FAMILY MEMBERSHIP IN POST-REUNION ADOPTION NARRATIVES

Julee Browning[1]
Grant Duncan
Massey University Albany

Abstract

This article reports original research conducted with 20 adoptees, adopted under closed-stranger protocols, who have been experiencing regular post-reunion contact with their birth families for more than 10 years. It expands on earlier research that focused on the search, reunion and immediate post-reunion stages. Drawing upon in-depth interviews, it examines the long-term experiences of adoptees in post-reunion. It examines the themes of the mothering role, family obligation and family membership to uncover how adoptees navigate their family membership within and between two families (adoptive and birth family). This study is informed by the thoughts, feelings and observations of the participants, in their own words, to convey a deeper understanding of their experiences. The findings indicate that long-term reunited relationships have no predictable pathways and are approached with varying levels of ambivalence and emotional strain; that no fixed pattern of family arrangements and relational boundaries emerges; and that the adoptive mother generally retains the primary role of "mother". While closed-stranger adoptions and the subsequent reunions may eventually cease, this research may assist in understanding the issues surrounding the reunion between gamete (egg and sperm) donors and their offspring in the future.

INTRODUCTION

It is now two decades since the Adult Information Act 1985 permitted identifying information to be disclosed to adopted people about their birth parents and vice versa. A considerable number (31,247) of adoptees had, by 2004, made application for such

information (Griffith 2004[2]), and many of these applicants have since been reunited with birth parents and/or birth-family members[3] (especially birth mothers) (Kennard 1991). Many have also gone on to form long-term post-reunion relationships with these birth parents and their wider family groups. This article reports on the experiences of adoptees who have been in post-reunion relationships with birth-family members for 10 years or more. It therefore gives some indications of the long-term qualitative outcomes of enduring post-reunion relationships.

The Adoption Act 1955 was based on closed-stranger adoption. Frequently, out-of-wedlock pregnancies were a cause for family shame, and newborn babies were relinquished for adoption in secrecy. Adoption was usually facilitated by the state, no exchange of identifying information occurred between the birth mother and the adoptive parents, and children were raised in ignorance of the identities of birth parents. It was assumed that children would bond with the adoptive mother and, placed in a wholesome environment, they would adapt to that environment as a family member (Griffith 1997:9). This practice was justified theoretically on the assumption that a child's development is largely determined by the environment (Bowlby 1951, 1953, 1969, Lorenz 1961), and also on psychodynamic theories about the "unsuitability" or emotional needs of women who become pregnant out of wedlock (Griffith 1997, Else 1991, Rowe 1959). The preference was therefore towards a "complete break", and the 1955 Act provided the mechanism for this to occur legally.

Since the 1950s, social attitudes towards out-of-wedlock births have changed dramatically, and many children who were adopted under the closed-stranger system grew up with a desire to know who their "blood" kin were. Policy and legislation moved in favour of adopted people's right to know their birth origins. Following the passage of the 1985 Act, a large number of adopted people made application for information (3,896 in 1986). Application numbers then settled down to a steady stream of adoptee applicants (932 in 2004) (Griffith 2004), and it seems likely that eventually applications will decline to minimal numbers.[4]

The Adoption Information and Services Unit of the Child, Youth and Family Service administers applications and provides identifying information under the 1985 Act.

---

2   Statistical information quoted from Griffith 2004 is unpublished data received directly from Keith Griffith and has no page numbers. The data is planned for publication towards the end of 2005.

3   "Birth mother" or "birth father" acknowledges the reproductive relationship, and is used here in the absence of a better term to describe the relationship. Also, this was the preferred usage of many of the participants in this study. "Mother" and "father" are used to refer to the adoptive parents, and "birth mother" and "birth father" to refer to the biological parents. For continuity, the adjective "birth" also appears when describing biologically related siblings, grandparents and other biological relatives.

4   By the end of 2004 a total 31,353 adoptees and 8,695 birth parents had made application to Child, Youth and Family, seeking identifying information (Griffith 2004).

Adoptees who are applicants (born prior to 1986) are required by the 1985 Act to undergo counselling prior to receiving any information – though this requirement is not placed upon birth-parent applicants or adoptees adopted after 26 February 1986. If the birth parent is the applicant the adopted child does not have to undergo counselling (Mullender 1991:133).

The process of reuniting adoptees and their birth parents has been the subject of considerable research inquiry in New Zealand and overseas.[5] However, there has been little research into the long-term outcomes or effects of reunion. Little is known about how the parties to the reunion bond or about the kind of family associations that may be formed. Modell (1997) looked at how the lack of a relationship script forces adoptees and birth families to apply elements from the models of other lasting reciprocal relationships: patronage, friendship, courtship and extended family ties (primarily those between aunt/uncle and niece/nephew). Howe and Feast (2001) observe that the desire for genetic connectedness is important, but suggest that this does not imply the desire for a relationship with birth parents, and that the affectional bonds formed in childhood with adoptive parents are strong and long-lasting.

Neither the Modell (1997) study nor the Howard and Feast (2001) study were based in New Zealand, and the length of time in reunion in their samples is on average about 10 years. New Zealand was one of the first countries to open records of closed-stranger adoption, and it was the first country to include applications from birth parents. Hence, studying reunions in New Zealand has the potential to provide insights into longer-term outcomes than was possible in the earlier studies. The participants in the present study of 20 adoptees experienced a range of time in reunion from 10 to 26 years[6] (16 years on average). Using qualitative methods, this study inquired into the degree to which adoptees immerse themselves in their birth families as family members.

The findings of this study provide insights into the issues that adoptees may face in a long-term reunion with their birth families. Such information could be of benefit to those who counsel or advise applicants in future. While closed adoptions are becoming rarer, the 1955 Act is still in effect and such adoptions still may occur, meaning that reunions will continue to be sought. Furthermore, the introduction of new fertility technologies, especially egg and sperm donation, will result in a new wave of people who seek to be united with their donor-parents, and similar emotional and social issues may arise.[7]

---

5   See Browning (2005) for references to this research literature.
6   Three of the participants had informally acquired identifying information prior to the 1985 Act: one responding to a newspaper advertisement and two using the Jigsaw network.
7   Unlike closed adoptions, however, the provision and eventual release of identifying information is mandatory for such donors after the child turns 18 (Devereux 2003:1).

The research findings also lead us to question those theories of family belonging that are based primarily on consanguineal ("blood") relationships – a view that is commonly expressed in the saying "blood is thicker than water". Malinowski's view was that the relationship between the cultural and the innate is such that kinship bonds are not purely a matter of biological relatedness:

> Social and cultural influences always endorse and emphasize the original individuality of the biological fact. These influences are so strong that in the case of adoption they may override the biological tie and substitute a cultural one for it. But statistically speaking, the biological ties are almost invariably merely reinforced, re-determined, and remolded by the cultural ones. (1930:137)

Malinowski thus asserts that adoption creates kinship where no biological relatedness exists – though this is viewed as an exception to the rule that "biological ties" are the basis of kinship.

Emile Durkheim drew a clear distinction between adoption and "normal kinship", but points out that the establishment of kinship is historically and culturally contingent: "Thus the nature of adoption has regularly varied [in European history] as the role which law and custom assigns to normal kinship has also varied" (Durkheim 1980:212). He concludes that kinship (even when based on "nature") is socially constructed rather than simply consanguineal.

The importance of both the biological and the sociocultural factors in defining and creating family bonds is also recognised in New Zealand law. The New Zealand Families Commission Act 2003 (section 10) uses the phrase "related by marriage, blood or adoption" as part of its definition of "family"; and the Children, Young Persons and their Families Act 1989 (section 2) defines the "family group" of a child or young person in a manner that may include biological or legal relationships, thereby including adoption.

Nonetheless, the difficulty of integrating the non-consanguineal relationships formed by adoptions into theories of kinship has caused some authors to characterise adoption in negative terms. Kressierer and Bryant (1996), for example, examined adoption as a deviant family form where the parent–child relationships lack the "legitimacy of consanguinity", have an "ambiguous linkage" and lack "community acceptance". Furthermore, they found the adoptive parent–child relationship to be "socially marginal and stigmatised". For these reasons, Kressierer and Bryant concluded that "deviance" is an appropriate term for adoptive families. Schneider suggests that, "there ought to be a clear cultural distinction between 'true' kinship and all other kinds of relationship" (1984:172) and that, "it is no accident that the assumption that 'blood is thicker than water' is fundamental to the study of kinship … it is an integral part of the

ideology of European culture" (1984:176). In Bernardes' view, "not only is biology considered the proper basis for family formation, but other forms of family formation and bonding consequently tend to be regarded as pathological and unworkable" (cited in Wegar 1997:41). Expanding upon Bernardes' argument, Riben states that "adoption is an absence of kinship" and defines kinship in terms of biological relatedness (cited in Wegar 1997:89).

These rather negative statements about adoption are based on the idea that consanguineal ties are the normative basis (outside of marriage ties) for defining kinship and family, and hence the adopted child does not develop a fully recognised family bond with the adoptive parents. If such views were to be taken literally, then one might hypothesise that the adopted child, upon reunion with a birth parent, would come to see this renewed relationship as the primary familial bond, thus replacing the relationship with the adoptive family. The present research tests this by inquiring into the experiences of adoptees who have enjoyed a long-term post-reunion association in adulthood with at least one birth parent.

RESEARCH OUTLINE

The purpose of the present research was to ask to what degree an adoptee immerses in their birth family as a family member after reunion. A qualitative approach was used in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of participants and the meanings that they attribute to their biologically related kin group. Participants were recruited through a newspaper advertisement. The sample consisted of 20 adoptees (four men and 16 women), ranging in age from 26 to 71 years[8] (the average age was 38 years), with 10 to 26 years having passed since initial reunion with at least one birth parent. Thirteen of the 20 participants had initiated the original contact.

One of the criteria for selection into the study was the maintenance of regular contact with at least one member of the birth family. Only one of the participants had not had contact with their birth mother, who had died prior to reunion. With respect to birth fathers:
• the identities of two birth fathers remained unknown
• two birth fathers had died prior to the adoptees' reunion with the birth mother
• five participants indicated no wish to contact the birth father
• four participants found both of their birth parents had become permanent couples
• the remaining seven participants located the birth father by other means.

---

8   One of the participants was born in 1933, prior to the Adoption Act 1955. From her perspective, the adoption had been "closed" as she was given no identifying information, and so she was included in the study.

Hence, the information in this study on relationships with birth mothers and their families is fuller and more consistent than for birth fathers. The frequencies of contacts between adoptees and birth-family members ranged quite considerably, from weekly to about five times per year. The types of contacts varied as well, including email, phone conversation, and face-to-face meetings.

One of the criteria for inclusion in the study was "European descent". Due to the quite distinct practices and concerns regarding adoptions among the Māori community (Metge 1995, Webster 1973), it was considered inappropriate to seek adoptees of Māori or Pacific descent for this project. However, similar research studies devoted to those communities would probably yield useful and interesting results. Nevertheless, three of the participants disclosed that they had some Pacific or Māori ancestry.

A semi-structured interview guide covered:
- obligations to the birth family (to attend family events, exchange gifts, etc.)
- how the birth relatives and the adoptee name one another
- inheritance
- the birth mother's mothering role towards the adoptee
- identification with the birth family, compared with the adoptive family.

Limitations

The scope of this study is therefore limited to the perspective of adoptees of European descent who have reunited for at least 10 years with at least one member of their birth family. Because little is known about the demographic characteristics of adoptees as a whole population, and given the sample size, no claims can be made about the representativeness of the sample, nor therefore about the generalisability of the findings reported below. The qualitative method was chosen for its ability to elicit lived experience in some depth, rather than to survey opinion on a larger scale. Given its purpose and sample, this research cannot tell us anything about adoptees who identify primarily with Māori or other non-European ethnicity, nor about the views of birth parents, nor about the experiences of those for whom an initial reunion did not result in a long-term association.

FINDINGS

One of the overriding features of the findings of this study is that there was no obvious, stereotypical pattern for adoptees in long-term reunion. The kinds of family bonds and obligations that arose were varied and individualised. Nevertheless, some common themes emerged.

None of the participants reported seeking out information on the birth family for the purpose of finding a "second" family. Often, the decision was driven by a deep-seated curiosity to discover "whom am I like". Hence, one male participant stated, "I was prepared for a meeting, a cup of coffee and a chat about life in general" (Quentin);[9] and a female participant said, "I wanted to know who I was and where I came from and that was basically it" (Marie). Any sense of family belonging that arose in the long term, therefore, was largely fortuitous and not particularly sought by the adoptees.[10]

The main common theme that dominates the reports from the participants is that the adoptive family remains the primary family, while the relationship with the birth family emerges as something like an extended family. Only one of the participants was an exception to this, in that he had come to see his birth parents as his primary parents. This outcome, however, was due to (in his own words) an "unsuccessful adoption", and the relationship with the birth mother was reported to be strained as well.

Obligations to the Birth Family

Although the birth family generally remained "secondary" to the abiding relatedness to the adoptive family, the nature and extent of involvement with, and the sense of obligation to, adoptees' birth families varied. The following quotes illustrate the range of adoptees' perceptions of their obligations to members of the birth family, mainly to the birth mother:

> "I feel an obligation to leave myself open and available to her and be as loving as possible, although there are times when I have to bite my tongue." (Jacinta)

---

9   During the preparation for this research, it was assumed that all participants would desire confidentiality. Ethics Committee approval was sought on that basis. All participants signed consent forms, and 18 chose a pseudonym to be used in the final report. Some chose the name that their birth mothers had originally given them. Two participants requested to use their real given names, however, pointing out that, in the past, secrecy about their identities had worked to their disadvantage. For these two participants, the approval of the Ethics Committee was renegotiated. Written consent was then obtained, allowing their real names to be used. None of the written reports of this research reveal which two names are "real", however.

10 The motives of birth mothers for reunion might be quite different, however.

"There isn't an obligation like I have with my [adoptive] parents, but certainly an obligation more like what I would have with a friend – a bit more than that I suppose." (Sonia)

"I do feel a bit obligated because I think the reason I go to see her is because I know how happy it makes her." (Natalie)

"I always felt my first obligation was to my adoptive family, but I knew I would be disappointing one mother on Christmas Day. We would always try to fit everyone in." (Jane)

"Obligation – yes absolutely. I think I feel obligated because I know how important it is to her. It's like I'm rejecting her if I don't nurture the relationship continuously." (Sandi)

"No, I don't think of it as obligation. But I do like to keep in touch anyway because, obviously, I like them or I wouldn't." (Eddie)

"Obligations – yes, more that they put that on to me to be obligated to attend gatherings and things." (Michelle)

This sense of obligation entails an emotional reciprocity, especially with the birth mother, and this is also reflected in practices such as the exchange of gifts and attendances at family functions. The choices made by the birth family to invite, or not to invite, the adopted relative were frequently cited as matters of considerable emotional significance, as well as creating expectations about appropriate levels of reciprocity. For instance, two participants noted occasions when birth relatives had not advised them of a death in their family in time for attendance at the funeral, thus making an implicit statement about the adoptee's "membership" of the close kin group.

Gift-giving and the recognition of occasions such as Mother's Day were often surrounded by uncertainty. Mother's Day was generally retained as such for the adoptive mother, but several participants did feel an obligation to recognise the day, perhaps less "formally", with the birth mother.

How the Birth Relatives and the Adoptee Name One Another

The English language lacks a convenient set of terms for the relationships formed from reunions. How does the adoptee introduce his or her birth mother to a third party (especially given that many of the participants simply do not like the term "birth mother")? The use of the term "mother" implies a lifetime's shared experience, especially during childhood, and so "mother" tends to remain the name for the

adoptive mother. Adoptees in this study attempted to avoid using a kinship label for the birth mother altogether, and would generally resort to calling her by her given name. This would mean that, when introducing her to a third party, many would not identify her as a "birth mother".

This issue of naming can extend to the next generation, as one participant revealed when she wondered what her new-born daughter would call her mother's birth mother. She did not want the child to call her birth grandmother (i.e. her mother's birth mother) "Nana", but had not arrived at a suitable alternative at the time of the interview. Another participant already had a son at the time of the reunion, and the son used his birth grandmother's (i.e. his mother's birth mother's) given name. The boy's mother had encouraged this in case the reunion did not last. A second child who had arrived some years after the reunion, when the relationship was well established, used the term "Grandma". The first-born son now switches between the two names.

> "I suppose I'm still a little edgy now when I introduce her to people. It doesn't happen that often. It does become a little awkward, but what annoys me sometimes is when people call her my mother, because she is not my mother. I don't particularly like the term 'birth mother' but I don't know what else to call her, but she is not my mother. I am family but I'm not family." (Sonia)

With siblings, the issues are different. Other children of the birth parents were most often genetically half-siblings, but sometimes they were full siblings. Nevertheless, adoptees seemed to be comfortable in referring to them simply as "brother" or "sister". In some cases, quite close relationships had developed between these siblings.

These dilemmas are about more than just how to name someone; they also reflect deeper questions of belonging and relatedness.

Inheritance

Inheritance is frequently an emotive issue for families because it highlights questions of equality, entitlement and emotional recognition. It is not just a matter of material assets. Most of the participants did not know what they could expect to inherit,[11] and their responses to this question revealed considerable ambivalence. This may not be unusual in many families, with or without adoptions, but the adoption relationship creates deeper ambiguities.

---

11 Until the Adoptions Act 1955, adoptees were able to claim on the estate of birth parents as equal siblings. The 1955 Act, however, changed that with its "clean break" principle. The adoptee was not expected ever to know who the birth parents were, and the Act explicitly terminated any rights to inheritance, as the child was deemed no longer to be the birth parents' legal child. The 1985 Act did not change this, so inclusion of an adoptee in a birth parent's will after reunion is purely optional.

Most participants tended to say that they had no expectations of inclusion in the birth parents' wills – or at least not as an equal sibling. Many of them did say, though, that they would like some recognition in the will by means of a significant memento. One male participant even specified the heirloom that he hoped to inherit.

One participant was an exception to this pattern. Both of her birth parents had subsequently married one another, and so she was a full sibling of the other children of the birth parents. She clearly wished to be treated equally with the other siblings in her birth parents' wills and, if not, she said, "I would feel like the odd one out, the adopted child, otherwise" (Jane).

The question of inheritance is clearly an ambiguous one, and its consequences cannot really be understood until the cohort of persons adopted under the 1955 Act experiences the death of birth parents, and possibly until case law settles some of these questions.

The Birth Mother's Mothering Role towards the Adoptee

The interviews revealed an imbalance in the expectations of a mothering role between adoptee and birth mother. Some participants reported that the birth mother saw herself as "mother".[12] Generally, however, adoptees did not share that view and, with only one exception (already mentioned) they retained their primary mother–child bond with the adoptive mother. This sometimes led to difficulties. In the words of one female participant:

> "I think for her, she [birth mother] thought the adoptive mother would just melt away. I think she thought I'd just blend into the family and we would all live happily ever after." (Jane)

This study reveals that at least some birth mothers have entered into the reunion with unrealistic expectations about bonding (or is it re-bonding?) with the adopted child. Participants revealed a level of discomfort in this new relationship, often a period of withdrawal from the birth mother, and feelings of guilt about loyalty to the adoptive mother. At the same time, they often felt protective of the birth mother's feelings:

> "It was emotional for my [adoptive] mother and she was scared about that, so when I'd go over and see them [the birth family], I never mentioned it to my adoptive family, so as not to upset them." (Eddie)

---

12 As this study only interviewed adoptees, note that Gediman and Brown (1989) have previously found that birth mothers do see themselves as mothers.

"I think my Mum was worried that she might lose me to this other lady who, in some respects, had more of a right to me emotionally (legally, no). But it goes way beyond a legal thing – doesn't it? – when it comes to flesh and blood. So I keep her [the birth mother] back here a bit." (Natalie)

"For me, I definitely had to work at having a relationship, and had to try and fit that into my life. When I'm with her, I feel like a city girl in the country. But I would never reject her." (Sandi)

"She [the birth mother] said, when she met me, that she felt the only thing she had ever done right in her life was to give me up, the only thing she has ever thought that she did right. I think that's phenomenal and that's why I would never reject her." (Sandi)

"I guess I stay in touch with her [the birth mother] because I feel this sense of loss about her and I just don't want to disappoint her somehow." (Michelle)

"She [the birth mother] is really fragile. I hold back a bit due to her fragility." (Caroline)

Although this study directly included only the views of adoptees and not their birth mothers, it appeared from the adoptee interviews that there were often differing expectations for a mother–child bond between the two parties. The participants in this study did not enter into reunion, in general, with the hope of finding a new "mother" – although it seemed that some of the birth mothers may have hoped to establish such an attachment. This sometimes led to difficulties in the relationships, including some tensions between birth mothers and adoptive mothers. Hence there was often a difficult "juggling act" for the child, who would not want to hurt or reject the birth mother, and yet did not want to allow her to assume a "mother" role.

Identification with the Birth Family, Compared to the Adoptive Family

The adoptees – in all cases but one in this study, and in spite of long-term association with the birth family – retained their adoptive family as their "primary" family. The shared history of childhood and growing up with the adoptive parents seemed to outweigh attachment to someone who, although genetically related, was previously a complete stranger. The adoptees had to move between two families in order to maintain their relationship with their birth parent, and the adoptees were the only "common denominator" between the two kin groups.[13]

---

13 Although this passage refers to *two* kin groups (the adoptive and the birth families) there are normally two distinct birth-family groups: the family of the birth mother and the family of the birth father. Hence, adoptees may have *three* kin groups to which they are related. With the exception of four participants whose birth parents eventually married, the participants' two birth-parent families were not related by marriage and had no contact with each other.

Sometimes the adoptive and birth families mixed socially, and sometimes they did not. One participant would not tell her adoptive mother when she was visiting the birth mother because, she said, the adoptive mother felt threatened by this relationship. In contrast, other participants shared family occasions (like Christmas or funerals) with both "mothers" together, without any tension. Adoptive and birth mothers sometimes formed friendships. One participant said that their adoptive mother saw the birth mother as a younger sister.

Regardless of the extent of social interaction between an adoptee's two family groups, the adoptive family generally remained the "primary" family for the adoptee. The adoptees may have seen themselves "mirrored in" the birth family due to physical likeness, and thus may have felt a sense of belonging with them, but the shared history and familiarity of the adoptive family lent a sense of security and "home" that was not replaced after reunion.

DISCUSSION

The primary finding of this study is that people adopted in closed-stranger adoptions who reunite with one or both of the birth parents (generally in adulthood) retained the adoptive family as their primary family and their adoptive mother as "the mother" – even when the relationship with the birth mother has been long-term and contacts have been regular. This stands out as an important exception to any theory or definition of "family" that would place consanguinity as the necessary and sufficient criterion – that is to say, in this case, "blood is not thicker than water". Shared history as a member of a family, despite not being genetically related, is sufficient for the adoptee to create a strong sense of family membership, attachment and security. The reunion with the birth parent, even the birth mother, does not disrupt or change this. It does, however, "fill a gap" for the adoptee in terms of knowing "whom I am like".

> "It changed my identity because I felt there was a black hole behind me and now it is filled in." (Suzanne)

Even after long-term association with the birth family, there is no guarantee that relations between the adoptee and the birth parents will be harmonious, or that it will be easy to juggle the various obligations and loyalties. After reunion, the adoptees continually have to redefine boundaries and navigate unfamiliar territory, because there are no clearly defined social customs or roles on which to rely. Consequently, the participants in this study reported a variety of experiences and arrangements.

A commonly used diagrammatic representation of a model of adoption relationships is a triad (see Figure 1).

Figure 1   Traditional Model of Adoption Relationships
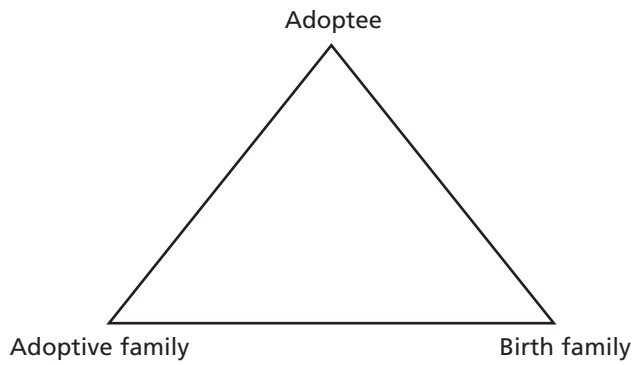
Under the closed-stranger adoption system, however, there is no actual contact between birth mother and adoptive family, and this side of the triad is, strictly speaking, mediated by the state; hence, the triangle shape is interrupted by the state's involvement (see Figure 2).

Figure 2   Closed-Stranger Adoption System
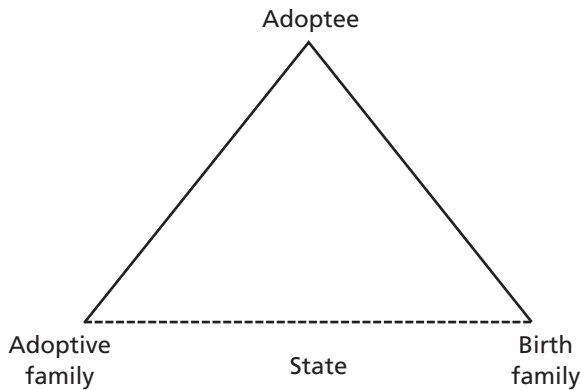
After reunion, the adoptee becomes the common link between two families, which may be represented more appropriately as interlinked circles (see Figure 3).

Figure 3   Adoption after Reunion
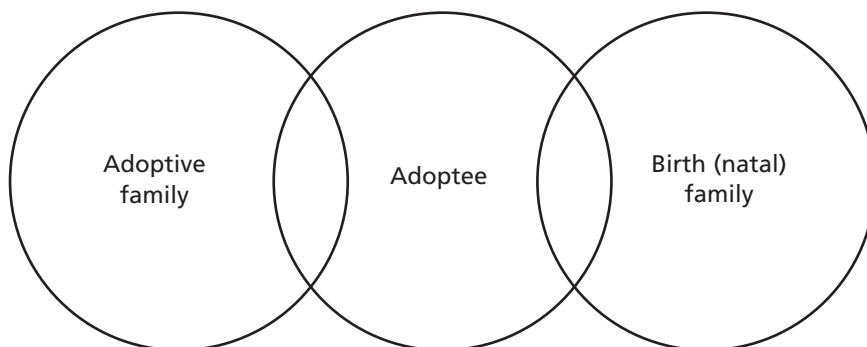
The adoptee may feel a sense of different identities when participating in different family circles. Sometimes, however, the two families themselves interlink, if the adoptive and birth families meet and get to know one another – even quite independently of the adoptee in some cases (see Figure 4).

Figure 4   Adoption after Reunion where Birth Family and Adoptive Family are Interlinked
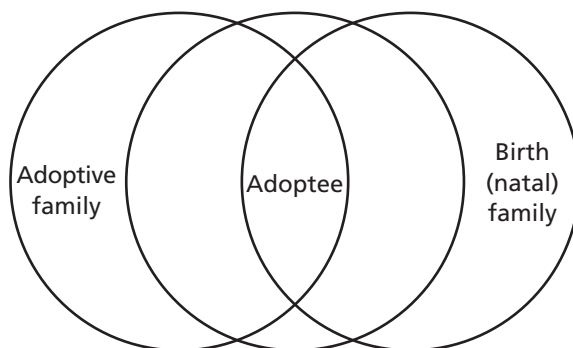
While, in some cases, the parties to the reunion may have entered into it with unrealistic hopes and expectations – only to be disappointed at some later stage – this study does not produce findings that would make it possible to tell parties prior to reunion what they can expect. The outcomes for adoptees and their birth families have, in this study, been various and unpredictable. There have been some common concerns

or issues that they have had to face, but there is no typical pattern in how these issues have arisen or how they have been addressed. Thus there is no convenient roadmap for the parties to these reunions, and we probably should not expect one.

These relationships contain a good degree of ambivalence. Even after 26 years of contact (in one case), many matters remained unresolved. This study does not support the view of Bergin (1995) that "resolution" of the issues arising from the lost time and the unfulfilled needs between the adoptee and the birth parents would take about five to six years. While most of the participants in this study were enjoying reasonably good relations with their birth families, it would be wrong to say that issues were "resolved", even well after 10 years had elapsed since reunion. The adoptees lived with quite a degree of dissatisfaction, discomfort and uncertainty about their status in relation to the birth family, and sometimes they had quite a delicate task in maintaining the right level of closeness with the birth mother in particular. Often the birth mother's needs were felt to be quite strong and the adoptee had to respond to this somehow, at the same time trying not to hurt the adoptive mother. The sense of obligation was sometimes quite complicated, as well as having few customary "signposts" to aid the parties in defining their boundaries. One participant who had been in reunion for 18 years put it this way:

> "I'd say I've immersed in my birth family less than half – 30% easily. I think you always are on the outer and that's how it is. I think if you met your natural family as a little person and there was that basic nurturing stuff, then you could do it, you could easily get into that family more. It is never quite satisfying, you probably get this idea of how it could have been because they [birth siblings] connect so much better than I do, it's that whole history thing. It leaves me feeling dissatisfied all the time. Like you are part of the family, but not really." (Jane)

CONCLUSION

While it is important for the development of a post-reunion relationship that the parties enter into it with reasonable expectations, the results of this study suggest that it would be hard to determine what "reasonable" expectations would be, given the variety of different outcomes. At least one can identify some of the common obstacles that may arise, and to forewarn applicants for adoption information about the things they may have to look out for. From the viewpoint of some adoptees, it would also be beneficial if birth mothers were to undertake counselling, and to be advised that the children they gave up many years ago have probably formed mother–child bonds that will not be replaced.

At a more theoretical level, the study of adoptions in general, and the present findings in particular, present an exception, or even a direct challenge, to those theories of kinship that seek to place biological-genetic relatedness in an essential and foundational role. The fact that the adoptive mothers retained the role and identity of "mother" for all but one of the adoptees in this study – even well after reunion with birth mothers – serves as an important correction to social theories and cultural norms based exclusively upon the idea that "blood is thicker than water". As a general answer to the question of the degree to which the adoptee, following long-term reunion, immerses in the birth family, one could conclude from the experiences of the present participants that their new family relations become comparable to those with an "extended family" – with all of the variation in degrees of closeness that this could imply. The complicating factor, though, is the lack of clear cultural understandings and norms about key family customs, such as how to name one another, which family events to include one another in, and adoptees' entitlement in birth parents' wills.

Most of the thought and research about reunions has been around the process of reunion itself. We are now in a position to understand what transpires in the long term within these post-reunion relationships. What the adoptee may have felt and expected at the age of, say, 20 when first applying for information will be quite different from what is felt and expected of the birth parent at the age of 40. The goalposts shift as time goes by, new challenges and unexpected obstacles arise (for example, when a child is born to the adoptee), and there is no easy way to resolve or negotiate these issues. There is no guidebook, and probably never will be. The participants in this study lived with ambivalence, a degree of uncertainty and dissatisfaction with these relationships – longstanding though they were – yet persisted with them.

For some, the search was all-consuming; demystifying for the seekers and sought alike. For most, though, the years that followed reunion had no guidelines or clear pathways, the boundaries were unclear, the obligations confusing and the lack of customs perplexing. The reunion with the birth family, in fact was a lifelong process.

REFERENCES

Bergin, N. (1995) *Post Reunion: The Adoptee's Experience*, MA thesis, University of Auckland.

Bowlby, J. (1951) *Maternal Care and Mental Health*, World Health Organisation, Geneva.

Bowlby, J. (1953) *Childcare and the Growth of Love*, Pelican Books, England.

Bowlby, J. (1969) *Attachment and Loss*, Vol. 1, Hogarth Press, England.

Browning, J. (2005) *Blood Ties: The Labyrinth of Family Membership in Long-Term Adoption Reunion*, MA thesis, Massey University, Auckland.

Devereux, M. (2003) "Old law leaves sperm donor dad out in cold" *New Zealand Herald*, 31 January, p.1.

Durkheim, E. (1980) *Emile Durkheim: Contributions to L'Annee Sociologique*, Yash Nandan (ed.) The Free Press, New York.

Else, A. (1991) *A Question of Adoption: Closed Stranger Adoption in New Zealand 1944–1974*, Bridget Williams Books, Wellington.

Gediman, G. and L. Brown (1989) *Birth Bond: Reunions between Birth Parents and Adoptees*, What Happens After, New Horizon Press, Far Hills, New Jersey.

Griffith, K. (1997) *New Zealand Adoption: History and Practice, Social and Legal 1840–1996*, K.C. Griffith, Wellington.

Griffith, K. (2004) Unpublished manuscript.

Howe, D. and J. Feast (2001) "The long-term outcome of reunions between adult adopted people and their birth mothers" *British Journal of Social Work*, 31(3):351–368.

Kennard, J. (1991) *Adoption Information: The Repossession of Identity*, MA thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington.

Kressierer, D. and C. Bryant (1996) "Adoption as deviance: Socially constructed parent–child kinship as a stigmatised and legally burdened relationship" *Deviant Behavior*, 17:391–415.

Lorenz, K. (1961) "Imprinting" in Robert C. Birney and Richard C. Teevan (eds.) *Instinct: An Enduring Problem in Psychology*, Van Nostrand Company Inc, New York.

Malinowski, B. (1930) "Parenthood: The basis of social structure" in V. Calverton and S. Schmalhausen (eds.) *The New Generation*, Macaulay Press, New York

Metge, J. (1995) *New Growth from Old: The Whanau in the Modern World*, Victoria University Press, Wellington.

Modell, J. (1997) "Where do we go next?: Long-term reunion relationships between adoptees and birth parents" *Marriage and Family Review*, 25:43–66.

Mullender, A. (1991) Open Adoption: The Philosophy and the Practice, *British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering*, London.

Rowe, J. (1959) *Yours by Choice: A Guide for Adoptive Parents*, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, London.

Schneider, D. (1984) *A Critique of the Study of Kinship*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor.

Webster, S. (1973) *Māori Adoption*, preliminary working paper, Auckland University, unpublished.

Wegar, K. (1997) *Adoption, Identity, and Kinship*, Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut.