Reunions of Adoptees who have Met Both Birth Parents: Post-Reunion Relationships and Factors that Facilitate and Hinder the Reunion Process

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Abstract

Eighteen adoptees who had met both their birth mothers and birth fathers were surveyed in order to determine (a) the types of post-reunion relationships they developed with each birth parent and (b) the factors that facilitated or hindered their reunions. While adoptees were more likely to develop a personal rather than non-personal relationship with birth mothers, relationships with birth fathers were more evenly divided between personal and non-personal relationships. Thematic analysis revealed some similarities in the factors that influence reunions with each birth parent (e.g., birth parent characteristics, support from others), though some differences also emerged (e.g., reactions to pregnancy and relinquishment). Issues of kinship, identity, and family structure are discussed, along with implications for counseling.

(Keywords: adoption, adoptees, birth mothers, birth fathers, birth parents, reunions, counseling)

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With the opening of adoption records and a movement towards greater openness in adoption in many countries, there has been a commensurate increase in the number of reunions between birth parents and their relinquished children. Although birth mothers and birth fathers contribute equally to the conception of their relinquished child, most research has focused on reunions between adoptees and their birth mothers. Indeed, Miall and March (2005a) note that, "the use of neutral terms such as *birth parent* in discussions of adoption masks the fact that birth mothers, not birth fathers, are the persons most often referred to in adoption research, policy, and practice" (p. 544). It is crucial for researchers and practitioners to consider reunions with each birth parent in order to better understand (a) the importance of biological connections for adoptees' identity development, (b) the complex family structures inherent in reunion, and (c) possible differences in reunion experiences that could impact on service delivery. Each of these issues is discussed below.

While views of kinship relationships have been challenged in recent years to accommodate a variety of family forms and structures (e.g., open adoption, stepfamilies, gay marriage, donor-assisted conception), the dominant western view of kinship is still grounded in biological relatedness (Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler, & Lash Esau, 2000; Modell, 1994). As Grotevant et al. note, this can put "adopted persons in an awkward position, since their familial ties are grounded in social relations rather than biology" (p. 381).   In particular, identity development for adopted persons does not only involve the usual challenges facing their non-adopted peers, but the additional task of integrating their social and biological worlds (Grotevant, 1997; Passmore, 2004; Passmore, Fogarty, Bourke, & Baker-Evans, 2005). While there is some evidence that adoptees may initially focus on reuniting with their birth mothers (Trinder, Feast, & Howe, 2004), many adopted persons are also interested in meeting their birth fathers (e.g., Clapton, 2003; Passmore & Chipuer, 2009). Reunions provide the best avenue for gaining information about both birth parents that can then be integrated into the adopted person's sense of self.

A second important reason for including both birth parents in reunion research is to elucidate factors that impact on the outcomes of changing family structures.   From a family systems theory perspective, each member of the family impacts on the family system as a whole. As research with stepfamilies has shown, however, boundary ambiguity can arise because it is not always clear who is in the family and who is not (Stewart, 2005). This may also be true of extended family networks that arise following adopted persons' contact with birth relatives. As the extended family structure changes to incorporate both adoptive and biological family networks, all members of the adoption triangle are likely to experience benefits and challenges. For example, interview data obtained from reunited adoptees in a separate phase of our research indicated that larger family networks provided opportunities for positive interactions between adoptive and birth families and gave adopted persons a more extensive support network (Foulstone, Feeney, & Passmore, 2006). However, the larger family networks gained at reunion could also be problematic, with some adoptees reporting negative interactions between adoptive and birth families, and difficulties in adapting to a new family or negotiating family roles. This could be further complicated in situation where relationships are strained between the birth mother and birth father and/or their families. By investigating reunions with both birth parents, researchers can gain a greater understanding of the changes inherent in extended family systems post-reunion and the factors that promote adjustment to these changes.

Third, as noted earlier, birth mothers have typically been the focus of adoption research and practice. While some similarities would be expected in reunions with each birth parent, it would be naive to assume that no differences would emerge. Traditional parenting roles are linked to gender, with mothers often being perceived as the nurturing caregivers and fathers being the providers. Indeed, research indicates that non-traditional parents (i.e., mothers employed full-time outside the home and stay-at-home fathers) are viewed more negatively than their traditional counterparts (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2005). Further, in the context of the adoption of relinquished children, it has often been assumed that the bond with the birth mother has unique emotional significance (e.g., Verrier, 1993), while birth fathers may be seen as uncaring and rejecting (e.g., Sachdev, 1991). Hence, it is possible that adoptees' perceptions of their birth parents, and of the relationships that develop post-reunion, may differ according to the parents' gender. It is essential that practitioners are aware of possible differences in expectations of relationships with birth mothers and fathers so that they can provide the best service for all members of the adoption triangle.

Given the importance of investigating reunions with each birth parent, the current study focuses on a group of adult adoptees that had met both their birth mother and their birth father. The main research questions focused on the types of relationships adoptees formed with each birth parent and the factors associated with adoptees' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their reunion experiences with each birth parent. Research pertaining to each of these questions is presented in the following section.

Types of Relationships

As reunions between adoptees and birth parents are relatively recent phenomena, there are few rules or maps to guide participants in developing post-reunion relationships (Gladstone & Westhues, 1998; Modell, 1997). In an Australian study of long-term reunions, Affleck and Steed (2001) conducted a thematic analysis on interview data collected from 10 adoptees and 10 birth mothers, only two of whom were mother-daughter dyads. While nine of the birth mothers and five of the adoptees were actively pursuing a mother-child relationship at the time of the study, it was difficult for some to actually conceptualize what would be involved in such a relationship model. Indeed, the definition of mother is not straightforward, because the adoptee's biological mother is not the one who has performed the ongoing mothering role (Affleck & Steed, 2001).

As part of a larger qualitative study on adoption kinship, Modell (1997) interviewed 16 adoptees who had reunited with a birth parent and 10 birth mothers and one birth father who had reunited with their relinquished child. She found that adoptees and birth parents with the longest-lasting reunions had generally tried a parent-child relationship model. However, such a model was misleading because it "did not fit the life stages of the 'child' and the 'parent', or (often) their generational closeness, or their pasts, which were empty of each other" (p. 57). Such models were often modified to resemble an extended family relationship. Some participants, particularly adoptees, were more likely to embrace a friendship model for the emerging relationship. Other researchers have also found that adoptees are more likely to describe their relationships with their birth mothers as a friendship rather than a parent-child relationship (Sachdev, 1992; Triseliotis, Feast, & Kyle, 2005).

Models of relationships with birth fathers are perhaps even more difficult to define. As part of a larger Australian adoption study that involved both qualitative and quantitative data, Passmore and Chipuer (2009) interviewed adoptees about their reunion experiences. None of the participants described their relationships with their birth fathers as that of father-child, with some specifically noting that their birth father could not fill the role of their adoptive father. Rather, adoptees' descriptions of their post-reunion relationships with birth

fathers ranged from close friendships to distant relative to non-existent. These results must be regarded with caution due to the small sample size. However, they are generally consistent with Clapton's (2003) study of Scottish and English birth fathers. Most of the birth fathers interviewed in that study also recognized the adoptive father as their child's "Dad", though Clapton noted that the roles of the social father (i.e., adoptive father) and the biological father did tend to converge in some of the ongoing reunion relationships. Conversely, birth fathers in Triseliotis et al.'s (2005) study were about evenly divided in describing their initial relationship with their daughters as parental or friendship. However, as the reunion progressed, they were more likely to describe the relationship as a friendship than a father-daughter relationship. Differences in findings across studies may be due to the fact that there were proportionally more searching birth fathers in Clapton's study than the one conducted by Triseliotis et al. More research is needed to clarify the types of relationships adoptees develop with their birth parents post-reunion, and especially whether adoptees develop different types of relationships with birth mothers compared to birth fathers.

Factors that Facilitate and Hinder Positive Reunion Outcomes

Research on reunions between adoptees and birth mothers (e.g, Affleck & Steed, 2001; Müller, Gibbs, & Ariely, 2003) or with birth relatives in general (e.g., Gladstone & Westhues, 1998) has highlighted a number of factors that can affect the outcome of reunions. These include the responsiveness of the birth parent, perceived similarities or differences between adoptees and birth parents, a sense of bonding or connectedness or the lack thereof, the degree of secrecy and empathy, prior expectations, boundary issues or difficulties in the development of emerging relationships, the support of the adoptive parents, and practical considerations such as time and geographical distance (Affleck & Steed, 2001; Gladstone & Westhues, 1998; Howe & Feast, 2003; Müller et al., 2003; Triseliotis et al., 2005).

Studies of reunions with birth fathers have identified some similar factors. For example, Passmore and Chipuer (2009) found that the outcome of such reunions was affected by birth fathers' attributes and behaviors (e.g., personality, similarities or differences with adoptee, behavior towards adoptee, communication style); the attributes of adopted persons (e.g., personality and expectations); and the behaviour of others, including adoptive parents. However, some potential differences in reunions with birth mothers and birth fathers have also been reported. Howe and Feast (2003) found that British adoptees were less likely to remain in contact with their birth fathers than their birth mothers over time, though many did still have some contact. This is perhaps ironic in view of Triseliotis et al.'s (2005) findings that "birth fathers appeared to give greater importance to the possibility of developing a relationship with their sons and daughters" compared to birth mothers, though these differences were smaller if all expectations were taken into account rather than just the main ones (p. 325).

Passmore and Chipuer (2009) also found that the birth father's treatment of the birth mother and his reactions to the pregnancy and relinquishment could affect adoptees' perceptions of their reunions with him. This finding may relate to attitudes to birth fathers in general. Sachdev (1991) found that adopted people, adoptive parents, and birth mothers were all less favorable towards the release of identifying information to birth fathers than birth mothers. Adoptees were also more likely to express positive feelings regarding their birth mothers than their birth fathers. Indeed, Sachdev argued that birth fathers are often seen in stereotypical ways, either as cads who sexually exploited an innocent young girl, or as "phantom fathers" who reneged on their responsibilities to care for mother and child. Although most birth fathers do not fit these stereotypes (Cicchini, 1993; Clapton, 2003; Nankervis, 1991; Passmore & Coles, 2008), negative attitudes towards birth fathers could

affect adoptees' desire for contact and the progress of reunions when contact does occur. Others may have mixed feelings about their birth fathers. While there are practical reasons why most adoptees initially set out to find their birth mothers (e.g., lack of information about the birth father; Trinder et al., 2004), it could also reflect the salience of the bond between mother and child. After all, the birth mother carried the baby for nine months and may also have had some brief interaction with the child following birth (Trinder et al.). However, the importance of the mother-child bond should not negate the fact that birth fathers are equal players in the adoption scenario.

Summary and Research Questions

While adopted persons' reunions with their birth mothers and birth fathers would be similar in many ways, differences in the primacy of the mothering role and stereotyped attitudes towards birth fathers may also bring about some differences. Few studies have considered reunions with birth mothers and birth fathers separately. The series of studies conducted by Howe, Feast, Triseliotis and their colleagues are exceptions (Howe & Feast, 2003; Trinder, Feast, & Howe, 2004; Triseliotis, Feast, & Kyle, 2005). Although these studies provide some comparisons of birth parent experiences and offer valuable insights into various aspects of reunions, they do not directly compare adoptees' perceptions of their reunions with each birth parent, nor do they look specifically at themes that facilitate or hinder reunions with each birth parent. The current study builds on this work by focusing on a group of adoptees who had each met both their birth mother and birth father, thus allowing direct comparisons to be made. To our knowledge, this is the first published study in which all participants had met both their birth mother and their birth father. Unlike a number of previous reunion studies that have mainly used participants drawn from adoption registers or agencies (e.g., Gladstone & Westhues, 1998; Howe & Feast, 2003; Müller et al., 2003; Triseliotis et al., 2005), the current study employed a broader cross-section of adoptees recruited through a variety of sources. We explored two main research questions: (a) what types of relationships do adoptees form with their birth parents post-reunion, and (b) what factors facilitate or hinder successful reunions with birth parents? Descriptive data were used to address the first question and thematic analysis was used to address the second. We expected that there would be some similarities in the emerging themes regarding reunions with birth mothers and birth fathers (e.g., the behavior of the birth parent towards the adoptee and perceived similarities and differences between the adoptee and the birth parent). However, we were particularly interested in possible differences that may emerge in post-reunion relationships and experiences with each birth parent. For example, adoptees' expectations of reunions with birth mothers and birth fathers may differ due to negative stereotypes or ambivalent attitudes towards birth fathers. Reactions to the pregnancy and relinquishment may also be more salient for reunions with birth fathers.

Method

Participants

Participants were 18 adult adoptees (15 females and 3 males) who had taken part in a larger study comparing 144 adoptees and 131 non-adoptees (see Feeney, Passmore, & Peterson, 2007 for more detail about the larger study). These 18 participants were chosen because they were the only ones who had met both their birth mother and their birth father. All participants were born in Australia, were of Anglo-Australian background, and had been adopted as infants. They ranged in age from 27 to 60 years, with a mean age of 36.61 years. At the time of the survey, 16 of the participants still had some ongoing contact with their birth

mothers and 13 participants still had some ongoing contact with their birth fathers.

Measures

As part of the larger study, participants completed a questionnaire booklet that included demographic information; items regarding their adoption, search, and reunion experiences; and a series of standardized questionnaires. Of most relevance to the current study are some questions that focused on participants' search and reunion experiences with each birth parent. Quantitative items included Likert scales on which participants rated their satisfaction with their initial reunion with each birth parent (from *1 = extremely dissatisfying* to *6 = extremely satisfying*) and their emotional closeness to each birth parent (from *1 = extremely distant* to *6 = extremely close*). They also indicated whether their relationship with each birth parent could best be described as a parent-child relationship, other family relationship, friendship, acquaintance, or stranger. Qualitative items included open-ended questions designed to clarify the ratings and/or provide opportunities for participants to give further information about their experiences (e.g., "Please explain why your initial reunion [with birth mother/birth father] was satisfying or dissatisfying). Answers to all open-ended items were typed verbatim prior to coding.

Procedure

Participants in the larger study were recruited via advertisements in the media, psychology classes, university newsletters, adoption support groups, flyers displayed in waiting rooms of doctors and counselors, and networks available to the researchers. Those who met the selection criteria (e.g., born in Australia, lived in intact family until the age of 16, adopted by non-relatives before the age of two years) were sent a cover letter, an informed consent form, the questionnaire, and a prepaid envelope for return of questionnaires.

Coding

Thematic analysis was used to identify factors that facilitate or hinder successful reunions with each birth parent (Joffe & Yardley, 2004). Separate files were made of all open-ended quotes that referred to reunions with either birth mothers or birth fathers. Each author then independently identified themes regarding the factors that facilitated or hindered reunions with each birth parent. Themes were also grouped into higher-order themes where possible. An inductive process was used, whereby we let themes emerge from the data rather than imposing pre-conceived categories (Patton, 2002). The authors then discussed their initial codes, using a progressive process whereby data were classified, compared, clarified, and refined (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002). Discussion and refinements continued until the authors reached consensus on all themes and sub-themes. The authors then compared the themes and sub-themes obtained for reunions with birth mothers and birth fathers to identify potential similarities and differences. Further discussion and revisions proceeded until the authors reached consensus on these similarities and differences.

Results

Types of Relationships that Develop Post-Reunion

As noted earlier, one questionnaire item asked participants to indicate how their relationship with each birth parent could best be described. Due to very small sample sizes in some cells, it was not possible to statistically analyze the data to determine whether adoptees experienced different types of relationships with birth mothers compared to birth fathers. However, some tentative observations can be made. Table 1 shows the frequencies of responses with regard to each birth parent. Each participant has been designated a letter from "a" to "r" so that their responses for each birth parent can be compared. Please note that two participants ("a" and "g'') indicated more than one type of relationship.

As shown in Table 1, a range of different types of relationships developed between adoptees and their birth parents post-reunion. Only 6 of the 18 participants indicated the same type of relationship for both their birth mother and their birth father. In cases where adoptees noted differences in the type of relationship they had with each parent, they seemed more likely to report a personal relationship with their birth mother rather than their birth father. For example, 14 participants indicated a family or friendship relationship with their birth mother rather than seeing her as merely an acquaintance or stranger ($n = 3$). Perceived relationships with birth fathers were more evenly divided between personal relationships (i.e., family or friendship; $n = 10$) and less personal relationships (i.e., acquaintance or stranger; $n = 8$). More participants developed a general family or friendship relationship with their birth parents ($n = 10$ for birth mothers and $n = 6$ for birth fathers) than a parent-child relationship ($n = 3$ for birth mothers and $n = 4$ for birth fathers). Interestingly, all three male participants viewed their birthfather as a stranger. This may not reflect a gender difference, however, as two of these adoptees said that they did not feel a connection with their birthfather or did not have much in common with him, while the other noted that his birthfather had a criminal record and had openly admitted to beating the birthmother and birth siblings. If these male participants had felt more of a connection with their birthfathers, the relationships may have progressed better.

Satisfaction and Emotional Closeness

Paired *t*-tests were conducted in order to determine whether there were differences in the extent to which participants were satisfied with their initial reunion with each birth parent and the extent to which they currently felt emotionally close to each birth parent. No significant differences were found for satisfaction with reunions with birth mothers ($M = 5.06$) and birth fathers ($M = 4.47$), $t (16) = 1.25, p > .05$; or for closeness to birth mothers ($M = 4.40$) and birth fathers ($M = 3.67$), $t (15) = 1.13, p > .05$. All mean scores were in the moderate to high range. Although there were no significant differences in participants' mean ratings of their birth mothers and birth fathers, there may be qualitative differences in the nature of the reunions with each birth parent. This issue is explored next.

Factors Affecting Adoptees' Perceptions of their Reunions with Birth Parents

Before presenting the findings regarding factors that facilitate or hinder reunions with birth parents, a caveat should be noted. As only questionnaire data were used, we did not have the opportunity to ask participants further about their specific responses to the open-ended items. Therefore, just because a participant did not mention a particular theme with regard to either their birth mother or their birth father, it does not necessarily mean that that

theme would not have arisen during further questioning. Thus, the frequencies noted in Tables 2 and 3 may under-estimate the importance of some themes.

Factors that Facilitate Reunions With Birth Parents

Table 2 summarizes the themes and sub-themes that facilitate reunions with each birth parent. Five themes facilitated reunions with both birth mothers and birth fathers: (a) positive birth parent characteristics (e.g., loving, open, interested in grandchildren); (b) similarities between adoptees and birth parents; (c) resolution of identity issues (e.g., gaining of information); (d) supportive behaviour from others (e.g., adoptive family, birth parent's spouse, siblings, extended family); and (e) resolution of expectations. Apparent differences between the two birth parents also emerged. For example, "positive adoptee characteristics" and "positive reunion process" were themes that facilitated reunions for birth mothers, but not birth fathers. However, it seems unlikely that these themes would never arise in birth father reunions; with a larger sample size and/or follow-up interviews aimed at clarifying the questionnaire responses, this apparent difference may disappear. More likely differences are as follows.

While the gaining of information was important for identity resolution in both types of reunions (e.g., obtaining family history, having questions answered, gaining self-knowledge), four of the female participants also described how the knowledge they gained from their reunions with their birth mothers helped them to feel as if they fitted in or belonged. As one woman noted:

> I was held close by a parent for the first time in my memory. We sat down together for a week talking deeply. I learned her story, my story, family stories and history. I understood aspects of self that were no longer considered strange (as by adoptive family) but just a part of me. I saw myself in mother and found myself in her—my intelligence, love of history, politics, philosophy and spiritual life, my face, my social conscience—all the things that had separated me from my adoptive family. I felt understood for the first time in my life.

Another woman had a similar experience:

> There were so many questions that I could finally get answers to. The most satisfying thing was that the huge hole or gap in my heart had finally been filled. I did actually come from somewhere (sometimes I used to feel like an alien or something).

It is not surprising that female adoptees' sense of identity would be more intensified when meeting their birth mothers compared to their birth fathers, due to the connection they might feel with the woman who carried them in utero (Verrier, 1993). However, recent research also shows that many birth fathers experience a psychological connection or bond with their relinquished child (Clapton, 2003). If more male adoptees had been surveyed, some of them may have identified closely with their birth fathers. In view of the relatively small number of responses, further research is needed to determine whether "fitting in" is more a feature of identity resolution with regard to reunions with birth mothers rather than birth fathers.

While resolution of expectations was important for reunions with both birth parents, another possible difference emerged in the sub-themes. Specifically, positive reunions with birth mothers were associated with having expectations fulfilled or exceeded, while a broader range of expectations was associated with successful birth father reunions. While some participants indicated that their expectations for their reunion with their birth fathers had been

fulfilled, others mentioned the importance of having no or low expectations. This may relate to the fact that negative attitudes are more often directed at birth fathers than birth mothers (e.g., Sachdev, 1991). Perhaps having fewer expectations of reunions with birth fathers helps buffer adopted persons from disappointment and also helps them to maintain an open mind about their birth fathers, both of which would be conducive to better reunion experiences without undue pressure. As one woman explained, "my birth father has very few expectations of me or our relationship. This allows us to catch up a couple of times a year and maintain a low-pressure friendship".

Factors that Hinder Reunions With Birth Parents

Table 3 summarizes the themes and sub-themes that hinder reunions with birth mothers and birth fathers. Four themes were common to reunions with both birth parents: (a) negative birth parent characteristics (e.g., unfavorable personality or behavior, secrecy or dishonesty); (b) personality differences between the adoptee and birth parent; (c) barriers to the reunion process; and (d) unsupportive behavior of others.

As expected, reactions towards the pregnancy and relinquishment seemed to influence reunions with birth fathers rather than birth mothers. Specifically, four participants noted that their birth fathers had denied paternity and/or had not taken responsibility for the mother or child during the period of pregnancy and relinquishment. Unlike the birth mother, who cannot deny that she is pregnant nor avoid making a decision about the future of her child, birth fathers can deny involvement or responsibility. Understandably, adoptees are less favorable towards such birth fathers.

Four participants also noted that their birth mothers had engaged in obstructive behaviors, such as refusing to answer questions about the birth father or blocking contact with siblings, while none of the participants specifically mentioned obstructive behavior with regard to birth fathers. As birth fathers' names often do not appear on adoptees' birth certificates, birth mothers are often the first birth relative contacted by adoptees (Coles, 2004; Trinder et al., 2004). Thus, the birth mother can have a "gatekeeper" role, in that she is sometimes the only means by which the adoptee can find out about the birth father. If the birth mother chooses not to share that information, she can block contact with the birth father. While it may not be easy for birth mothers to share such information, especially if the birth father had not supported her at the time of the pregnancy and relinquishment, such obstructive behavior may be detrimental to her ongoing relationship with her son or daughter.

Another potential difference relating to birth mother reunions was that three participants noted the effects of inappropriate expectations by either themselves or their birth mothers. For example, one adoptee "had her on a pedestal for so many years and she totally shattered any hopes for a relationship". Two participants also noted difficulties that arose when they had different expectations from their birth mothers. For example, one adoptee had only been looking for information, but "there was a lot of pressure upon [her] as the immediate and extended family welcomed back their 'missing daughter / granddaughter / niece / cousin' etc". Her birth mother tried very hard to make up for her "lost childhood", even buying her gifts such as dolls and children's toys, though the adoptee was in her 20s at the time. She also felt pressured to establish a relationship with her siblings. As she noted:

> My birth mother introduced us as 'sisters' from the beginning, which unfortunately
> created a false and unrealistic expectation upon our relationship. Initially I worked
> hard to create a 'sisterly' bond – however, over time I realized that I really didn't feel
> that bond and have been unable to maintain the relationships on this level. Again the
> relationship has been hindered by relationship pressure and expectations.

In view of the small sample size, it would be premature to assume that inappropriate expectations could not also occur in birth father reunions. However, if adoptees generally have higher expectations of their reunions with birth mothers, perhaps due to the primacy of the mother-child bond (Verrier, 1993), then the effect of inappropriate expectations may be more critical in reunions with birth mothers. This suggestion awaits further research.

Discussion

Type of Relationships that Develop Post-Reunion

The first research question examined the types of relationships adoptees develop with their birth mothers and birth fathers. Interestingly, only 6 of the 18 participants reported the same type of relationship for their birth mother and birth father (e.g., friendship). As much of the birth parent literature actually refers to the birth mother (Miall & March, 2005a), it is important for researchers and practitioners to recognize that the reunion experience and subsequent relationship development will not necessarily be the same when meeting birth mothers compared to birth fathers.

Although a variety of responses was noted for reunions with each birth parent, ranging from parent-child to stranger, it seems that most participants developed personal relationships (i.e., family relationships or friendships) with their birth mothers, rather than perceiving her as merely an acquaintance or a stranger. Conversely, relationships with birth fathers were more evenly divided between personal relationships and less personal relationships (i.e., acquaintance or stranger). This distinction between relationship types is important, because personal relationships play a unique role in terms of fulfilment and emotional bonding (Wright, 1999). One reason why adoptees were more likely to develop a personal rather than a non-personal relationship with their birth mothers may be that women are generally perceived as having more expressive characteristics that could facilitate relationship development (e.g., aware of others' feelings, emotional, affectionate; Spence & Buckner, 2000). Given that the majority of participants were also women, it is perhaps not surprising that personal relationships typically developed between adoptees and their birth mothers. From a psychodynamic perspective, adoptees may also feel an unconscious connection with their birth mothers as a result of bonding that had already begun in the womb (Verrier, 1993). While adoptees were more evenly divided in terms of whether they developed a personal relationship or not with their birth fathers, it should be remembered that many did establish personal relationships, with four participants describing it as a father-child relationship. For some adoptees, the relationships formed with their birth fathers were just as personal, and sometimes even more personal, than those established with their birth mothers. This contrasts with Passmore and Chipuer's (2009) findings, in that none of their female participants described their relationship with their birth fathers as that of father-child. However, that may have been an artefact of the small sample size in the previous study.

Similarities and Differences in Reunions with Birth Mothers and Birth Fathers

The second research question looked more specifically at the factors that facilitate or hinder reunions with each birth parent. As expected, there were some similarities across birth parents. Reunions with both birth parents were facilitated by positive characteristics of the birth parent (e.g., being loving and open), physical and personality similarities between the adoptee and birth parent, resolution of identity issues through the gaining of information, support from others (e.g., adoptive family and birth parents' family), and having expectations

fulfilled or exceeded. Moreover, reunions with both birth mothers and birth fathers were hindered by the birth parents' unfavorable personality or behavior, personality differences between adoptees and birth parents, and unsupportive behavior from others. Some of these themes overlap with those identified in previous research (e.g., Affleck & Steed, 2001; Gladstone & Westhues, 1998; Müller et al., 2003; Triseliotis et al., 2005). Moreover, the role of other parties to the reunion further confirms the potential challenges of extended family networks noted earlier.

A number of apparent differences also emerged regarding reunions with birth mothers and fathers. It was suggested earlier that reunions with both birth parents were important for adoptees' identity development, and this was indeed borne out by the current findings. However, there was also some evidence that birth mother reunions may be more important for a sense of belonging for some adoptees. This may fit with previous suggestions that the bond between birth mother and child has unique emotional significance (Verrier, 1993), or may simply reflect the gender bias in the current study such that there were more female-female dyads than female-male dyads. Further research is needed to explore this possibility. Successful reunions with birth mothers also tended to be associated with the fulfilment of expectations, while less successful reunions were associated with inappropriate expectations. Conversely, successful reunions with birth fathers were associated with a broader range of expectations. There were some indications that birth fathers' negative reactions to the pregnancy and relinquishment could adversely affect adoptees' perceptions of the reunion, while obstructive behaviour by birth mothers could also be detrimental. Before discussing the implications of these findings, some strengths and limitations of the current study should be considered.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research

The main strength of the current study is that it is the first to focus on participants who have met both their birth mother and their birth father, thus allowing specific comparisons to be made. While many of the findings confirmed those of previous researchers (e.g., Affleck & Steed, 2001; Gladstone & Westhues, 1998; Passmore & Chipuer, 2009; Triseliotis et al., 2005), new information was gained regarding possible differences in adoptees' perceptions of their reunions with birth mothers and birth fathers (e.g., the "gatekeeper" role of the birth mother, the importance of issues surrounding the conception and relinquishment, expectations, and resolution of identity issues). Although the results of the current study shed light on possible similarities and differences in reunions with birth mothers and birth fathers, some limitations should also be noted.

In view of the relatively small sample size, especially for some themes and sub-themes, more research is needed to confirm and expand the themes identified in this study. A related issue is that the data may have been somewhat constrained by the questions asked. Single-item measures were used for satisfaction and closeness, thus limiting reliability and validity, and participants were only given five options for describing the relationship they had developed with each birth parent (e.g., friend, stranger). While these categories were based on the types of relationships found in previous studies, they did not allow for other descriptions that may have better described the relationships developed by some participants. Indeed, previous researchers have noted that it is often difficult to describe such relationships (e.g., Affleck & Steed, 2001). Although open-ended items were used to gain further information about adoptees' reunion experiences, they were mainly used to clarify respondent's answers to the quantitative items. While some participants wrote detailed answers, others gave short, simplistic responses. There were also some cases where it would have been helpful to clarify certain comments with the participants. In future research, it

would be beneficial to obtain richer data through in-depth interviews. Not only would this allow for clarification where necessary, but it would provide thick description which could further elucidate relevant themes.

As this study only considered adoptees' perspectives of their reunions, it is also possible that these views are not fully consistent with those of the birth parents. For example, many adoptees noted characteristics of their birth parents that facilitated or hindered their reunions, but few mentioned the influence of their own characteristics. As previous research indicates that members of the same adoption triad do not always concur in their perceptions of reunion experiences (Howe & Feast, 2003; Triseliotis et al., 2005), it would be beneficial for future research to include both adoptees' and birth parents' perspectives.

Finally, the current sample consisted of those who had been adopted as infants, by couples of the same ethnic group as themselves, during the era of closed adoption records. Thus, it is not clear whether results would generalize to other types of adoption scenarios (e.g., transracial, inter-country, or special needs adoptions; various forms of open adoption). More research is needed regarding the reunions of adoptees from these groups.

Implications for Counseling

The current results indicate that there are more similarities than differences in the reunion experiences that adoptees have with their birth mothers and birth fathers. Thus, much of the general birth parent literature, or literature referring specifically to reunions with birth mothers, would also be relevant to reunions with birth fathers (e.g., the importance of loving and open behavior by the birth parent, and the importance of both adoptees and birth parents having realistic expectations for the reunion). However, service providers also need to be aware of some potential differences.

As the birth mother is often the "gatekeeper" for information regarding the birth father, her refusal or reluctance to provide such information may be detrimental to her relationship with her child. Counselors could help birth mothers to understand the importance of adoptees having information about both of their birth parents. As this may be a difficult issue for birth mothers, especially in cases where she felt abandoned or mistreated by the birth father, great sensitivity is needed in helping birth mothers work through such issues. Adoptees also need to be patient and sensitive, realizing that issues surrounding the birth father may be difficult for their birth mothers.

Second, while many birth fathers do continue to care about the birth mother and child, some birth fathers were perceived as having mistreated or abandoned the birth mother. It is certainly possible that some birth fathers would have changed in the intervening years. Indeed, Cicchini (1993) found that many birth fathers develop a greater sense of responsibility for their relinquished child as they mature, which sometimes prompts them to search for their child. Thus, some birth fathers who may not have seemed to take an interest in the child at the time of the pregnancy or relinquishment may be very interested in meeting the adult child. Trinder et al. (2004) also caution that information about birth fathers in adoption records may not always be accurate. Counselors could help adoptees and birth mothers work through these issues. In cases where the birth father is still reluctant to acknowledge and/or have a reunion with his adult child, counselors could help him work through the main reasons for this reluctance. If he has not told his subsequent wife and children about the relinquished child, for example, he may have genuine fears about their reactions. Counselors could assist birth fathers in making choices about the consequences of revealing or not revealing such secrets, and the benefits and challenges of having a reunion.

Although adoptees and birth parents are the main participants in the reunion, the results also confirm the importance of the support, or lack of support, of other people (e.g.,

adoptive parents, siblings, birth parents' spouse). This highlights the importance of taking a family systems view of reunions. Not only can other people influence adoptees' perceptions of their search and reunion experiences, but reunions between adoptees and birth parents can also have an impact on the broader family network. Indeed, this can be an emotional time for other family members, as they may have their own fears or concerns regarding the reunion. Unfortunately, counselors have not always been sensitive to such needs (Petta & Steed, 2005), and this should be redressed in the future.

Conclusion

This study has identified possible similarities and differences in the types of post-reunion relationships adoptees develop with each birth parent and the factors that facilitate or hinder the reunion process. While more similarities than differences were found, some themes did seem more important for reunions with one birth parent rather than the other. More research is needed to further clarify, evaluate, and extend the themes identified in the current study. As more evidence is gained regarding the similarities and differences inherent in reunions with each birth parent, adoption counselors and service providers will be in a better position to assist all members of the adoption triangle.

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Table 1
Types of Relationships Established with Birth Parents

_____

	Birth mother	Birth father
Parent-child	a* b c	a b g* i
Other family relationship	d e f g* h i j	d h q
Friendship	a* g* k l m	g* j m p
Between friend and acquaintance	n	__
Acquaintance	o p	e f k l
Stranger	q	c n o r
Missing	r	__

_____

Note. Different participants are designated by different letters. Male participants are designated c, n, and r.

* Indicates participants who chose more than one type of relationship.

Table 2
Factors that Facilitate Reunions with Birth Mothers and Birth Fathers

Facilitating Reunions with Birth Mothers	*Facilitating Reunions with Birth Fathers*
Positive BM characteristics (11) • Loving (9) • Open (5) • Interested in grandchildren (2) • Other (1) Similarities between adoptee and BM (8) • Physical similarities (3) • Personality similarities (7) Resolution of identity issues (7) • Gaining information (6) • Feelings of belonging (4) Supportive behavior from others (7) • Adoptive family (3) • Birth mother's husband (4) • Siblings (3) • Extended family (3) Resolution of Expectations (3) • Fulfilled or exceeded (3) Positive adoptee characteristics (2) • Maturity (1) • Non-blaming (1) Positive reunion process (3) • Right type of contact (2) • Mediator helpful (1)	Positive BF characteristics (9) • Loving (8) • Open (5) • Interested in grandchildren (1) Similarities between adoptee and BF (7) • Physical similarities (2) • Personality similarities (6) Resolution of identity issues (3) • Gaining information (3) Supportive behavior from others (5) • Adoptive family (1) • Birth father's wife (1) • Siblings (1) • Birth father's family (3) • Birth mother (1) Resolution of Expectations (9) • Fulfilled or exceeded (2) • Similar expectations (2) • Adjusted expectations (1) • No birth father expectations (2) • No or low adoptee expectations (3)

Note. Numbers in parentheses represent the number of participants who mentioned that theme or sub-theme. As the sub-themes were not necessarily mutually exclusive, frequencies for sub-themes do not always sum to the frequency for the overarching theme.

Table 3
Factors that Hinder Reunions with Birth Mothers and Birth Fathers

Hindering Reunions with Birth Mothers	*Hindering Reunions with Birth Fathers*
Negative birth mother characteristics (5) • Unfavorable personality or behavior (3) • Secretive/dishonest (1) • Obstructive behavior (4) Personality differences (1) Barriers to reunion process (7) • Problems with initial reunion (2) • Unresolved emotional issues (5) • Geographical distance (3) Unsupportive behavior from others (1) Inappropriate expectations (3) • Adoptee's expectations too high (1) • Adoptee and BM had different expectations (2)	Negative birth father characteristics (8) • Unfavorable personality or behavior (4) • Secretive/dishonest (4) • Denied paternity or responsibility (4) • No attention to grandchildren (1) Personality differences (4) Barriers to reunion process (1) • Problems with initial reunion (1) Unsupportive behavior from others (2)

Note. Numbers in parentheses represent the number of participants who mentioned that theme or sub-theme. As the sub-themes were not necessarily mutually exclusive, frequencies for sub-themes do not always sum to the frequency for the overarching theme.