

# Reunion in Adoption – A Tumultuous Life Event

by Mari Gallagher



## Introduction

This article will explore reunion in adoption from the viewpoint of an adopted adult, outlining relevant statistics in order to estimate the likely incidence of such an issue in the counselling room, together with the possible presenting issues of the adopted person as they relate to both relinquishment in early childhood by birth parent and reunion in adulthood with that parent. Adoption and adoption reunion, as each applies in a general and specifically Irish context, will be covered, to include an exploration of secrecy, silence, shame and disenfranchised grief in adoption. Furthermore, the author will outline how a therapist might work with the adopted adult who has reunited with a birth parent. Finally, the author will evaluate the role of the therapist in helping the adoptee through such a tumultuous life event.

## Adoption – an Overview

Adoption, as per Adoption Authority of Ireland (AAI): “provides for the permanent transfer of parental rights and duties from the birth parents to the adoptive parents. An adopted child is considered to be the child of the adopters as if born to them in lawful wedlock.” Adoption is a global phenomenon that touches the lives of numerous families. Interest in the role of legal adoption as both a child welfare solution and as a means of alternative family formation for adults wanting to become parents has never been higher (Wrobel & Neil, 2009).

While the positive impact that adoption can make on childrens’ life chances has been well documented, the author notes that an extensive body of literature has been published by adopted adults worldwide, outlining deep and passionate dissatisfaction with aspects of the adoption process.

International research stresses that adoptees have a higher risk of psychiatric contact than their non-adopted peers (Laubjerg & Petersson, 2011). Adopted adults also carry with them a strong tendency to deny that adoption can be the basis for their problems (Small, as cited in Robinson, 2003, p. 136). The latter suggests, in the author’s view, while reunion in adoption may pose challenges that require therapeutic help, and reunion is the specific focus of this article, adoptees may present as clients at any time with an issue unrelated to adoption, and it is important for the therapist to be aware that unacknowledged feelings around adoption may be the root cause.

## Adoption – The Irish Perspective

Societal progress has changed attitudes to birth outside of marriage and has led ultimately to fewer children being placed for adoption. Domestic adoption in recent decades has been a rare occurrence in Ireland and the enactment of the Adoption Act 1991 gave intercountry adoption a statutory basis (AAI). Between 1991 and 2007, 3,596 children born outside of Ireland were placed for adoption (in Ireland) as per the Registrar of Foreign Adoptions (O’Brien, 2009). Many of the adult adoptees (+18 years old) now potentially presenting in the counselling room were born in countries such as Romania, Russia, Vietnam and China.

## Search and Reunion - Overview

Though it is not the norm, some adoptees start an active search for birth parents during adolescence. Demographic studies indicate that the typical searcher is a young adult – the average age is 29 – and that up to 80% of searchers are female. Psychological searching, that is, clarifying his or her feelings about being adopted, is an inherent part of clinical work with adoptees (Brodzinsky, Schechter & Marantz, 1992). In the author's own experience as an adoptive parent, birth family contact provides relief and fulfilment for the adopted child - in the words of the writer's sixteen year old son upon receiving e-mail contact from his Russian birth sister: "a weight has been lifted from my shoulders."

Erikson's (1950) model of the life cycle indicates the psychosocial task - Ego Identity versus Identity Confusion - as the defining aspect of adoptee adolescence and the period when adolescent adoptees are coping with peer reactions to adoption, connecting adoption to one's sense of identity, coping with racial identity in cases of intercountry adoption and considering the possibility of searching for biological family (Brodzinsky et al, 1992).

Adoptee young adulthood stage – Intimacy versus Isolation – involves further exploration of the implications of adoption as it relates to the growth of self and the development of intimacy, the adjusting to parenthood in the light of the adoptee's own relinquishment and facing one's unknown genetic history in the

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context of the birth of children (Brodzinsky et al, 1992).

The central conclusion of a British study (2000) of search and reunion experience of 126 adults adopted at under 18 months and reuniting in their late 30's with birth mothers now in their 50's and 60's was that the reunions had largely been beneficial albeit accompanied by intense emotions (Triseliotis, Feast & Kyle, 2000). The personal accounts are full of apprehension, excitement, relief and often the quelling of longstanding guilt and discomfort.

For adopted people, contact appeared to lead to better integration of the experience of having two families (Triseliotis et al, 2000). Verrier (1993) writes: "reunions often seem to have a calming effect....it's as if the adoptee had been holding his breath for all those years and could begin breathing again. There is a release of tension and a renewal of life" (p.151).

Winterson, a British adoptee who described her reunion with birth family as unsuccessful, writes: "Many people who find their birth families are disappointed. Many regret it. Many others do not search because they feel afraid of what they might find. They are afraid of what they might feel – or worse, what they might not feel" (2011, p. 226). Dodds (1997) an American-German adoptee writes of the loss of cultural and national

identity inherent in intercountry adoption and his devastation with reunion with his German birth mother with whom he stated he was unable to form a bond.

An adoptee's reason for searching may ostensibly be to access medical history. To an adoptee, no matter what her age, the cold hard fact that she doesn't know her birth or medical history can be a painful aspect of her existence (Eldridge, 1999).

Positive communication about adoption, in general and in response to a child's specific curiosity, can support active information seeking. The search for birth information is not fuelled by poor psychological adjustment or negative family relationships, but occurs in the context of positive family functioning (Wrobel & Neil, 2009).

## Search and Reunion – The Irish perspective.

Given that it is now widely accepted that most, if not all, adopted people need to learn something of their birth history (Eldridge, 1999) the recent passing of The Adoption (Information and Tracing) Bill 2015, is a welcome, positive development for the estimated 50,000 adoptees in Ireland who heretofore have been without the right to their birth certificates or to be given the names of their birth parents (O'Brien, 2015).

The facilitation of reunions is a relatively new phenomenon in Ireland. In 2005, the National Adoption Contact Preference Register (NACPR) was set up to facilitate contact between adopted people and their birth families. AAI (2015) confirmed that 7,516 adopted people and 3,525 birth relatives have signed up to the NACPR since 2005 with a total of matches standing at 706.

This figure, while a relatively low percentage of client population, indicates that reunion in adoption is a growing phenomenon that places demands on the helping

things: secret keeping is damaging and divisive, deception creates family mistrust and shame, and hiding the truth destroys family intimacy and security. Above all, open, honest, sensitive communication about adoption and the past builds the gateway to healthy individual adjustment and family life (Keefer & Schooler, 2000). If adoption has always been treated as an unspeakable secret, the adoptee gets the feeling that being adopted is something horrible and shameful (Brodzinsky et al, 1992).

The existence of a role handicap,

Only in recent years has come the realisation that adopted people, regardless of how apparently problem-free their adoptions have been, experience a deep and painful sense of loss because they have been separated from their birth family. Adopted people often raise issues of their sense of identity and sense of belonging. Because they are told that, by virtue of being adopted, they are “special”, “chosen” and “lucky”, their grief at the separation from their birth family is denied, by society and often by their adoptive parents (Robinson, 2003). The therapist, consequently, will need to be aware of the possible impact of unacknowledged grief when dealing with the adopted adult.

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professions for increased expertise on the specific complexities of adoption.

### **Silence, Secrecy and Shame in Adoption**

For generations, people discussed adoption only in guarded, hushed tones, and most laws, policies, practices and attitudes related to adoption were shaped more by good intentions than by good knowledge (Pertman, 2009). The adoptive parent may believe that non-acknowledgement or ‘playing down’ of the child’s adoption is in the best interest of the child. Letting the child know from an early age that he was rejected by his birth parent is likely to make a brutal assault on self-esteem (Kirk, 1984).

Adopted persons who are now adults have taught us important

that is, situational discrepancies that interfere with competent role performance, impacts on the adoptive parent’s ability to deal with the challenges of rearing the adopted child (Kirk, 1984). The adoptive parent’s feelings towards adoption can also be a barrier to the adopted person instigating a search for birth family. Adopted people often wait until after the death of adoptive parents to start searching, thereby reducing the chance of reunion with birth parents while they are still living (Robinson, 2003).

### **Disenfranchised Grief**

Doka (as cited in Lenhardt, 1997) defined disenfranchised grief as the grief that people experience from a loss that is not, or cannot be, openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported.

### **Implications of Reunion for Adoptee**

Notwithstanding that increasing numbers of adopted people are undertaking a search for their birth families, little has been written about the effects of such a reunion on the individual. It is important that therapists are aware of the particular emotional state of adoptees post-reunion (Moran, 1994). The post-reunion emotional state (Moran, 1994) can be divided into four stages:

**Stage 1: Paralysis:** Initial reaction of utter amazement and shock as the adoptee has looked into the face of the person who gave her life. Paralysis may arise from the simultaneous experience of so many emotions – the mind and soul are on overload. Physically, an overwhelming lethargy may set in, making routine tasks impossible.

**Stage 2: Eruption:** Emotions will wash over the adoptee like the

aftershock of an earthquake. During this stage the adoptee will have time to absorb the realities of her origins. It is the time when the fantasies about the biological mother and the circumstances surrounding the adoption must be laid aside. Although the truth may set one free, it is not always easy to face.

**Stage 3: Loss and Grief:** The realisation of loss of bonding in having been relinquished by birth parents can be devastating for the adoptee. In this stage, the adoptee realises that the primary bonding cannot be recaptured. It will take time to move beyond this stage of loss and grief.

**Stage 4: Empowerment:** With acceptance comes a sense of self-empowerment. During empowerment, the adoptee moves beyond acceptance to the growth of a new self-knowledge and self-awareness.

Lifton (2010) states that in order for a therapist to help adoptees and their adoptive parents, he/she must be able to see the ghosts that accompany them. These ghosts spring from the depths of unresolved grief and trauma that both parties have experienced: loss of biological child by the adoptive parents and loss of birth parents by the adoptee. Professionals cannot really see the adoptees and adoptive parents that enter the counselling room, unless they can see the ghosts that accompany them (Lifton, 2010).

### **The adoptee in the counselling room**

Frankie Pearse, a British adoptee, writes:

*If you do decide to go for counselling, make sure you go to someone who specialises in adoption. Someone who may not be trained within that field may not understand why you think, feel and act the way you do. I once had a series of sessions with a counsellor who could not understand why I kept wanting to talk about my mother and how she treated me. This experience put me off going to see another counsellor for a while. As I was still suffering from depression, which was getting heavier and heavier in my head, I was advised to go to the Post Adoption Centre (2012, p.53).*

As already outlined, Lifton (2010) emphasises the importance of therapist understanding of adoption issues and how these issues are likely to present in the counselling room.

Self-concept, as described by Rogers (1961), begins in early childhood, when the child starts to experience self as separate and different from other selves. As a way of understanding, the therapist will explore with the adoptee the experiences of childhood. If the adoptive parents transmitted the message, knowingly or unknowingly, that adoption must be kept secret or is something to be ashamed of, the adoptee is more likely to experience problems in adjusting to being adopted and all that being adopted entails (Kirk, 1984). The adoptee has an opportunity, in therapy, to explore occasions of his childhood

when he felt different from his adoptive family, both in looks and personality. Feeling different from significant people in one's life often has a profound impact on the adoptee's self-concept (Brodzinsky, 1992). The adoptee may fear that he could lose his adoptive parents, who he senses might feel betrayed by the adoptee's decision to reunite with birth family (Lifton, 2010).

### **Multicultural counselling**

The author believes there are two main strands to multicultural counselling of adopted persons. The first strand refers to a therapist meeting with a client who is of another race but adopted into an Irish family. Racial diversity adds further complexity to the adoption mix. Physical characteristics help children define themselves and make connections with others. Feelings of belonging and security are nurtured by looking like the people around you (Brodzinsky, 1992).

The therapist may be meeting a client who is not only dealing with post reunion emotions but also with the impact of a lifetime of feeling racially different, both within the adoptive family and outside. Gehringer (2014), a Korean adoptee raised in America, writes: "the repetitiveness of questions such as 'speak any Chinese?' filled me with annoyance....the constant reminder that I didn't belong caused me to become full of unnecessary anger and resentment" (p.17). The term "genealogical bewilderment" is used to describe a sense of disconnectedness, a feeling of being cut off from your heritage,


your culture and your race (Sants cited in Brodzinsky, 1992).

The second strand of multicultural counselling of an adopted client relates to the perceived differences inherent in having been reared by non-biological parents and being reared by one's biological family. This perception by the adoptee may exist even if she is of Irish heritage. Adoptees have written of their secret envy of friends who have been reared by their biological families and their perception of such friends as privileged (Curran, 2013).

### Conclusion

This article has sought to demonstrate how a therapist might work with the adopted client who has reunited with birth family, by outlining a background to adoption, the current status of adoption reunion in Ireland and the stages of emotion the client might experience. Suggested therapeutic approaches have been outlined.

In conclusion, the author notes the words of Alex Haley (1976/2007):

“In all of us there is a hunger, marrow-deep, to know our heritage, to know who we are and where we have come from. Without this enriching knowledge, there is a hollow yearning and the most disquieting loneliness” (p. 8). 

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