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# Reunions between Adoptees and Birth Parents: The Adoptive Parents' View

*Phyllis R. Silverman, Lee Campbell, and Patricia Patti*

*This article looks at the reactions of adoptive parents to reunions between their adopted children and the children's birth parents. The focus is on how adoptive parents feel the reunion affects the family's integrity. Three types of family responses are identified: (1) closed, (2) divided, and (3) open. Acceptance of the differences between families created by adoption of children and those created by childbirth was a factor in the families' openness. Closed families saw no difference, and reunion suggested to the adults that they had failed as parents. Parents in open families understood the difference in families, saw the children as separate, and felt no threat to their competence as parents. Families' need for boundaries is examined, and the way the concept of family is constructed is discussed. Implications for the practice of adoption are considered.*

**Key Words:** *adoptive families; birth parents; openness; reunions; search process*

In the past, the premise on which adoptive families have been created was that they would be like any family into which a child is born. They were usually told to tell the child, from the beginning, about the fact of his or her adoption. It was assumed that adoptive parents and their children would not need any extensive information about or contact with the birth parents. Birth certificates were altered to indicate that the child was born to his or her adoptive parents, and the record was sealed so that even as an adult an adoptee could not legally obtain his or her original birth certificate in most states in the United States. The birth mother was told to go on with her life as if she had never had the child. Many adoption agencies and states continue these practices.

Clothier (1943) recognized that adoption professionals were underestimating not only the im-

portance to adopted children of knowing their genetic history but also the importance of historic continuity for the development of a sense of personal identity. The subsequent literature, generated by both adoptees (Fisher, 1973; Lifton, 1975, 1988) and professionals (many of whom are adoptive parents or adoptees themselves), has begun to identify how the social and emotional development of adopted children may be different, but not necessarily problematic, as a result of their not being born into their families (Brodzinsky, 1990; Kirk, 1964, 1985; Miller-Havens, 1990; Nickman, 1985; Pavao, 1986; Schechter, 1970; Sorosky, Baran, & Pannor, 1978). These authors have raised doubts about the value of advising the adoptive family to imitate in every detail the experience of a family into which children are born.

Adult adoptees have become more outspoken and, with or without their adoptive parents'

permission, are searching for their birth parents. Birth parents who had surrendered their children found that they could not put the loss behind them and, encouraged by the adoptee movement, began to look for their children (Deykin, Campbell, & Patti, 1984; Silverman, 1981). As a result there are growing numbers of reunions between adoptees and birth parents (Campbell, Silverman, & Patti, 1991; Kowal & Schilling, 1985; Sachdev, 1989; Silverman, Campbell, Patti, & Style, 1988).

Many adoptive parents find themselves caught in this changing social movement, for which they were not prepared (Baran & Pannor, 1990). The possibility of reunion was not part of the arrangement when a child was adopted 15 or more years ago. The parents were not alerted to the fact that their adopted child might ask, "Then in whose tummy did I grow?" In Kirk's (1964) words, "they [the adoptive parents] were not helped to understand their difference" and to see that acknowledging and even knowing their child's other set of parents would not jeopardize the integrity of the adoptive family. Sachdev (1989), in a retrospective study of adoptive families served by several Canadian social agencies, found that adoptive parents preferred to have veto power over adoptees' seeking identifying data, even if the children were adults. If the parents could not have veto power, then they wanted to be alerted by the agency that their child was searching. This request presents a dilemma for the agencies because both the adoptee and the adoptive parents are clients whose different needs they must respect. Sachdev concluded that these parents feared that they would lose their child.

Even today, when many adoptive parents are advised that their child might search for the birth parents, there are few guidelines about what their role should be in this process. Little is known about what questions adoptive parents have about reunions and what they do when a reunion occurs.

This article is the third in a series that examines reunions between adoptees and their birth parents and the impact of this reunion on the participants. The first article looked at this experience from the point of view of the birth parent (Silverman et al., 1988). The adoptee's perspective was the focus of the second article (Campbell et al., 1991). This article deals with the experience of the adoptive parents.

## Method

Data were gathered using mail questionnaires individually designed for adoptive parents, birth parents, and adoptees, respectively, who participated in a reunion between adoptees and their birthparents (Silverman et al., 1988). The questionnaires were distributed by adoption reform organizations. Each set of questionnaires was analyzed separately. Because of the many ways in which reunions are arranged and the secrecy that traditionally surrounds the whole adoption process, it is very difficult to systematically sample the adoption population to identify a representative population of adoptive families who have had reunions. Caution, therefore, must be used in generalizing from the results presented here to the whole population of adoptive families.

Thirty respondents, primarily women, returned the questionnaires designed for adoptive parents; the data cover 32 children in 30 families in this sample. In six of these 30 families, no reunion had yet taken place, despite the existence of identifying information. We assumed that the families who took the time to return the questionnaire were more receptive to reunions than those who did not respond. This impression is borne out by the fact that in 20 of the 24 families in which a reunion had occurred, the impact of the reunion was perceived as generally positive.

We learned more about reluctant and rejecting adoptive parents from both the adoptee and the birth parent questionnaires. To provide a more complete picture, for this discussion we used data from the adoptee and birth parent questionnaires as well. A descriptive, qualitative approach was used in the analysis (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987). Our primary question was, How do adoptive parents feel the reunion affects the integrity of the adoptive family?

## Findings

### Respondents

The 24 adoptive families in which reunions had taken place were white, primarily college educated, middle class, and married. The parents ranged in age from 33 to 83 years; the average age was 48. They represented the major religions in the United States in about the same proportion as found in the larger population. There were 54 adopted children in these 24 families, all but four of whom were adopted when they were younger

than six months old. In 14 families there were also birth children. Twenty-two of the adoptions were arranged through a private or public adoption agency. There was one intrafamily adoption and one open adoption; the birth mothers in both cases were openly identified by the adoptee as his or her birth parent. The children at the time of the reunion ranged in age from two to 52 years; 14 were female and 10 were male. All the families had been candid with their children about the fact of their adoption.

In the 24 families in which there was a reunion, four adoptive parents had initiated the search for their child's birth parents, usually for the birth mother. These families reported a conviction that it would help their child grow and would be, on balance, beneficial to all parties. They were clearly influenced by the adoption reform movement and wanted to do the "right" thing for their child. Some searched because they felt it might help their troubled adolescent child. In 12 families the decision to search was made by the adoptee. In two families interest in the search was stimulated by a reunion between the adoptive mother and her birth child. Six children were found by their birth mothers, and one 46-year-old was found by her siblings. In one instance the child was searching at the time she was found.

Thirty-three percent of the 24 adoptive families were affiliated with an organization concerned with issues of adoption. In contrast, 62 percent of the adoptees and 74 percent of the birth parents who we reported on in our earlier articles were more likely to belong to an adoption reform organization.

The sample from the adoptee population consisted of 114 adoptees who had reunions with their birth parents and provided demographic information about their adoptive parents (Campbell et al., 1991). Their parents ranged in age from 20 to 60 at the time of the adoption. At least half of the mothers had gone to college, but most of them were full-time homemakers when they adopted. More of the adoptive fathers had gone on to graduate education than had their wives. The family was supported primarily by the father's income. Most of the men were

professionals, self-employed businessmen, or skilled artisans.

Most of these respondents always knew they were adopted, but as they perceived it, there was little dialogue about the adoption after the early years of their lives. Thirty-six percent of the 100 adoptees who responded reported that they experienced conflict with their adoptive parents about the reunion. In contrast, 25 percent reported that their adoptive and birth parents had met, and in 21 of these instances the two sets of parents had developed a relationship.

### **Adoptive Parents' Response to Reunion**

The data showed three types of responses by the adoptive parents to the reunion and its consequences. Using the data from the three groups of respondents, we grouped the adoptive parents into those who were open and accepting, those who were divided in their reactions, and those who were closed and rejecting. Reiss (1981), in his study of families facing new and stressful situations, identified families who could not develop new coping strategies at times of stress or change as having a "closed" family system. These families approached a new situation with

fixed understanding and had little flexibility in their repertoire of responses. At the other extreme, Reiss identified as "open" families who were flexible and able to shift their understanding in light of new information.

This typology can be applied to the way adoptive parents reacted to the encounter with their child's birth mother or birth father. The degree of stress these parents experienced was related to their ability to remain open to this opportunity. With the exception of the respondents who already knew the birth parent, all of the adoptive parents reported some apprehension about encountering the birth parent. Their concern was that their child not be hurt and that their family not be threatened. The more open and flexible the family system was, the less sustained was the stress they experienced.

Brodzinsky (1990), using Kirk's (1964, 1985) conceptualization of the adoptive family's ability to acknowledge their differences from families

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formed when children were born to them, studied how this ability affected the family's accommodation to the adoption. He described families on a continuum that ranged from those who could acknowledge their differences to those who rejected any differences that might exist. Our data suggest that families in a closed system were more likely to have difficulty accepting the differences, whereas those in an open system were better able to accept the differences. The authors thought that families who also had biological children would be more open, but this was not the case. In each of these family types there were families with both adopted and biological children.

**Closed Family System.** Some birth parents reported that the adoptive parents prevented the reunion from occurring. When the initial contact was made, these adoptive parents became angry, and some threatened legal action. Others indicated that the child was unready, or they simply did not respond to the inquiry. No other data about these families are available because there was no reunion.

When the birth parent successfully contacted the adoptee, some adoptive parents tried to prevent any continuing contact. One adoptee refused further contact when his adoptive parents threatened to cut off financial help for college. Another adoptee was elated when the birth mother called but followed her husband's advice to first tell her parents before she met her birth mother. When they reacted negatively, she refused to see or talk on the phone with her birth mother.

Some adoptees, anticipating this kind of closed reaction, kept the reunion a secret. When they searched, they did so against the wishes of their parents, and they did not share what they found. One adoptee, who wanted to be honest, was disowned by her parents when she told them she had made contact with her birth family. Some adoptees later found that their adoptive parents had always had identifying information about their birth parents but had been unwilling to share it, and in some cases the adoptive parents lied about the birth parents to make them seem unattractive. One adoptive mother went so far as to say that she had saved her daughter "from the gutter," implying that otherwise her child, like her birth mother, would have been fated to conceive a child out of wedlock.

The adoptive parents in closed family systems reported that they saw their children's loyalty as

essential for their own well-being. They reported feeling betrayed by the reunion. They characterized the adoptee as "in the middle" because, as they saw it, he or she "must choose." It was as if the child could have only one key relationship in his or her life, and the reunion meant that the relationship with the adoptive parent must be severed. These families expressed various emotions: "feeling hurt"; "rejected"; "my rights have been violated"; "we struggled to keep him alive. I'm jealous of everything she [the birth mother] gets from him."

Although her own relationship to her son had not changed as a consequence of his making contact with his birth mother, one adoptive mother said that she would not adopt again. Another adoptive mother said it was she who had helped her child learn more about her origins, but she was appalled that it led her child to search and have a reunion. When adopted children acted on their need to know more about their origins, adoptive parents often felt this indicated that they had failed as parents. They saw the adoptees' behavior as being disloyal to them. One parent noted that her child was "impulsive and unfeeling just like her birth mother." Now that she knew where the daughter got these qualities, she reported, she had no hope of any ongoing relationship with her adopted daughter.

**Divided Family System.** A second type of family reaction was reflected in families where one parent was accepting and supportive but the other parent rejected the idea of a reunion. Birth parents perceived adoptees in this kind of family as having a good deal of conflict. Many adoptees in divided families reported that their parents encouraged them to be careful as if to protect them from being hurt. But adoptees felt that the advice was used to deter them in their search or reunion. The primary characteristic of these divided families was suspicion. Energy was spent trying to dissuade the adoptee from searching or having a reunion with the goal of containing any conflict in the family. One father told his son that he was killing his mother by his reunion activity—that his birth mother could not love him as they did. The son retreated after the initial reunion to pacify them.

However, most adoptees in divided family systems minimized conflict with their adoptive parents by talking very little about their search for their birth parent. Tacit approval of one parent

may have been enough for them to continue, or they did not need approval at all. In the divided systems respondents were quite comfortable keeping their secret, a quality that distinguishes a divided system from a closed one; adoptees in closed systems seemed to have more internal conflict about the search. Most adoptees in divided family systems were older and no longer living at home. They were able to move between the two families with relative ease.

The adoptive parents did not report situations in which the spouses disagreed. Instead, they sometimes referred to their own divided feelings. Two sets of parents reported they were suspicious and felt uneasy about the idea of a reunion. They talked of feeling threatened and scared. One mother said, "I always knew she wanted to search. I made it very clear that I would not help her." Another mother talked of the shock she felt that her child's siblings (they were born to the same birth mother) could find their sister. These parents could not set aside their own feelings and fears and handled things by trying to ignore what was going on. They were not immediately rejecting, but their uneasiness became a stressor, and the reunion could not be discussed with them.

**Open Family System.** The third group of adoptive parents were readily identified as being open and supportive. Some birth parents reported that they developed close friendships with their child's adoptive parents. One birth mother reported that the adoptive family, in which there were three other adopted children, drove 200 miles to meet her. They were curious and interested in who she was. She said, "We were very comfortable with each other and . . . I can't restore the years I missed, but now our family has a whole group of new friends."

Adoptees talked about being encouraged by their adoptive parents, who were helpful to them as they searched and welcomed the birth parent when a reunion occurred. They also reported how happy their adoptive parents were for them. Even when interparental relationships did not develop, adoptive parents in an open system were not threatened by their children's contact with their birth parents. The family's open boundaries allowed people to move in and out with ease.

The adoptive parent in an open system saw his or her child's life as being enhanced by the opportunity for this new relationship and understood its impact on his or her own life as positive. One

mother saw the institution of adoption as "too bloodless." She thought that there was "no compassion for all the people involved." Another parent said that she always felt that her adopted child had two families and that the birth mother is her child's parent as well. This feeling did not in any way impede her closeness with her adopted child:

The bond between parent and child can never be broken! The need to know one another will always exist until they find each other! The nurturing of children comes from many sources (friends, relatives, schools, churches, and so forth) whether the child grows up with the birth parents or the adoptive parents. Every person has the right to decide about contact and reunion with birth parents.

An adoptive parent who became good friends with the birth mother observed, "I had some anxiety, but also trust. We are good friends (and she's like a favorite aunt to the adoptee). We have lots to tell each other. We have mutual respect, similar character traits."

These open parents were very clear that their children were not "theirs" in the sense that they owned them. They believed that the children would have many caring relationships that would not diminish the family relationships. One woman likened it to her relationship with her mother-in-law that was never competitive with her relationship to her own mother. Many of these parents reported that they were closer to their children in some ways after the reunion than they were before. Many adoptees, as well, reported a renewed closeness with their adoptive parents after a successful reunion.

A successful outcome for the adopted family is not guaranteed by the openness of the family system. In one case the adoptive mother reported that her 19-year-old daughter had gone to live with her newly divorced birth father. Both the birth mother and the adopted family were concerned about this arrangement, and although they supported reunions in general, they were upset about the lack of guidelines for the participants. The issue of guidelines was also addressed by parents of young children who had successful reunions. They reported that they had to create their own guidelines for maintaining a relationship with the birth mother.

What was common to all these parents was that they did not see their child's wish for a

reunion as a reflection of failure. They did not feel that their self-esteem or self-worth as parents was dependent on their child's behavior.

### Discussion

The typology of family systems suggested here seems to distinguish the adoptive families. When the family system experienced insurmountable conflict around the reunion, the system was more likely to be closed. When the adoptee could act nonetheless, the system could be seen as divided. This typology facilitates an understanding of adoptive families' reactions to a reunion of their children with their birth parents.

The different ways in which these families reacted to their child's birth parents also seem to reflect how these families view the parent-child relationship. Many of the parents in the closed or divided system needed their children to act in a certain way for the parent to feel competent. Is their reaction a result of a psychological need, or can it be understood as one consequence of the way the adoption system is structured?

We can try to explain these differences by identifying various characteristics in their situations that distinguish one family from another (Blum, 1983). However, it may be more productive to look beyond the individuals involved to the way the institution of adoption is constructed and the way this influences the range of possible parent-child relationships.

In traditional closed adoption, parents are subject to close scrutiny by agency personnel to see if they are "good enough" to assume the responsibility of caring for the child. The process can be seen as an auction in which the "best" bidder gets the child. This process reinforces any tendency the adoptive parents may have to see the child as property and thus to maintain themselves as a closed system. They are not encouraged to acknowledge the child's origins, except in a vague, undefined manner. They are not asked to see how their own needs and losses may affect their expectations of this child. There is little discussion of diversity in how families originate or in how they will develop into a cohesive unit. Both the social and the legal systems promote and support the idea that adoptive families and families into which

children are born are the same. Parents are not encouraged to acknowledge and see as legitimate the differences that occur in families as a result of how the family originates.

One consequence of this failure is to make the family boundaries inviolate, often isolating the family. The focus on making the adoptive family like all other families reinforces the tendency in this society to want people to stand on their own. We do not prepare people to accept a world in which they are part of an extended network of care and connection. Society has constructed the sense of the family from a theoretical model that focuses on individuation and autonomy, emphasizing practices that protect the family's integrity and privacy. In this framework, to be considered mature, individuals must stand on

their own, and each family, following the metaphor, must stand on its own, as if all members' needs will be met in this one context. A child can only belong to one mother and to one father. This system reinforces the tendency in some families to be closed.

The issues of the child as property and the requirement of only one set of parents to

ensure mental health is being challenged as more and more children grow up in single-parent households, in families in which there is joint custody or active visitation, and in blended families. In such situations children are parented in various ways by many people.

We need to extend to the adoptive family a broadened view of the family and its origins, so that it would not be anomalous for an adopted child to have several nurturing relationships of various intensities, each playing a different part in the child's life. It is also important to recognize that the child's needs for nurturing change over time as he or she matures and develops. This expanded view of the adoptive family can be seen as very threatening if the traditional adoption structure is the only acceptable model valued by society. We need to expand our visions of the adoptive family to account for diversity and to move from a closed concept of the nuclear adoptive family to one that encompasses a web of relationships that sustains growth and approximates an open family system.

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The adoptive family should have other models to follow, and intervention should promote openness and flexibility. If such families are helped to understand their difference from the beginning, they may not be as threatened by or uncomfortable with their child's knowing his or her birth parents or being connected to another family in whatever way seems appropriate for the child, the adoptive parents, and the birth parents. Thus, the parameters of the adoptive family would be safeguarded, and the birth parent would not intrude inappropriately. In the words of an adoptive mother,

While the search and resulting warm reunion was wholly supported by the family and the majority of our friends, there were a few who thought we had "lost our minds" to support and help in the search. Our reply was always the same: If one is secure in the love of a child, adopted or natural, and his or hers for you, there need be no fear or hesitation to support. We would do it again and will continue giving our support. ■

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