To their credit, Seglow et al. did not completely disregard the significance of adoptees' personal accounts, and they acknowledge that the information provided by teachers and adoptive parents may not reflect the adoptees' perspectives on or feelings about adoption. For example, they note:

The majority of adoptive parents thought that their child was neither really anxious or confused about his [sic] adoption. However, this does not necessarily give an indication of the child's own feelings which he may well cover up effectively at that age. (Seglow et al., 1972:149)

Further, they recognize that there are reasons apart from disinterest which may account for a lack of inquiries from adoptees about their biological origins.

It is a common fallacy to assume a lack of interest if there are no questions [from adoptees about birth relatives] -- this is analogous to parents giving no sex education because the child has not asked direct questions.

Most children sense, almost subconsciously, the topics which parents do not feel able or easy to talk about; hence they refrain from raising them. This in turn makes possible parental rationalization or self-deception that the child is not curious when in fact the real reason stems from parental reluctance to tackle the subject; indeed, many adoptive parents admit difficulty in broaching it. (Seglow *et al.*, 1972:168)

Finally, in recommendations for future study, the researchers emphasize the importance of including adoptees' reflections in data collection, with the condition that adoptive parents give their consent.

Jaffee and Fanshel (1970), in a study on the life adjustment of one hundred adoptees between the ages of 21 and 30 years, also chose to focus on the perceptions of the adoptees' adoptive parents. Thirty-three adoptees were interviewed, but the contents of those interviews were not analyzed for their initial report. Two main reasons were given for not concentrating on the accounts of adoption provided by the adoptees themselves. First, as the researchers developed the interview schedule for the adoptive parents, they became aware

that these parents had played a role in the adoption drama equal in importance to that of the adoptee himself [sic], and that therefore their perceptions of the experience had to be included as an essential source of data. (Jaffee & Fanshel, 1970:331)

Second, access to the adoptees posed a difficulty because "the [adoption] agencies were loathe to approve a direct intrusion upon the adoptee in this research venture

without first securing the parents' permission" (Jaffee & Fanshel, 1970:6). The agencies were concerned with breaching confidentiality assured to the adopters at the time of the initial contract, as well as being charged with interference after having promised to withdraw from the life of the adoptive family after the placement of a child. Additionally, the researchers questioned the emotional stability of the adoptees and their capacity to deal with such an interview procedure.

I agree that adoptive parents play an integral role in the "adoption drama," but I question their suitability as the sole providers of data for the investigation of the *adoptee's* life experience. In fact, Jaffee and Fanshel (1970) offer this caution:

[...] the reader should bear in mind that these findings probably present a somewhat biased picture of the adoptees' life experience since they represent exclusively the perceptions of the adoptive parents and do not take into consideration the views of the adoptee side of the parent-child role-set. (Jaffee & Fanshel, 1970:304)

Furthermore, the researchers seem to disregard the fact that the sample of adoptees in this study were all adults, and their participation in the study should not have required parental consent.¹² Connected to this concern is the question of the emotional stability of the adoptees in the sample. In contrast, the researchers make no mention of any concern for the emotional stability of the adoptive parents and their suitability for interviewing. Finally, Jaffee and Fanshel present "the descriptive data about the adoptees according to the three outcome categories [...] labelled 'low problem,' 'middle range,' and 'high problem'" (1970:70), illustrating the aforementioned problem-centred approach common to adoption research.

¹² This is an example of the common reference to adoptees as children, regardless of their age.

Jaffee (1974), analyzed the adoptee interviews excluded from his study with Fanshel (1970) and compared them with the interviews with the adoptive parents. Both groups considered the adoption process a "success" and expressed strong familial ties. However, discrepancies between the groups were noted in the reports of the amount and accuracy of bio-historical information provided to the adoptees.

A quarter of the adopters said they had given full and truthful information about the first [i.e. birth] parents, but only one-tenth of the adoptees believed this to be the case. Moreover:

more than half the adoptees said they had pressed for additional information about their biological parents but ... only one-fifth of the parents interviewed gave the same report ... almost three times as many sets of parents as young adults asserted that the adoptees had never voluntarily raised the subject ...
[Jaffee, 1974] (Benet, 1976:189)

Raynor (1980) also notes similar discrepancies between the reports provided by adoptees and adoptive parents about the sharing of information.

In a study on the adoption of older children, Kadushin (cited in Shaw, 1984) concedes the inadequacy of information about adoptees which is collected only from secondary sources; however, according to Shaw (1984), he

presents as a working assumption the view that, if the child performs his [sic] role functions to the parent's satisfaction, this suggests not only reasonably decent adjustment on the part of the child but also that the child is satisfied in the relationship. This assumption seems to take no account of the power imbalance in family relationships, rather as if one were to derive a measure of the happiness of Victorian marriage from interviews with husbands only. (Shaw, 1984:120)

Finally, Feigelman and Silverman (1983) investigated the tendency of adoptees to raise questions regarding biological history and to actually search for birth relatives. The sample consisted of 373 adoptive families, 129 of which had at least

one "child" aged 18 years or over at the time of the study. The inclination to ask about birth relatives, the incidence of actual searching (indicated by the adoptee asking to see birth or adoption records) and speculations about the likelihood the adoptee would search in the future, were all reported by adoptive parents. In the section of the text which refers to the "Differences Between Searchers and Nonsearchers" (1983:216), no adoptees were interviewed -- all data was collected from the adoptive parents.

The point is not to undermine the account of adoption provided by adoptive parents, but to point out that often the account of *being adopted* is provided by individuals outside of that experience. The following is a review of research that collected data on the experience of being adopted from the adoptees themselves.

The first study in this category is one conducted by Raynor (1980) which used unstructured interviews with 160 sets of adoptive parents and 105 of their adopted sons/daughters to compare adoption outcome in families where children were adopted by foster parents, with those where children were directly introduced into the family through adoption. Adoptive parents were interviewed first, and apart from the adoptees.

The adoptees were between 22 and 27 years old, and with the exception of four of them, were interviewed only after the researchers had obtained permission from the participants' adoptive parents. The parents were assured that the researcher would not transmit any information from the adoptive parents' interview to the adoptee, nor divulge any information about the adoptees' backgrounds. Of the 59

eligible adoptees *not* interviewed, 36 had that decision made for them by their adoptive parents.

It was surprising how many parents who did not want the adult adoptee to take part felt they should make this negative decision for him [sic] without consulting his wishes. (Raynor, 1980:19)

Several adoptive parents, in justifying their unwillingness for their sons/daughters to participate in the study, suggested that they thought the adoptee was not interested in the subject of adoption or in fact had forgotten about it. In families where adoption had not been mentioned for 10 to 20 years, the parents

felt that as long as their children showed no obvious interest in their adoption or background, no interest existed, but that any mention of it was likely to awaken it and they saw this as leading to unhappiness for all concerned. (Raynor, 1980:20)

Those adoptees who were interviewed were asked to comment on their experience of childhood in their adoptive family, their relationships with their adoptive parents, when they were told of their adoptive status and how they responded to that information, the ease or difficulty with which they discussed adoption with their adoptive parents, their attitudes to their birth parents, their current social and personal adjustment, and their level of satisfaction with their own lives presently. The researchers defined adjustment as "conformance or adaptation to one's environment" (Raynor, 1980:64)¹³; they did not attempt to assess the life-adjustment of adoptees who had not been interviewed. Once again, the purpose of this adoption

¹³ This definition is comparable to that provided by Kadushin (cited in Shaw, 1964), which equates adjustment with satisfactory performance of role functions.

research is not so much to discover what the experience of being adopted is like, but to put adoptees' responses to their experience on a continuum of adjustment in order to justify adoption as a viable practice.

Some discrepancies arose between information reported by adoptees and adoptive parents, such as the age at which adoptees were told of their adoptive status, and what bio-historical information adoptive parents had provided to the adoptees.

Regarding the latter,

[...] the adopters' ability to provide this information depended on what they themselves knew -- often not very much -- but as the interviews went on the project staff were increasingly concerned about the extent to which basic background data had been withheld, distorted or forgotten. (Raynor, 1980:95)

When asked if they were comfortable approaching their adoptive parents for more information if they wanted it, over half of the adoptees interviewed expressed reluctance to do so because of unwillingness to "hurt, anger or antagonise their parents by referring to [birth history]" (Raynor, 1980:98). In twenty percent of the families participating in the study, adoptees and adoptive parents differed in their assessment of the adoption outcome. These discrepancies in reporting point to the need for adopted people to be consulted in adoption research that purports to explain their experience, rather than relying solely on the intuition of others outside of that experience. They also indicate a factor other than indifference which contributes to adoptees *not* asking about their genealogical backgrounds. Although Raynor can be praised for engaging adopted people in this research, it is unfortunate that the insights of those who were denied participation by their adoptive parents were excluded.

One of the first studies to solicit the responses of adopted adults without first contacting their adoptive parents was reported by Paton (1954). Paton is an adoptee who was interested in contacting her own birth parents, and the research arose out of her desire to establish a central registry where adoptees and birth parents could indicate an interest in contacting each other. The research thus served as a needs assessment for this service.

The study consists of the reports of 40 people who were adopted between the years 1893 and 1933. Fourteen of the 40 participants were adopted after the age of two years, and had recollections of their birth family; the other 26 participants were adopted before the age of two years, and had no recollections of birth family.

Participants were solicited through a classified advertisement run for seven weeks in a moderately-priced, nationally circulated magazine. Each respondent to the advertisement received a questionnaire which, in addition to requesting basic facts about her/his adoption, stressed

the relationship of the adopted person to the natural [i.e. birth] parent, by knowledge, by contact, and by attitude. [...] Some stress also was placed upon feelings about status, and freedom to communicate on the subject.

(Paton, 1954:11)

Despite her claims that the study is primarily descriptive in nature, and that the purpose is not "to study present adjustment so much as past experience presently viewed" (Paton, 1954:28), the researcher proposes various indicators of successful adjustment such as marriage and parenthood, and identifies the "crux of successful adoption [as] the ability to sustain the knowledge of it with relative ease" (Paton,

1954:55). Moreover, typical of much adoption research, Paton (1954) categorizes the adoption situation as an individual problem, and proposes a solution:

It was our belief that the adopted have a life problem which can be described as a resolution of this ambivalence [between birth and adoptive parents], some means of incorporating and managing a synthesis of two sets of parents, one set absent and partly unknown. (Paton, 1954:11)

Paton (1954) claims that *all* adoptees must confront the *issue* of searching for birth parents at some point in their lives, whether or not they engage in an active investigation. She identifies two factors which seem to affect adoptees' searching behaviour (that is, wishing to find birth parents and acting on this wish): 1) security in the adoptive home and family throughout the adoptee's developmental years, and 2) self-development or the extent of personal achievement. If there is an interruption or crisis in either of these factors, the adoptee may be inclined to search for her/his birth relatives. In Paton's (1954) sample, 25 of the 40 adoptees had either searched for their birth relatives or had expressed an interest in doing so. Search outcomes tended to be more satisfactory for these adoptees when they had the approval and encouragement of their adoptive parents.

Throughout the report, Paton (1954) refers to a vague "pull of biology" (p. 140) and emphasizes the inescapable connection to one's birth parents. She hypothesizes that a physical image of birth parents is important for the growing adoptee's own self-image, and that adoption interferes with this image at various points in the adoptee's development. In her recommendations for adoption success, Paton (1954) eventually acknowledges the "pull of biology" (p. 140) as a cultural

construct. First, she suggests that adoptees be placed with adoptive parents who will be sympathetic to the birth parents' social situation and the circumstances surrounding relinquishment of the adoptee. Then, she calls for some mechanism to be established enabling adopted people to express an interest in biological history, given the importance ascribed to that information by the cultural context in which she writes.

They [adoptees] are a part of a culture which has expressed racial interest through the institution of the family, emphasis upon generations, and the continuity of same. Therefore, the adopted individual, unless he [sic] be entirely separated from the broader culture, has an interest in his heritage and his background in a racial sense, even if it seems to be simply an individual impulse which is expressing itself. (Paton, 1954:159)

Finally, she makes a passionate appeal to repair the "injury that has been done to the culture" (Paton, 1954:160), that is, the permanent separation of birth parents and adoptees, by structuring the institution of adoption such that cultural prescriptions regarding biological generational continuity can be met.

Adoption is a long sequence of the disruption of the culture which has been established in terms of family and continuity of generations. In some fashion it must fulfill the larger task of repairing the break in the cultural fabric [...] (Paton, 1954:160, emphasis in original)

Paton's assertion about the necessity of a physical image of birth parents in order for adoptees to successfully develop their own self-image is inconclusive, as it does not appear to be based on any intersubjective data, including her correspondence with the 40 adopted participants in her study. However, this assertion does raise questions about how culturally-bound notions of identity (in this case, emphasizing biology) may influence identity development in adopted people.

In McWhinnie's (1967) study, fifty-two adults between the ages of 18 and 60

years who had been adopted as children, were interviewed in Scotland between 1954 and 1956. A life history method was used for the interviews, which were analyzed from a perspective focusing on the interplay of biology and environment.

The concept of each individual having a particular potential, on which the influence of environment would play, was the standpoint from which the life histories in this present research project were evaluated. These histories were a study of social circumstances and environment and of attitudes and patterns of reactions to such circumstances and environment. (McWhinnie, 1967:54)

In addition to requesting biographical information about both the adoptee and her/his adoptive parents, participants were also asked to provide information about the relationships in the adoptive family, and information specific to their adoption, such as their parents' reason(s) for adopting, when and how they were told of their adoptive status, the type and amount of bio-historical information that they wanted, their attitudes to their birth parents, and their attitudes to discussing adoption with others.

Like Paton (1954), McWhinnie (1967) did not request the permission of the participants' adoptive parents before approaching the adoptees. In fact, adoptees were approached by their general medical practitioners, who happened to know of their adoptive status. In three cases, however, adoptees' refusal to participate involved their adoptive parents' disapproval of the study.

The purpose of the study was to evaluate current adoption practice, using adoption outcome (good adjustment versus poor adjustment) as a measure of efficacy. Another goal of the research was to solve the problems that were identified in adoption.

The aim of this research was to be the servant of the 'social engineer' interested in devising or improving techniques for dealing with particular practical problems. (McWhinnie, 1967:52)

Evidence of adoptees' adjustment was collected from their reports on the following areas: school and education, work, health, social relationships and interests, personal history since adolescence and information about marriage and children, and "any deviations from the socially accepted norms of behaviour" (McWhinnie, 1967:91). Subsequent to the compilation of the detailed social history, the medical doctor who had initiated the contact with the participant validated the evaluation of each adoptee's adjustment. The categories of adoptees' adjustment were: Good (15 adoptees), Fairly Good (six adoptees), Intermediate (21 adoptees) and Poor (10 adoptees).

McWhinnie (1967) suggested that from the perspective of adoptive parents, most of the adoptions would have been considered successful, since the adoptees were dutiful and did not express outwardly any concern about their adoptive status. Also, using the criteria of "community value" employed by Theis (cited in McWhinnie, 1967:195), in which adoptees' adjustment was assessed on the basis of "self-support, law observance and response to educational opportunity" (p. 195), most of the adoptions in the study would have been considered successful. Using adoptees' reports, however, this was not the case, indicating once again the necessity of including their perspective in adoption research which addresses the experiences of adopted people.

Information about biological origins and relinquishment was, with some individual variation, important to the adoptees in the study. In a large majority of

cases, birth parents were seen more as a resource for this information than as parent figures. The researcher noted that if bio-historical information was lacking or incongruent, the adoptees tended to have difficulties.

For example, if they were not given information, or were given conflicting details, then they fantasied about what the true story might be, and in most cases their fantasies made their biological parents and the circumstances of their birth less socially acceptable than they were in reality. (McWhinnie, 1967:263-264, emphasis added)

Adoptees' tendency to devalue their birth origins runs contrary to the popular notion that they are perhaps more likely than others to fantasize about an alternate "perfect" family (particularly when their present situation is unhappy or in conflict), precisely because they know that another set of parents does in fact exist.

While McWhinnie's (1967) study demonstrated the unique perspective that adoptees bring to an examination of adoption as a useful and effective institution, it did not address issues of identity development in any great detail. Further, like Paton's (1954) study, the participants in this study were adopted over at least four decades, during a time when adoption was recently becoming more common across social classes, and adoption practice was changing rapidly. Although some issues remain common for all adoptees in the sample, the influence of time and changing social conditions is difficult to predict.

The Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota (1968) polled adopted adults to determine whether a philosophy espousing the social bases of parenthood was useful in the practice of adoption. The purpose of the study was to gather information about the subjective experience of adoptees in their adoptive relationships, and use this

information to supplement existing educational programs for prospective and current adoptive parents.

The participants in the study were enlisted through referrals from public and private adoption agencies. Agency staff referred adopted friends, acquaintances, or relatives as well as adopted clients from their own case loads. Adoptees were required to fit the following criteria to participate in the study: 21 years of age or older at the time of the study or, if under 21, not living with adoptive parents; adopted during childhood (the final participants had been adopted between the ages of one month and six years); adopted through any source -- public or private agency, or other means -- but the adoption must not have been by a biological relative; and not in the process of applying for an adopted child for the first time. Those participants who already had at least one adopted child were allowed to take part in the study.

From the thirty referrals initially received, the sample was reduced to sixteen (12 women and four men) by attrition. The participants were divided into two groups -- one of eight women and one man, and one of four women and three men. Each group met for discussion for two hours each month over a six month period; the discussions were tape recorded for analysis at a later date. The agenda for the group meetings was constructed from topics submitted by referring social work agencies, adoptive applicants, and clients of adoption workers and unmarried parent workers. Three central themes emerged: 1) the meaning of the knowledge that one is adopted; 2) the meaning of the adoptee's biological background; and 3) the self-concept of the adoptee. This latter category was related to adoptees' attitudes towards themselves

and others, particularly their adoptive parents. Focus questions for this third theme covered a wide range of topics, including whether or not adoptees felt special or different from other people, how their adoptive status affected their thoughts on marriage, and what they thought of mixed racial placements. Participants were not restricted to commenting on these themes solely on the basis of personal experience, but were encouraged to express opinions and beliefs from their own perspectives as adoptees.

The participants' responses to the three topics of discussion were varied, but some patterns appeared. There was general agreement that nationality is culturally defined and more closely related to tradition than to blood lines, however the adoptees believed that most people want to know about their ethnic/racial heritage because it provides a sense of historical continuity. Although they unanimously agreed that medical and birth information should be made available, the participants tended to agree that environment has a much greater effect on individuals than biology, and that there is no inherent need for adoptees to have complete information about their birth parents.

In most instances, they felt, there is no great void in the adopted child's life which information about the biological parents could fill. Rather than help an adopted child with his/her self-identity, most felt that complete information could cause confusion and interfere seriously with the development of a normal parent-child relationship with adoptive parents. (Lutheran Social Service, 1968:26)

Yet, there were a few (unspecified number) of the group who had very strong feelings around wanting more complete information about birth parents because of curiosity and questions of self-identity.

I offer three cautions about this study. First, the sample size (16 participants) is small, given the diversity of experiences represented within it. For example, the participants were adopted between the ages of one month and six years, introducing the possibility that some of the adoptees had recollections of their birth families. This could have significant implications for how they interpreted the meaning of adoption and their biological background. Second, the participants were encouraged to offer their opinions about situations outside of their experience, which may be interesting, but should not necessarily be considered an accurate reflection of other adoptees' realities. Opinion was not separated from experience in the analysis of accounts. Third, the study was conducted in a group setting, which raises issues of interpersonal dynamics in the group discussions; that is, it is possible in a group setting for certain individuals to have their concerns either suppressed or over-represented. Focus groups can be very helpful in generating general areas of concern, but it is useful to follow this procedure with individual interviews so that all participants are given equal opportunity to express themselves.

Finally, Triseliotis (1973) conducted a study of seventy adult adoptees in Scotland who had made official inquiries about birth information.¹⁴ At the time of the study the adoptees' ages spanned more than four decades, although almost seventy percent of the sample was between 20 and 35 years of age. Roughly ninety percent of the participants had been adopted by people not biologically related to them; the

¹⁴ In Scotland, any adoptee aged 17 years or over can apply at the Register House in Edinburgh for information from the original entry of her/his birth.

remainder had been adopted by biological relatives.

The purpose of the study was to define the general characteristics of adopted adults who searched for birth information, and to determine their motives for procuring such information and to what purpose they intended to use it. Interviews with the adoptees were non-directive, but covered the following topics: "relevant past and current life situations; [...] internal and external pressures, [...] the quality of their relationships and their self-perception" (Triseliotis, 1973:2), as well as the meaning of their adoption in relation to their search. Two groups of adoptees emerged, based on the goals they identified for the search. Sixty percent of the participants were primarily interested in meeting their birth parents, while 37 percent "were mostly interested in obtaining information about their sociological and biological origins" (Triseliotis, 1973:15). The remaining three percent (two adoptees) had very pragmatic motives for their inquiries, related to information required for a security clearance, and for a wedding that was to occur outside of Great Britain. Because of these unique circumstances, the latter two adoptees were excluded from the analysis.

Not surprisingly, all of the searching adoptees commented on the importance of knowing about their origins and genealogy, although this was not to the exclusion of attachment to their adoptive parents.

The overall impression was that the adoptees badly wanted to identify with their adoptive parents and be like them [...] Even in the most successful cases of positive identification, however, it rarely extended to the parents' genealogy beyond those in the immediate family circle. In other words the adoptees implied a difficulty to conceptualise and align themselves with the adoptive parents' genealogical background.

(Triseliotis, 1973:57)

According to Triseliotis (1973), identities are based on the relationships developed first within family, and then outside, and the values and traditions of one's culture which are transmitted to individuals through the family. He notes that inner pressures, such as feelings of unhappiness or insecurity, combined with outside crises such as a death, a birth, marriage, or adolescence, often prompted the adoptees to search for biological background information. These stressors may produce concerns about identity in any individual. For adoptees, however, these concerns may be manifested in active searching behaviour. In the case of adolescence, for example,

the developmental task at this stage appeared to be a final effort to integrate the two sets of parents within the adolescent's identity. [...] Most adoptees in the sample [...] saw their adoptive parents as forming their primary frame of reference, and their natural origins as contributing a minor but important part towards the formation of their identity. (Triseliotis, 1973:102-103)

Thus, the motives of the searching adoptees were focused on completing a personal identity that was perceived as missing an important component.

Triseliotis' (1973) research filled a large gap in the canon of adoption literature. However, his study is aligned with other problem-focused research in that the difficulties faced by adoptees in accumulating identity material were personalized as identity crises. In a foreboding introduction to Triseliotis' (1973) report, Katz noted that

the adoptee is uniquely vulnerable to the most traumatic types of identity crises. Once an adopted child learns that he or she has two sets of parents, one biological and the other legal, the characteristic curiosity -- "who am I?" -- is heightened to an often psychically damaging degree. (Triseliotis, 1973:x)

Further, only adoptees who were actively searching for bio-historical information, in the sense of having made official inquiries, were interviewed for the study. I propose that this represents only a small range on the continuum of searching inclination and behaviour for adoptees. Given the indications that there are many reasons for adoptees not actively searching, despite great interest in biological information, a wider sample of participants would provide a more extensive illustration of the complexities and challenges faced by adoptees in their identity development.

METHODOLOGY

The variety of interpretations of adoptive life experience is well-documented in the preceding literature. Representing one perspective, many of the aforementioned studies attempt to evaluate adoption practice through an appraisal of the adjustment of adult adoptees. In these studies, adjustment tends to be measured by the levels of achievement in school or work, the quality of relationships in and outside of the adoptive family, and conformity to social norms. The weakness of this research is explicated by Shaw (1984), who points out that the indicators of adjustment do not recognize issues of power in adoptive family relations. Not only does this measurement personalize perceived difficulties in adjustment, it fails to examine factors which may determine adoptees' behaviour and interpretation of experience. The process of identity negotiation, however, is addressed in only a few instances in the literature, more often as a result of adoptees raising the issue than a result of researchers confronting this topic. Adoptees' perceptions of their own identities has thus been relegated to the periphery of previous adoption research, leaving much of this area to be explored.

Symbolic interactionists such as Weigert (1975, 1986) have given substantial weight to the component of subjectivity in the formation of personal identity. An application of this perspective does not permit a reliance on third-party accounts of adoptees' experiences to inform an analysis of identity. Subjective interpretations are central to understanding the relation of individuals to each other and to social

institutions in the construction of their own identities. This study, therefore, concentrates on the adoptees' own voices and the stories that they tell about their adoption experience in an effort to explore how they negotiate their identities as adoptees in the context of both biological and adoptive kin groups.

Research Design

This research study gives voice to the experience of adoption as reported by adopted people and places that experience in the context of the routine negotiation of an adoptive identity. Laing notes that

Experience is not objective and it is not conveyed to objects. The way it is communicated or conveyed is different from the transfer of objective information [...]

When we turn to experience and learn what it may have to teach us, we cannot do so by a method constructed to exclude it.
(Laing, 1982:10, 12)

With this instruction in mind, I chose a qualitative methodological approach as the most appropriate strategy to document and interpret the adoptees' accounts of their experiences. My own experience as an adopted person informed this approach and contributed significantly to the research process.

The researcher's personal conceptual framework is regarded as an integral portion of [the qualitative] research process, as the sensitizing structure from which the interpretation and integration of grounded data into new concepts, theories or empirical findings are made.
(Turner, 1981:227)

I have noted that the accounts of adoption are most often provided by the most powerful actors in the institution of adoption -- that is, social service agents and

adoptive parents. Research cited above has illustrated that the dominant modes of accounting employed by these participants in the adoption process do not always capture the experience of adoptees. Adopted people may thus be required to perform the "translation" described by Ardener (1975) in recounting their experience of adoption, such that they subrogate the "official" story of adoption for their own interpretations. There is not adequate means for expression of the buried narrative of their reality in the accounts and perhaps even the language provided by the dominant narrative. The purpose of this study is to gain better insight into the methods adopted people use to negotiate their adoptive identities and the social prescriptions for those identities. Thus, the methods employed in this study are obliged to offer adoptees the opportunity to discover their own language with which they can construct, describe and explain their subjective realities. To this end, I conducted individual semi-structured, focused interviews with ten adult adoptees between February 1988 and July 1993. My own experience as an adopted person is reflected in the data through my participation in the interactive interview process.

Sampling, Data Collection and Analysis

The methodological strategies employed in this research follow closely the principles of grounded theory methodology. In grounded theory research, the procedures of sampling, data collection and analysis are interrelated and often happen concurrently. Strauss and Corbin point out that "All grounded theory procedures are

aimed at identifying, developing, and relating concepts," (1990:177) which are the basic unit of analysis. Conceptual labels, such as "Searching" or "Questioning" are applied to empirical indicators (actions or events). These indicators are examined comparatively and are grouped into more abstract classifications called categories, according to "similarities, differences, and degrees of consistency of meaning" (Strauss, 1987:25).

The principles of theoretical sampling guided the data collection in this research. The hallmark of theoretical sampling is its focus on concepts rather than on individuals. That is, the "aim of theoretical sampling is to sample events, incidents, and so forth, that are indicative of categories, their properties and dimensions," (Strauss & Corbin, 1990:177). This enables the researcher to illustrate the relationships between categories. Based on the sensitivity that the investigator brings to the research question through personal experience and familiarity with relevant literature, an initial sample of individuals is identified for participation in the study. At this point, sampling is characterized by openness rather than specificity to allow potentially relevant concepts to emerge (Strauss & Corbin, 1990:181). As data collection proceeds and categories are constructed, the researcher focuses on clarifying variation within categories and validating the relationships between them. Sampling ceases at the point of "theoretical saturation," that is, when: (1) no new or relevant data concerning each category is encountered; (2) the variation within each category is accounted for and the category is well-developed in terms of its dimensions, its causal conditions, the behavioral strategies through which it is

expressed, and its consequences; (3) the relationships between the categories are clear and validated (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Due to the exploratory nature of this study, in the sense that adoptees' subjective experiences have been under-represented in previous adoption research, and because of the temporal and financial limitations on this project, saturation may not have been reached in all of the categories generated.

In addition to the guidelines of theoretical sampling, I established supplementary criteria for participants' involvement in the study. First, all research participants must have identified themselves as adoptees. This required that they were aware of their adoptive status prior to their participation in the study. Second, all participants were required to be at least 18 years of age and not under the guardianship of any agency or person. This criterion ensured that the participants themselves could offer informed consent, so I was able to contact them directly, rather than through a guardian or parent. Finally, due to financial and time constraints on this research, I required that the participants live in Winnipeg or surrounding areas, or be willing to participate by mail or telephone. As sampling and data collection proceeded, I attempted to identify as much variation as possible in the emergent categories and thus sought out individuals with specific characteristics and experiences of adoption. These included inter-racial adoption, contact with genetic kin, and apparent interest or disinterest in genetic history.

I used three different strategies to locate potential research participants. First, some participants were selected through a variation of "snowball" or "friendship

network" sampling. I found that I located these participants in very much the same way that *they* met other adoptees. In other words, the subject of adoption arose in conversation, and the adoptees revealed their adopted status. Four of the participants were contacted in this way, two through university classes at different institutions, and two through a sports organization of which I am a member. Three other participants were referred to me by non-adopted acquaintances and colleagues who were familiar with this research project. The other participants in the study constitute a purposive sample. These three participants were contacted through an adoptees' discussion group which operates at a local university campus.

Despite the small number of participants in the study, a wide diversity of adoption experience was represented. The age of the participants ranged between 20 and 32 years. Six of the participants were women, and four are men. Two of the participants were people of colour; eight participants were white. Nine of the adoptees were placed with adoptive parents of the same racial background, while one participant had the experience of an inter-racial adoption. To the best of their knowledge, all but one of the participants, who was in long-term foster care, were legally adopted by their adoptive parents. The individual who was in long-term foster care identified himself as an adoptee. The composition of the participants' adoptive families also varied considerably. One participant was an "only child" (no adopted or non-adopted siblings in the adoptive family), two participants had non-adopted siblings only (who are the biological offspring of the adoptive parents), two participants had both adopted and non-adopted siblings, and five adoptees had adopted

siblings only. None of the adoptees' siblings were genetically related to the adoptees.

All participants signed a letter of informed consent which outlined the purpose of the study and the rights and obligations of the researcher (me) and participants (see Appendix A). The interview guide, which provided a general framework of topics to be covered, was informed by issues that were identified through my review of previous adoption research, my own adoption experience, and Kitzinger's (1987) work on the social construction of lesbian identities (see Appendix B). The interviews with the participants ranged from one hour to three hours in length. Some interviews were conducted over the course of two sessions because of insufficient time available to complete the entire interview guide in the first scheduled meeting. In these cases, the exchange was continued at a later date which was convenient to both parties. The interviews took place in a variety of settings, including a restaurant, my office at the University of Manitoba, my home, a participant's office, and participants' homes. All interviews were tape recorded and the interviews with nine of the participants were transcribed verbatim. Subsequent to listening to the final interview, it was apparent that the information provided was not substantially different from previous interviews. Therefore, the interview with the final participant was not transcribed verbatim, rather I took detailed notes on the portions of the interview which were relevant to the emergent themes identified from previous data collection. At this point in the data collection it became clear that the themes or categories I had identified in the interviews had reached a level of saturation adequate to the exploratory nature of this study.

Subsequent to transcribing the interviews, I reviewed each transcript and took brief notes on its content. During this process I was attentive to concepts that linked together the experiences described by the participant in each interview, and I assigned codes to corresponding passages in the transcript. This line-by-line scrutiny of the data is called "open coding" (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As the analysis proceeded, the conceptual codes were provisionally linked to form categories. I began by copying the coded passages from the transcripts and organizing them in category files. The elements of the categories became more clear as the data were compared to each other within and between each category. Passages that had been coded for more than one category indicated connections between categories. Later in the analysis, I continued to explore the relationships between categories through "axial coding," that is, coding for their causal conditions, dimensions, behavioral strategies, and consequences (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The three primary research questions I posed in this study were: 1) What is the range of subjective interpretations of adoptees' experience of adoption? 2) How do adopted people negotiate their adoptive identities and the social prescriptions for those identities? 3) How do adoptees make sense of their adoptive status in the context of biological and social kin groups? The answers to these questions lie in the wealth of information and experience provided by the adopted participants in this study. In this chapter, I shall present a model which accounts for the way adoptees conceptualize and describe their experiences of adoption.

Through the systematic analysis described in the preceding chapter, I identified several themes or categories in the interviews that I conducted with adopted participants. These categories include: Conceptions of Adoption, Communication, Roots, Information Gathering, and Connections. The "core category," which accounts for most of the variation in patterns of behaviour (Strauss, 1987) and "represents the central phenomenon around which all the other categories are integrated," (Strauss & Corbin 1990) is Conceptions of Family. I have conceptually ordered the categories to create a theoretical map of adoptive identity.

The Model of Adoptive Identities

The model of adoptive identities is graphically depicted by a configuration of overlapping fields of experience. (see Appendix C) The core category, Conceptions of Family, may be imagined as a spherical universe which contains the remaining categories. This universe is composed of two hemispheres, the Social Construction hemisphere and the Biology hemisphere, which represent two patterns of thinking about family. The categories Conceptions of Adoption, Communication, Roots, Information Gathering and Connections, pictured as small spheres within Conceptions of Family, are located in the Biology hemisphere or straddle the border between Social Construction and Biology. Some of the categories subsumed within Conceptions of Family intersect according to the nature of the relationships between them.

The most difficult task of analyzing the data provided by the adopted participants has been tracing the labyrinthine connections between the categories of their experience and then talking about each in isolation. Categories overlap and suffuse each other, illustrating the intricately woven patterns of adoptees' identities. By deferring to the voices of the adoptees at every opportunity, my aim is to provide an accurate representation of their complex realities. What follows is a detailed description of each conceptual category and its place in the model of adoptive identity.

Conceptions of Family

As the core or primary category in the model of adoptive identity, Conceptions of Family subsumes all other categories in the model. These secondary categories illustrate how the assumptions presented in Conceptions of Family are played out in the construction of adoptees' identities. Therefore, the reader will see elements of Conceptions of Family appearing throughout the discussions of the secondary categories, as these elements guide the meanings and behaviours encountered and enacted by the adoptees.

Adoptees' identities can be grounded in either a social constructionist (nurture) or biological (nature) understanding of kin relationships. If an adoptee believes that heredity or genetic factors play a primary role in shaping an individual, then they are more likely to emphasize biological connections in family relationships. Alternatively, if the adoptee believes that environment and social relations have a greater impact on an individual's development, then they are more likely to emphasize social connections in their definition of the nature of family.

The social constructionist perspective of family makes social interaction between kin a necessary condition of family membership. On the basis of this condition, one adoptee justifies his disinterest in contacting his genetic kin:

They [birth parents] are individuals apart from me. I mean they barely knew me at all. [...] I've changed a lot now, so have they [...] we're just separate people. [...] I guess I shouldn't even refer to them as my natural *parents* [...] (Transcript 9A:37)

Another adoptee who expressed dissatisfaction with the kinship labels applied to social

and genetic kin explained:

They're [genetic kin] people who may be biologically related to me in terms of genes, but they're not family. I mean they don't know me from anybody, so why would they be family? [...] but we don't really have words [...] to describe them. [...] "Mother" means so much more to me than just a person who gives birth, so I even have a hard time with "biological mother." (Transcript 2A:14-15)

In the social constructionist view of the family, a hierarchy of parental role functions is created such that the nurturing role of parents is accorded primacy over the biological functions of conception, pregnancy and birth. According to this perspective, the status of authenticity is awarded to the adoptive parents who have nurtured the adoptee from infancy.

[adoptive] Mother would always defend her role as my real mother, "because I raised you, I looked after you, I made you chicken soup, you know, I changed your diapers," and that made sense to me and it still makes sense to me now. (Transcript 1A:23)

Your parents are the ones who bring you up. Well, that's what we were always told. (Transcript 3A:3)

Membership in the family is further determined by the temporal and spatial immediacy of social relationships within the family. The adoptive family, because of the currency of its social relationships, is considered paramount over the biological family, which is seen in the past tense. Entrance into the adoptive family may be viewed as a second chance or a new beginning, or even a re-birth for the adoptee, and at the instant of this re-birth, her/his history is discontinued -- the birth family ceases to exist for the adoptee and a new history is created with the adoptive family.

Family members may employ various strategies to affirm the social constructionist conception of kin relationships. One, noted above, is the assertion that

social roles (such as nurturing) are superior to biological roles in the family. Another strategy that is used frequently is the equation of the nature of social and biological kin relationships. In other words, this strategy suggests that there is no difference between kin relationships that are social and those that are biological. This is illustrated in participants' contentions that there is no discernible difference between adoptive parents' treatment of adopted children and their treatment of non-adopted children within the family. One participant confidently proclaims:

I am just as much a part of the family as any other member.
(Transcript 6A:9)

Clearly, the social constructionist perspective on family undermines the importance of biological relations and emphasizes the primacy of social connections between kin.

The biology-based view of family, on the other hand, suggests that there is a natural biological order which determines the character of family. The principal condition of membership in a family is genetic connection to the other members. This connection between kin is confirmed by indicators such as birth names, similarity in physical appearance or temperament, and birthmarks. One adoptee describes how she was recognized as a member of her birth family:

[Birth grandmother] came towards me really fast, ripped up my shirt and was looking for the birthmark. Um, she saw the birthmark and she just started to cry, and she started hugging me [...] She said when I was first born she went specifically looking for something that she'd be able to identify me with later. (Transcript 8A:33-34)

The genetic relationship is purported to cause an irresistible bond between parent and child, generating a profound sense of filial duty. One participant explains:

[...] while my [adoptive] parents have [...] done a lot for me and I'll

always have obligations towards them, [...] for some reason I feel that if you're related to somebody by blood then you have a deeper obligation, 'cause that's a, a huge bond. (Transcript 7A:17)

Another adoptee affirmed this perceived differential connection between social and biological kin:

It's *different* to adopt a child than to have biological children. I mean, even if you would *fight* it, there's probably still a different bond that you have with your own biological children. (Transcript 5A:50)

The rupture of this biological bond through the breach of the "natural order" of family is perceived to have negative effects on both child and parents.

Several adoptees believe that the biology-based view of family is rooted in a pervasive social bias toward genetic kin relationships. They note "the pressure that society puts on you to reproduce yourself" (Transcript 1A:37) and a social "emphasis on parents having children that are really theirs -- the whole philosophy of blood ties" (Transcript 2A:30). Participants point out indicators of the "biology bias" such as the desperation of couples participating in technological treatments for infertility, and the assumption that the children in a family will be the same race as the parents. Such external manifestations of the biology-based conception of family reaffirm the paramount importance of biological ties to kin.

Both the social constructionist and biology-based conceptions of family are well-documented in the experience of the adopted participants. However, no adoptee aligns herself/himself completely with one viewpoint or the other. Rather, the adoptees construct a delicate balance between these perspectives as they negotiate their adoptive identities within and outside their adoptive families. The remaining

discussion of the categories will illustrate how the participants construct their adoptive identities using their individual conceptions of family as a guide.

Conceptions of Adoption

The category Conceptualizing Adoption encompasses the different meanings that adoptees have attributed to their relinquishment by their birth parent(s), and to the practice and experience of adoption. It includes the adoptees' perceptions of other people's notions of adoption, as well as those meanings that the adoptees claim as their own. The adoptees' understanding of adoption tends to change over time as they are exposed to a greater variety of world-views and revise the meanings to which they were introduced in childhood.

In their process of understanding adoption, adoptees typically begin with their own relinquishment. Put simply, the adoptees in the study respond to relinquishment in two ways -- "emotionally" and "rationally." While an emotional understanding is characterized by the adoptees' feelings of rejection or abandonment by birth parents, the rational understanding accounts for the social circumstances and perceived hardships (poverty, isolation and stigma) that the birth parents likely faced. A few adoptees combine an emotional understanding of relinquishment with a rational understanding. One describes her perception as follows:

[That's] probably the most emotional part for me, is that sense of every so often, that like "How could she leave me?" (chuckle) and then realizing [...] thank goodness she did because I can't imagine what it would have been like. (Transcript 2A:23)

The remainder of the adoptees in the study focus on the rational approach to relinquishment. This rational understanding of relinquishment usually informs the method by which adoptive status was initially disclosed to most adoptees in the study.

With only one exception, all of the participants in the study first learned about their adoptive status from their adoptive parents. Most of the adoptees report that in this initial disclosure their adoptive parents emphasized that the birth parents wanted to retain custody of and care for the adoptee, but that certain factors such as youth and lack of financial resources prevented them from doing so. One adoptee explains:

I was told that it was the best thing for me to be given up. When you're five or six years old you don't challenge this. You don't say "Well, you know, what's the difference between finances and emotional stability," or anything like that. (Transcript 1A:15)

Another adoptee made sense of the circumstances surrounding his adoption in the terms of prevailing social values:

I knew that she wasn't married at the time. I suppose when you're a kid, if you're not married, you don't have children. It's as simple as that. (Transcript 6A:12)

Most of the participants acknowledge the pressures that potentially faced their birth parents, and perceive relinquishment and adoption as having been in the best interests of everyone concerned.

Once I thought about the situation that [the birth parents] were involved in, um, I would not have wanted to have been kept in that kind of situation. I mean, giving me up was the best thing they could've done. (Transcript 8A:39)

As they described the circumstances of the birth parents, the adoptive parents concurrently emphasized their own desire and capacity to be parents. In essence, a

relationship of mutuality was constructed, such that relinquishment and adoption was viewed as a mutually beneficial arrangement between birth and adoptive parents. As noted above, most adoptees perceived that this arrangement served their interests as well. One adoptee illustrates how she has incorporated the concept of mutuality between birth and adoptive parents into her current definition of adoption.

Some people can have [children] and can't keep them, and some people want them, and can't have them. So you make kind of, kind of a trade. (Transcript 1A:58)

This participant's conception of adoption closely resembles the account provided by her adoptive parents:

"Mommy and Daddy couldn't have babies of their own and they really wanted babies, and some people can have babies but they have to give them up because they're young or, or there, there isn't a daddy [...] So we were very lucky and we got to choose you and you were so special." (Transcript 1A:13)

All but two of the adoptees recall being told the "chosen child" story by adoptive parents, teachers or adoptive grandparents, who used this adoption myth to either present or interpret information about the adoptees' status. Although proffered in different contexts by different actors, the elements of the "chosen child" story remain the same. Described by David Kirk (1964) in his study of adoptive parents as a "myth of origin," the story suggests that the adoptee is special in some way, and therefore she/he is chosen or "picked" by the adoptive parents to join the adoptive family. Several adoptees report that for them, this story conjured up images of a nursery with rows upon rows of babies from which they were selected.

When I was younger I thought it was like, you know, they had a whole row of cribs and they went and looked in they said "Oh, she's really

cute, I'll take her" (Transcript 2A:4)

Another adoptee described a similar image:

And that song, "How Much is That Doggie in the Window?" [...] whenever I would hear it I would think "[That] must have been how we were." On display, you know, sitting behind the glass, and then we were chosen. (Transcript 5A:25)

A few adoptees describe their perceptions of being purchased from a catalogue or mail order brochure, and in jest refer to receipts for lawyers' fees as their "price tags."

One adoptee expresses concern that the "chosen child" story encourages the judgment of individuals on appearance rather than substance, but most of the participants report that at the time of the telling, the story made them feel special and wanted. Although the sense of "specialness" tends to diminish as the adoptees pass out of childhood, most agreed that the "chosen child" story is an appropriate mode of introducing how they became part of their adoptive families.

While the "chosen child" myth serves to explain how the adoptee arrived in the adoptive family, adoption is also interpreted as coinciding with or even replacing the genesis of the adoptee. That is, some adoptees regard the incident of adoption, rather than birth, as the beginning of their existence.

It just seemed that from the moment I was adopted on, that's when my life started. [...] Because before that, it's never talked about.
(Transcript 5B:30)

One participant was actually surprised to discover in a childhood conversation with a non-adopted cousin, that he was born.

She [7A's cousin] was older than I was, and she was just telling me

about how she was born, you know, how she came out of her mother, and I said "Oh, I'm glad I didn't go through that. I was adopted." [laughter] And then she set me straight. (Transcript 7A:6)

This separation between birth and the beginning of one's life contributes to the phenomenon of the "missing chapter" in an adoptee's biography. Information regarding the "post-natal, pre-adoption" period of an adoptee's life is rarely available, unless that adoptee has been reunited with genetic relatives. Thus the "chosen child" story not only explains the adoptee's entrance into the adoptive family, it takes the place of an account of the adoptee's birth.

As the adoptees age and the glow of "specialness" created by the chosen child story fades, most adoptees in the study begin to incorporate other issues into their conception of adoption. For example, they more fully develop their rational understanding of relinquishment by including an analysis of the perceived stigma of adoption. Although some adoptees report that they were the targets of name-calling as children, they rarely see themselves as stigmatized directly; instead, they acknowledge the stigma that has been attributed: 1) to their birth parents because of their participation in "illegitimate" sex, that is, sexual relations outside of marriage or inter-racial sexual relations, or 2) to their adoptive parents as a result of their inability or unwillingness to biologically produce offspring. In other words, participants in the study acknowledge the stigma attached to actors in the adoption sphere, but do not internalize that stigma in their identities as adoptees. One adoptee remarks:

I don't see it [adoption] as tied in with any shame, i.e. the failure of the adoptive parents or the evil things that the birth parents have been involved in. [...] I don't feel that I'm some sort of an evil child with some sort of obvious mark on me or that I have bad blood -- I don't. (Transcript 1A:58-59)

One way of responding to the perceived stigma of adoption is to assert the similarity between adoptive and biologically-related families. Most of the participants in the study maintain that adoptive family relations and biological family relations are equivalent.

I consider them [adoptive parents] my parents, they consider me their son. There's been absolutely no favouritism between their biological son and myself, either way. It's as natural as it can be. (Transcript 6A:8)

Another adoptee explains:

I don't think any of us [3A and adopted siblings] really considered it a big deal. Like, I don't think we considered us different from anyone else [...] (Transcript 3A:6)

Although these adoptees claim that there is no difference between living in an adoptive family and living in a family in which the members are biologically related, they seem to be referring to the nature of the interpersonal relationships rather than the experience of adoption as a whole. Thus, the adoptees who claim there are no differences between being adopted and not being adopted, may simultaneously recognize unique qualities of their experience.

*[...] they know that it's different but that it's not, you know. I mean, 'cause it *is* different, I mean it's not quite the same, in some ways, because [...] you do know that you're adopted and you do know that you possibly have another set of parents, maybe siblings running around somewhere, but that on the other hand, that it is the same as [biologically related families] -- you know, that you go through the same thing with your [adoptive] parents [...] (Transcript 2A:10-11)*

The perceived effects of growing up adopted have helped shape the meanings adoptees attribute to adoption. As indicated by the comments of adoptees who believe there is no significant difference between adoptive and biologically-related families, some adoptees do not identify *any* positive or negative effects of their adoption. Most, however, acknowledge that adoption has shaped their experience in some unique way. One thing that all participants in the study acknowledge is that as a result of adoption, they have been deprived of information about their genetic heritage, whether that be information about medical history, social history, or resemblance to genetic kin. The adoptees have a variety of responses to this lack of information, which will be explored in the discussion of the Roots and Information Gathering categories.

Half of the participants believe their adoption experience has affected both their platonic and romantic relationships. Fears of abandonment, fears of emotional intimacy, and even a fears of sexual intimacy are attributed to being adopted.

I sometimes think that maybe in terms of that sense of, of being left, that [...] sometimes really colours my relationships with other people. That somewhere way, way deep down inside of me there's always a fear that people will leave me. [...] [It] must be 'cause I'm adopted. (Transcript 2A:21-22)

I know it has had a profound effect on my life. I, I'd say the biggest thing that it has affected is my, my ability to form relationships, be it friends or romantic relationships. I have a really easy time of forming them, but um, I cling. (Transcript 8A:68)

I can't make myself vulnerable. I can't let myself be loved totally by somebody else, just in case it gets pulled away. Which might relate back to uh, being adopted of course, and the nine foster homes. (Transcript 6A:31-32)

My [birth] mother being 16 [...] I think affected me throughout the years [...] of course I never wanted to get pregnant when I was 16. [...] I know that I didn't want to do anything 'til I was married [...] because I didn't want to get pregnant. I know that affected me as a person. (Transcript 10A:30-31)

Two adoptees also attribute other problems, namely bulimia and difficulty developing literacy skills, at least in part to adoption.

However, not all the perceived effects of adoption are construed as negative. Several adoptees note that their adoption provided them with opportunities that they would likely not have had if they had remained with their birth kin. These participants recognize that adoptees tend to be upwardly mobile when one compares the income and social class of birth parents and adoptive parents. One participant also believes that her experience of inter-racial adoption has given her a better understanding of race issues than most people have.

The category Conceptualizing Adoption displays the diversity of meanings that participants have constructed as they make sense of their adoption experience. It sets the stage for exploring how adoptees communicate their experience within and outside of the adoptive family, as well as how they think about their genetic histories, and attempt to gather information about birth kin.

Communication

The adoptees in this study described different patterns of Communication which they and others have employed in their interaction related to adoption. Patterns of Openness and Closure dictated the amount and type of information released to the adoptees, and the amount and type of information the adoptees released to others. Adoptees often perceived both implicit and explicit rules for maintaining these patterns both in their adoptive families and in public interaction.

The initial disclosure of the adoptees' status offered them the first opportunity to engage in a discourse in which the subject was their own adoption. As previously mentioned, the participants learned about their status from their adoptive parents in every case except one, in which the adoptee was told by a childhood playmate who lived next door. However, most of the participants had no discrete recollection of this disclosure. Rather, they described having an implicit knowledge about their adoption:

I remember being told there was no Santa Claus more than I remember being told that [...] I was adopted. I really don't remember when I was told. I just always remember knowing. (Transcript 3A:7)

In most cases, some version of the "chosen child" story described above was used to present and/or interpret the adoptees' status in their adoptive families. The only adoptee who had not been told this adoption myth scoffed:

I was there, they phoned (chuckle) -- it's factual! They phoned, "We have a child for you. Do you want her?" "Yes." "She's coming." Boom. I was there, and they adopted me and it's great, it's special, but it's not *chosen* -- not like Jesus Christ. (Transcript 10A:76)

The manner in which the adoptees' status was disclosed to them influenced the way in which they constructed the meaning of adoption. The adoptees, in turn, disclosed their adoptive status to outsiders as an expression of their identities and as a strategy for testing or confirming their perceptions of adoption. One adoptee described how, as a child, she gauged her own reaction to adoption by the way in which others responded to the disclosure of her adoptive status. Another participant acknowledged how she continues to test people's reactions to adoption:

I'll bring that up [adoptive identity] just in normal conversation with people, and it's sort of an experiment to see how people react to that, and funny enough, people react really shocked and they really don't know what to say [...] (Transcript 5A:4)

Adoptees also reported disclosing their status when adoption came up in casual conversation, when physicians or insurance companies requested medical history, and when outsiders commented on the adoptees' lack of physical resemblance to adoptive family members. For some participants disclosing their adoptive status was an integral part of getting to know others:

[...] my close friends I've told. It's come up in conversation, or ... it's almost like you would say "Hello, I'm an alcoholic" [...] if you want to give somebody a sort of rounded picture of who you are, who *I* am, I would tell them about being adopted. (Transcript 5A:23-24)

[Adoptive status] is one of the first things a person knows about me when they meet me, and it's always been that way. It's always been a really big part of my life. [...] It seems like wherever I go, adoption is there in front of me. And as a result, it comes up. (Transcript 8A:53)

Other adoptees preferred to share their status primarily with close friends before they would disclose this information to strangers. One adoptee compared his adoptive identity with his identity as a divorced person:

[...] being adopted and being divorced are two things that I don't mind talking about, but I don't -- often I don't just bring it out. [...] Some people I tell because I want them to know things about me [...] I want to share things with them. Other people I tell just because they ask or because it comes up in conversation, and I just contribute to the conversation. (Transcript 7A:17-18)

Another adoptee described how intimacy with another person was one criterion for determining the circumstances under which she would disclose her adoptive status:

[...] both my brothers are six foot three, six foot four, so a lot of people say to me "What happened to you?" because I'm only five foot. [...] our standard answer is "Well, [adoptive brother] ate all my food." [...] I usually don't say "Well, I'm adopted." [...] if it's not somebody that I really care for, if it's not somebody that really should know my business, then I won't tell them. (Transcript 10A:6,25)

None of the participants in the study actively concealed the fact of their adoption.

Another element of Openness is the extent to which the adoptees participated in discussions about adoption. Most of the discussion that was not connected to self-disclosure took place in the adoptive family. It appears that traditional gender role stereotypes influenced discussions of adoption within the adoptive family. Given that the family and reproduction has traditionally been considered the realm of women and mothers, it should not be surprising that most adoptees addressed their questions about adoption issues to their adoptive mothers. In most discussions, the subject of adoption was usually raised in the context of explaining the adoptees' unique talents, interests, or temperaments. While some adoptees were very open with their adoptive parents about issues like searching for birth relatives, all of the participants were conscious of how their adoptive parents might perceive their questions and comments. Consequently, adoptees tended to talk about practical issues of adoption -- strategies

for information gathering, questions about medical history, and so on -- rather than talk about their feelings about being adopted.

While many participants claimed that their adoptive families were open to discussion about adoption issues, they also reported that they were the most frequent initiators of this dialogue. They often perceived subtle indicators that adoption discourse caused other adoptive family members discomfort. One adoptee described her adoptive parent's reaction to conversation about adoption issues:

5A: It was [okay], but you know that "perfectly okay" that's not really perfectly okay? [...] And sort of a little bit of uncomfortable feeling.

I: Is there anything that you can name that makes you think that it's *not* okay somehow?

5A: It's sort of the expression on my mother's face, and then sometimes when we talk about it on the phone, there's like this distance, so when she says "Oh, I'm really happy for you," [...] it doesn't feel like it's really sincere and there's a lot of feeling behind it. And also because it's only talked about to a certain extent and then it's -- like because I always initiate it, then we'll talk about whatever I have to say, and then, and then it's like sort of jumping to another subject. (Transcript 5A:32)

Another adoptee encountered a similar reaction from adoptive parents about the subject of her reunion with genetic family:

See, if, if I was to just blurt something about um, uh, "I had such a good time in [city]," and my, you know, "I did this with my brother and sister," or -- I probably [...] either wouldn't get a reaction -- I would either be ignored or they would just say, "Oh, that was nice," and try and change the subject as fast as possible. (Transcript 8A:12)

Adoption has a reputation for being a "conversation stopper" outside the adoptive family as well. Participants often reported that upon revealing to others their

status as adoptees, the conversation was abruptly ended.

I've found with adoption that if you tell somebody who's not adopted that you're adopted it's kind of like "Oh, that's nice," -- end of conversation. (Transcript 6A:43)

The participants often responded to this reaction with a strong desire to "break the silence" about adoption and raise public awareness about the experience of being adopted.

I guess the reason I talk to people um, people that *aren't* adopted, when they ask me questions, I love to answer their questions because I'm hoping that I'll educate them a little bit. Because people are really naive when it comes to adoption and what goes on. So, that's something just doesn't get talked about. (Transcript 8A:56)

Another adoptee remarked,

I feel that it's something that is not talked about as much as it should be. Uh, I'm not saying that everybody should be walking down the street with a sign saying "I'm adopted" on them [...] but I still think it is an important social issue that should not be swept under the carpet. The feelings and um, actions and how being adopted manifests itself in one's later life. It's something that's not talked about that much. It should be. (Transcript 6A:31)

For some adoptees, the experience of adoption is also imbued with secrecy as well as silence. While silence may be considered more passive, the secrecy element of Closure is characterized by the active suppression of information. The secrecy surrounding adoption ranges from the disclosure of an adoptee's status to the searching for genetic relatives. For example, the participant whose adopted status was revealed to him by a childhood neighbour, recalled that the disclosure was presented "like he was telling me a secret." Another adoptee remembered her adoptive father's reaction to discovering that she had told a babysitter about her

adoptive status:

At one point I remember him being angry that I had told a babysitter. [...] Yeah, I told her that my sister and I were adopted, and she was one of my parents' students at school, and I think my father was afraid that everyone would find out at school [...]

(Transcript 5A:27)

Another participant recalled having the impression that being adopted "wasn't something you told a lot of people," rather, it was "something you kept quiet."

As many of the adoptees became curious about their Roots and began asking questions, some were suspicious that their adoptive parents were withholding information from them. One adoptee recounted a conversation that she had with a cousin, who was also adopted.

I was questioning her about when *she* was asking questions when she was younger, and we both came to the conclusion that we're not sure whether they [adoptive parents] were actually withholding the information from us, or whether they really did forget [...] (Transcript 8A:60)

Acting on her suspicions, this adoptee searched for the missing information on her own.

I just felt like she [adoptive mother] wasn't telling me something. I went snooping and I found this [card] and it had my, had my formula written on it, it had uh, my birth name written on it [...] But she never chose to share it with me, which kind of bothers me. But she just says she forgot it was there. (Transcript 8A:61)

The search for information about genetic relatives highlights the institutionalized secrecy of adoption. One adoptee described how she perceived the adoption agency's procedure for distributing information about genetic relatives to adoptees:

Then there's this file of information kept in some secret headquarters, and it's to headquarters that [social worker] goes to this person, who does nothing else but retrieve sensitive information, passes it on to [social worker], who then sort of, you know, does the personal guidance through it.
(Transcript 1A:83)

As much as the adoptees perceived that others (adoptive parents, social services) withheld vital information from them, the participants themselves also kept secrets from their adoptive parents. Frequently, adoptees concealed information from or lied to their adoptive parents about searches for information or contact with genetic kin. One participant, who described her adoptive parents as being open to inquiries about adoption, related how she and an adopted sibling, on separate occasions, secretly took their adoption papers from their adoptive parents' locked files.

I think 'cause she [adoptive mother] was home that day, so I snuck and got the key and snuck and opened it up and took it out, and then I put the keys back and then I guess I went upstairs to read it, and guess I -- I guess I never got the opportunity to put it back that day, so I just had it for awhile.
(Transcript 3A:5)

Another participant reported how she felt compelled to lie to her adoptive mother about the nature of her relationship with her newly-found genetic parents:

Um, she knows I refer to [genetic parents] as "mom" and "dad." That was accidental. She found that out this summer. [...] I am still not honest with her about it. [...] I think she knows I'm lying, but uh, she needs -- she needs to hear otherwise. (Transcript 8A:55)

An adoptee who had made contact with genetic relatives without informing her adoptive family, commented on the strain of maintaining "two very separate boxes of my life."

The third element of Closure is privacy, which is concerned with the

protection of the personal boundaries of adoptees, adoptive parents, and birth parents. In one participant's adoptive family adoption was considered a private arrangement and was classified as "family business," along with financial information, health, and family conflicts. This classification clearly dictated where and when it was appropriate to discuss adoption issues.

Most of the adoptees were sensitive to the past and current situations of their genetic parents and chose not to search for genetic kin, fearing that their actions may be invasive.

I was always curious about it, but I never thought I should or would do anything about finding out, out about my birth parents. Uh, probably just because, you know, whatever reasons they had for putting me up for adoption, you know, they probably wouldn't want to hear from me again. (Transcript 7A:13)

Others, however, eventually felt justified in their search subsequent to meeting their genetic relatives.

What was satisfying is um, in some ways my search has been justified, because [genetic mother] was wanting to know where I was. She was asking for me. Um, people who all said "Oh this is a dangerous invasive process -- you're going to upset a lot of people," -- on the contrary. Um, she was glad to hear from me. (Transcript 1B:21)

Nevertheless, most of the participants saw some utility in the existence of institutional barriers which mediate access to identifying information about adoptees and genetic relatives. One adoptee commented:

Um, the, the process as it stands in [province], as I understand it, is one that allows either party to change their mind and keep the privacy. [...] It goes in to a bigger philosophy -- you just can't demand that somebody see you. [...] I mean in divorces, in, in break-ups of affairs, in family ties, or what have you, if you decide to say no to someone, that "no" should be respected. You shouldn't have somebody else inflicted on you. (Transcript 1A:53)

Although none of the adoptees described their desire for information as vindictive and all had thought carefully about the implications of seeking more genetic history, most believed that the regulations which prohibit free access to identifying and non-identifying information serve to protect the privacy of both them and genetic relatives.

The adoptees who spoke about the silence, secrecy and privacy that determine the extent of disclosure about adoption in their lives offered a number of theories about why these patterns occur. Many speculated that the general public, that is people outside of their adoptive families, consider adoption a taboo subject, possibly because of its connection to extra-marital sex and "illegitimate" births. Although they recognize the stigma attached to single mothers and their children two and three decades ago, none of the adoptees interviewed considered the concept of "illegitimacy" to be valid in the present. Silence within adoptive families was attributed to a number of factors. Some participants suggested that adoptive parents may be reluctant to discuss adoption in order to normalize the adoption experience and help them to "forget" that the adopted son or daughter is not biological offspring. One adoptee described this strategy as follows:

Um, parents put their stamp on their children and that's their child! [...] When you get in an adoption situation, uh, I've been stamped

twice, but my, my uh, adoptive parents have tried to erase the first stamp, as hard as they could, and have been unsuccessful.
(Transcript 8A:57)

The adoptees also speculated that for adoptive parents, adoption may serve as a reminder of infertility, or as a blow to their masculinity or femininity, or may call into question their relationship with their adopted sons and daughters. Thus, the adoptees typically raised the issue of adoption with some misgivings, concerned that they would injure their adoptive parents in some way. Although some adoptees attributed their own silence to a generalized absence of communication in their adoptive families, most explained their reluctance to talk about adoption issues as an attempt to protect their adoptive parents from feelings of insecurity or guilt.

Roots

The theme of Roots appears frequently in the research data. It represents the substance or building material of adoptees' identities as the biological offspring of their genetic parents. Roots varies in its significance to each adoptee, but every participant emphasizes at least one aspect of this concept. The scope of Roots ranges from pre-natal experiences of the pregnant birth mother to the current situation of birth kin, however this concept consists basically of three elements: medical information, resemblance to genetic kin, and social history of genetic kin.

The importance of access to the medical history of genetic kin is raised by all of the adoptees in the study, regardless of their attitudes toward contact or reunion

with birth kin. Participants express substantial interest in hereditary illnesses or conditions, ranging from heart disease, cancer and epilepsy to allergies and male pattern baldness. The female adoptees in particular are curious about their birth mothers' experience of labour, and some adoptees express interest in "birth statistics" such as their weight and length at birth.

The perceived effects of not having detailed medical information about genetic relatives vary. For example, adoptees report not being able to respond to common inquiries about genetic issues or details of their births. As a result, some adoptees choose a strategy of de-emphasizing the importance or relevance of genetic medical history:

I'm sometimes curious about labour, but I think it would bother my [adoptive] mother to ask her -- and the only questions it would answer me is if I intend on having children, which I don't intend over the next little while. What is the possibility that my own labour would be similar? (Transcript 1A:23-24)

Another adoptee describes how she and her adoptive mother responded to a physician's routine inquiry about medical history:

Even when you start menstruating, I mean, you know I went to the doctor 'cause I was having phenomenal cramps and the doctor's sitting there saying to [adoptive] mom, "Well, so what are your cramps like?" And we kinda both looked at each other and went (shrug). And the poor doctor, I'm sure is like (scratches head), 'cause we never said anything. We just kind of -- "Well, you know, I don't think it really matters," and the doctor went "Oh, alright," but you know, I, I don't think quite caught on. (Transcript 3A:16)

One participant describes the lack of genetic medical information as "a little bit of Russian Roulette" (Transcript 2A:6), highlighting the uncertainty of a health without history.

Regardless of the extent of their contact with birth relatives, most of the participants recommend that detailed genetic medical information be made available to the adoptees who request it. While updated (that is, post-relinquishment) medical information is considered useful to adoptees, there is some concern that the collection of such data could make birth parents "captive" to an event in their past from which they may have attempted to distance themselves.

The second element of Roots is resemblance to genetic kin, specifically in physical appearance, temperament, and talents or interests. These adoptees' preoccupation with physical resemblance to genetic kin is second only to their desire for medical information. One adoptee reports that she is reminded of adoption whenever she looks in the mirror, while another often searched the faces of people on buses in hopes of recognizing the features of her birth mother, who she describes as "an adult me." Strong physical resemblances among biologically-related members of adoptive families, partners' families, or friends' families often trigger adoptees' curiosity about their own appearance. For some adoptees, this interest became focused in adolescence, a time when one's physical appearance often takes on paramount importance.

I think it was probably adolescence, like about twelve or thirteen, where I started to realize -- like we'd go to these [adoptive] family reunions, for one thing, and it always seemed like everyone *looked* exactly the same. (Transcript 5A:19)

The curiosity about physical appearance is consistently associated with a desire to make a physical link between the adoptees and their genetic kin. Physical resemblance provides a concrete connection, a substantial verification of one's place

in a kin group. When asked what he thought it would be like to look like someone else, one adoptee responds:

I don't know, it'd be partially a confirmation that, that this person is related to me, like a visual confirmation of it. [...] I've wondered uh, what *she'll* [birth mother] look like and if I'll see any [...] of my features in her, or if she had a picture of my [birth] father, if there'd be similarities there. (Transcript 7A:30-31)

Many of the adoptees consider the features of genetic relatives essential building blocks for "putting oneself together."

Identifying similarities in temperament or personality is another means by which adoptees feel connected to kin. Several participants note that they have felt like outsiders in their adoptive families because of significantly different values and lifestyles, and assume that they may find closer connections with biological relatives. One adoptee suggests that there is a disadvantage in having only one's adoptive family to which personality traits can be attributed:

Any sort of character flaws that I may have are, are my responsibility and it's not something -- like I even hear people *now*, like my age, saying "Well, well that temper, well you know, I got it from my father," sort of thing. So in a way, they, they have the excuse to, to take less responsibility for that flaw. [...] And I, I've never been able to do that. I've *wanted* to, but I didn't feel that it would be very legitimate to do that. Although environmental influences would have, you know, affected me. (Transcript 5A:11)

As they struggle to determine the origins of their personalities and aptitudes, these adoptees often re-evaluate the comparative effects of heredity and environment.

Uh, I just feel like I belong there [with genetic relatives]. [...] Um, a lot of my personality is very similar. I, I have people ask me all the time, the question of [...] heredity or environment, and I, I don't know. I don't have an answer. Um, at one point I said it was half and half, but I don't know. (Transcript 8A:36-37)

Unsure about what traits to attribute to "nature" or to "nurture," one participant charted the interests of both genetic and adoptive parents in an attempt to trace the origins of her own abilities. However, this adoptee comments that the tendency to attribute certain behaviours of genetic parents to their offspring can have unfortunate results.

I moved in with my boyfriend and suddenly there was this issue of, you know, this is bad blood coming out. [...] Um, not in a *big* way, but there, there was a kind of concern that [...] I should maybe get married in case there were any -- as if you're sort of predisposed to having illegitimate children. (Transcript 1A:6)

Nevertheless, most characteristics that are presumed to be inherited are viewed in a positive light.

Several of the adoptees suggest that knowledge about the pursuits and abilities of genetic forebears could illuminate their own potentials.

So I'm obviously interested in [...] the origin of everything and how it came to be how it is. Uh, and now I have an opportunity, hopefully, to learn that about myself. [...] I think that's just how I think about things. [...] I think it's important to know where [something] started from and how it got up to where it is now, and then if you have that understanding of something then you'll be able to first -- to be creative with it, or work with it. (Transcript 7A:14)

These adoptees recognize the concurrent influences of both adoptive and biological kin, acknowledging the traits they share with each family, but the genetic link remains a glaring omission from their identities.

The social history component of Roots can best be described as a fascination with one's "family tree" and a desire to "flesh out" the typically flat characters presented in non-identifying information on birth kin. One of the participants

describes the condition of being "rootless" as "a sense of not *belonging* to someone, [...] feeling like you don't have a past, that you're just this sort of [...] floating person." (Transcript 2A:13) Another participant supplements this depiction by describing his own sense of having "a blank bit at the bottom, the foundation." (Transcript 6A:20). Several adoptees report that when faced with the exercise of constructing a family tree, a task either pursued on their own initiative or assigned to them in school, they have been frustrated in their conviction that their adoptive family's lineage is not an accurate representation of their own roots. One participant recalls her disillusionment with the family tree project:

I sort of see myself in this family tree, just *me*, you know, like there's not all these other arrows and lines and stuff [...] Well, I ordered a family tree set, and this was gonna be my big hobby that I was going to research all this information, and I remember at one point thinking "Well, okay, you know, this is kind of interesting and it's neat filling out this chart, but really this isn't your *family*," you know, and I really felt -- I remember actually, you know, stopping and deciding that I was no longer going to put effort into it because *really*, it wasn't my family. (Transcript 5A:43)

For another participant, the genetic family tree provides a connection between past and future.

You know, like if I originated from some country in Europe, that's where my ancestors were, then in the future, I'd, I'd probably want to go there. In the future I'd probably want to read about, about that, and whatnot. So, it -- I'd more understand where I came from, and then I could pass that on to my children. (Transcript 7A:15)

In addition to the "arrows and lines" of the family tree, most adoptees in this study are curious about the routine experiences of their genetic relatives and believe that this information would provide a context of lived social history in which they

could situate themselves.

It helps make a whole person -- you just didn't drop out of the sky -- that you're connected to a process of other people who also had struggles with their parents, who -- you know, you go through phases in your life, and I'd like to know what those phases were like for the other people that I came from. (Transcript 1A:55)

For many adoptees, the histories of their adoptive families cannot replace this significant connection to both the biological and social past of genetic forebears.

Information Gathering

While Roots represents some of the resources that adoptees use to build and modify their identities, Information Gathering comprises the techniques through which these resources are collected. The strategies for Information Gathering include cataloguing, researching, questioning, searching and reunion.

Although "Gathering" implies activity on the part of the adoptees, in some circumstances they are passive recipients of information about their adoption or birth histories. In these instances, the adoptees will catalogue and store for future reference the unsolicited information provided. It is usually furnished by adoptive parents, and in all cases is non-identifying, that is, it does not reveal the identities of the adoptees' birth parents. For example, one participant's adoptive parents occasionally dispensed non-identifying information when they perceived it to be contextually relevant.

Quite often they would initiate it [the discussion of genetic history].
"Oh, well of course you do that [1A]; we expected that because we

were told that your [birth] mother was artistic and your [birth] father used to like to dance" [...] I was surprised by having this information pop up that I *didn't* pursue it [...] [Adoptive] Mother didn't seem to want to share a lot, so what she did give me I was happy with and didn't *want* to pursue. (Transcript 1A:30)

The adoptive parents of other adoptees volunteered to show them documents containing non-identifying information about birth parents. All adoptees who were offered the opportunity to see such information accepted.

Some adoptees gathered information about adoption from sources outside of the adoptive family. This research provided them with a popular view of adoption represented in books, newspaper or tabloid articles and television programs. The adoptees interpreted media accounts of nasty adoptive parents, bitter adoptees and blissful reunions between long-lost birth kin as inaccurate and sensationalist.

Many adoptees employed the strategy of questioning as a more direct and interactive way of acquiring information. In most cases, the adoptees' questions refer to one of the three components of Roots -- medical information, resemblance to genetic kin, and social history of genetic kin.

All adoptees in the study have inquired about medical history. Their motives for doing so include general curiosity about health issues or current medical conditions, and concerns about how this information (or lack of it) may effect marriage plans. The adoptees first addressed their questions about medical history to their adoptive parents, who invariably did not have the detailed information necessary to satisfy the adoptees' queries. Those participants who have made contact with genetic relatives are gratified by having the direct access to detailed medical history

they have long desired.

I now have someone I can turn to if I have more questions. [...] You know, did anyone ever have glaucoma, cancer, three legs -- is this sort of genetic? Um, I can now turn and do that. (Transcript 1B:21)

As noted in the discussion on Roots, most adoptees in the study have a fervent curiosity about the origins of their physical appearance; this often leads to questions about the appearance of their birth parents.

The details I usually ask about are physical details, for the most part, because I -- as my cousins and as my friends mature and become more like, sort of, adults, you can *see* the family resemblance. You can see the family resemblance in my [adoptive] brother. My father's family looks like they're all made with cookie cutters, for heaven's sake, you know. [...] Uh, and I look at the pictures and I try to find similarities. [...] I want -- I -- it's almost a selfish thing. I want to see, literally, where I came from. (Transcript 1A:25-26)

Again, adoptive parents are usually the first to be asked for this information, and when it cannot be provided some adoptees are left feeling frustrated and even cheated.

In an attempt to situate themselves on the continuum of their birth kin's social history, adoptees asked specific questions about their genetic parents' life experiences. These questions include: What were the circumstances surrounding the adoptees' birth and relinquishment? What kinds of support was available to the genetic parents during pregnancy and relinquishment? How did the genetic parents feel about their relationship to each other, the pregnancy and the relinquishment of the adoptee? What were the genetic parents' occupations, if any? What is the current situation of the genetic parents? Are there any genetic siblings? And probably most important, what are the genetic parents like, as people? What are the stories they could tell about themselves? These types of detailed questions were sometimes met with

resistance from adoptive parents and other adoptive family members.

The information that they have been positive about has been what [...] the social worker would call non-identifying information. All the information I have been given doesn't threaten our mother-daughter or our, our daughter-father links. [...] The information I'm asking for now are things that underline the links that I have with someone else, that sort of challenge the links I have with them. Who were they, really? Where did they live, really? [...] it underlines the possibility of a different, a different connection somewhere else. (Transcript 1A:33)

Under certain conditions, the adoptees may choose to suppress queries about birth kin. In some cases, adoptees assume that information is not available and that asking for it would be futile. In most cases of self-censorship, however, the fear of hurting their adoptive parents prevents the adoptees from directly asking them questions. One adoptee remarks that she was reluctant to ask her adoptive parents to show her documents containing non-identifying information, despite having been invited to see them or ask questions about them whenever she wanted.

I guess I didn't want to ask my parents about them, 'cause then I'd, I figured it would hurt *their* feelings, that they'd feel "Well, she wants to know about her other parents," like they'd feel really insecure about it [...] (Transcript 3A:4)

When adoptive parents have not been able to provide the information requested by the adoptees, or the adoptees have not felt comfortable asking them for the information, most participants in the study added the strategy of searching to their repertoire of methods for Information Gathering. Questioning and searching are closely connected, and sometimes produce similar results. Searching tends to be more active, however, and involves both covert and overt methods for collecting information, such as sneaking into adoptive parents' locked files to peruse documents

containing non-identifying information or conducting a full-scale search for birth kin through the official channels of child welfare agencies.

The motives for searching, like those for questioning, are usually connected to the adoptees' curiosity about genetic Roots. Impending marriage, for example, may pique an adoptee's curiosity about their medical history. For some adoptees, the belief in an intangible link to their genetic forebears, represented in part by the notion of "bonding," plays a large role in their desire to search for and meet genetic parents. These adoptees assert that a biological bond between mother and child is very important, both in pre-natal and immediate post-natal environments. They believe that this bond cannot be extinguished by physical separation. Hence some are convinced that their biological mothers think of them on the anniversary of their birth, causing birthday celebrations to take on a sombre tone. One adoptee describes a birthday ritual that she has constructed to recognize and reflect on her separation from her birth mother:

I think I was born at like 9:10 pm or something like that so usually at that time, if I happen to be at home, then um, I usually just sort of -- I think last year I lit a candle and I just read it [non-identifying information] and sort of had a bit of quiet time. [...] I get kind of emotional that day as well, and that's not always a really happy day for me [...] (Transcript 5A:47)

For a few adoptees, searching is also motivated by an awareness of historical patterns of discrimination and inequality which they perceive had a significant impact on their birth mothers.

[As] I got older I started thinking about women's options and sacrifices and, and problems. [...] I want to find out more information and possibly track these people down, specifically the mother, to say that I

do understand, that I *do* forgive. (Transcript 1A:26)

The discussion about Conceptions of Adoption indicated that adoptees may perceive some stigma attached to their birth parents' "inappropriate sexual behaviour" and pregnancy "out of wedlock." In these cases, the adoptees may be motivated to search in an attempt to repair the emotional damage presumably suffered by birth parents during pregnancy and relinquishment.

Other interpretations of adoption may also motivate adoptees to engage in searching behaviour. For one participant, "adoption [...] was a search" (Transcript 8A:42). Once she realized that her birth parents were not an abstraction, but were tangible people who existed somewhere in the physical world, she felt compelled to locate and meet them. This adoptee interpreted adoption as an interruption in the life that she was supposed to lead, and thus

going through with the search and the reunion was a way of correcting that, or trying to get my life back on track. (Transcript 8A:42)

Adoptees who acknowledge a social bias toward biological kin relationships, interpret a desire to search as "natural curiosity" (Transcript 2A:30). However, adoptees who accept and internalize this social bias tend to be more wary of searching and of the searching adoptees' motives. One such participant describes adoptees who express a lot of interest in birth their histories as "wacko" and "off the deep end" (Transcript 9A:43).

The extent of the information search varies between procuring non-identifying information from adoptive parents or child welfare agencies, and exhaustive efforts to locate and meet birth kin. People around the adoptee -- friends, adoptive family

members and others -- respond differently to searching. In some cases, the adoptive parents are full and willing participants in the exercise, encouraging and supporting the adoptee in their search. The adoptive mother of one participant took the initiative to enrol her daughter in the provincial child welfare system's Central Registry, which facilitates connections between birth parents and adoptees. In other cases, the response is not so supportive. Searching adoptees may find that their loyalty to the adoptive family is questioned, or that they are accused of maliciously or selfishly injuring their adoptive parents. This may cause the adoptee to divert questions and searching away from the adoptive family and toward the child welfare system, in an attempt to legitimize their actions. The challenges may also cause the adoptee to employ covert rather than overt methods of searching, and self-impose a code of silence about the search. One adoptee provided a poignant comparison between her interest in identifying information about her Roots, and her non-adopted brother's interest in aspects of his identity:

My [non-adopted] brother has a lot of questions about hockey and skates and statistics and lifestyles of the team players, and *I* don't have these questions 'cause I'm not interested in hockey. But on the other hand, I don't think his driving need to know about hockey at this moment is going to make him call the hockey association, you know, under cover of something else, is going to make him, you know, write letters to players halfway across the world in terms of identifying more clearly who he is. (Transcript 1A:75)

Those adoptees who pursued information through the official channels of the child welfare system were frequently frustrated by how long it took to retrieve information and pass it along to the adoptee. It was not uncommon for applications for non-identifying information to be filled one or two years after the original request.

Several adoptees noted, with some irritation, that the non-identifying documents finally produced by the agencies contained spelling mistakes and typographical errors. This was interpreted by some participants as a comment on the agency's investment in providing such information to adoptees. The length of time required for searches to be completed varied, depending on whether or not birth parents were listed in the Central Registries, and how much information the adoptees could supply. Some adoptees were warned that a search for genetic relatives could take as long as five to eight years to complete, because of extensive waiting lists for this service.

The motives for *not* searching are similar to the motives for not questioning. Adoptees were concerned that searching would cause their adoptive parents distress, and would be disruptive to birth parents. One adoptee witnessed a neighbour's negative reaction to a search by an adopted daughter, and decided she could not subject her adoptive parents to the same pain. Another adoptee chose not to pursue a search when he discovered that the agency through which he had been adopted closed a few years prior to his investigation. Some adoptees choose not to search when they consider the uncertainty of the outcome, fearing what may happen if their birth parents do not meet their expectations or are in need of assistance.

Three adoptees were in fact reunited with genetic kin, while others who desire reunion were still in the process of searching at the time of the study. Although reunion was only one of the goals of searching, it was also considered a strategy of Information Gathering, because personal contact with birth kin typically yielded far more detailed information about the adoptees' biological Roots than could be provided

by non-identifying information. The motives that prompted adoptees to search also inspired some to seek a reunion with biological relatives. In these cases, the extent of the information provided by non-identifying documents was simply not enough to satisfy the adoptees' need to be connected to their genetic forebears' history. In some cases, the adoptees anticipated that the "bond" between birth parent(s) and child, which was interrupted by adoption, could be re-established through a physical reunion.

The reunions between adoptees and birth kin had a variety of consequences. For instance, to their surprise, two adoptees discovered that their birth mother and father had married each other subsequent to the relinquishment of the adoptee and had borne more children. As a consequence, the adoptees unexpectedly had siblings to whom they were fully "blood-related." For all of the adoptees who were reunited with birth kin, the prospect of meeting birth parents and birth siblings was concurrently exciting and confusing.

The distinction between social constructionist and biology-based Conceptions of Family became clear in the reunions between adoptees and birth kin. In two cases, the adoptees anticipated that the parental roles they were accustomed to seeing in their adoptive families would be played out in their relationships with their birth parents. When their birth parents did not assume this role, but responded to the adoptee as a friend or confidant instead, the adoptees were puzzled and disappointed. For another adoptee, the reunion highlighted the contradictions between her identity as a daughter and sibling in her adoptive family and her identity as a daughter and sibling in her

birth family. This particular adoptee relied on a social constructionist model of kin (which requires, among other things, a social relationship between kin) to make sense of her membership in her adoptive family. When confronted with not only a birth mother, but biologically-related siblings as well, this adoptee found that the social constructionist conditions of family membership did not account for her membership in a biological family with whom her social relationships were minimal.

I was a little bit, sort of taken aback, when [birth mother] started, you know, doing comparisons [between 1B and birth sister] [...] "-- wait a minute, she can't borrow my clothes. I have enough trouble with *one* sister." [...] "Sister" to me describes a relationship that is certainly not there with this person. (Transcript 1B:11)

For another adoptee, the reunion with birth kin seemed to widen the gulf between her biological and social identities rather than provide some process for reconciling the two. The split between her biological and social identities was manifested most clearly by her desire to be addressed by her birth name with her biological kin and by her adoptive name with her adoptive kin. This adoptee felt a strong affinity with her birth kin because of perceived common traits, and planned to move to the city in which her birth parents and siblings resided so that she could live closer to them and develop a more intimate relationship with them. At the same time, however, this participant expressed a deep devotion and commitment to her adoptive family.

In most cases, the reunion provided the adoptees with information which they considered vital to their identities. With one exception, in which the adoptee was given a cool reception by the birth father because he was suspicious that the adoptee wanted financial support, the adoptees and birth relatives were met with open arms.

Upon discovering that the birth parents were as anxious to meet the adoptee as vice versa, the adoptees felt justified that they persevered in their search for birth relatives.

One important factor that should not be overlooked when examining strategies for Information Gathering is that in all cases, control over access to the information desired by the adoptees was in the hands of either their adoptive parents or child welfare agencies. In their attempts to gather the material they deemed necessary for constructing their identities, adoptees creatively developed both overt and covert strategies to collect and manage the information procured within and outside their adoptive families and the child welfare system.

Connections

The final category that I will address here has been labelled "Connections," to connote expressions of both isolation and community. As mentioned in the description of the study sample, several of the participants have non-genetic, adopted siblings. Given the emphasis on silence noted above, it should not be surprising that none of the participants report speaking at any length to either adopted or non-adopted siblings about the experience of adoption. Although one adoptee suggests that it was helpful to be raised with siblings who were also adopted, others describe feelings of alienation and isolation in their adoptive families. Asked to speculate how she would respond as a parent to an adopted child, one participant answers:

I'd probably try to reassure the child, this person, that it was okay to feel, you know, different, and it's okay to feel isolated, and I would hopefully try to be sensitive to that and try to incorporate them more in to the family.

(Transcript 5A:15)

Another adoptee emphasizes the importance of having peers affirm her experience:

"[It's] really frustrating, because I have nobody to say, um, 'I know what you mean.'" (Transcript 8A:53)

The isolation that these adoptees feel may be magnified in part by the fact that "adoptee" is an invisible identity. The participants in this study report meeting adoptees outside of their families primarily by chance. Typically, the meeting occurs because adoption or a related subject will arise in conversation and the adoptees then identify themselves. A few of the participants have actively sought the company of other adoptees by joining discussion or political action groups which focus on adoption issues. Regardless of the means by which they meet other adoptees, most of the participants report feeling a fundamental link with their peers.

[...] it'll be like in a class and someone will say "Oh I'm adopted" and somebody else'll say "So am I," and you just sort of look at each other and it's like "Yeah" -- [...] I don't even know if it's so much anything you say, it's just, I always feel sort of like a bond. It's like "Yeah, they know" [...]

(Transcript 2A:10)

Another adoptee confirmed this bond:

Like, I think, um, if you're adopted you do have a general understanding of what it means and how it feels.

(Transcript 8A:15)

The participants in this study who have developed networks with other adoptees remark that the feelings of isolation they have experienced are alleviated by

these contacts. Here are some of the participants' accounts of connecting with other adoptees:

Uh, it's interesting to talk to them [other adoptees] and see where they're coming from and to find out I'm not the only person that feels like this.
(Transcript 6A:30)

[It] *has* helped me to talk to other people with the same situation and just compare myself to their situation and how they feel.
(Transcript 5A:17)

I don't feel as alone as I did before. And I really felt alone before.
(Transcript 8A:26)

The peer support that participants have sought in a community of adoptees has affirmed their experience of adoption and fortified their identities as adopted people.

In this section I have presented the Model of Adoptive Identities, which provides a conceptual framework for understanding adoptees' identity construction and maintenance. The components of the model -- Conceptions of Family, Conceptions of Adoption, Communication, Roots, Information Gathering, and Connections -- are interconnected. Separately and in combination, they influence how adoptees make sense of their adoptive identities in interaction with adoptive family, birth family, and others.

In the following chapter, I shall describe how the Model of Adoptive Identities is manifested, according to the Conceptions of Family hemisphere in which the adoptee locates herself/himself. Each component of the model takes on a slightly different meaning, depending on whether the adoptee adheres to a social constructionist conception of family or a biological conception of family. I shall then

illustrate how the Model of Adoptive Identities is compatible with the framework of identity construction outlined by Weigert (1975, 1986), presented earlier.

SYNTHESIS

I undertook this study with the aim of exploring, through adoptees' personal accounts, how adopted people negotiate, construct, and interpret their adoptive identities. Because identity is the focus of this study, I chose to employ a methodology which would acknowledge the subjectivity of the adopted participants throughout the data collection and analysis. Grounded theory methodology, which has its theoretical roots in symbolic interactionism, met this criteria. This method encourages theory-building, and by employing the strategies of grounded theory methodology, I was able to construct a model of adoptive identities. The model indicates that an adoptee's Conception of Family, informed either by a social constructionist or a biological attitude, is the lens through which she/he views other components of her/his identities. In other words, the meaning that adoptees attribute to the institution of family interacts with and affects the meaning they ascribe to the practice and experience of adoption, the extent and manner of their communication with others about adoption, the meanings they assign to their biological Roots, the strategies, if any, they employ to gather information about those Roots, and the extent to which they feel connected to other adopted people. These fields of experience also overlap with each other in a complex interplay of meaning and action.

As the core category of the model of adoptive identities, Conceptions of Family defines and infuses the other categories of adoptive experience. The social construction and biology hemispheres of Conceptions of Family represent the dichotomy of thinking about kin relationships. Adoptees who located their

understanding of family in the social construction hemisphere regarded social relationships as the primary condition of family membership, and hence had their identities firmly rooted in their adoptive families. They viewed relinquishment and adoption as rational solutions to the stigma of their birth parents' illegitimate sexual relations and their adoptive parents' infertility. They viewed adoption as redemption for them and their biological and social parents. In this sense, they regarded their biological connections to kin as part of another place and time, and focused on present relationships with their adoptive families. These adoptees affirmed the social constructionist conception of family by asserting either that there is no difference between social and biological kin relationships or that socially-based kin relationships are in fact superior to biology-based relationships. Adoptees asserted the superiority of social family relationships by boasting to their non-adopted siblings that by virtue of being "chosen children," they had a higher status in the adoptive family. These adoptees also acknowledged the advantages of having been adopted, such as upward social mobility.

For adoptees who embraced a social constructionist conception of family, communication patterns tended toward closure. The "normalization" of adoption experience by disavowing any difference between adoptive and biological kin relationships seemed to minimize discussion and promote silence, secrecy and privacy within the adoptive family. However, there was openness in all the adoptees' experiences to the extent that they knew of their adoptive status (one of the criteria used for their participation in the study), and for most participants, the "chosen child"

story framed the disclosure of this information. When it was used to present the concept of adoption to the adoptees, they interpreted it as a sign of their special and honoured status in the adoptive family. They subsequently repeated the story to others (particularly non-adopted siblings) to reaffirm this status. Otherwise, these adoptees did not advertise their adoptive status to outsiders unless that information was considered contextually relevant in conversation or was specifically requested, as in the case inquiries about medical history for the purposes of medical examinations or insurance.

Adoptees who positioned themselves in the social construction hemisphere of Conceptions of Family did not express much interest in their biological Roots beyond relevant medical information. Rather, these adoptees tended to use their adoptive kin's social history and even personality characteristics and idiosyncrasies as raw material for constructing their own identities. None claimed to physically resemble their adoptive kin, but some acknowledged having adopted the attitudes and mannerisms of members of their adoptive families. The relative insignificance of biological Roots in these adoptees' perceptions of their socially constructed identities accounts for the type and extent of Information Gathering that they did.

Information Gathering refers to the strategies adoptees used to collect information about their adoption and/or biological history. Adoptees in the social construction hemisphere tended to participate most often in the more passive forms of Information Gathering such as cataloguing and researching. Not unlike adoptees who prescribed to a biology-based notion of family, these participants reported that their

adoptive parents offered them access to non-identifying information about genetic kin. However, they were reluctant to pursue this information, claiming that it was unnecessary to understanding themselves. Any questioning done by these adoptees referred only to medical history. I attribute these adoptees' interest in medical history to their present and future orientation to family relationships, such that the medical information they received alleviated concern about their present health and future development, rather than representing the rediscovery of a lost connection to birth relatives. Occasionally, these adoptees also engaged in covert searches for information, such as secretly looking at non-identifying information in their adoptive parents' locked files, but they did so because they feared that asking direct questions might undermine the commitment they have to their adoptive family relationships and consequently injure their adoptive parents.

The adoptees who believed in the social construction of kin relationships located their identities in their adoptive families. Consequently, they did not invest much energy in their *adoptive* identities. Rather, they maintained that the fact of their adoption was relatively inconsequential. Thus, they did not report any affinity with other adoptees, or express any significant desire to connect with their adopted peers.

Biological Conceptions of Family, on the other hand, are characterized by the principal condition of a genetic relationship between family members. The influence of genetically inherited characteristics are believed to override the effects of the social environment. Adoptees who more closely adhered to this perspective understood their experience of adoption and their adoptive identities differently than adoptees who

considered family relationships to be socially constructed.

Adoptees in the biological hemisphere tended to have an emotional response to relinquishment and adoption. They believed in a mysterious and powerful bond between birth mother and child, and saw adoption as a breach of the perceived "natural order" of family relationships. Although most of these adoptees appreciate the positive intentions of the "chosen child" story, they re-evaluated the myth as they matured and concluded that the conditions of their membership in the adoptive family unit included the inability of their adoptive parents to reproduce biologically. In other words, they still saw themselves as chosen, but not as the *first* choice of their adoptive parents. Adoptees who were situated in the biological hemisphere were more likely to acknowledge that the experience of adoption was different than the experience of growing up surrounded by one's genetic kin. Consequently, they also more often attributed fears of abandonment and fears of intimacy in platonic and romantic relationships to adoptive experience.

The communication patterns of adoptees located in the biological hemisphere of Conceptions of Family were more likely to be characterized by openness, especially outside of their adoptive families. In addition to responding to requests about biological history, these adoptees disclosed their adoptive status as a matter of course when initiating relationships with other people because they considered this biographical fact an integral part of who they are. Because these adoptees were more likely to introduce adoption as a topic of conversation and seek information about their genetic histories, they were often frustrated by systemic and adoptive family

codes of silence, secrecy and privacy.

For adoptees invested in a biological interpretation of kinship, biological Roots were an integral part of their identities. In addition to medical information, curiosity about their resemblance to birth kin in terms of physical appearance, talents and interests, and temperament pre-occupied these adoptees. They anticipated that a visible physical resemblance to birth kin would provide them with a concrete connection to an otherwise abstract kin group. Even without this immediate connection, they tended to identify more closely with their genetic social history or "family tree" than with that of their adoptive kin.

The emphasis that these adoptees placed on biological Roots, combined with the extent of openness or closure in communication patterns within and outside their adoptive families determined their use of Information Gathering strategies. Information Gathering tended to be more overt within the adoptive family when communication patterns were characterized by openness. Even so, the adoptees often suppressed their questions and engaged in covert search strategies for fear of hurting their adoptive parents. Overall, adoptees who adhered to a biology-based conception of family engaged in more active modes of searching and were the only participants who sought and participated in reunions with birth kin.

For all participants, connections with other adoptees were often happenstance. However, the adoptees who were aligned with biological Conceptions of Family, often frustrated by institutional and familial communication patterns of silence, secrecy and privacy, tended to seek out other adoptees. Outside of their adoptive

families, they often disclosed their adoptive status in conversation and thus increased the likelihood of meeting other adopted people. These connections frequently led to the sharing of strategies for information gathering and for managing adoptive and/or birth family relations.

Most of the participants in the study do not "fit" clearly in either the social construction hemisphere or biology hemisphere of Conceptions of Family. In fact, it would be difficult to support the claim that any participant in the study had a purely social constructionist or purely biological understanding of kin relationships, although certainly some are closer to the poles of this continuum than others. I have attempted in the preceding discussion to describe the characteristics of the adoptive identities located in these polar regions. Most of the participants, however, include both social and biological components in their Conceptions of Family, and invest their identities in both social and biological kin relationships. They employed diverse strategies to make sense of their dual identities, using a variety of means at different stages in the construction of their identities. For example, when these adoptees first learned about their adoptive status (typically through the "chosen child" myth) they perceived that the social bond between kin was superior to a biological bond. This strategy continued as they matured and they understood more clearly the circumstances of their relinquishment and adoption. They recognized not only the hardships possibly endured by their birth parents, but also the upward social mobility they experienced by being adopted. Confronted with questions from outsiders about their experience, they focused on "normalizing" their adoptive experience, denying that there is any

difference between kin relationships that are purely social and those that are biological. In adulthood, these adoptees now struggle to maintain a delicate balance between the conceptual hemispheres of social construction and biology, embracing both the social and biological bases of kin relationships as integral to a cohesive adoptive identity.

I have noted that I would focus in this study on the *process* of identity negotiation and construction rather than on the roles that the actors in adoption occupy. The Model of Adoptive Identities focuses on the meanings and methods that adoptees use to accomplish the task of identity construction. This model was generated by a method which is theoretically grounded in a symbolic interactionist perspective and emphasizes the centrality of subjectivity in human interaction. Hence, the Model of Adoptive Identities can be located within a more comprehensive and far-reaching symbolic interactionist understanding of identity. In the next section, I shall review the theory of identity construction proposed by Weigert (1975, 1986) and illustrate its connection to the Model of Adoptive Identities.

Weigert asserts that the dynamics of human interaction are central to the construction of identities. He makes a distinction between self, defined as self-aware subjectivity which provides the individual with a unified experience, and identity, which he defines as self socially situated, or self as object. Weigert describes three modes of identity which constitute the individual agent: the subjective or "I" mode, the objective or "Me" mode, and the intersubjective or "We" mode. The subjective mode is indicated by an un-mediated knowledge of self as agent. The objective mode

represents the self as a social object, labelled by social symbols such as gender and occupation. In social interaction, an individual's identities are constantly constructed and reconstructed as participants in the interaction change. For example, the infant who is named (a recognized indicator of membership) by genetic parents may be relinquished and re-named by adoptive parents who claim that child as their kin. Subjective and objective identities do not always agree, as indicated by adoptees who believe they have retained a bond with their birth mothers, yet live in an adoptive kin group who do not readily acknowledge biological ties. When subjective and objective identities *do* agree, however, social interaction and the rules which govern it are affirmed, creating a collective notion of "We." This "We" identity is manifested differently for adoptees in the two hemispheres of the Model of Adoptive Identities. For adoptees who are aligned with a social constructionist view of family, "We" is affirmed by connections with adoptive kin and a depreciation of biological links. For those who have a biological perspective on family, "We" is affirmed by focusing on genetic relationships and by gathering information about and even reuniting with birth kin. For the latter category of adopted people, "We" is also affirmed by an association with a peer group of other adoptees. Weigert explains that these identities are generated through a combination of situational and structural factors. Thus, the rules of interaction, such as openness and closure, and structural factors such as the definition of family (social constructionist or biological) implemented within that interaction will determine the form which an identity takes.

Weigert also notes that there are limits to the types of identities that can be

realized at any particular time. He refers to these limits as sources of identity. Embodiment, or the organismic source of identity acts as the container for the self, and this physical self is invested with social meaning. The meanings that are loaded onto the body affect personal identities, especially if those meanings differ markedly from or contradict the individual's structural situation. For example, several of the adoptees in the study report a perceived social bias toward blood ties between kin, and a belief that certain physical and temperamental characteristics are genetically inherited. Some adoptees appropriate these biases and beliefs and position themselves in the biological hemisphere of Conceptions of Family, while others eschew the influence of biology and focus instead on the power of socially constructed relationships to define families.

The second source of identity -- structure -- acknowledges that institutions are socially created to govern human interaction. So, a structured identity like "adoptee" is invented and institutionalized to correspond to the exigencies of human experience, such as childlessness, "illegitimate" births, and the lack of parenting figures for relinquished children, and to the solutions that are created to resolve these conditions. These structured identities are part of a taken-for-granted reality which is not usually contested unless it becomes problematic. For example, the adoptee who has existed peacefully within the social constructionist sphere of family relations may question the validity of this viewpoint when confronted with a searching birth parent or the onset of a genetically inherited disease.

The dialectical source of identity is rooted in a perspective which recognizes

the social construction of meaning. When a person, whether in some crisis or by conscious volition, (re)evaluates the meanings that are the foundation of a particular identity, she/he gains insight into the social production of identities and can question their seeming "natural" or "super-natural" imposition. Thus, the adoptee, obliged to defend the validity of adoptive kinship in the face of a biology-biased view of family, may question the authenticity of biologically-based kinship ties and (re)construct a conception of family that emphasizes the primacy of social relationships. On the other hand, dissatisfied with a purely social constructionist view of kinship which does not acknowledge the history of their bodies or the influence of genetics, some adoptees may construct a biological definition of family. In either case, when an identity is discarded after re-evaluation, a new one must be produced to replace it.

The enactment of a new identity is the focus of Weigert's (1986) "metadynamics of identity." Each metadynamic connects a mode of identity (subjective, objective, intersubjective) with a source of identity (embodiment, structure, dialectic). In the dynamic of reflexion, the individual is cognizant of herself/himself as both the subject and object of awareness. She/he realizes that the embodiment of the self is replete with social meaning, and in critically examining the identities available, cognitively "tries on" assorted identities to see which ones "fit" the best. This practice of reflexion appears to account for the fluidity of adoptive identities in those participants who attempt to reconcile both the social and biological bases of their kinship connections.

The dynamic of "presentation-attribution" concerns the presentation of self (I)

to others as an object (Me), and the others' interpretation of that portrayal of self. Presentation-attribution occurs in a taken-for-granted reality; that is, identities are seen as being generated in a natural context, outside the realm of human will and action. This "natural" frame of reference defines the "links, conditions and content" (Weigert, 1986:176) for interaction that occurs within it. This metadynamic is demonstrated by adoptees who are firmly rooted in either a social constructionist conception of family, where adoptees who are interested in their biological origins are labelled as "wacko," or a biology-based conception of family, where the bond between biological mother and child is paramount.

"Development-routinization" highlights the dialectic between self (I) and collectivity (We). This metadynamic can be observed in the rituals and status passages associated with individuals' biological and social-psychological development. Such events are part of the social timetable that regulates the identity construction process. "A person's sense of becoming and integration" (Weigert, 1986:178) is a reflection of the correspondence between their perception of their experience and the explanation of that experience by the external social order. Any discrepancy between the two is interpreted as a sign that the individual may need treatment to become realigned with the socially determined schedule of identity. Many of the adoptees in this study reported encountering ambivalence about the overt synthesis of biological and adoptive kinship in their interaction with adoptive family members, child welfare officials, and other non-adopted people. Some of these adoptees felt pressured to embrace *either* a biology-based view of kinship which undermines social relations *or* a

social constructionist view of kinship in which adoptive family relationships replace entirely the connections to birth relatives. The *dis*-integration demonstrated by these adoptees illustrates their struggle to discard one view of family in favour of the other, when both are integral to their sense of wholeness.

Earlier I indicated that power dynamics are not adequately addressed by Weigert's model of identity construction because negotiation at the micro level cannot, as he claims, always remedy structural imbalances of power which are manifested in social interaction. In the Model of Adoptive Identities, the imbalance of power between adoptees, adoptive parents and the child welfare system is clearly demonstrated in the categories of Communication and Information Gathering. Adoptees typically had very little control over the amount and type of information released to them, and were frequently frustrated by the extended waiting period for retrieving information from child welfare agencies. In response to the unequal access to bio-historical information, the adoptees developed overt and covert strategies for gaining access to this identity-building material.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As I conclude, I want to address some weaknesses in the Model of Adoptive Identities. First, although I believe that I have provided a forum in which adoptees' voices are finally heard, the emphasis this study places on subjectivity relegates to the background the structural inequalities that impinge upon adoptees' micro interactions with families and others. The model's other weakness lies in its artificial dichotomy. Although I have criticized other adoption research for dividing adoptees into categories of Searchers and Non-searchers, I must acknowledge that my own model resorts to a bi-polar framework which puts the adoptees in a position of "forced choice," that is, accepting either a social constructionist or a biological view of kinship. This model may not adequately express the complex and delicate balance between social and biological relations that adoptees strive to achieve. An alternative representation (see Appendix D), where Social Construction and Biology are depicted as two separate spheres which intersect, may allow more room for those adoptees who would otherwise be stranded on the border between the hemispheres of Social Construction and Biology.

It appears that a binary mode of thinking has shaped the theoretical formulations about adoption, family and identity: Searchers versus Non-Searchers, Social versus Biological, subjectivity versus structure. The components of these complex institutions and interactions are constantly set in opposition to each other. Clearly, a different method of conceptualizing identity is necessary to capture the

fluidity of its continual negotiation and construction. The "either/or" perspective must be substituted with a more inclusive and integrated mode of theorizing.

In spite of its weaknesses, I believe that this study has made a contribution to the canon of adoptive research. My goal in this study was to fill a void in empirical adoption research by documenting the subjective perceptions of adoptees. This account of adoptees' identity construction allows for a more complete and balanced description of the adoption experience.

Adoption practices have changed dramatically over the last thirty years as birth parents, adoptees, and adoptive parents have demanded more open policies for the sharing of identifying information. However, as the adoptees in this study describe, there are still many barriers to the full acceptance of an integrated social-biological conception of family. In fact, many of the issues that have been passionately contested in the sphere of adoption are resurfacing in current exchanges in the field of New Reproductive Technologies (NRT). Participants in the debates over whether sperm and egg donors and "surrogate" mothers should remain anonymous, or whether people who use NRT to fulfil their goals of parenthood should reveal to their children the mode of conception, pregnancy and birth, do not often take into account the lessons that adoption has to offer (Jackson, 1993). The need for the inclusion of *all* the participants' voices in these debates is clear. The implications for the construction and reconstruction of kinship relationships are long-lasting and leave indelible impressions on the identities of the people who often have the least opportunity to speak on their own behalf.



Appendix A

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

Winnipeg, Manitoba
Canada R3T 2N2

Statement of Informed Consent

Constructing an Adoptive Identity: The Accounts of Adopted Adults

This research is being conducted as part of the requirements for a Master of Arts program in the Department of Sociology at the University of Manitoba. The purpose of this research is to explore the experiences of adoptees through their own subjective interpretations. The participants' accounts will furnish the context in which to examine how adopted people construct, negotiate and interpret their identities as adoptees.

The account of each participant will be tape-recorded in an individual interview with the researcher, lasting approximately 1 1/2 (one and one-half) hours.

I understand that I may refuse permission for the tape-recording of the interview. I understand that the text of the tape-recording will be transcribed to print for analysis, after which the tape will be destroyed.

I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary. I may refuse to answer any or all questions without penalty. I may withdraw from the research at any time without penalty. If I choose to withdraw from the study, I also have the option to withdraw the information that I have provided.

I understand that both I and the researcher may request a second interview and further contact. I understand that I will be given an opportunity to ask questions at any time during the study and after my participation is complete. I may contact the researcher by leaving a message with the Department of Sociology, (phone) 474-9260.

I understand that any information I provide in the course of this interview will be kept in strict confidence, and that in no way will my identity be revealed during any stage of the data analysis or in publication of the research findings.

Having read and understood the nature of this research and my participation in it, my signature below signifies my willingness to participate.

Participant's signature

Date

Researcher's signature

Date

Appendix B

Interview Guide

1. Have you been legally adopted by your present parents?
If not, do you consider yourself adopted?
Do you ever use the words "adoptee" or "adopted" to refer to yourself?
2. Assuming that you are ever required to make the distinction, how do you generally refer to:
a) your genetic parents?
b) your adoptive parents?
3. I'd like you to tell me some things about your adoptive family:
a) Are both of your parents still living?
b) Are they married to each other, separated, divorced, living common-law, or otherwise?
c) Are you living with your parents? If not, when did you move out of their residence?
e) Do you have any siblings? If so, are any/all of them adopted? Are you biologically related to any/all of your siblings? How old are your siblings?
4. How would you describe the relationship(s) you have with your parent(s) and/or sibling(s)?
If you are a parent, how would you describe the relationship you have with your children?
5. How much contact do you have with relatives outside of your immediate family? (For example, how often do you see or speak to or correspond with uncles, aunts, cousins, grandparents, etc. ?)
6. How did you find out that you were adopted?
Do you recall being told that you were adopted?
Do you recall how old you were when you were told?
Do you recall how and by whom this information was presented to you?
Do you recall what your first reactions were to being told that you were adopted?
7. At what point did the meaning of "adoption" become clear to you?
What did it mean to you then?
What does it mean to you now?
8. Do many people know that you were adopted?
Who have you told, and why?

9. How much of your thoughts and feelings about adoption have you shared/do you share with your family?
Have you ever asked any questions about your adoption? (For example, "Why was I adopted?" or "What can you tell me about my birth parents?")
If so, how often did you ask?
To whom did you direct these enquiries?
What initially prompted you to ask questions about your adoption? (For example, to satisfy your own curiosity, to get information to answer the questions of friends, anxiety about your status in the family ...)
Have these motives ever changed?
10. Have you ever hesitated to ask your parent(s) for information regarding your adoption?
If so, what caused you to hesitate?
11. Do you have any information regarding your birth relatives and/or the circumstances surrounding your adoption?
What kind of information?
How did you obtain this information?
Is it enough?
How would you describe the feelings associated with obtaining this information?
Has this information affected how you feel about being adopted?
If so, how?
Did you anticipate or have any expectations about how the information might affect you?
If so, did these expectations differ from how you were actually affected?
12. Have you ever been in contact with Child and Family Services, or any other agency mandated to arrange adoptions, for the purpose of obtaining more bio-historical information than was provided to you by your parent(s) or other adoptive family members?
If so, what was that experience like?
Who did you tell about this contact?
13. Is adoption ever discussed in your family?
Have you felt such a discussion would be permitted and/or welcomed?
If so, who usually initiates the discussion and in what context does it usually arise?
14. Has anyone in your adoptive family ever attributed any of your behaviour within or outside of the family to the fact of your adoption?
If so, what kind of behaviour were they referring to?
Do you think the attribution was appropriate?

15. Do you know other adopted people?
How did you meet?
16. In what ways do you think you are different from, and the same as, other adoptees?
17. If you were in a room full of people you didn't know, is there any way you think you could tell if any of them were adopted, without directly asking them?
18. How do you think being adopted is different from not being adopted (i.e. being raised by one's genetic parent(s), being orphaned, being raised in a blended family, being in foster care, ...)?
19. What kinds of things tend to remind you that you were adopted? Or are you constantly aware of that fact?
20. Some researchers have suggested that adoptees are not as "well-adjusted" as people who have been raised by their genetic parent(s) [adjustment is measured by achievement in school or work, quality of relationships, conflict with the law, and other indicators of conformity to social rules].
How would you explain this finding?
Do you agree with it?
21. Non-parents: Do you want/have you ever wanted children?
If yes, how do you envision having children?
Would you ever adopt a child? What would you tell her/him about adoption?
How do you think being adopted has affected your views on parenting and family?

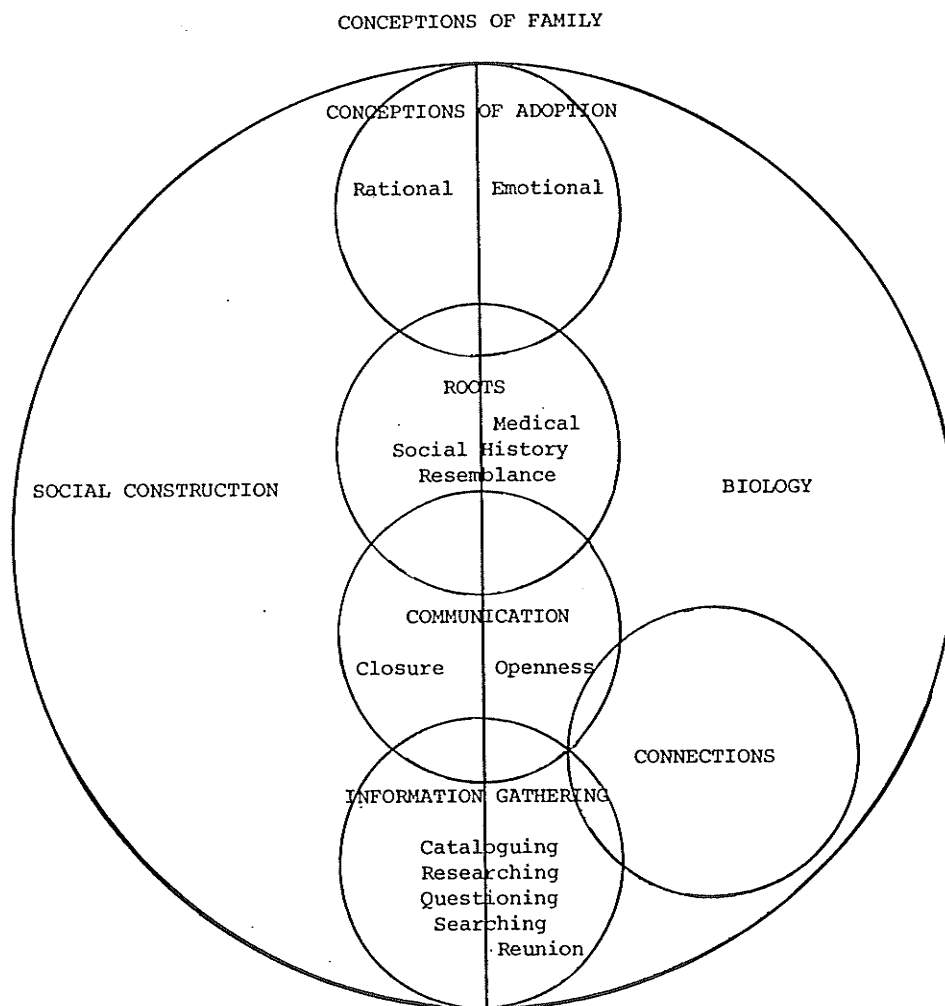
Parents: Would/have you ever adopt(ed) a child? What would/did you tell her/him about adoption?
How do you think being adopted has affected your views on parenting and family?
How do you think being a parent has affected your views on adoption?
22. In general, how would you describe what it "feels like" to be adopted?
23. What do you like about being adopted?

24. If you could change anything about your adoption experience or the practice of adoption in general, would you?
If so, what would you change?
25. Do you have any humorous or not-so-humorous anecdotes about your experience of adoption that you would like to share?

* This guide is in no way intended to be exhaustive; participants will be encouraged to expand the list of topics as it relates to their experience.

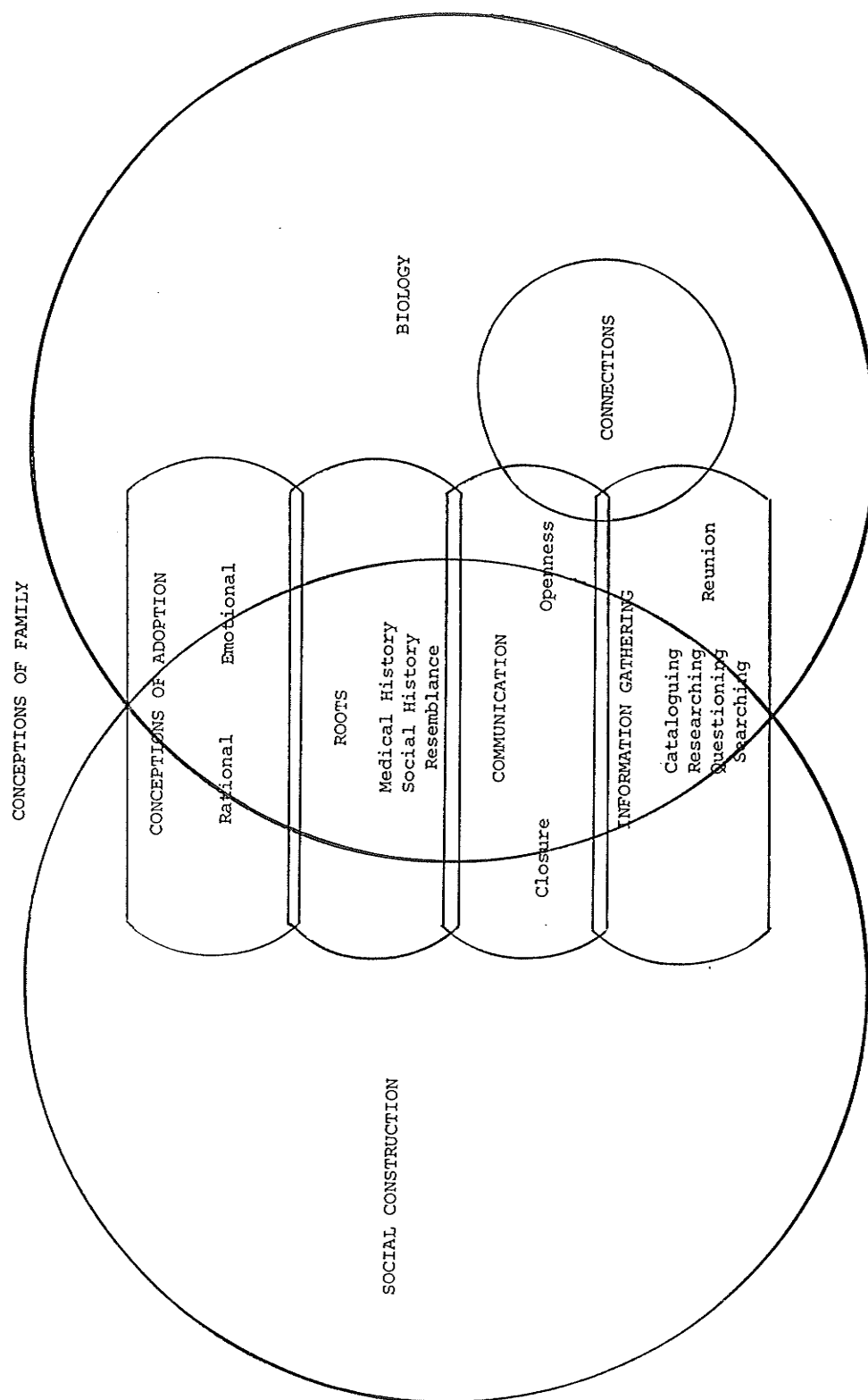
Appendix C

MODEL OF ADOPTIVE IDENTITIES



Appendix D

MODEL OF ADOPTIVE IDENTITIES II



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