

Running Head: Experience of Adoption Reunion

Putting the Pieces Together: The Natural Mother Experience of Adoption Reunion

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigated the natural (birth) mother's experience of adoption reunion, both in relation to the experience of surrendering the child and as an event in itself. Eight natural mothers (47 to 56 yrs old) that had been involved in a reunion with their child within the last 10 years participated in this study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted that involved the participants describing their feelings, thoughts, and physical symptoms during surrender and during reunion. Participants were also asked to discuss support, lack of support, the effect that the surrender experience had on the reunion, and the progression of the reunion. The results of the study indicate that surrender is an extremely negative experience and that this has a significant impact on how reunion is experienced. It was also found that despite the negative influence of the surrender experience, reunion is a positive event that brings many benefits to the mother's psychological, social, and physical well-being. Implications for clinical and practical application are presented.

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INTRODUCTION

Women who relinquish a child for adoption endure one of the most difficult situations any mother may face in her life. To lose a baby to death is likely the most painful experience any person can imagine. To lose a baby to adoption is a pain that only those who have lived it can begin to comprehend. Becoming a mother is perhaps one of the most significant roles a woman plays in her life and motherhood may be the most intimate connection one human has to another (Foley & Nechas, 1993). The separation of mother and child usually brings with it severe consequences for both people. Over the last two decades, research has been conducted with the intent of understanding the unique challenge and consequences with which these mothers are confronted.

Recent changes in legislation have facilitated increased openness in adoption records. As a result, adoption reunion has become a common occurrence. Research investigating this rather unique experience is somewhat limited, likely due to both the stigma and secrecy surrounding the topic of adoption and the relatively recent increase in adoption reunions.

Given that surrendering a child to adoption is generally such a traumatic experience, it follows that reunion with the lost child, who is now an adult, may bring with it a unique set of benefits and challenges. The purpose of this study is to explore the natural mother's experience of adoption reunion, both in relation to the experience of surrendering the child and as an event in itself. This research is descriptive and exploratory in nature. The term natural mother was chosen for this research to reflect the wishes of the women in this particular sample. The term birthmother is more common,

but to some surrendering mothers this term implies that they are simply baby machines or incubators, and not real mothers.

Early Research on Unwed Motherhood

Around the early 1930's, discussions of unwed motherhood started to appear in the literature (Bertrand, 1994). The writings around this time focused mainly on psychoanalytic theory and the meaning of the pregnancy. This research portrayed women who became pregnant out of wedlock as deficient and abnormal (Clothier, 1943; Deutsch, 1945). Young (1947) concluded that the mother pregnant out of wedlock was immature, unhappy, and impulsive. Cattell (1954) suggested that unwed mothers are psychologically disturbed. Researchers explained the intra-psychic etiology of unwed motherhood in terms such as separation anxiety, object loss, and unresolved Oedipal fantasies (Heiman & Levitt, 1958).

Negative descriptions of unwed mothers continued into the 1960's. Investigations into the experience of the unwed mother still examined personality defects and shortcomings. For example, Kravitz, Trossman, and Bernard (1966) suggested that factors such as an imbalance between instinctual drives and ego control, impulsivity, and early deprivation contributed to an unwed pregnancy. Studies of this type did not address the feelings, experiences, or emotions of these unwed mothers, but instead, the reasons behind their pregnancy.

As can be expected, early research regarding the unwed mother was largely an artefact of social attitudes at the time. The portrayal of the unwed mother as "feble-minded and inherently depraved" (Lowe, 1927) served to maintain the idea that the unwed mother and her child were deviant members of society. Society's view of

unplanned pregnancy and childbirth reflected Puritan, Victorian, and religious influences (Brodzinsky, 1990). These attitudes persisted for much of the twentieth century, and nurtured stigma and secrecy around the topic of adoption. Many mothers surrendered their children as a result of this stigma and secrecy, and a related lack of societal and family support. The attributes that were attached to unwed mothers served to maintain an abundant supply of healthy infants until around 1980. However, it might be naive even today, in a society that we consider to be quite permissive, to conclude that stigma does not still influence the decisions of young, pregnant girls and women, especially those with fewer resources.

Consequences of Surrender

Beginning around 1970, along with a gradual shift in attitudes toward unwed pregnancy, research began to explore the effects of relinquishing a child to adoption on the mother. Finally, after centuries of stigmatizing the unwed mother, an attempt was made, at least among academics, to understand the challenges that natural mothers face. This research began to fill a large and crucial gap in knowledge.

Many negative, painful, and complicated emotions have been found to accompany the experience. The mother who becomes pregnant “out of time” with societal expectations faces a double edge sword. If she keeps her child she is seen as a shameful, filthy, and worthless person. When she gives that child up, she is seen as selfish and uncaring (Lauderdale, 1992).

One particular biblical old-testament story reflects this dilemma that is prominent in adoption. Two women claiming to be the mother of the same child asked King Solomon to settle their dispute. He decided that instead of choosing one woman, the child

was to be cut in half and shared equally. One of the women remained silent. The “birthmother,” wishing no harm to her child, decided to give him up. King Solomon, realizing the depth of the mother’s love, granted her the child.

This seems to be the predicament that a woman considering adoption faces. Many, if not all mothers only want the best for their children. Young women who become pregnant outside of the norms accepted by society may feel or be convinced that adoption is in the best interest of the baby. Prior to the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion in the United States, the two socially appropriate options for handling unwed pregnancy were marriage and adoption (Bertrand, 1994). In the past women have been told that they will “forget this one” and go on to have more children when the timing is more appropriate. However, research and anecdotal reports now suggest that surrendering mothers do not forget the baby and more often than not experience severe psychological consequences. Is it reasonable to assume that a mother can simply give away her child as if it were a trivial possession and get on with her life?

Studies in this area to date tend to be descriptive in nature and give natural mothers a long awaited chance to speak about their experiences (Pannor et al., 1978; Lifton, 1979; Rynearson, 1982; Millen & Roll, 1985; Condon, 1986; Silverman et al., 1988). One finding that seems to be consistent is the presence of unresolved grief in the mothers’ lives (Baron, Pannor & Sorosky, 1977; Burnell & Norfleet, 1979; Lamperelli & Smith, 1979; Silverman, 1981; Rynearson, 1982; Millen & Roll, 1985; Condon, 1986; Weinreb & Murphy, 1988; DeSimone, 1994). It appears to be difficult for natural mothers to grieve the loss of a child that is still alive. The ambiguity of the loss is likely a source of conflict for these women, as it can impede the normal grieving process.

According to Millen and Roll (1985), the normal mourning reaction can be inhibited and prolonged in mothers that have relinquished a child. Zigun (1990) emphasizes that the unsatisfactory resolution of grief work can result in dysfunction and/or dysphoria. The natural mother has suffered the loss of a child, but the fact that the loss is ambiguous can impede necessary grief resolution. Also, in the past it has been customary to encourage mothers not to grieve for the child, but to instead forget the child as soon as possible and move on. The normal mourning reaction is clearly inhibited in this case.

Natural mothers, contrary to the idea that they are able to forget the child, tend to think about the child often, sometimes to an extreme degree (Sorosky et al., 1978; Rynearson, 1982; Fravel, McRoy, & Grotevant, 2000). Thoughts include worries about the child's well-being, what the child looks like, what the child's interests are, how the child is being parented, and whether the right decision was made. Many natural mothers also report involuntary curiosity when they see children of "about the right age," and wonder if that could be their child. Some mothers even recall following the mother and child for a time (Rynearson, 1982).

Natural mothers report varying degrees of medical and psychological problems that seem to be associated with the loss of the child (Burnell & Norfleet, 1979; Lifton, 1979; Millen & Roll, 1985; Condon, 1986). The most common problems include depression, anxiety, sexual dysfunction, fatigue, and somatic dysfunction. Many natural mothers report being preoccupied or obsessed with fears of future infertility.

In one of the more comprehensive studies conducted, Winkler and van Keppel (1984) included a control group of young women who had not surrendered one of their children. Results of the study suggested that the effects of relinquishment on the mother

were negative and long-lasting. Approximately half of the participants who had given up a child felt an increasing sense of loss over time, which for many women extended over 30 years. When compared to the matched control sample, the surrendering mothers displayed significantly more psychological impairment. There were three factors that seemed to relate to poorer well-being: lack of opportunities to talk about feelings around the surrender, lack of social support, and an ongoing sense of loss about the child.

As demonstrated by the previous study, there are several factors that likely contribute to a mother's adjustment following loss of a child to adoption. DeSimone (1994) investigated some of these factors, including perception of coercion, lack of social support, lack of opportunity to grieve or express feelings following surrender, and uncertainty over the loss. The study found that higher levels of unresolved grief were associated with the mother's perception that others coerced her into the relinquishment. Individuals who reported feeling external pressure to surrender the child were significantly more likely to experience high levels of prolonged grief than those who reported internal reasons for the decision. This suggests that an important factor in post-surrender adjustment is the amount of perceived control over the decision to relinquish. A strong association was also found between guilt and shame regarding the decision to surrender and unresolved grief. Contrary to Winkler and van Kepple (1984), DeSimone did not find an association between lack of social support and levels of grief. Among the most interesting findings was the association between lack of opportunity to express feelings regarding the surrender and levels of unresolved grief. This finding indicates the importance of allowing the mother to properly express and grieve the loss of the child. Finally, the study found that uncertainty over the loss was correlated with higher levels of

unresolved grief. The fact that the child is still alive and “out there” somewhere, but inaccessible to them, makes it difficult to achieve any sense of finality. In their discussion of boundary ambiguity, Fravel, McRoy, and Grotevant (2000) expand on this idea. Boundary ambiguity exists anytime a person’s physical and psychological presence are incongruent (Boss, 1999). This appears to be a very salient theme for natural mothers.

The experience that natural mothers have during surrender can also have a significant impact on subsequent daily social interactions. Many natural mothers experience problems developing intimate relationships (Rynearson, 1982; Deykin et al., 1984; Weinreb & Murphy, 1988). Overprotective parenting styles with subsequent children have also been commonly reported (Rynearson, 1982; Deykin et al., 1984; Condon, 1986). For example, many natural mothers feel abnormally protective over their other children, experience compulsive worry about the child, and have excessive difficulty accepting the growing child’s need for independence.

As is the case in other highly traumatic experiences, natural mothers may employ various defences in order to cope with the loss of their child (Faulkner, 1991). Natural mothers often experience denial and dissociation in order to cope with overwhelming emotions related to the surrender. This makes sense according to previously discussed concepts of the impaired grief process. Those that have lost someone to death may utilize various coping mechanisms, such as denial and dissociation to cope with the loss. Natural mothers, however, often continue to experience denial and dissociation long after the surrender, likely because the nature of this loss is abnormal.

According to Russo (1976), “the centrality of motherhood to the definition of the adult female is characterized in the form of a mandate, which requires having two

children and raising them well” (p. 143). If a woman’s identity is highly dependent upon her status as a mother, then relinquishing one’s maternal rights must have a significant impact on a woman’s identity. An unplanned pregnancy and the relinquishment of a child for adoption are outside the range of typical adolescent experience and threaten the successful negotiation of the developmental tasks of adolescence (Lash Esau, 2000). However, Lash Esau (2000), in her study of identity and intimacy, found that many natural mothers demonstrated strong identity as measured by high exploration and commitment. It is possible that relinquishing a child does not have a negative influence on identity formation. It is also possible that the way that identity is defined may have an effect upon whether or not a person is said to have a strong identity. Also, mothers that have relinquished children for adoption may have conflicts of identity that are not necessarily readily reported, observed, or measured.

It is clear from the wealth of literature that has now been produced that surrendering a child for adoption can be a source of considerable distress for many women. It is reasonable to conclude that some women make the choice to surrender their child for adoption and are quite comfortable with this choice. However, for most it is a life-changing act that can be difficult to ever recover from, and may have medical, psychological, and social effects to varying degrees.

Adoption Reunion

Reunions between adoptees and their natural parents are a relatively recent phenomenon in the history of adoption (Silverman et al., 1988). This new phenomenon is becoming increasingly common. Legislation pertaining to adoption is gradually changing in order to allow more openness in adoption records, enabling more people to search for

their biological relatives. Many natural mothers express a desire to meet their children (Sorosky et al., 1978). Adoptees also choose to search for their biological parents and other family. According to Canadian law, mothers and children may not search for their kin until the child is of legal age, generally eighteen.

The meeting of two strangers that are actually mother and child is likely to be a bizarre experience, with both positive and negative components. The two people, mother and grown child, must try to negotiate a relationship and navigate a host of unique challenges in order to accommodate the needs of all parties involved. The nature of the relationship between adoptee and natural mother can take various forms, both positive and negative (Modell, 1997; Fraser, 1997; Gladstone & Westhues, 1998; Howe & Feast, 2001). An overwhelming majority of adoptees and natural mothers portray the reunion as positive, even if it is not successful, and do not regret the decision. The negotiation of this new relationship clearly has many unique pathways, but most adoptees and natural mothers experience the reunion as necessary and positive. It is also clear that there are various reasons for an adopted person to seek out a reunion, but the most common reasons reported are a search for a cohesive identity, curiosity, and to share the period of life they had lost by separation (Waner, 1988; Sachdev, 1992; Howe & Feast, 2001). Although important in their own respect, all of these studies conceptualize reunion mainly from the adoptee's point of view and do not explore the experience of the mother in any depth.

Very few researchers have investigated the natural mother's experience of reunion separate from the dyadic adoptee-natural mother relationship. Given that surrender has been shown to be so traumatic for the mother, the effect that reunion has on

her well-being is well worth consideration. Field (1992) compared mothers who had reunited with their children and mothers that were still awaiting the possibility of contact. Women who were reunited reported significantly greater improvements in feelings connected with “adoption events” and also reported higher levels of perceived social support. Women who were waiting for reunion or information about their child showed significantly more negative affect and poorer psychological well-being than even those who had obtained some non-identifying information. A study by Silverman et al. (1988) also suggests that even when reunion is not successful, it has a very positive impact on the natural mother’s life. Mother’s in this study described feelings of release, increases in self-esteem, and reduced feelings of guilt and grief.

In summary, the literature on surrender suggests an extremely negative impact on the mother. The limited literature on reunion indicates that it is primarily positive and often a necessary progression in the life of adoptees and natural mothers. However, few studies have actually investigated the individual experience of the natural mother in any depth. With the increasing numbers of reunions occurring, it is important to thoroughly understand the kinds of benefits and challenges the mother faces in reunion.

The current work is concerned with describing and understanding the natural mother’s perspective in reunion. The goal will be to discover the unique challenges and benefits that these women face. Also, because surrender is so traumatic and negative for many mothers, specific emphasis was placed on how the surrender experience influences the reunion and perceptions of it. Unlike the adopted person, the mother must be able to integrate her previous, often very painful memories of surrender with the reunion experience. It was hypothesized that this would have a significant impact on the mother’s

feelings and thoughts during reunion, as well as the way the reunion was negotiated. It may be tempting to assume that reunion is the remedy to the painful loss of a child. This study seeks to determine whether or not this actually the case. It was hypothesized that reunion, although unable to undo the damage done by the loss of so many years, would facilitate many positive changes for the mothers, emotionally, physically, and socially.

METHOD

Participants

Eight women were recruited through the Canadian Council of Natural Mothers. An advertisement was posted on the CCNM website with the permission of one of the members (see Appendix A). Seven of these women also meet on a monthly basis at a member's home to discuss adoption and reunion related issues.

Participants' ages ranged from 47 to 56 years. All of the participants were white Caucasian. Education levels varied from a high school diploma to three university degrees, including graduate degrees. The average household income of the participants ranged from \$30 000 to more than \$75 000. Five of the participants were currently married, one was divorced, and one was single. The number of children per mother, including the child surrendered, ranged from one to four. Each participant surrendered one child. The length of time since first meeting ranged from one year to nine years.

Procedure

All participants were given a choice of when and where to be interviewed. Five were interviewed in their homes, one at her place of work, one at the University of Calgary, and one at her son's home. Some participants had requested to view the interview questions before hand so that they could give some thought to them.

Participants were able to gather their thoughts and prepare, as the questions were sensitive in nature and also required participants to recall a great deal of information. After meeting, I had the participants read the consent form (Appendix B). I brought to the participant's attention that they were free to refrain from answering any of the questions or to completely terminate the interview at any time. They were assured confidentiality and anonymity through the use of arbitrary participant numbers and removal of any identifying information. Participants were encouraged to ask questions at any time before, during, or after the interview. Along with the informed consent, participants were provided with information on post-traumatic stress disorder (Appendix C), to make them aware of some of the potential risks of their participation. The interviews varied in length from approximately 40 minutes to 100 minutes. The participants were also asked to complete a short demographics questionnaire (Appendix D).

A set of questions (Appendix E) was used in order to guide each interview. The questions concerned both the participants' experiences during surrender and during reunion, as well as one question regarding hopes for the future of the relationship. After the interview was completed, the participants were given a debriefing sheet (Appendix F). They were also asked if I could contact them within one week to see how they were doing and address any questions or concerns that may have arisen. Each agreed, and I subsequently contacted each of them by phone. None of the participants reported any problems during the follow-up calls. The interviews were later transcribed and then interpreted using content analysis.

Analysis

In analyzing the transcripts, themes were developed based on the questions from the interview guide. One additional theme was added in order to better capture a distinct issue that emerged in the interviews, which was treatment during pregnancy and surrender. The first question in the interview guide asks about emotions during pregnancy and surrender, so the first theme was called ‘emotions during pregnancy and surrender.’ First I read each interview several times in order to get a sense of the important themes discussed. Next, I went through each interview individually and highlighted each instance in which the participant talked about the theme in question. For example, in the case of emotions during pregnancy and surrender, I went through each transcript and highlighted text in which an instance of this theme occurred. I did this for each theme. I then cut out all of the instances of each theme and pasted them onto pieces of paper organized by theme. Next I read through all of the themes individually to determine sub-themes within these larger categories. For example, a concept within emotions during pregnancy and surrender that became clear was love for the child, so love for the child was made a sub-theme. Once the sub-themes were developed I went through the sheets for each theme (eg. emotions during pregnancy and surrender) and highlighted each sub-theme in a different colour. These themes and sub-themes and a discussion and examples of each are presented in the results.

RESULTS

Emotions During Pregnancy and SurrenderNumbness

It was clear that for all of the participants, surrender was an emotionally overwhelming event. As a result, an experience common to all of the interviews was emotional numbness. Participants were so overwhelmed by the pregnancy, the surrender, and all of the emotions around it, that they became numb. In order to cope with the intense feelings that accompanied the pregnancy and the loss, these women had to become numb to them or dissociate from them.

I was totally numb I think, probably by the fourth month, like I just, I totally, it was just a nightmare, a living nightmare every day. Umm, and by the time he was born I don't think I was even there anymore. (Int. 2 Lines 15 -17)

Oh, yeah, numb and umm...despair, just really totally umm, uh, and I can even remember being in the hospital and I just, hardly able to walk I was just so numb, depressed, umm, really nothing left of me really as a person. (Int. 2 Lines 24 - 26)

A lot of numbness. I tried very hard not to think about losing him at the time, and uh, and I guess that was the main thing, just shutting down. Uh, at one point I thought about, the forms hadn't been correctly filled out and I had to go back and sign them again, and I thought, I was thinking about getting him back at that point, trying to get him back, and when that wasn't possible, then I was more depressed about it. But mostly I tried to dissociate from it completely. Just not think about it. And I basically lived in a state of denial until he found me. (Int. 8 Lines 14 - 21)

So feelings, they were all buried. I didn't allow myself to experience any. I was afraid to because I was, I was afraid that if I went there, you know, I wouldn't know how to deal with it, so I just didn't go there. (Int. 4 Lines 24 - 26)

Isolation

Another feeling that was dominant in the interviews was that of being emotionally alone and isolated. All of the participants were quite young at the time of the pregnancy, but felt as if they were dealing with this significant life event alone, with no

understanding of the emotional burden being carried. These feelings of being alone had repercussions for the decision to relinquish and for future adjustment, which will be discussed in more depth in the discussion.

So, uh, from then on feelings and emotions were basically, even though there were a lot of people around I suppose, I was, felt very much alone through the whole pregnancy, umm, alone and aloneness and being separate and apart in terms of umm, not people's proximity, but in terms of emotional, emotionally being alone, and scared. (Int. 7 Lines 16 – 19)

All I can remember is feeling very alone and feeling very much, umm, like I had no one in my life. Umm, I didn't really think that there was anybody that could help me. I didn't feel like there was anybody who understood. (Int. 3 Lines 30 – 32)

Grief and Loss

There was extreme grief and a sense of loss present for all the mothers during the time of pregnancy and surrender. They did not want to lose their babies, but surrender seemed to be the only option at the time. The expressions of sadness came in various forms, but the emotion was very salient in all of the interviews when discussing surrender.

I was just, I was absolutely devastated. I was, like I cried myself to sleep before, you know, many nights before the baby was born, but after that I was absolutely destroyed. Like I just felt like there was a big hole in me that would never be healed. (Int. 6 Lines 177 – 180)

Uh, a great sense of loss, because I remember that, although I was in the situation that I was in, I actually wasn't unhappy about it. I actually felt a lot of love for him, when he was still, you know, in me. And, umm, really didn't want to give him up. I mean, as long as he was there, then I knew he was still with me. And, umm, so there was a great sense of loss, you know, that I'd given up someone that I would probably never see again. (Int. 1 Lines 113 – 117)

Shame

At the time when the participants were pregnant, it was considered extremely shameful to be in that position. For many of the participants, feelings of shame were very

powerful and influential. They felt like they had committed the worst crime imaginable. They experienced feelings of shame about being pregnant and shame about having to surrender their child.

Like, umm...and not, you know, of course you're, you're not going to die, but in those years it was so shameful to have been umm, caught being sexually active, and, not necessarily being sexually active because I think people sort of guessed that some of those things were going on, but, but being caught at it, and that's basically when you started showing your pregnancy and then there was no...no hiding it anymore. So lots of that kind of umm...shame, and being shameful and feeling guilty about...not having been the kind of person, or, or child that my parents expected me to be. Sort of feelings that I had not met their expectations. (Int. 7 Lines 19 – 26)

There were also feelings of shame about being in a position where adoption seemed like the only option. It is clear now that there were many outside factors making it difficult to keep this child. However, in the moment, the participants, who were almost children themselves, felt shameful that they were not able to keep their babies. One participant felt that this was the source of her feelings of shame, rather than the shame of actually being pregnant.

So, grief and umm...and...regret and incredible shame, that I had carried with me, umm, forever...of the sh-, not the shame of being pregnant. A lot of people think the shame that's associated with adoption is the shame of being pregnant. It wasn't that. It was the shame of not being able to...not being able to raise your child, of finding yourself in a place that you couldn't look after this baby. And feeling so ashamed that you weren't capable of being able to do that. (Int. 5 Lines 118 – 123)

Love

Feelings toward the baby, both before and after birth, were described as exclusively positive. Participants felt a great deal of love for their children and emphasized that none of the negative emotions were directed toward him or her, but rather at the situation, having to surrender, and lack of support.

One of the things that I remember most strongly is that as soon as he was born they put him on my tummy and uh, I remember this huge rush of love and wanting to protect him that I hadn't expected. (Int. 8 Lines 49 – 51)

And umm...the only time I would cry is umm...when I would cuddle with him, when I was sleeping, and I'd just curl around my belly and, you know, poke his feet, and his knees, and his elbows, and stuff like that. (Int. 4 Lines 18 – 20)

One participant pointed out that the awkwardness of the situation prevented the positive feelings that she did feel from fully developing.

I was taken to a room and I was able to feed him, and it was, I was the youngest of six children myself and had never had any exposure to newborns, so this was very awkward and unusual. But I did have a sense of closeness and warmth, even though it was so awkward and it was a difficult situation for me. (Int. 7 Lines 85 – 89)

I had positive feelings towards the baby. I didn't, you know, I wasn't thinking that it was his fault, or to get rid of him or any of those things. I really had feelings that would have developed, but it was just such an awkward and difficult time that they really didn't have a good chance to develop. (Int. 7 Lines 91 – 95)

Although there were a range of expressions used to convey the emotions felt during pregnancy and surrender, the experience was described primarily in negative terms. All of the participants reported only positive feelings toward the baby, but in terms of the actual experience of having to surrender, negative emotions prevailed. As discussed, the overwhelming nature of the negative emotions caused the women to become emotionally numb or to dissociate from the emotions.

Thoughts During Pregnancy and Surrender

Baby's Well Being

The most emphasized and central thought that the participants recalled during surrender pertained to the well-being of the baby in a number of areas, including financial, social, and emotional well-being. For all of the women, at least part of the decision to surrender was based on this line of thinking. The mothers were very

concerned about being able to provide their children with a two-parent home, which was the expectation at the time. One of the participants recalled that she was told that “he’d be a bastard, he’d be illegitimate, this is what you’d be doing to your child” (Int. 2 Lines 37 – 38). This concern for the baby’s well-being was echoed by others.

But at the time, you know...boys were supposed to have fathers, you know. And uh...I mean I, children deserve to have fathers, but...it was, there was a thought that went through everybody’s head that if a boy was raised by a, without a father that he would be a sissy and, you know. There were so many other things and so many other factors that you know you, you couldn’t...did you want your child to grow up with the stigma of being an illegitimate child? You know? And, and, it wasn’t, they weren’t called illegitimate children, they were called bastards. That’s what they were called, right. And did you want your child to grow up with that stigma. And no, I didn’t want that for him. (Int. 5 Lines 40 – 50)

The participants were also concerned about being unable to support the baby financially. Without some kind of interim support, the mothers had no way to raise this baby on their own and be able to provide for both of them.

Umm...a lot of, umm, it was like making a decision in a vacuum. That’s all I thought about was my baby. All I thought about, what was gonna happen, and a, umm, I couldn’t, I had nowhere to go. I had no home, I had no money, I had no job. And so it was always thinking about him. (Int. 2 Lines 34 – 37)

Several of the mothers also had concerns for the baby’s safety as a result of people in their lives. They did not want to put their children in jeopardy by bringing them into a dangerous environment.

I had made a decision that my child would not be safe around her, and that she would not be there to assist me in any way, shape, or form if that was her intention is to kill the child and end the pregnancy. (Int. 3 Lines 180 – 182)

Of course the father, I was terrified of, so I really knew that if I left him with a babysitter, the father would take the baby. That’s what I thought. I mean I can’t say he would or wouldn’t, but I believe he would. (Int. 2 Lines 40 – 42)

Wishes of Others

The opinions and wishes of other people, such as family and the community, also appear to be a common theme in the participants' thought processes at the time. The social climate served to perpetuate a negative portrayal of pregnancy out of wedlock. The wishes of family, community, and professionals for the mothers to surrender were influenced by the social stigma at the time and they conveyed these wishes both explicitly and implicitly. The participants were made painfully aware that people did not want them to raise this child out of wedlock. These influences played a major role in a life changing decision of whether or not to keep the baby, and were likely hard to ignore.

Umm...just that this was what I had to do and umm...I would uh, you know, make up for all my mistakes, and everybody would be happy that I'd made this decision, and, I was thinking about everybody else actually. I wasn't thinking about myself. (Int. 4 Lines 28 – 30)

And umm, being hated by everybody in my life or even strangers, people that didn't even know me were outwardly cruel. So it was like putting on this facade of just like steel so that you could survive what was happening. And of course, uh, I stayed in this home at the end, and umm, I mean the whole atmosphere there was they were...helping you with your sins. (Int. 2 Lines 52 – 56)

Treatment During Pregnancy and Surrender

Related to the above reference to shame and stigma, a theme that was particularly salient and relevant for most of the participants was the way that they were treated during surrender. Although very similar to the discussion of the wishes of others, this idea has been separated because it was clearly emphasized in the interviews. Not only were the participants influenced by the wishes of others, they were influenced by people's negative behaviour. They recalled being treated extremely poorly at some point during the pregnancy, and this was likely a factor in the feelings described, such as shame,

isolation, fear, and guilt. In later questions regarding reunion, participants often referred back to the way they were treated during the pregnancy and surrender. I was struck by the negativity and lack of support that these women had to cope with, especially at such a young age.

And the social worker, the same one who'd been so miserable, uh, waited until I gave him up in court, or handed him over, and then walked over to the nurse in the corner, and I did not know he was even in the room, walked over to the nurse and all of a sudden I see her walking toward me with this bundle. And she stopped me as I was leaving with my girlfriend who'd gone with me, and she grabbed my arm and she forced me to turn around, and she took the blanket off the baby, shoved him in my face and said, 'have a really good look because this is what you're gonna regret for the rest of your life.' (Int. 1 Lines 233 – 239)

And I had lots of reservations about even sharing it (the reunion) with my mom, because when she found out that I was pregnant she tried two different ways to abort the pregnancy. And, umm, I really didn't know what was going on. (Int. 3 Lines 170 – 173)

And I believed at that time that I should surrender, because my baby was better off without me, because I wasn't good enough to be his mother and I didn't deserved to have my own baby, and all those kind of things. It was wrong, like, to think that, but that is what I was thinking at the time, because that's what I was told. (Int. 2 Lines 18 – 22)

Physical Effects During Pregnancy and Surrender

Numbness

Unlike some anecdotal reports of physical ailments after surrender, such as aching arms, most participants did not report any physical effects of the surrender that they were aware of. When asked the question regarding physical effects of surrender, several participants did describe feeling numb. However, these experiences of numbness were described primarily in emotional terms, so they have been included in the previous discussion of feelings during pregnancy and surrender. Nonetheless, numbness might be interpreted as a physical sensation for some of the women.

Oh, yeah, numb and umm...despair, just really totally, umm, and I can even remember being in the hospital and I just, hardly able to walk I was just so numb, depressed, umm, really, nothing left of me really as a person. (Int. 2 Lines 24 – 26)

Exhaustion

A physical symptom during surrender that was reported by one of the participants was exhaustion. She said, “well I think it was just total exhaustion, because, I was a very slight person at the time, I was barely over a hundred pounds. But I look back, I must have had a lot of stamina.” (Int. 6 Lines 236 – 238)

Anxiety and Depression

When asked about physical symptoms of surrender, several participants described symptoms of anxiety and depression. However, these symptoms did not necessarily occur immediately following the surrender. Also, the symptoms were described as physical, but might be considered psychological afflictions instead.

Umm, a lot of nervousness, umm, you know, inability to eat, concentrate, that kind of thing, umm, and you know, I developed depression and panic, like after, in '88, and certainly don't, I don't attribute the depression solely to the pregnancy, but it certainly had an impact, you know. (Int. 7 Lines 122 – 125)

Emotions During Reunion

Overwhelmed

Extremely powerful and overwhelming are two ways to describe the nature of the emotions experienced by the participants during the initial reunion. Reunion was described as very emotional, both in a negative and positive way. Participants were inundated by all of their feelings. One participant described the experience as “like being hit by a train” and said that it was “emotional to a point that (she had) never experienced before” (Int. 4 Lines 44 – 45). She echoed the feelings of many of the other participants.

Umm...it took me a really long time to really even identify what I was feeling...because you're just overwhelmed with all these emotions that you don't even know what they are, it's just like they come. It, it's like being hit in the side of the head with this ball of something and you don't what it is, right. It's just this big ball of emotion and you don't even know what they are. (Int. 5 Lines 63 – 67)

It appears that some of the intensity of the emotions experienced during reunion is related to the emotional numbing or repression that often occurred during pregnancy and surrender. Some participants describe being in denial of emotions and thoughts about the surrender for many years, until the reunion. The reunion served to release these repressed emotions, resulting in an outpouring of negative emotions in reunion. Many negative emotions would likely have occurred even without denial and repression occurring. However, the nature of the experiences described suggests a more complex explanation. These women either felt incapable of dealing with the multitude of negative feelings around surrender or were told not to feel anything and not to grieve the child. This unresolved grief seemed to be very strong in reunion.

So for the very first time in almost thirty years I began to experience these emotions that uh, I had never felt before, because, you know, they told me in the hospital...you've got...don't be sad, you're doing the right thing. And uh...you'll forget this one. You'll go on with your life and...you'll have more babies and...you'll forget all about this one. They told me not to grieve this child, so...I didn't. I walked out of the hospital, I just turned my back...and I just never felt anything. I totally...dissociated from this event. (Int. 5: Lines 123 – 129)

So the reunion was significant not only in that it brought about particular negative and positive feelings, such as happiness and sadness, but because it released many emotions that were bottled up over many years since the surrender. Although the participants considered this emotional release positive and necessary, coping with the emotions was a difficult process. One participant felt that she would not have been able to face the feelings from the surrender without having her son back in her life.

But it was really the emotions, I, it, they were just overwhelming, because you're dealing with the past and then dealing with...uh, uh, my son, right there in front of me. But I would never have been able to relive the past without him. I couldn't. I don't think I would have been able to. I had to know he was there to...to relive what was done in losing him. (Int. 2 Lines 113 – 117)

Grief and Loss

In reunion, all of the participants reported intense feelings of grief, sadness, and loss. Although they did not lose a child to death, these women lost their children. All of them had to endure twenty-three years or more of this loss. As one participant put it, "it's a long time to wait; twenty-three years is longer than a lot of sentences for murder" (Int. 7 Lines 395 – 396). It is clear that a great deal of grieving occurred, even though the child has been found and not lost.

And it wasn't until about...I think about two weeks later...that the full force of what was actually unfolding in my life...began to, umm, unfold. And then I began to experience grief. And I still do. I went through the...probably about four months of...such intense grieving that there were days I don't even know how I functioned. (Int. 5 Lines 105 – 108)

It was like there was this kind of shifting inside of me, and everything that had been totally and completely shut down for eighteen years, it was like there was this very tiny hairline crack in this whole shell, this wall, this literally concrete wall that I had built around this experience. And the, the grief that was in there and the, the pain and the loss that was in there, just kind of began to...drip into my life. And I began to experience incredible depression and, and...and I have, ever since then. (Int. 5 Lines 224 – 230)

The sense of loss was and continues to be, uh, pretty gut wrenching. Like it's, uh, it goes away all the time as I develop a relationship and as the years pass, but, you know, the sense that you've lost those years and you're never getting them back no matter what is just a tremendous thing that you just cannot explain to anybody. No one will ever know and so there is really no point in going beyond that explanation, that it's just a tremendous sense of loss and grief and mourning. (Int. 7 Lines 211 – 216)

Participants reported that the feelings of grief and loss lessened with time. Despite this, the feelings are still present to this day, at some level for each participant. One

participant commented that “the pain is still so readily there, and it’s nine years later and I’m sitting in my son’s house with him making tea, and yet there’s still that pain and that sorrow.” (Int. 8 Lines 99 – 101)

Joy

Despite the overwhelming nature of reliving the past and its associated emotions, many positive emotions were also evident in reunion. There is enormous joy and happiness in meeting the child and fostering a relationship with him or her.

Oh, having my son. That’s just the best. It is knowing he’s there, knowing he’s okay, umm, knowing I can pick up the phone, or . . . , I can see him. Umm. . . just having him, can’t say having him back, because thirty years are missing and, my baby was taken away and thirty years along with it. But that’s the best. That is absolutely the best. (Int. 2 Lines 391 – 395)

Fulfillment

There were also feelings of fulfillment evident in the interviews. Many participants intended from the very day they surrendered to one day find their child. So achieving this goal was met with a sense of having fulfilled a promise and even a destiny.

I had a huge sense of joy that I was finally going to meet my daughter, because I had waited a long, long time for that to happen. And, umm. . . there was just so much excitement around, umm. . . waiting to get the first kind of interaction with her. I didn’t know whether it was going to be a letter or a telephone conversation, or she would show up at the door, or I would be allowed to show up at her door, or whatever, so, lots of things going through my mind. And umm, a huge sense of. . . fulfillment, like it’s finally going to happen. (Int. 3 Lines 74 – 80)

Pride

Several of the participants expressed a great deal of pride in their children. They are proud of their children in the same way that a mother who raised her child almost always is. One of the participants said, “my thoughts were how proud and how much admiration I had; the admiration that he’s a wonderful, sweet, kind, forgiving, and giving

person” (Int. 7 Lines 203 – 206). Another participants said, “when I got home that night... after we’d had lunch, he phoned to make sure I got home okay, so he’s a very caring person.” (Int. 1 Lines 359 – 361)

Fear

For most of the mothers, the fear of rejection by the child haunted their relationships, at least in the beginning. After having to live without their sons and daughters for so many years with the guilt felt about surrendering, the mothers were very aware that any meeting or phone call could be the last. This may not seem reasonable to those who have not been in this situation. However, the adoptee-natural mother relationship can be tumultuous at times, and the two parties are dealing with many difficult issues. The participants feared that at some point, for various reasons, their children would cease contact with them.

And the other negative thing is that certainly, even though (he) didn’t hold any ill will towards me, I couldn’t believe that, and, and I still really feared rejection. I really feared a turnaround in how he felt about me, and, you know, often there is with reunions, and unfortunately I’d heard enough of them that it was a bit of a scare. So still that fear of rejection that, that sort of still permeated the whole thing for quite some time. (Int. 7 Lines 174 – 179)

One of the emotions that I experienced very strongly in those first months was a fear of losing him again. I mean, I was constantly aware of it. Any phone call might be the last time he called me and I would lose him again. Only this time I now knew the pain of the loss, like you can deny it once, but you can’t do it again, and that fear governed me a great deal. (Int. 8 Lines 101 – 105)

I didn’t even hug him the first time he was here because I was so afraid that if touched him that he would just go away, and never come back, and I would never see him again. That, the thought that my touch would offend him so deeply that he would not come back again. I would never see him, I would lose him a second time. That I think has been the overwhelming emotion, through the whole thing, is fear. Fear of losing this child a second time. Fear of not doing it right... again. (Int. 5 Lines 164 – 169)

Anger

One of the strongest feelings evident in the interviews was anger. There is a lot of anger that seems to appear once the mother has been reunited with her son or daughter. The participants feel angry over the fact that the surrender occurred in the first place, because they were either chastised or simply denied support.

I have a lot of sadness anger, frustration, umm...first of all at my family of origin, my, meaning my parents. I can't really blame my siblings because they were too young. But my parents for thinking that, umm, they can dispose of their kind. I feel a lot of anger towards society for being marginalized. Umm...I, I'm just totally amazed at how warped their thinking is. Thinking that they can take one woman's child...to satisfy the void in some other woman's life. (Int. 3 Lines 231 – 236)

I was so filled with regret for what I had done. And so angry with myself for allowing it to happen. And angry because I began to understand what had happened to him...and that everything they told me...were lies. And...so I was very angry, because they lied and because they betrayed me. And I was angry at my parents because, where the hell were my parents? That's not what loving parents do, they don't walk away from their child, which is what my parents did. (Int. 5 Lines 140 – 145)

A related source of anger was the fact that these women were told that their children would live perfect lives with perfect two parent families. As children themselves, they were convinced that their children would live out a fantasy that probably does not exist, and that they were not good enough for their children. So there was an intense anger present when they realized that their children did not live perfect lives and that they themselves could have given them just the same or better. Of course, the participants are not trying to say that the parents are not fine people, but simply that they were fed an image of a fantasy for the child that did not actually exist.

The thoughts were really about what I was told, that I wasn't good enough for my son, and that these adoptive parents, they deserved my child. So what I kept, what was just, the most amazing thing was...there aren't any perfect, I kept looking at

people and saying there's no perfect, how did I ever believe that I wasn't good enough? Because there are no perfect parents. And when I met his parents, they're just ordinary people. They didn't deserve my child, I did. (Int. 2 Lines 121 – 126)

There was a great deal of pain for me in the fact that his, he had not been given the perfect life. The people who adopted him, I mean, not that they're not nice people and not that they don't love him. They are not the people, I would have kept him if they had said 'these are the people we're giving your son to.' And that made me very, very angry. At the same time, I couldn't show him that anger, they're his parents. (Int. 8 Lines 123 – 130)

Related to the above feelings of anger, there is also anger at feeling coerced into surrendering the child. Many years later, these women are finally realizing that they were not to blame for making this, in their minds, horrible decision. They were coerced by a society in which babies were needed to fill demand and having a child out of wedlock was shameful.

I think what, what the reunion actually did is to wake me up to the reality of what, what is actually happening, what was actually done to us. And umm...I can actually see now...how...how I was coerced into giving up my child. And umm...it's, it just totally bamboozles me. (Int. 3 Lines 260 – 263)

But on the other hand, you know, all of the, you know, the, so many people have been able to come out of the closet and be acknowledged, like gay groups and, you know, native rights and everything, and native peoples. Like, just an example, a native girl, even back thirty years ago, she was encouraged to keep her child, you know, but if you were a healthy white girl, young mother, it was just, everything in their power was done to give that child up. (Int. 6 Lines 696 – 701)

Thoughts During Reunion

Child's Well-Being

Just as in the time of surrender, common thoughts during reunion concerned the daughter or son's well-being. As discussed previously, an important reason for surrendering the child for adoption was this same concern for well-being. It is only natural that these concerns remain.

Umm, some concern that he would be okay at all, you know, like what had happened to him and if he lived a good life, and some people had found even their children had died. So there was a huge amount of relief. (Int. 7: Lines 133 – 136)

So there were a lot of things around my reunion with him. Concern for his health and welfare, concern for his siblings, uh, concern for what, how he may have been traumatized, you know, now realizing that he was in a foster home, and I thought he was adopted right away. And now I know through my own healing journey how that can affect a person. So I was very concerned about his mental and emotional state. (Int. 1 Lines 282 – 286)

Disbelief Over Separation

Participants also expressed many thoughts about how awful it was that the surrender occurred in the first place. There was a disbelief that this had actually happened. In meeting the child it was as if they had realized the magnitude of the loss and the impact it actually had on them. Before the reunion it was like they were able to ignore these thoughts, or did not realize them. In reunion, the thoughts could no longer be denied.

I remember, umm, the first time that I was close to her. Like, I hugged her and I could smell her. And umm...her skin smelled like the daughter that I raised, and I just thought, oh, this is terrible, how, how this could...how we could be separated, you know. (Int. 3 Lines 83 – 86)

Child's Feelings

There seems to be a great concern for the son or daughter's rights and feelings in the reunions. Most of the participants mentioned that they always tried very hard to consider the needs of the adoptee. In order to do this, often one's own feelings have to be set aside and dealt with separately. For example, one participant said that she was "thinking about how to make sure (to) consider him and (not) run roughshod over him and (not) overwhelm him and try to be considerate" (Int. 7: Lines 189 – 190). The mothers do not want to cause their children any harm and try very hard to avoid doing so.

So, what happened in the past really is all mine to deal with and to...whatever, heal from, or whatever I have to do. And the relationship is separate. I'm the mother to, he's my son, and he needs me to not load him up with my stuff. Just to be his mother and build our relationship, and provide from him what he needs. (Int. 2 Lines 223 – 226)

(He) felt very much like he didn't want to be the skeleton in somebody's closet. And so, I mean, there was the fear that it would affect my career and that kind of thing if people knew I had a child out of wedlock. And so at that point I had to sit there and think, okay, well, the last time I lost my son with this kind of stupidity and I'm not doing that again right? So pretty much I went systematically to make very, to make sure everyone knew. (Int. 8 Lines 206 – 213)

Family's Feelings

Many of the mothers feel they have to be careful to consider their family's feelings as well. It can be a difficult adjustment for siblings and spouses when the adopted child comes into their lives. One mother said that she made sure to "try to consider the other members of (the) family, (her) children and (her) husband, and (tried) to include them in the process (Int. 7 Lines 190 – 191). Participants thought a great deal about how to ensure that no one's feelings were hurt or that no one felt left out.

What I have to work with is, and my husband as well, is acknowledging feelings of my raised children, and trying to accommodate everybody's feelings, which I thought I was doing, but I don't think, there's things I'm holding back of the real feelings, not on my part, but on their part, which bothers me. (Int. 6 Lines 676 – 679)

Physical Effects During Reunion

Positive Effects

Three of the participants reported that reunion had physical implications for them. For one participant, reunion had a positive impact on physical functioning.

My whole life has changed completely, uh, emotionally and umm, physically, I don't have anxiety, I don't have any of, I used to have trouble with my heart. I was on medication for a long, long time. I don't have that at all. (Int. 2 Lines 379 – 382)

Birth Effects

Two other participants also experienced physical symptoms that seemed to be a result of reunion. These physical effects appeared to be a release of physical sensations that might normally have occurred at the time of birth.

There were physical effects at reunion that were interesting. Umm, for example, when he found me, one of the things I felt and you haven't had children so you won't know this, but the letdown effect just as you're about to feed a, breastfeed a child, and just before the milk comes in. It feels a little painful just because your breast is full and you're about to feed your child. And I had that constantly, twenty-four hours a day for three months after he found me (Int. 8 Lines 55 – 61). And it was so clearly a birth effect. It was like my body was remembering what should have happened and stopped with the loss. (Int. 8 Lines 67 – 68)

Prior to reunion I had the weirdest sensation in my hips. Uh, I actually had pain in my hips to the point where I actually went to, went for, umm, was it, uh, what do you call it? Not an ECG, but a...

Interviewer: An MRI?

Yeah, it was an MRI because I had pains in my hips and all through my abdomen, prior to me, uh, the reunion with him, and it's gone away since. So I think the emotions of the actual giving birth and then suppressing everything, uh, was released just prior to, you know, me meeting him. (Int. 1 Lines 295 – 302)

*Influence of Surrender Experience on Reunion**Processing the Negative*

For all of the women in this study, surrendering their child was an exclusively negative experience. However, as many participants expressed, much of the negativity sustained at the time of reunion was not actually processed until the reunion. These feelings were in a sense repressed and then resurfaced in reunion. This influenced the reunion in a highly negative way. It was difficult for participants to cope with all of these negative feelings and thoughts while at the same time trying to foster a relationship with the son or daughter.

All that negativity that I felt during the surrender really just waited, you know, twenty-three years to come out. I, I relived much of it and I processed what I

needed to process when, uh, in the months before, you know, as I was trying to find him. And of course, it's helpful for the person searching because they are able to process it and not be surprised by someone coming. But, uh, my feelings and the things that happened and that sort of thing during surrender experienced, er, influenced reunion very negatively, um, I don't know how you would get around that. It's just, it wasn't a happy thing. (Int. 7 Lines 232 – 239)

And umm...thirty-two years of denial. Umm...there was no turning it off once the faucet was open. I mean, it was just like you'd lost a washer or something that, it just wouldn't shut off. I'd had it, you know, I had it shut up so tight that when I opened it, and it came apart, it just, there was no turning it off. (Int. 4 Lines 94 – 97)

One of the participants emphasized the importance of not letting your negative feelings from surrender influence you and burden your child. There is the potential to cause some tension in the relationship if the mothers let their pain from surrender influence the reunion too much.

My life is totally separate from my relationship with (him) and from the reunion. At first I don't think it was, umm, because I, I kind of knew from reading, because I read a book, *Lost and Found*, on the way (to see him), I read about. So I knew he was coming from a different place than I was. And umm, I made a few faux pas that I, I wouldn't make again should I go in, but he survived and I survived. Uh, but I had to separate it out because he still wasn't, he still isn't, he's coming, but he isn't, he doesn't see adoption and loss the same as I do. (Int. 2 Lines 215 – 222)

Umm, I think for one thing, umm...the intensity of my loss and my sorrow came across really strong to my daughter. And I think that caused some trepidation in her. But, in looking back now, I think it also helped her recognize some of her own emotions around our separation. (Int. 3 Lines 107 – 112)

Independence

All of the participants emphasized feeling very alone and unsupported during their pregnancy and surrender. At a very young age they were forced to make a life-changing decision all alone. Also, most of the participants were forced to make the decision for exactly that reason, because there was no support. As a result, the feeling in reunion was very much one of wanting to do this on their own. The reunions were

considered very personal, and although they appreciated support that was extended during reunion, the mothers were also very independent in this endeavour.

I mean I did, you know at the time of surrender, certainly needed everything in terms of financial and you know, emotional and all of those things, none of which I got really. But at this point, at the point of reunion, I really needed everybody to get the hell out of my way and let me do this. (Int. 7 Lines 345 – 348)

Changes As the Reunion Progressed

Less Fear

As the relationships developed, participants that had expressed a fear of a subsequent loss of the child experienced less fear of rejection and fear that the relationship would end. The participants started to feel more confident in the relationship, of their place in their child's life, and in themselves. Also, there appears to be a realization that they really have no control over whether or not the child chooses to continue the relationship and that the child's decisions do not rely solely on their behaviour.

There was certainly less fear of rejection, umm, and I became more confident in myself, uh, as the relationship progressed. I had more of a sense of calm and more of a sense that, umm, that I wasn't a bad person anymore. (Int. 7 Lines 261 – 263)

You don't get a lot of do-overs in life, and this is a pretty major do over. So...uh, there's been a lot of fear. And I, I've almost, and there still is, but I, I have to admit that, umm, it doesn't, I'm not as fearful now as I was. And I guess...part is because I'm more comfortable in the fact that I know that he's not able really to respond to me right now. He's umm, he's very deeply in denial. (Int. 5 Lines 169 – 174)

Time-outs

Unfortunately for some of the participants, these fears that the relationship will not continue have come true, at least to an extent. In these situations, it does not appear that the relationships are completely over. There is still a good possibility that things will

be rectified. However, for now, the relationships are in a state of limbo. This is the source of a great deal of disappointment for these women. However, it is not surprising that it is difficult to make these new relationships work. A third participant, who is still in contact with her son but feels it is not going well, put it this way:

It's no wonder that these reunions, you know, fall apart. You have two people that are, so damaged emotionally, and they come together, and neither one of them has the foggiest idea about what's going on, and it's, it's no wonder that they can't communicate. (Int. 5 Lines 514 – 517)

Nonetheless, it is still very hard to cope with what could potentially be a second loss of the child. These changes in the status of the relationships are one of the directions that the reunion can take. One participant said, “I want him to be part of our life and I just want to be part of his life, but I don't know how we can do that” (Int. 4 Lines 338 – 339). There seems to be desperation to have a good relationship with the child, but also a lot of difficulty trying to negotiate the relationship.

We have quite a banter back and forth and we're really quite honest with our feelings. There's no beating around the bush. And I think because of that we've been able to get to the depth, like the core wound, umm, with each other right away. And I think maybe that has contributed to some of these time outs we're having in our reunion. Long time outs. (Int. 3 Lines 126 – 130)

Who To Tell

Since the reunion was a source of great pride, most mothers told everyone they knew about it. While surrender was a time of much secrecy and stigma, in reunion the participants relished in the ability to tell everyone about this wonderful event taking place in their lives.

Every body I could possibly find to tell. I, I was very proud, finally, and when I came out of the closet, more or less, I came out in a big way (Int. 7 Lines 287 – 288). So now was a time when I could open up and say, hey guys, you know that thing that happened, well, I've got a boy that I'm so proud of and this is happening to me and it's all wonderful. (Int. 7 Lines 296 – 298)

However, even though some of the participants probably wanted to tell the world, leftover secrecy and shame, and difficulty initiating the topic initially kept them from sharing their news. Eventually they were able to become more open about the reunion though.

I went to a meeting at Adoption Options and there was an adoptee there, and I said, 'why is it that I can't, you know, I've got this out, but I, I haven't even told my parents yet.' And she told me, she says, 'keeping it inside as a secret after the reunion, it's just like a second refusal to the adopted person.' So with that in mind, I came home. I said, 'I have to tell my parents.' I still couldn't phone them, but I wrote to both of them, both sets of parents. (Int. 6 Lines 349 – 354)

Initially, only my family. Only my kids. Umm...they, I didn't really share with anybody at work or...I really, I mean who do you go to? I mean nobody knew. I mean, you didn't tell anybody, I mean you couldn't tell anybody. Umm...I mean how, how do you say to somebody, oh, guess what I did this weekend? I found the son that I lost, you know, twenty-eight years ago. Umm...so initially uh...nobody knew. (Int. 5 Lines 268 – 272)

There were also some misgivings for some participants in telling certain people who were unsupportive at the time of the pregnancy.

I had lots of reservations about even sharing it with my mom, because when she found out that I was pregnant, umm, my mom is a nurse, and, er, was a nurse. When she found out about the pregnancy she tried two different ways to abort the pregnancy. (Int. 3 Lines 170 – 173)

Understanding the Impact of Reunion

Participants feel that others cannot understand the impact the reunion has unless they have been in the same situation, or are very close to the situation. This is the case in many situations besides adoption and adoption reunion. It is difficult to take another person's perspective. However, it appears that this is an even greater challenge in adoption reunion. Others have a difficult time understanding how painful surrender can be and how reunion can be just as painful. The participants do not resent people for this,

but simply state that it is uncommon, although not unheard of, for people to be able to empathize with them.

Nope. Nobody understands. And not even, like I say, his father. He didn't understand. Like, everybody thought, oh this is so wonderful and we'll just carry on, like they were so casual about it. It was like...it was like, umm, meeting a new best friend or something, you know. But not to me. It wasn't any of that. So, no, nobody understood. Still don't. In fact, the only ones who do understand are other mothers. (Int. 4 Lines 137 – 142)

Support During Reunion

Listening and Empathy

Participants expressed feeling fairly supported during reunion, in stark contrast to how they felt during pregnancy and surrender. Support came primarily from other raised children and spouses, but friends and other family members were also generally supportive. Part of this support involved being willing to listen and to at least try to understand why the participant was doing this and its importance. This does not necessarily mean that other people will understand the significance of the event, as discussed previously, but the fact that they are willing to try is appreciated. None of the participants were given this consideration during surrender.

Umm, my children were great. They, umm, I'm sure they must have thought, you know, what the hell is going on here, but, umm, so they, I didn't doubt that they were trying to understand as best they could. (Int. 7 Lines 323 – 325)

My closest friends, and there are four or five of them, were very supportive, uh, very, very. I was staying with a girlfriend ... when I arrived there and she was pretty upset for me, like she wanted to know how everything went and then, uh, even wanted to know if I wanted her to go for dinner with him that night. (Int. 1 Lines 433 – 436)

Lack of Support During Reunion

Focus on the Positives

One thing that was identified as unsupportive around the time of reunion was the fact that some people limited their support to the positives. Certain people in these women's lives were quick to offer support, congratulations, and encouragement about the reunion. However, as soon as the participants suggested that there were some negative aspects and problems, people could not believe this and chose not to provide support for this facet of the experience. This is an important oversight because the participants are coping with some very difficult emotions that in any other situation would be supported, such as the death of a child.

My sister was supportive, but in the sense that, ahh, this is great, he's back and it's all wonderful, and didn't it work out fine and dandy. But the minute I would say, no, it's not fine and dandy, like, I, I have some real issues here. Well, you shouldn't have any issues. Give your head a shake. Look what you have to be grateful for. You're so lucky. You know, blah, blah, blah, blah. Umm...but I wasn't feeling that at all. Like basically I was, it was, you know I was rejoicing, but I was grieving at the same time, but nobody acknowledged the grief. So there was absolutely no support for the grief. There was only, there was only support for rejoicing. (Int. 4 Lines 153 – 160)

Controlling the Experience

Another behaviour that the participants found to be unsupportive was people trying to dictate what the experience should be like and how the participants should feel and behave. The participants did not feel that they needed someone trying to control them like this. Other people are not in the situation to experience what it is like and how it should make someone feel.

My sister and I had a big wopping. Because she wanted to control what, my experience, and tell me what was going on, even with my son. Tell me that I was angry and I was going to lose him cuz I was so angry. (Int. 2 Lines 314 – 316)

I've been at meetings with the government, at a meeting, and I was the only mother in that room who had lost a child. And the people in that meeting asked people adopted, adoptive parents, people who were children of adopt- of, of

people who were adopted, what birthmothers feel like. No one asked me. (Int. 2. Lines 330 – 333)

Belief in a False Reality

Some participants also find it very unsupportive when people refuse to accept what they are being told about the past and the surrender. The participants are finally speaking about how they felt at the time and some people choose not to admit that this was the case. Some people chose not to trust the participants' own descriptions of how they felt. The mothers expressed frustration that their feelings and experiences were not seen as valid.

Nobody wants to hear today either. But, and my family, my brother and sister, my parents aren't alive, but it's been really hard for them, uh, because they want to believe what they believed for thirty years. That I willingly surrendered a child and just went out and gave up a child and got on with my life. And so it's been really hard for them. (Int. 2 Lines 310 – 314)

And finally I just had to tell her, that, this is my experience, this is what happened. Same with my brother. I told him, this is what went on. We were all in the same city and I was invisible to them. And so it's been very, I don't blame them, it's not their fault, but they can't pretend that what happened to me didn't happen. And so they weren't very supportive. (Int. 2 Lines 316 – 320)

Being a Natural Mother

Not the Real Thing

For the participants in this study, being a natural mother means that they will never be able to have a true mother-child relationship with their son or daughter. There is no way that they can take back the years that were lost. The adoptive mother will always be considered the child's mother. It is difficult to cope with this because even though the participants did not raise their children, they still feel like the mother. Adding birth, natural, or any other prefix to the title mother is a permanent reminder of the role they will never play in the child's life.

So everyday is a constant reminder of what you cannot give. Like you're not allowed. What this person...will not allow you to give them, you know. What you can never be. Everyday is a constant reminder of what you can never be to this child anymore. (Int. 5 Lines 184 – 187)

Being a natural mother is not as good as being a mother, because having the term natural in front of mother means it's something else besides mother, and as much as I find it difficult, um, sometimes it's awkward, but I'm never gonna get back the years I lost. (Int. 7 Lines 368 – 370)

Question of Status

It seems that for most of the mothers, being a natural mother also means struggling with your status as such. They are constantly trying to figure out where they fit into the picture, or maybe more appropriately, where they are permitted to fit into the picture. As one participant put it, she never had to question or think about her status with her raised child.

I had never dealt status of being a mother with my daughter. There is an ease in that. And with (him) there is always the sense, the knowledge that he feels disloyal to his adoptive mother because he knows me and because he has a close relationship with me and there are times that drives me crazy, because why should he suffer for that? (Int. 8 Lines 311 – 315)

Natural Mother as Positive

Although being a natural mother is not the ideal situation, being reunited enabled some of the participants to see the label in a positive light. Before reunion there were only negative aspects of being a natural mother. Reunion allowed the mothers to discard the shame and stigma once felt when considering oneself a natural mother. For some reason, having the child back in their lives changed how the participants felt about themselves and the entire situation. It is difficult to say for sure why the reunion facilitated this change, but it may be a result of the emotional processing that occurred at reunion. Most of the emotions and thoughts about surrender were repressed because of

their overwhelming nature. It was not until reunion that the participants were able to reflect on the event. In this reflection, they realized that the horrible things that they were told are not true and that they are not shameful for being natural mothers. For instance, one of the mothers said, “it’s changed from being a negative thing prior to, at surrender it was all about negativity and shame and guilt and loss, and all of those things” (Int. 7 Lines 366 – 367).

Natural Mother As a New Role

Having the surrendered son or daughter back in their life also means that the participants must integrate this new role into their lives. Being a natural mother may not carry with it the benefits of raising the child, yet as a natural mother the participants still seemed to feel a sense of responsibility to the son or daughter. One participant said, “I have to be there, I’m responsible to him, until I die” (Int. 2 Line 451). To fulfill these responsibilities does require some adjustments, ones that the mothers appear to be more than happy to make. Nonetheless, the transition can still be challenging.

I only thought of myself as the mother of a daughter, so when he came back I suddenly had to think of myself as also the mother of a son. And that was disconcerting. It was a different sense of me as a person and as a mother. If, I mean, part of that is that when you just have a daughter or daughters you can listen to jokes about men, you know, being beer sodden oafs and just laugh about them in some senses, but when you have a son, you have to think about how those kinds of jokes affect your child. (Int. 8 Lines 115 -121)

Positives of Reunion

Knowing Child is Well

Concern and worry for the adoptee’s well-being were very apparent during surrender, through the years, and during reunion. As a result of this permanent worry, it makes sense that one of the positive facets of reunion reported was the knowledge that

the adoptee was alive and well. The participants felt relief and a sense of peace in knowing the child was living a relatively happy, healthy, and prosperous life.

To know he's okay, I don't know, that he turned out okay. He's umm, relatively healthy with respect to his emotional state, you know, certainly, umm, that's about it, I think that those are the positive things, getting to know him and knowing he's okay. That was a big one, I, you know, knowing he hadn't died, knowing he hadn't endured abuse at his parents hands, or at anybody's hands and you can't imagine how those things go through your mind over the years. (Int. 7 Lines 390 – 395)

But I was happy that he was a whole person, that he played hockey, that, you know, he did sports, and there were no repercussions from (his) arm. So uh...yeah, very happy about that. So, happy that he seemed to be very well adjusted. He had three children under ten, like then, ten, six, and two. And he's a good father, a good husband. (Int. 1 Lines 258 – 263)

Having a Relationship

The opportunity to form a relationship with the child that they lost to adoption is a continuing source of joy. For most, the reunion has been positive in this way. The participants have been able to get to know their children and grandchildren. Although it cannot undo the damage done, it is clearly the next best thing. One of the mothers said, "I often think, my God, it's been such a joy, like I just beam when I think of being with them" (Int. 6 Lines 680 – 681).

Self-Esteem

It was quite shocking to hear the enormous changes in confidence and self-esteem some of the participants experienced after reunion. Prior to reunion the women talked about having very low self-esteem. At the time of the pregnancy and surrender they were treated in ways that caused them to believe terrible things about themselves. It was not until reunion that they were able to think about the things that were said and done and re-evaluate them as less significant or not at all significant. Again, this seems to be due to

the fact that reflection on the events of surrender did not occur until the child was back in the mother's life. One participant commented, "I became more confident in myself as the relationship progressed. I had more of a sense of calm and more of a sense that I wasn't a bad person anymore" (Int. 7 Lines 261 – 263). This feeling was mirrored by several other participants.

So, but really I...other people's opinions, they were right and of course I would be wrong, because, uh, now no, not at all. Like I really have an, I have confidence and self-esteem etcetera and all that kind of stuff. And umm, particularly in to with this, it's, I can talk about, and not myself personally, but in general, about what was done and people, I just, when they talk and say stupid things, instead of being, like thinking, oh they might be right, I think, oh God. (Int. 2 Lines 372 – 378)

Helping Other Mothers

Some participants expressed that it is positive for them to be able to help other mothers that have lost their children. Being part of the Canadian Council of Natural Mothers and other groups enables them to share their experiences and support other women that are in the same position. They also feel it is important to speak up about their experiences in order to make the public aware of the implications of surrendering a child, to prevent unnecessary trauma for other mothers and adoptees. The ability to do these kinds of things only became possible after reunion, because so much of the experience was ignored or repressed prior to this.

I think it's important that we support one another and that we let people know what we've been through and umm, as I said before, there's just no way on earth that anybody can describe this experience to someone else who hasn't had it happen, and to think that other people are making the decision to surrender without knowing some of this is, it's like prescribing medication that could make someone be missing limbs when they deliver and not telling them that. (Int. 7 Lines 434 – 439)

I began to see the larger pattern that women are silenced by shame, and that disallows other mothers from knowing their children. And so then, in many ways

now, I would rather not talk about it, I would rather just leave it and then I won't have to get weepy, right? But I continue to talk about it as a political act, so there can be many other mothers who know that they are not alone. (Int. 8 Lines 217 – 223)

Identity

Reunion appeared to facilitate the formation of a complete identity that was lacking prior to reunion. It was very interesting to hear the participants talk about how they were able to integrate the person that they were when they surrendered with the person they are now to finally achieve a cohesive sense of identity. It is as if they left behind part of themselves at surrender and were not able to find it until reunion. One participant said that “it’s like picking up the person you left behind and joining it with the person you are, and there you are, you’re a whole person again” (Int. 2 Lines 188 – 190). This was a very positive result of reunion for the participants.

I created this whole false persona, umm, afterwards, because I had nothing left. When I, when I left that hospital and I left that baby behind, I left everything that I was at seventeen. Everything that I was at seventeen, everything that I believed in to be true and right and good, at seventeen, was gone. There was nothing, no part of who I was as a person left. As completely, totally, emotionally incinerated. There was nothing left of me, and I had to go and I had to rebuild this person that could survive on whatever was left inside. And, and that person was not the real me. And...I have, I feel that I have connected with that person who was me at, before losing my child. So, yeah, it’s a, totally different thing. (Int. 5 Lines 390 – 398)

It just gives you a real strength. It, it’s just, umm, it’s like picking up the person you left behind and joining it with the person you are and there you are, you’re a whole person again. Umm, I have a ton of self-confidence, tons of self-esteem now that I’ve, it just came back. It’s like looking, all of a sudden my life made sense. Like I could look back and say, oh, that’s why I did this, that’s why I had all that trouble, that’s everything fell into place. And (he) was the key to my life. And my life is, like I can be who I am now. And I didn’t. I lived a, I lived a false, not a false life, cuz I have, my kids are incredible kids that I raised and all that. But there was...I made a person that could survive; a person that pretended they could belong in a world I was kicked out of. And so, and it’s a, if you ever read about this, it’s, and I, I didn’t, I didn’t know that that everybody knows that {laughter} but that’s what I did. So I created somebody who could survive,

because the person, I couldn't survive having lost my baby. So I created somebody that could smile and laugh and totally, uh, just, I don't even know, like an actress. (Int. 2 Lines 216 – 229)

Like, I know who I am. I found myself! That's not too bad after all thirty years. But that's exactly what it is because that's who you leave behind. Your identity is destroyed. You're a slut, you're a whore, you're a baby abandoner, you're all kinds of horrible things, and umm that's what you, that's what sticks in your mind, even though my life to the world I was perfect. That was a shocker for them. They thought I was perfect. But I never saw myself as perfect. (Int. 2 Lines: 188 – 207)

Uh, it took probably several years to integrate the person I'd become with the young girl. My husband said, the weekend he came to visit the first time, that he watched me go back to being a sixteen year old, like he could just see me regress, and he said it was astonishing. (Int. 8 Lines 105 – 108)

Closer Family

Positive effects of the reunion were not restricted to the mothers. According to some participants, forming a relationship with the adoptee also brought the existing family members closer together. It is not clear why this is the case. Perhaps the mother's increased openness facilitated more communication within the family, or the fact that the family banded together to help support her during the reunion made them feel closer. Whatever the reason, reunion does appear to have some positive implications for the family unit. One participant said, "it's made us a lot closer as a family" (Int. 4 Line 283). Another said, "we just all became closer" (Int. 2 Line 355).

Negatives of Reunion

Recognition of Loss

Although all of the mothers felt that the reunion was mostly positive and expressed no regrets about meeting their children, the reunion makes it impossible to deny or repress the feelings of grief and loss. Seeing the child, now a grown man or woman, forced the participants to contemplate the years lost, the bonds not formed, and

the memories that were missing. Before reunion it was possible to ignore these thoughts. After reunion, the child is there in front of these women, forcing them to face all the things they lost. For example, one of the women said, “it was a lot easier when I didn’t know (the pain and loss) was there” (Int. 8 Lines 344 - 345). Another woman said that “the negative is knowing that I can never change the past, I can never undo what was done, I can never take away the pain of losing my child” (Int. 2 Lines 403 – 405). Others also expressed this feeling of loss.

I guess a negative thing would be the sadness of the reality of what actually has happened. That we, we were really lost to each other forever, you know. That, the person she is is not the daughter that I would’ve raised. And umm, I can’t really expect her to ever be that person. That person is lost. (Int. 3 Lines 282 – 286)

Interference

A few participants reported being frustrated by other people in the child’s life interfering with the relationship, particularly spouses or adoptive parents. By exerting their influence over the adoptee, some mothers feel that these people created tension in the adoptee-natural mother relationship. For example, some people seemed to make the adoptee feel guilty about the relationship with the natural mother. It is difficult to cope with this because even though she might feel this interference is causing turmoil in the relationship, it is not the mother’s right to tell the child who to listen to or what to think. As discussed previously, the natural mother is not granted the same rights as a mother that raised the child, and as such, she must simply hope that her child will not be influenced and will continue the relationship with her.

I feel there’s some interference...on behalf of his mother. Umm, I feel that he went through a bit of a guilt trip afterwards because he seemed to want to continue the relationship and then all of a sudden, he backed off. So something happened. (Int. 1 Lines 548 – 550)

I don't know, the worst part is I don't know where we can go from here in light of the way things are. Umm...I really put it all on his wife, the whole...everything. Umm, you know, I was so grateful to her and I, I just loved her to death for finding me and bringing us together and...but on the flip side of that, I just don't think I'll ever get over the way she tore it apart as well. (Int. 4 Lines 290 – 294)

Negotiating the Relationship

There seems to be some difficulty trying to navigate through different obstacles in this new and strange type of relationship. Some of the mother-adoptee pairs had an easier time than others at successfully establishing a pattern of interaction. For those that experienced and continue to experience more challenges in this area, it is extremely exasperating.

Sometimes the hopelessness is really, you really get overwhelmed by, you know, in any other relationship, if you're in any other relationship where you felt that you were not even, that you were barely, we were talking about this on the internet today actually that, you know, this relationship, I feel barely tolerated. And if I was in, if it was any relationship with anybody else, I simply would say, okay, well you know, I tried my best and, you know, throw in the towel and walk away right. But you can't do that, you know, you just, you can't do that. (Int. 5 Lines 178 – 184)

I think that we have a lot to learn from each other. And I think that umm...we could be having a lot of fun together if we could put...some of the feelings aside, or if you could somehow dredge through the feelings, we could be having a lot of fun together and feel a lot of closeness. (Int. 3 Lines 301 – 304)

Effects on Functioning

Pre-Occupation

In the initial stages of reunion, all of the mothers reported being unable to think about anything else but the son or daughter, the reunion, and the surrender. This made it difficult to function normally in everyday activities and responsibilities.

I was so preoccupied with it cause it was going on in my head everyday and yet I wanted to make very certain that, to my raised children, that, you know that, it was all in my head, like I wasn't ranting and raving about it. It was total preoccupied, preoccupation in my head. But I didn't want to make other people

aware that it was that, that I was preoccupied with it. And it's just, it was so all consuming...so that I found that it was really hard to keep a balance. (Int. 6 Lines 755 – 761)

Depression

Some of the participants experienced symptoms of depression during the initial stages of reunion. Clearly this also makes it very difficult to function from day to day and had a large impact on their lives.

I have a very difficult time functioning, on a day to day basis, I have a very difficult time, very overwhelmed many, many days, by simple tasks. Umm...the simple things, like getting up on my day off. I only have one day off and I get up and I know that I have about a dozen things I need to do, and, and I can't, I can't organize my thoughts enough to get it done, you know. (Int. 5 Lines 426 – 430)

Umm, so you know, priorities have shifted a lot. Uh, but it has, it had an enormous impact on my lifestyle, on my work, I'm barely able to function at work. Uh, many, many days in fact, there, you know, sometimes it's an entire week goes by where I can't do anything at work. I go into work and, and the same thing happens. I know what I have to do, but I can't do it. It's like I can't shift my thoughts away from...this whole reunion, loss, adoption, grief, thing, to say, okay, put that over there, now, and deal with this. (Int. 5 Lines 439 – 444)

But after reunion...that's all, I couldn't think about, making a list, I couldn't think about going for groceries. I could barely think about taking a shower, you know. Like...I'd get up out of bed and I'd go through the motions all day long and I'd do what I thought had to be done, but, honestly...I had no memory at all. Like, to try and remember little tasks, and to multi-tasks, I, I couldn't do it. And I didn't realize that that's part of clinical depression is you can't multi-task. (Int. 4 Lines 252 – 257)

Continuation of the Relationship

There is no doubt that all of the participants want to continue a relationship with their children. Although some of the participants are experiencing challenges to these relationships, they still expressed a desire for continued contact, whenever it is possible. There were two primary reasons for wanting to maintain or achieve this relationship with the child.

Love

Love for the child seemed to be the most powerful basis for wanting a relationship. The mothers clearly care for their children a great deal.

I've always cared and loved my, cared about my son and loved him very much, whether or not I raised him I was thinking about him throughout my life and the only reason I didn't raise him was because I didn't have the support I needed and I didn't feel I could or should or, you know, all of the society mores, you know, that we make for ourselves but, that were imposed upon me where you sort of, know there's a losing battle, so, um, anyway I do want to continue a relationship with my child and with my grandchildren and he encourages that, and um, it's just um, something that I wouldn't give up for anything. (Int. 7 Lines 425 – 431)

Support for the Child

A second reason for wanting to maintain a relationship with the son or daughter is to be able to provide them with whatever they may need. This might be in the form of emotional support, advice, or more tangible forms of support. The mothers feel a responsibility to their children, despite the fact that they did not raise them.

I have to be there. I'm responsible to him, until I die. Umm, he needs me. He maybe doesn't think he needs me. He maybe doesn't think he needs me, I don't know, I think he knows he needs me. Uh, there's lots of, he has uh, he's got a long way to go, umm, to bring his life...to where he'll want it to be. (Int. 2 Lines 451 – 454)

Umm...it's, it's my job. It's always been my job, it's been my job. Uh, I have to, it is my job to help him fulfill his destiny, in whatever capacity I am able to do that. And if that just means that, you know, maybe for the next fifteen years things don't change, then, then that's the way it has to be and I just need to accept that. (Int. 5 Lines 501 – 505)

DISCUSSION

This study set out to describe the personal experiences of natural mothers during adoption reunion. The first goal of the study was to describe what the surrender was like. Previous research indicates that surrendering a child is traumatic and carries with it long-term negative consequences. This was also true for the participants in this study. The surrender was described as exclusively negative, including feelings of grief, loss, depression, isolation, and shame. Also, the surrender was so emotionally overwhelming that this negativity was denied or repressed for many years until the reunion occurred. Emotional numbness during surrender was described by all of the participants and this had important consequences during the reunion. The participants were also treated very poorly during their pregnancies and the surrender, which contributed both to the negative feelings and to the reasons for surrendering. This finding is new to literature examined for this study.

It was also hypothesized that the way that surrender was experienced would have a significant impact on how reunion was experienced and negotiated. This prediction was also confirmed. First, the negative thoughts and emotions that seem to have been repressed at surrender, surfaced during reunion. This finding makes sense when compared to previous literature in which unresolved grief seemed to be the cause of later problems (Millen & Roll, 1985; Zigun, 1990). The experience of delayed grief made the reunion a very difficult time for the participants, even though the event was joyful in many other ways. Clearly repression, denial, and dissociation are not the only reason that negative feelings are experienced during reunion. Even if thoughts and emotions were not ignored or repressed at surrender, negative feelings were exacerbated during reunion. It is

clear that surrender has a considerable impact on the way these mothers felt, thought, and behaved in reunion. The fact that the surrender was so traumatic made the reunion traumatic as well. The intensity of the mother's emotional pain may have also had some influence on the adoptee's perceptions, and consequently the relationship. However, this was not completely clear in any of the interviews, and to draw any convincing conclusions would require the adoptee's opinion.

The reunion experience was also influenced by the lack of support during surrender. Participants expressed a need to be very independent during the reunion and not to have others interfere, at least in the beginning. The participants were forced to cope alone during surrender and this had implications for how they chose to proceed during the reunion. They felt that since they were not supported during the pregnancy that they would help themselves now as well. Also, at surrender they needed many kinds of support. This was not the case at reunion. Support was appreciated, but at this time in their lives they were much more competent than they were at such a young age.

An unexpected finding was that there was also a reciprocal relationship between the surrender experience and the reunion experience. It was expected that surrender might have an effect on reunion. It was not expected that reunion would have an effect on the perception of surrender. However, this was the case. Reunion was responsible for many changes in the way participants thought and felt about the surrender. For example, when the baby was surrendered, many of the mothers felt very guilty about the decision and for being in the situation in the first place. Reunion seemed to facilitate reflection on the event, and the mothers came to realize that the surrender was a result of a lack of support at the time rather than a character flaw. This appeared to be associated with a decrease in

feelings of guilt and increases in self-esteem during reunion. Participants also became very angry about the events that transpired at surrender. This was a completely different perception than from before reunion, when the participants viewed the events as primarily their fault. Reunion seems to have had a huge impact on how the time of pregnancy and surrender is perceived. This was generally a positive change because it facilitated increases in self-esteem, completion of fractured identities, and decreased feelings of shame and guilt.

Another goal of the study was to discover the unique benefits and challenges that the mothers experienced in reunion. The results indicate that the reunion was highly beneficial to the mothers' well-being. Some of these benefits were improved confidence and self-esteem, no longer feeling shameful, a completion or re-integration of identity, processing of repressed emotions, knowing the child is okay, improved family relations, and the ability to help other mothers. The participants' ideas about being natural mothers also changed for the better. Although being a natural mother is not considered as good as raising the child, reunion changed the perception of this role of natural mother from negative to positive. The participants experienced many positive emotions including joy, fulfillment, and pride. None of the participants expressed any regrets about the reunion or wished they did not reunite. This was independent of whether or not the reunion was proceeding in an ideal way. The participants felt that the reunion was beneficial and necessary for them to feel at peace with their lives. These findings are consistent with the limited literature that suggests that reunion facilitates positive changes in natural mothers.

So far, negative aspects of reunion have not been discussed in the literature. However, despite the challenges faced in reunion, the positive aspects appear to far

outweigh the negative. Challenges or negative aspects of the reunions included interference in the relationship on the part of certain people, anger, fear of rejection, difficulties negotiating the relationship, and as mentioned previously, having to face feelings of grief and loss. Also, there were some people that were unsupportive during reunion, either intentionally or inadvertently, which was also challenging at times. For the most part though, the participants felt much more supported during reunion than during the pregnancy, when almost no support was offered.

The results also indicated that reunion initially had a significant impact on the participants' daily functioning, ranging from preoccupation and mild impairment to significant depressive symptoms. This made it very hard to function. The impact of surrender on daily life has been investigated previously. The impact of reunion on daily life has not been investigated. It is interesting to see that reunion, although it is generally a positive event, can have a significant impact on the mother's daily functioning, at least for the first weeks, months, or in some cases, even years. This is an important observation because family, friends, and even helping professionals may not be aware of how much of an impact the reunion has on these women's functioning.

A major conclusion that can be drawn from these results is that reunion is generally a positive and beneficial event in the lives of natural mothers. Reunion plays a very constructive role in a situation that is otherwise bleak. It is essential that helping people are aware that reunion is an event that will benefit most natural mothers. In the past it has been argued that natural mothers do not want to have their lives and privacy invaded. In this and other studies, this has not been found to be the case. Reunion seems to be the only thing that can ease the pain of surrender.

A second conclusion that can be drawn from the results of this study is that although reunion is generally very positive, it is an emotionally trying event that is not experienced without difficulty. As some of the participants expressed, it is very unsupportive for people to assume the reunion is an exclusively joyous occasion and to not offer support for grieving. The results of this study suggest that reunion does not undo the damage done by the loss of a child. This may have implications not only for the family and friends of women in reunion, but also for women considering surrender. It is difficult to appreciate the huge impact that surrender has and to understand that the possibility of reunion twenty or thirty years later will not cure the pain incurred.

Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations in interpreting the present results. The study was descriptive and exploratory in nature. It was successful in describing the surrender and reunion experiences of these women, and the relation between the two. However, these descriptive results cannot necessarily be generalized to the broader population of natural mothers. The study adds to the limited literature on adoption reunion and may serve as the basis for future inquiry.

Secondly, the participants were a relatively homogenous sample. They are all members of the Canadian Council of Natural Mothers and their values and experiences may reflect this membership. The participants in this study were a fairly well educated group. Findings from this study may not be as applicable to a less educated group of women. Also, the participants were generally of moderate to socio-economic status. The results may have been different for women with lower or higher socio-economic status.

Future Research

Future research could investigate reunion with larger samples and in a more quantitative and systematic way. Future investigation could also include a comparison group of not yet reunited mothers. There is still a very limited body of research pertaining to adoption reunion. With more adoption reunions occurring, it is important that the phenomenon is fully understood from all perspectives. It would also be interesting to study the natural father's perspective of reunion. Fathers do not necessarily have the same connection with the child that the mother does, but there may still be implications of surrender and reunion for them.

CONCLUSION

Taking one woman's child and calling it another's has been a considered the logical solution to two problems: infertility and premarital or out of time pregnancy. However, at least for the mother, adoption appears to create more problems than it solves. There are also implications for the adoptee, but these are beyond the scope of this paper. It appears that for the natural mother, the loss of a child is associated with many long-lasting psychological, social, and medical problems. Often, these effects are not considered when suggesting or urging a young woman to surrender her child. This study adds to a body of research that suggests that surrendering a child may not be the ideal remedy to pregnancy that it is often considered. This is not to say that a woman should not have the right to choose adoption, but that woman should also have all the information that is available in making an informed decision. There are many long-term consequences of surrender that the public may not be aware of.

Compared with the staggering number of adoptions prior to the 1980's, few adoptions occur today. However, there are still many adoptions occurring. Knowledge of the implications of surrender and the limitations of reunion might prove highly beneficial for mothers contemplating adoption. This study suggests that young, unmarried mothers may only be incapable of supporting their child for a short time. Knowing the implications that surrender can have upon a woman, family, friends, and the government may be more willing to support a woman for the short time she requires to become self-sufficient.

This current research also suggests that reunion, although it is highly desired and beneficial, is not a solution to the pain of surrender. That being said, reunion appears to provide numerous benefits to the natural mother. Mothers contemplating a reunion may find this knowledge helpful in deciding whether or not to reunite. Similarly, mothers contemplating reunion might find it helpful to know that reunion can also be very painful and challenging. As a result of this knowledge, hopefully they will not be as surprised with the inundation of emotions and will be better able to prepare themselves. Mothers who are already in the process of reunion may find solace in knowing that the experiences they are having are not uncommon and that there are other women facing the same emotional roller coaster. Helping professionals may also benefit from being more aware of the types of challenges that natural mothers face in reunion, as adoption and adoption reunion are not commonly discussed issues that all people are aware of. Finally, in light of the open records controversy of late, government representatives may also benefit from the knowledge that reunion is generally very positive for the natural mother, contrary to what some people have suggested.

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Appendix A: Sample of Notice Regarding the Study for Posting on CCONM website

Volunteers are needed to participate in a research study that will focus on the relinquishment and reunion experience of natural/birth mothers. The study is strictly for research purposes, in order to gain further insight into the experience of the natural/birth mother. The study is not intended to provide counselling or support to natural mothers in any way. Women who feel that they may be in need of professional support should contact a private or public counselling service. Lacy Westin, a fourth year psychology student at the University of Calgary, is conducting the study. The research is being conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts (honours) degree in psychology. Any natural/birth mother who has reunited with the child she surrendered for adoption within the last ten years is eligible for the study. Interested participants should reside in the Calgary area.

The study consists of a one-on-one interview, which will be approximately 60 minutes in length. An additional 30 minutes is required to sign consent forms and discuss the study. The interview questions are quite personal in nature and will address your experiences primarily during reunion, but also during relinquishment. We would like the questions answered in a verbal format, and would like to tape record the entire interview. All information provided by participants will be kept strictly confidential. If you are interested in participating in this study and would like further information, please contact Lacy Westin at (403) 613-2230, or by email at lawestin@ucalgary.ca.

Appendix B: Informed Consent

**UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY
INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

Research Project Title: The Natural Mother's Experience of Adoption Reunion

Investigators: Lacy Westin and Dr. V. Pruegger
Department of Psychology

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, please ask. Please take the time to read this form carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

This research study is concerned with the nature of the experience of adoption reunion for the natural mother. We are studying the thoughts, emotions, challenges, and benefits that natural mothers face during reunion with a child they surrendered for adoption, which is why you have been asked to participate. We will also explore your pregnancy and surrender experience.

It is important that you understand that this study is not intended to provide any kind of counseling or emotional support. The research is being carried out strictly for research purposes, in order to gain insight into the experiences of the natural mother. In no way does it attempt to provide support to natural mothers. The information you provide in the interview may contribute to a better knowledge of the reunion and relinquishment experience, and in the future may help professionals provide better support to natural mothers.

The study will require approximately 90 minutes during which time you will be asked to respond verbally to a series of open-ended questions regarding your reunion experience. You will be asked to discuss the kinds of thoughts and emotions that you had, and maybe continue to have, during surrender and reunion, as well as challenges, benefits and support that you experienced. You will be asked to describe your experiences in

depth, but only to the extent with which you are comfortable. The questions are quite personal in nature, so please feel free to decline participation at any point if you do not feel comfortable. Your responses, along with those of 9 other women will be used to gain a sense of the factors that are involved in reunion for the mother.

It is possible that thinking about the reunion and the relinquishment may trigger some strong feelings for you. You may become upset or agitated because of this. If you sense that this is case, and you'd prefer not to confront such feelings right now, please feel free to decline participation at this point. We will fully understand your decision if you wish to withdraw and encourage you to do so if you feel it will be too upsetting. We only want you to proceed if you are certain you want to spend time thinking about this event. Also, if at any time during the interview you do not wish to continue, please do not hesitate to inform the interviewer, and there will be no obligation to answer anything further.

We have included some information on trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder. Before signing this form and indicating your consent, please take the time to read this information. Sometimes when a person has experienced something very traumatic, the effects can often go undetected except when triggered by certain stimuli. This additional information will facilitate a better understanding of some of the risks involved with participation in the study. If you feel that there is a possibility that you may have some underlying emotional difficulties that may be triggered by the sensitive questions in the interview, please do not hesitate to decline participation at this point. If you feel that you have already discussed this experience at length and are accustomed to the feelings that this produces for you, and you feel comfortable continuing, please read through the rest of this form.

If at some point during or after the interview you feel distressed, please let the interviewer know promptly. Arrangements for professional counselling have been made with both a private clinical social worker and a public adoption counselling agency. Colleen Clark is a clinical social worker with extensive experience working with natural mothers and adoptees. She has counselled over one-hundred natural mothers and is very knowledgeable in the topic of adoption and adoption reunion. Adoption Options also offers counselling for natural mothers and the counsellors are trained in the area of adoption and adoption reunion. If you feel that you would benefit from seeing one of these counsellors, we will make every effort to fulfill this immediately. Colleen Clark will be on-call during the interview and for a time afterwards. The interviewer will escort you to Ms Clark's office, either by driving, or in a cab at her expense. If you are not comfortable with one of these options, alternate arrangements can be discussed. If you would prefer to meet with a counsellor at Adoption Options, I will arrange to have someone see you as soon as possible that day. Below we have also listed the names and telephone numbers of Ms. Clark and Adoption Options. If you would like to make an appointment on your own at a later time, please feel free to do so. However, it would be helpful for the interviewer to know of any difficulties you are having so that we can follow-up with you and ensure you are doing well and do not require further assistance or have questions or concerns.

Colleen Clark, MSW, RSW
(403) 547-9126

Adoption Options –Jane Reid, MSW, RSW (Program Coordinator)
202-1228 Kensington Rd NW
(403) 270-8228

I would also like to make a follow-up call to everyone who participates in the study. I will do so within a week of the interview, provided you consent to this. The purpose of this call is to check in with you and ensure you are not having any difficulties due to the interview. I can also address any questions or concerns you may have. If you have experienced difficulties, I would like to make sure you feel the resources provided to you are helpful and that you do not require any further information on counseling.

As one way of thanking you for your time we will be pleased to send you a summary of the results of this study once they have been compiled (probably in about 3 months). This summary will outline, in general terms, the factors we found to be involved with reunion. If you would like to receive a copy of this summary, please put the address to which you would like it sent here:

In signing this form I fully understand that I am participating in this study as part of the educational experience of the investigator in the Department of Psychology. In exchange for my time I expect to contribute to the understanding of the topic being explored. If, after the study, I have concerns regarding this experience, I may register my concerns with Dr. M. C. Boyes, Chair: Department of Psychology Research Ethics Board. He will insure that my comments are acted upon with no fear that I will be identified personally. Dr. Boyes can be reached at: A230, 220-7724, boyes@ucalgary.ca.

All of the information we collect from you (the interview tape, written information and consent forms) will be stored so that your name is not associated with it (using an arbitrary participant number). The write-up of the data will not include any information that can be linked directly to you. The research materials will be stored with complete security throughout the entire investigation. Do you have any questions about this aspect of the study?

We would like to tape record the entire interview. The recordings will be transcribed and the tapes and transcripts stored without your name associated with them. We would also like to quote parts of your interview in the final report and presentation, but any such quotations will be carefully presented to ensure that it is not possible for anyone to trace them back to you. Do you have any questions or reservations about this?

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation. If you have further questions concerning matters related to this research, please contact:

Lacy Westin: Undergraduate Student, Department of Psychology,
The University of Calgary; 613-2230

Dr. V. Pruegger: Assistant Professor of Psychology (University of Calgary)
vpruegge@ucalgary.ca

If you have any questions concerning your participation in this project, you may also contact Mrs. Patricia Evans, Research Services Office, Room 602 Earth Sciences, telephone: 220-3782.

 Participant

 Date

 Investigator

 Date

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. This research has the ethical approval of the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board.

Appendix C: Information on Trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

(compiled from the National Center for Post-traumatic stress disorder website and Birth Mother Trauma by Heather Carlini)

When people find themselves suddenly in danger, sometimes they are overcome with feelings of fear, helplessness, or horror. These events are called traumatic experiences. Some common traumatic experiences include being physically attacked, being in a serious accident or being sexually assaulted. Most literature indicates that surrendering a child for adoption is a traumatic experience. Because surrendering a child is traumatic for many women, it is not uncommon for some women who have surrendered a child to experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This generally occurs when the woman does not take steps to work through the feelings she has experienced. If the emotions are ignored or repressed, they can surface at a later time in many undesirable forms. Certain situations or triggers may cause the traumatized person to experience symptoms unexpectedly. An awareness of the feelings and emotions that can occur is helpful in identifying the problem and seeking help. It is also important that you are aware of the reactions that you may have to the interview that you will be participating in. This will enable you to be more informed about your decision to participate or decline participation. If you feel that you may not have adequately addressed the negative feelings and thoughts you might have about the surrender of your child and/or the reunion, please carefully consider whether or not you want to participate in the present study, as your participation may cause you to experience any of the following symptoms. The following is a list of symptoms that those who have experienced a trauma may encounter.

Re-experiencing symptoms:

- Upsetting memories such as images or thoughts about the trauma
- Feeling as if the trauma is happening again (flashbacks)
- Bad dreams and nightmares
- Getting upset when reminded about the trauma (by something the person sees, hears, feels, smells, or tastes)
- Anxiety or fear, feeling in danger again
- Anger or aggressive feelings and feeling the need to defend oneself (or in the case of natural mothers, the need to protect their other children)
- Trouble controlling emotions because reminders lead to sudden anxiety, anger, or upset
- Trouble concentrating or thinking clearly

People can also have physical reactions to trauma reminders such as:

- Trouble falling or staying asleep
- Feeling agitated and constantly on the lookout for danger
- Getting very startled by loud noises or someone approaching unexpectedly

- Feeling shaky or sweaty
- Having your heart pound or having trouble breathing

Avoidance Symptoms:

- Actively avoiding trauma-related thoughts and memories
- Avoiding conversations and staying away from places, activities, or people that might remind you of the trauma
- Trouble remembering important parts of what happened during the trauma
- Shutting down emotionally or feeling emotionally numb
- Trouble having loving feelings or feeling any strong emotions
- Finding that things around you seem strange or unreal
- Feeling strange
- Feeling disconnected from the world around you and things that happen to you
- Avoiding situations that might make you have a strong emotional reaction
- Feeling weird physical sensations
- Feelings physically numb
- Losing interest in things you used to enjoy doing

Trying to avoid thinking about the trauma and avoiding treatment for trauma-related problems may keep a person from feeling upset in the short-term, but avoiding treatment means that in the long-term, trauma symptoms will persist.

There are also problems that can be secondary to or associated with the primary trauma symptoms. These include:

- Depression
- Despair and hopelessness
- Losing important beliefs
- Aggressive behavior
- Self-blame, guilt and shame
- Problems in relationships with others
- Feeling detached from others
- Social isolation
- Problems with identity
- Problems with self-esteem
- Alcohol and drug abuse
- Physical health symptoms and problems

Complex Post-traumatic Stress Disorder:

The diagnosis of PTSD accurately describes the symptoms that result when a person experiences a short-lived trauma. For example, car accidents, natural disasters, and rape are considered traumatic events of time-limited duration. However, chronic

traumas continue for months or years at a time. Clinicians and researchers have found that the current PTSD diagnosis often does not capture the severe psychological harm that occurs with such prolonged, repeated trauma. Dr. Judith Herman of Harvard University suggests that a new diagnosis, called Complex PTSD, is needed to describe the symptoms of long-term trauma. Some of these symptoms may apply to mothers that have surrendered a child, since the experience of surrender often is a long-term trauma. The following is a list of some of the common symptoms of complex PTSD that may be experienced by natural mothers.

- Alterations in emotional regulation, which may include symptoms such as persistent sadness, suicidal thoughts, explosive anger, or inhibited anger
- Alterations in consciousness, such as forgetting traumatic events, reliving traumatic events, or having episodes in which one feels detached from one's mental processes or body
- Alterations in self-perception, which may include a sense of helplessness, shame, guilt, stigma, and a sense of being completely different than other human beings
- Alterations in the perception of the perpetrator, such as attributing total power to the perpetrator, or becoming preoccupied with the relationship to the perpetrator, including a preoccupation with revenge
- Alterations in relations with others, including isolation, distrust, or a repeated search for a rescuer
- Alterations in one's system of meanings, which may include a loss of sustaining faith or a sense of hopelessness or despair

A National Center for PTSD fact sheet. (2001, November 12). Retrieved December 20, 2003, from <http://www.ncptsd.org/index.html>

Carlini, H. *Birth Mother Trauma: A counseling Guide for Birth Mothers*. Morning Side Publishing: Saanichton, British Columbia, 1997.

Appendix D: Demographics Questionnaire

The information that you provide on this form will be kept completely anonymous and confidential. If there are any questions that you would prefer not to answer, please leave them blank.

What is your age as of your last birthday?

How many children do you have, including the child that was placed for adoption?

How many children have you placed for adoption?

What is your approximate annual household income?

- Less than \$ 10 000
- \$10 000 to \$19 999
- \$20 000 to \$29 999
- \$30 000 to \$39 999
- \$40 000 to \$49 999
- \$50 000 to \$59 999
- \$60 000 to \$74 999
- \$75 000 or greater

What is your race/ethnicity?

- White Caucasian
- Black
- Hispanic
- Asian
- Other (specify) _____

What is the highest level of education you have completed?

Appendix E: Interview Guide

When was your child born?

Did you have a boy or a girl?

Was the child you placed for adoption your first born?

When did you first reunite with your child?

What kinds of feelings and emotions did you experience during the surrender?

What kinds of thoughts did you have around the time of surrender?

What kinds of feelings and emotions did you experience during reunion?

What kinds of thoughts did you have during the reunion?

Were there any physical/health effects of the surrender? Did any of these return during the reunion?

How do you feel your experience (emotions, thoughts, physical effects) during surrender influenced your experience during reunion?

After the reunion, how did your feelings, thoughts and emotions evolve as the relationship progressed?

Who knew about your reunion? Do you think they understood how you were affected by it?

What or who was supportive during this time? What did this support involve?

What or who was unsupportive? What did this involve?

What does it mean to you to be a natural mother now that you have reunited with your child? How is this different from before you reunited?

What were the positive aspects of the reunion?

What were the negative aspects of the reunion?

How did your experience during reunion affect your daily activities (for example, work and family)?

Do you want to continue a relationship with your child? Why or why not?

Appendix F: Debriefing Form

Post-Project Discussion

Researchers have been studying adoption for more than three decades now. During this time, considerable progress has been made in efforts to determine the effect that relinquishing an infant has upon the mother. However, the question regarding the experience of adoption reunion has received considerably less attention. Studies that have addressed reunion have focused on the way that the relationship is negotiated and the personal experience of the adoptee. While these are both important, they do not address the personal emotional experience of the natural mother. This study seeks to examine this experience. In particular, we are interested in the feelings, challenges, benefits and support, or lack of support, that mothers experience during this time, as well as the relation of the reunion experience to how they experienced surrender of the child. In no way do we intend to provide any type of counselling through this study, rather we hope to improve understanding and therefore counselling related to this subject in the future

There are several reasons for believing that researchers' disregard of the personal experiences of birthmothers during reunion is an important oversight. First, the way that the mother feels during reunion may have an important effect on the outcome of the reunion. For example, if the mother feels extreme guilt, anger or lack of support, this may have a negative effect on how she negotiates the relationship with her child. Second, the way the mother experiences reunion may have an impact on her adjustment in all areas of life, including family, work and friendships. Existing research suggests that surrendering a child for adoption has various negative emotional consequences for the mother. It follows that the way she experiences reunion may also have an important impact, whether positive or negative. Also, if surrendering a child is often an extremely negative experience, what impact does this have on the reunion? Are adoption reunions as traumatic as the surrender, or do they have a more positive impact? It is important to understand the impact that reunion has on all areas of the mother's life, in order to provide adequate support should she seek it. Furthermore, the occurrence of adoption reunion has become increasingly common. With the trend toward more openness in adoption, it is important that the impact of adoption reunion on all parties involved is understood.

This study examines how the natural mother experiences adoption reunion. In the interview you provided information about the way you experienced your own reunion, as well as some information about your pre-adoption experience. We will use this information to gain insight into the nature of adoption reunion from the natural mother perspective. We will seek to determine if there is a relationship between the mother's feelings around the time of adoption and during reunion, and what effect the adoption experience has upon the reunion experience. This will help us learn, for example, whether the mother's experience of surrender will predict how much distress she experiences during reunion. We will explore common themes that occur throughout the interviews, in order to determine further areas of investigation. For example, if the theme of identity

proves to be common to several of the women, it may suggest the need for more intensive research into the effect of reunion on identity. This study will provide a starting point for future investigation into adoption reunion. We hope that it will guide research into a direction that will benefit those involved with adoption reunion.

We realize that for some people, thinking about certain aspects of their reunion or the relinquishment may cause them concern or be upsetting. Our goal is to make sure that you leave the interview today feeling as good as you did when you arrived. If, for any reason, you feel distressed as a result of your participation in this study, please notify me. As mentioned before the interview, I have made arrangements for Colleen Clark or a counselor at Adoption Options to meet with any participants who feel upset after the interview. If you feel that immediate support is something you would benefit from as a result of the interview material, Colleen Clark will see you immediately. Jane Reid at Adoption Options will be available that day, but may have to finish up with an existing appointment before she can see you. I will accompany you there by either driving you or by taxi at my expense. If you would prefer to contact one of these counselors independently, I have included the contact information below. However, it will be beneficial to me as a researcher if you notify me of any difficulties you are having so that I can ensure you receive appropriate and optimal support. I would like to follow-up with you following any counseling you receive to see you are doing and to address any questions or concerns you may have. Otherwise, if you have questions that you think I can answer, or concerns you'd like to talk to me about, I'd be happy to discuss these with you now.

More generally, we would appreciate your feedback about your experience in this study. Please feel free to offer your comments, criticisms, and kudos.

If you are interested in this topic, you might want to check out these books and articles:

Carlini, Heather. (1997). *Birth Mother Trauma: A counseling guide for birth mothers*. Saancton, B.C: Morning Side Publishing.

March, Karen (1997). The dilemma of adoption reunion: Establishing open communication between adoptees and their birth mothers. *Family Relations: Journal of Applied Family & Child Studies*, 46(2), 99-105.

Affleck, Marian K., & Steed, Lyndal G. (2001). Expectations and experiences of participants in ongoing adoption reunion relationships: A qualitative study. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 71(1), 38-48.

Fraser, James. (1997). Developing definitions of an adoptee-birthmother reunion relationship. *Marriage & Family Review*, 25(1-2), 67-78.

Brodzinsky, Anne B. (1990). Surrendering an infant for adoption: The birthmother experience. [Chapter] Brodzinsky, David M. (Ed); Schechter, Marshall D. (Ed). *The psychology of adoption*, 295-315.